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SMP II

Fluid Frames

“Understandings of self are inherently rooted in community. From the moment we are given proper names, we enter into domains of relationship, and through relationships we develop a sense of who we are and what we are worth. A solid sense of self derives from relationships that are coherent and consistent over time. By living in communities where we are known by many people, who also know each other, we each derive a strong sense of “being somebody”—somebody endowed with particular characteristics, capacities, and proclivities” (Gergen, 2000).

In other words, through interaction we create a reciprocal relationships of giving and receiving a sense of “mattering”, or how much we feel important to others. This importance can affect our self-esteem and the extent to which we use our agency to become who we wish to become. However, it is only through the development of these relationships and interactions are we able to conceive this true understanding of self. Art affords individuals the opportunity to develop a sense of themselves and helps them to develop the ability to see the world from multiple perspectives (Gude, 2009). This recognition that identity is not fixed or simple can facilitate an appreciation for the diversity that exists in communities.

Through interaction, accessibility of art, and empowerment I wanted to use the

opportunity of the St. Mary's Project to create a collaborative community mural project to facilitate interaction among the St. Mary's community where we could work along side each other to create a shared visual representation of the strategic vision for the college to discuss who we are now and who we wish to become as a community. I want to continue the conversation about diversity and civility on campus by providing an opportunity to express a multitude of diverse voices. Too often I encounter individuals who do not feel entitled to creativity. This project was meant to demystify art and expose it as tool to bring awareness to individual agency. Additionally, through the process of creating this mural I hope that students, faculty, and staff can share time, space, and stories as a means of developing a sense of themselves the ability to see the world from multiple perspectives (Gude, 2009).

Art as Communication and Accessibility

When art is only accessible to those with resources, art becomes a very one-sided narrative. With budget cuts most harshly affecting subjects not tested under No Child Left Behind, it is apparent that art, music, and physical education curriculums are being left behind. Increased stress on parents in hard economic times may affect children psychologically (Corsaro, 2005). Although there are some awesome free museums that could provide extended education in the DC area, they are not geographically accessible to all. Additionally, not all museums are accessible to those who may have varying intellectual and physical abilities (Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon, 2000). Unlike the National Portrait Gallery, many museums are curated in a way that tells history from a singular, privileged standpoint (Green, 2010). While there are countless arguments to lobby for more funding

for the arts within the public school system, something needs to be done in the meantime to make sure that people have access to this expressive and self-esteem building outlet. Community art, when executed correctly, provides art lessons and expressive outlets to a wide range of individuals.

Art from its inception has been about communicating. The Cave paintings are believed to have been created some 32,000 years ago (Clottes, 2003). While the purpose of the paintings are still debated, many historians and anthropologists suggest that they many have been a means of visual communication or story telling of experiences. Communities of people would gather to tell their stories in the same location, in a public space. The cave paintings were a necessity to communicate ideas and share experiences in a platform that was available to many. The mural project attempts to create an opportunity for everyone to use art as a vehicle to learn about the world, relate to each other, reflect and develop a sense of self that continues to spread the message that art is for everyone if they want to use it. While art as a singular practice is a completely legitimate pursuit, it does not have to be the only application. Like the cave paintings, individuals were asked to incorporate in the mural something that is a symbol of who they are at St. Mary's or what their experience has been. They were told that they could add to the bodies in any way that suited them whether that is through drawing, words, photographs, or physical object. I intended to create several different ways for volunteers to participate. It is important to foster an appreciation for art before you start talking about the formal elements. This is also why we had the splatter paint, mosaics, and the plastic bags. There were individual contributors that had different physical abilities. For example, one contributor was color blind and did not feel comfortable painting, but very much enjoyed coming to work on the mosaics.

Despite the change in modalities, the content remains the same across the board: using art as a means of interacting, expressing one's identity and feeling proud of individual contributions to the whole. These symbols tell the stories of St. Mary's past and present. Inside of the figures is St. Mary's embodied.

