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Societal Borderlands: Community Art Making as a Means to Turning Borders Into Points of Interaction

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Introduction

Social practice is a growing area in art that is seeking to expand what art is through what it does. Artists working in this way are more interested in the interactions and situations they might create than the things they produce. This project was a social practice artwork that was made up of a community art group that facilitated the collaboration and interaction of neighbors in Provo, UT. For three years, I have been leading this project in the form of a community art class that invites parents, their children, and others from around the city to create individual and collaborative art projects. The intention is to facilitate the opportunity for people from different backgrounds to connect. Over the past three years I’ve tried a variety of pedagogical approaches and was eager to do larger more permanent projects. This ORCA project was conducted to enable that ambition and to better understand the perspective of the participants.

Methodology

For the research I continued my involvement with the community center like normal. Two projects were organized and carried out during the time that the study was conducted. A community art garden was designed, built, and planted by local participants. In September a final building event was coordinated and hosted with the community center and the surrounding apartment complex. The event was publicized to the local public through social media flyers and invitations. Of the twenty to thirty people who were in attendance, just over half were from the neighborhood or were previous participants and the rest came from other areas for the first time. There was food, music, and everyone who came got to paint a rock they could add to the garden border. The second project was a photography project. Each participant received at least one disposable camera which they could use to take pictures using the techniques learned each week in class. Each week also had a different theme to get started. After a couple of months of this schedule all the cameras were collected, sent to a developer, and all the pictures were printed. The photos were put on display in a gallery on campus for a couple of weeks in the middle of which we hosted a reception for everyone to come see the pictures and to again invite the public, specifically the campus community. To accompany the pictures, a video was made interviewing the participants about their experiences and ideas throughout the project. Most of the participants came to view the exhibit prior to the reception. At the actual reception only one family that participated in the photography project made it but about twenty-five people from around campus and the city came. Surveys asking what about the events and projects made them feel the most connected to their community were sent to those who attended the photography exhibit reception and those who put their names down on a list to get the survey at the garden exhibit.

Results

The projects were successfully executed with more people attending the garden event than the photography exhibit reception (through unnumbered others viewed the exhibit before and after the reception). Listed here are selected relevant survey responses for participants in the garden event and the...
photography exhibit. First, is the question and then the responses according to the respective event (garden then photography exhibit). What have you learned about the community through this event?

Garden Event Visitors: “Unity can come thru friendships and working side by side with others in the community is a great way to make meaningful connections.” “People like to do things together, even with people they don’t know, when one connective person rallies them together. It just takes one person to make something come together sometimes.”

Photography Exhibit Visitor: “I think as humans we generally value people and relationships. Many of the photos were of people or gatherings of people. I also noticed some photos of flowers. And I could imagine some console walking along with their camera, then seeing something beautiful and wanting to capture it in a photograph.” “Latin American influence on our community culture.”

Do you feel more connected to the Provo Community by visiting this event? (Why?)

Garden Event Visitor: “Yes. I doubt I’ll ever meet them again but working together definitely made me feel like a part of the community.” “A little. A rock I painted will be a part of Provo forever, so I left my mark. I’m not super likely to run into most of the other people there again in my day to day life, but I certainly enjoyed the time spent with them at the garden art building event.”

Photography Exhibit Visitor: “Yes and no. Yes—it is good to see lots of different people in the photos and to realize that they appreciate and value some of the same things I do. But I think if I had met or talked to the people who took the photographs it would have been more connecting.”

Do you think that visiting this event will change how you think of and treat other people? (How?)

Garden Event Visitor: “Possibly. And having rubbed shoulders with fellow Provo-ites at this event might make me more open to other community events going forward.”

Photography Exhibit Visitor: “Maybe? Undecided. As I said before, meeting the people, hearing them talk about their experiences, why they chose the subjects they did, etc, would probably have impacted me more. When I saw people at the exhibit that I recognized from the photos, it was meaningful and I found myself sort of watching them and wanting to know more about them.”

Photography Class Participant: “I think that it has helped me connect to society, because it’s been a while since I had participated in this kind of class. My family and I really learned a lot.”

Discussion

From these responses and from the observations of the researchers, collaborative interactive event/exhibitions, like the garden building party, seem to be more enabling of the kind of connection and understanding that this project is aiming for. The photography exhibit was still relevant in sharing stories of the participants but it was less effective in providing opportunities for community members to interact. Projects like that are not completely irrelevant though, as can be seen in social practice works like Tania Bruguera’s Taitlin’s Whisper #6, where an open microphone permitted anyone for a period of time to say whatever they wanted at the Havana Biennial at a time when free speech was not permitted in Cuba. In terms of a work of art, the photography project enabled the art making of the class members. In the future, collaborative works like the garden or other public art will be a priority.

Conclusion

Overall, it would seem that for participants the collaborative projects (like the garden event) facilitate community connection better than artwork that shares stories (like the photography exhibit). This project and the responses, along with future plans, has been accepted to be shared at the Utah Conference for Undergraduate Research at Weber State in February.