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Socially Engaged Art in the Americas
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Working For Communities, Not in Them
West Meets East

West Meets East is a project facilitated by artist Loraine Leeson, designed as a response to rising aggression of the neofascist British National Party in Bow, East London against minority communities. The project worked specifically with teenage Bengali girls from the Central Foundation School for Girls in Bow. It was fueled by the girls' experiences of arriving and adjusting to life in Britain, and eventually came to focus on their experiences towing the line between two cultures. *West Meets East* extends past the physical and temporal in its significance; the project is both a physical quilt made as well as dialogue surrounding it. Each artist was involved in producing a physical work as well as an idealized performance of dialogue. The act of creation and the continuation of dialogue are paramount to understanding the significance of this piece in addressing a social issue. The process of *West Meets East* allowed for a therapeutic space for the artists, centered their voices, and facilitated knowledge sharing between the Bengali community in Bow, East London and the art community. The projection of the completed quilt throughout the Docklands constructed another, wider, and lasting space for dialogue. In these ways, *West Meets East* generated an exemplary approach for discussing issues of culture and identity, commonality and difference and further, addressing the violence against minority communities in the Docklands.

The physical process of creation is a vital aspect of the project as a whole. This process began at the individual level, with brainstorming sessions. The Bengali girls all collected images and objects that they felt represented them in some way. They all brought their own ideas to the

group, and each individual voice was highlighted. Next, they combined their ideas into their own, separate collages, creating an expression of their experiences and concerns. In this way, they were able to create the conversation that they wanted to have. They were put in the position of creation--of power--rather than Leeson. As creators, they commanded agency and their voices were centered in dialogue. Eventually, the group transitioned into a shared work, focusing on the possibility of creating common threads between their experiences. The collaboration in creating this piece is crucial to the importance of the project as a whole. It symbolizes the shared experiences and struggles of the girls; specifically the idea of participating in two cultures was echoed throughout the space. Acknowledging this similarity created a supportive community. The space was full of collective understanding, and functioned as an outlet for the girls. In this way the process of creation had therapeutic effects for participants. This process continued as the group determined how to represent their shared experiences in a physical form. Conversation was centered on the experiences of the girls. Decisions about medium, images used, and placement of those images were all critical to the girls' expression of their intersecting identities. The eventual projection of the art was an important part of the process as well. A photo mural was displayed on a billboard in Dockland as part of a larger collection of billboards creating visibility for marginalized groups in the community. This visibility is extremely important in the empowering process. Having a final product can evoke a sense of pride and accomplishment, especially knowing that it will be seen by a broader community. Their experiences were shared with the broader community as well as within the community formed through the project. In these ways, the process of *West Meets East* from start to finish is a crucial aspect of the project, and should be valued as part of the artwork as a whole.

The physical elements of the quilt also all contribute to the project's overall meaning. The quilt is loaded with symbolism of the Bengali girls' experiences living between two cultures; every aspect of it incorporates this duality. The medium of a quilt alludes to garment factories. This links the piece to the girls' family members, many of whom work at small garment factories. In the center of the quilt there is an image of hands, decorated with mehndi hand painting, and sewing a denim jacket with a sari. The joining together of a jean jacket and a sari represents a fusion of Western and Bangli culture respectively. The two garments are being sewn together with an industrial sewing machine, drawing again on the allusion of the garment industry and connection to family. The hands sewing the two garments together are covered in mehndi hand painting that is traditionally associated with marriage ceremonies, insinuating a 'marriage' of cultures. The traditional mehndi was juxtaposed by the fact that it was painted with nail polish. The central image is surrounded by images around its border. These include elements of popular Western consumer culture, such as McDonald's and CocaCola logos. The border also incorporates images of village life in Bangladesh. These represent aspects of life in the United Kingdom in contrast to life in Bangladesh. Between these images, the border consists of English and Bengali words which illustrate some of the shared pleasures of the group. The use of both languages to write these words is another symbol for the union of their identities. All of these aspects "symbolize a process in which identity is defined, or performed, through past rituals and traditions, the experience of daily work, and the influences of contemporary consumer culture" (Kester 23). Through the design of this quilt, the Bengali girls were able to express their experiences and give voice to their concerns and questions surrounding their identities.

West Meets East teaches us how to better address social problems because of its intentional emphasis and amplification of the voices of marginalized communities, as well as the

process of shared learning that occurs. The project promoted personal growth and introspection through individual exercises. By bringing those individual reflections together, the girls formed a supportive community amongst themselves. Their discussions surrounding design and implementation facilitated this community of care because they were rooted in commonalities amongst their experiences living between two cultures. The project evokes catharsis in two ways: in terms of community, allowing the girls to release some of the tension of split identities through their unification, and in terms of expression, giving them the space to present their reflections. In addition to creating a comfortable space for expression, *West Meets East* is an important model for addressing social problems because there is shared learning occurring. Leeson brings in her expertise as an artist to spark brainstorming amongst the girls, and suggests mediums for expression. The project is focused on the experience for the girls, but it also works to expand dialogue outside of the group, amplifying their voices. Leeson is able to use her connections as an artist in order to project this piece for the broader community to view. Other initiatives that address social issues should follow the strengths of this project--it is exemplary in its focus on marginalized experiences and voices, collective healing, and use of resources to make those voices heard by the broader community.

Despite the project's strengths, it is important to explore the dynamics of power within this piece. As a facilitator, how does Leeson make sure that she is not steering the project towards her own interests? How does she maintain authenticity of the piece in showcasing others' work? To what extent should she publicize the work? What impact will this have on the community? Does viewer reception matter? Who is credited for the work? Whose name do we hear? What is her relationship with the community? Why did she take on this project?

Analyzing Leeson's approach to *West Meets East* can help answer these questions. She takes a dialogical approach, and within this, she works to achieve understanding rather than create confusion. She begins with dialogue within the community, trying to learn about the people with whom she is working. This is why the process of construction and the projection of the quilt are so important. Leeson describes herself not as an "object maker," but "as an artist who facilitates shared visions." In this way, she is a bit removed from the creation process. As Kester states, Leeson's "artistic identity is based in part on [her] capacity to listen, openly and actively, and to organize scenarios that maximise the collective creative potential of a given constituency or site" (Kester 24). Her paintbrush is her ability to promote dialogue, so to speak. As such, the piece does not seem to be geared towards improving Leeson's status as an artist, but instead amplifying and making clear the dialogue and the voices of others.

As a piece that rejects the traditional confusing, earth-shattering framework of avant-garde art, *West Meets East* did not garner the same publicity. Traditional framework suggests that the function of artists in avant-garde art is as the intelligentsia class, creating the theory behind action. This way of thinking causes a separation between artists and society. Leeson takes a different approach, allowing the community that she is working with to be the thinkers and the voice behind the artwork. They made the meaning of the artwork explicit, in this way, they deconstructed the next barrier between themselves as artists, and society. Although the project does not fit within traditional conceptions of avant-garde, this in itself is ground-breaking and avant-garde. It is challenging the very notion of what it means to be considered avant-garde art.

West Meets East was not created for the evaluation of the art community, and for this reason it may not garner the same attention as a piece that falls in the traditional role of avant-garde art. This is unfortunate because it is exemplary in its approach to addressing social issues.

Projects should be geared towards the benefit of the communities that they are working with.

Artists should be working for communities, using their own capital, resources, and connections so that their concerns are heard. Their focus should be on individual and community goals in whatever form they take. *West Meets East* should be lauded for its rejection of elitism that often accompanies avant-garde artwork, and its success as a space of community healing.