Art as Empowerment

The Isenheim Altar piece is a historical example of art as a transformative vehicle. A Monastery commissioned it to be painted by a German artist, Matthias Grünewald, in the 1500s for a hospital that treated those plagued by illnesses such as leprosy. It depicted the Christ's journey to crucifixion and resurrection. Patients in the hospital were able to be empathetic towards Christ's voyage and possibly remain hopeful throughout their own difficult journey (Mellinkoff, 1988).

The Altar was not a static painting, but rather one that changed and was moved during the days of the week to show different parts of the story and to line up with the holy calendar. This shifting and revealing is related to the St. Mary's mural in that there is not one singular mural, but rather a compilation of different themes and ideas. One can choose to enter the office spaces or just walk through the hallway. This active meditation affords the viewer the chance to decide what is most important to them about their journey at St. Mary's. It offers the chance to focus in on one aspect at a time, but then after it has all been revealed or experienced, the chance to consider their place within the grander whole.

"People who deeply engage the world through creative thinking and making, learn to expect and accept the accompanying anxiety of recognizing one's simultaneous power and vulnerability in confronting a self-formulated problem. We have the power to ask questions

of the world, to structure inquiries—and the responsibility for pursuing those investigations, for shaping answers—however incomplete” (Gude, 2009). In other words, through the act of making art, individuals can learn about their own identities in order to be able to perceive and develop an understanding for others’ experiences. By making art, individuals are able to see their agency in turning ideas into tangible results by looking at something from a different point of view.

While the mural is attempting to act as a positive example of the power of diversity and the multiplicity of narratives that exist at our school like the Isenheim Altar Piece, it is different in that the mural was created by those whose stories are depicted. Not only does this give individuals the recognition that their voices are important but it gives them the confidence to use those voices. The only person that can truly tell your story is you because you are the one experiencing it. While others may have similar experiences and understand where you are coming from, it is never an absolute true representation unless it is done by the self. This is why it is vital that representation be left the responsibility of the individual. While the concept for the main mural was a design that had been voted on, it took shape and changed as individual input was expressed. I tried my best to be a facilitator - rather than director - for the project and made sure that individuals felt that the power to create was in their hands and was not being dictated by myself or my personal vision for the mural. I was constantly posing questions to the group as to how we could integrate new ideas that surfaced and if they liked the current actions of addition.

Artist Krzysztof Wodiczko also offers the idea that public space is run by those who have the power and privilege to do so and asks how we can give those not in this group a voice without literally handing them a microphone (Phillips, 2003). He answers by suggesting

that artists work with these people to create artifacts of their stories, memories, and experiences (Phillips, 2003). He relates a lot of his conceptual ideas to psychological theories on trauma and having the victims give testimony to their trauma to ultimately begin to heal (Phillips, 2003). Ultimately, though, the choice is up to those who feel marginalized to use this platform or not (Phillips, 2003). This gives the people that he works with a sense that it is not just his project, but theirs as well (Phillips, 2003).

However, he thinks that communities can often be a form of “symbolic incest” and that his projects offer individuals a chance to step out from the community and realize their agency and independent thought (Phillips, 2003).

Psychologist Maslow believed that through a process of self-actualization, individuals are able to develop a greater sense of self-esteem, openness to new perspectives, and autonomy (Manheim, 1998). Self-expression can improve mental health. Art affords individuals the opportunity to develop a sense of themselves and helps them to develop the ability to see the world from multiple perspectives (Gude, 2009). This recognition that identity is not fixed or simple can facilitate an appreciation for diversity. It is through the action of making this mural that individuals can develop a greater sense of themselves and their goals and “possible selves” and perhaps in interacting with others in the process can gain new perspectives. And while possible selves can develop without feedback, it is imperative that we go beyond the present to understand identity (Markus & Nurius, 1986). A positive view of a possible self can lift mood, increase happiness, and reduce stress. It also brings about an awareness of the idea of agency, that we have control to a certain extent over our behaviors and actions that can bring us from present self to future possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Emphasis on identities that are desired can reduce stress and

improve self-esteem and sense of mastery (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Art as Interaction

