

Animateur¹ of Mutirão²: Artist as Catalyst for Community Animation

How can one co-create artwork with collaborators or participants when only the facilitator is participating in the conversation surrounding conceptual framework for the work at hand? This dichotomy embodies an objectification and a neocolonialist conquest over the bodies of participants in socially engaged art projects. Socially engaged artists participate in an art historical discourse, which is exclusionary by nature.

The work of a truly socially engaged artist, or a community-based artist is fundamental and basic to the essence of our being. The task is collectively and creatively reimagining and rebuilding the world around us, physically, socially, and spiritually. Working together on community arts projects positions contributors as active critical citizens involved in shaping the world around them, rather than as passive consumers of culture.³

As a practicing mural artist who works with collaborative and participatory methods, I witness the importance of people gathering together to pursue collective public and community projects. Formal and informal networks of support emerge when people get together in a physical space to accomplish a common goal. These goals should be community driven, though I believe that the artist's role is vital in leading community-based projects in terms of leveraging assets as well as playing the role of facilitator, consultant and catalyst in order to skill build, and facilitate interpretative processes when assessing community needs. The artist's role as facilitator and catalyst is vital because of their ability to creatively explore solutions avoiding recreation of usual tropes and perpetuating standards and exploitative values. Working together in the same space toward a collective goal can combat isolation. When we are working alone and or in isolation, collective hope becomes diminished. There is an irrefutable energy and momentum that arises when we are together in small groups or en masse. Because humans are social beings, it is important that we create opportunities to continually foster productive social interaction through collaboration. Alternatively we feed into the existing condition of isolation and estrangement because of the conditions of contemporary labor and technology.

New types of unions and coalitions need to be formed that do not solely center on organized

¹ Goldbard, Arlene, and Don Adams. 2006. *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*. Oakland, CA: New Village Press. *Animatuer* is a term used in francophone countries to describe community artists as an animator of civic life. I use this word in reference to the process of developing interest in and activating cultural and social events.

² *Mutirão* is a word of Tupí (an indigenous people of Brazil) origin that is used to describe a collective effort to accomplish a common goal. This term is often used in the favelas of Brazil when a community works together to fulfill a basic need (i.e. build a community center, sewage system, etc.). The work is often accompanied by barbeque, beer, and togetherness. I use this term because there is not an adequate translation in to the English language.

³ MacDonald, Stuart Wyllie. "Tools for Community: Ivan Illich's Legacy." *International Journal of Education through Art* 8 (2): 121–133

³ Bishop, Claire. 2012. "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now." In *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, 35–45. New York, N.Y.; Cambridge, Mass.; London: Creative Time ; MIT Press.

labor but include unorganized labor, neighborhoods, and communities.⁴ Creating community through the arts and collective projects can lead to relationships, empathy, friendships, informal networks, bonds, stronger communities and therefore greater possibilities of networking for social causes. David Harvey and Sian Lazar articulate the importance of formal and informal networks in the resistance against neoliberalism in El Alto, Bolivia.⁵

But there is something else at work in El Alto that Lazar is at great pains to integrate into her account. Underlying values and ideals are particularly strong, and are often upheld and articulated through popular cultural events and activities—fiestas, religious festivals, dance events as well as through more direct forms of collective participation, such as the popular assemblies (in the neighborhoods and within the formal and informal trade unions). These cultural solidarity and collective memories enable unions to overcome tensions "and promote a collective sense of self, which in turn enables them to be effective political subjects."⁶

It is important to foster face-to-face relationships in physical space that lead to empathy and shared goals where we are held responsible for our engagement with others in the co-creation of our collective cultural futures. Through understanding can arise empathy, shared goals, and meaningful cultural projects that can create a stronger social bond. Artists need to build partnerships among each other and with community organizations that create reciprocal, responsible, and symbiotic relationships for the betterment of all parties.

We must shift our understanding of how social change happens from the romanticized and antiquated expectation of mass revolution in the street to a diverse range of social-cultural engagement practices that create a direct difference in our immediate environment. I refuse to enforce the dichotomy of reformist or revolutionary but instead support the efforts of both. It is through building of community and empathy that we can lay the groundwork for a different way of existing in the world, so that if there is revolutionary change we the people will understand our responsibility to each other when constructing a new system of governance. Social change can be constructed through an ongoing series of efforts or interventions in which we change our understanding of our relationship to the world we make and are confined to live in.⁷ The modernist ideology of creating utopic visions and projects to change the world is outdated and deserves an update, we need not abandon ideas for vast sweeping change but instead understand how change can be informed, activated and articulated in a sensitive manner through a series of actions and interventions.

Art alone cannot change the world, though it is a good place to start kindling the fire of creativity within the human race. Art can provide a space to learn how to be active citizens as well as to imagine new and different possibilities for the present and future. We must creatively reimagine ourselves, our relationships in the world, and the extension of ourselves, which is the built and natural environment. Through participation in collective projects we can begin to remember and reinvent what it means to be in the world together, to create moments that embody what it

⁴ David, Harvey. 2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso.

⁵ Lazar, Sian. 2008. *El Alto, Rebel City: Self and Citizenship in Andean Bolivia* /. Durham: Duke University

⁶ David, Harvey. 2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso. Pg. 148

⁷ Miles, Malcom. "A Game of Appearances: Public Spaces and Public Spheres." *Art & the Public Sphere* 1 (2): p185

means to exist in the world with the values of respect, care, and love for all of those who chose to participate. Through collective experiences we can develop the tools and knowledge necessary to produce new understandings of what it means to live together. Conversely we will know how to synthesize our communities, cities and societies in the image of our new understanding of interdependent and reciprocal living.