The process of making art can be a learning experience in itself. Coming together despite differences and working towards a common goal to create something is art in and of itself. Through the act of making meaning and sharing our experiences we begin to recognize the complexity of the human experience (Gude, 2009). Expanded perception ignites an openness and empathy towards others' experiences. (Gude, 2009). The development of self through art making in the form of articulation of experiences is the facilitator to begin a discourse in understanding and appreciating the beauty of diversity.

The mosaic mirrors are a manifestation of this idea. The broken pieces are a metaphor for our differences coming together to create something beautiful. They afford individuals the opportunity to physically see themselves in the mural, but never all at once. You must move to see different parts of yourself, just like it is impossible to show your whole identity at once since our identities are fluid and change depending on the environment, situation, and individuals we are interacting with.

Judith Baca and an organization called SPARC joined together to create the "Great Wall" which was a mural that depicted the history of California from the perspective of working class non-Anglo Americans from earliest pre-history to the 1960s. It took 7 years to complete and Judith invited kids from the local neighborhoods to participate in the creation of the mural. The mural was a meeting ground for interaction and education. Students with similar experiences as well as differing experiences came together in one space to learn about history. This opened up their eyes to different cultures and events in history.

The St. Mary's mural is a product of many hours of interaction. My St. Mary's Project is not the final mural itself, but rather the interactions that took place. I met so many new people and made efforts to introduce everyone each time we met. We shared pizza, exchanged stories about where we grew up, favorite books and much, much more. We talked about what St. Mary's is today and what it's lost and gained along the way and what's stayed important over the years. These moments and discussions are fleeting, but their meaning and importance resonate long after the moments have passed. The mural can be seen as one of these moments in time. The chalkboard element leaves the mural open to continue to be added to and topics continue to be discussed. This mural is a process of collecting ideas, discussing pressing and relevant topics that essentially shape the social identity of our community, and creating an opportunity to come together in a space on campus to make art an accessible means of voicing opinions about our collective identity. Our identities are fluid; they are built in a moment and then change with the demands of the environment and people. Our collective identity is not much different, we change and grow depending on who we are surrounded by and what environment we are immersed in. The mural is meant to act as a moment of reflection and meditation. Interactions and shared experiences help us to better understand each other and become more conscious of others' experiences. It is a process meant to tend to current wounds in attempt to heal them. A lot of issues have surfaced at this institution this past year and while they may have been going on for a while, they are just beginning to be discussed. The mural is a conduit through which dialogues can be exchanged and understanding achieved. While it will be destroyed when Anne Arundel is torn down, the intentions and discussions that surfaced from the process will hopefully resonate within the individuals who participated for them to act

upon if they wish. This mirrors the intentions of healing mandalas.

Mandalas are created by a number of cultures. Tibetan Buddhists and Navajo people in North America create healing mandalas to restore or protect individuals or the larger environment (Anderson, 2002). Mandalas are temporary or ephemeral works made using sand, grain, pollen, flower dust, and other natural materials. The act of creating mandalas is seen as a ritual that holds the people in the group together to create a process and product that reflects and personifies collective values and beliefs (Anderson, 2002). Consciousness can be achieved and balance and order attained (Anderson, 2002)

With the changing physical landscape at St. Mary's we can use the mural as an opportunity to reflect on our visions for the future and turn them into a concrete shared experience.

While this mural will not be a permanent feature of our school's landscape, as Anne Arundel is being torn down, neither is the collective identity of our institution. We are constantly changing and growing in a fluid motion. This will be an ephemeral community experience to reflect the notion that we have agency in the direction of this change.

Through the process of creating the mural we build community through experience. We come together to become more conscious, to better understand, and when we disperse and the moment of interaction has passed, we carry our experiences with us to mold and to shape us.

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