

Art for change?

It is often taken for granted that art functions as a tool and a vehicle of social change; indeed, it was just this theme that we took up in our first discussion board posting. While the vocal majority seemed to agree that art could foster social change, many of us, when encountering work such as Warhol's *200 One Dollar Bills* or Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* might find ourselves wondering exactly what type of change such work could really make. Does a painting that takes money for its subject do anything to unsettle a culture that seems more and more to place the individual pursuit of money above the needs of the community? Does a urinal inscribed with a forged signature (see Duchamp's work mentioned above) do anything more than offer a paltry challenge to the taste of a leisured class?

It was precisely the complicity of market system art like Duchamp's and the American Pop artists like Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg with the oppressive class that was at the heart of a 1973 protest staged in front of another landmark Sotheby's auction. On that October day a group of New York City taxi drivers and artists stood before the renowned auction house to call down Robert C. Scull who they claimed made his fortune robbing cabbies and hawking art. Some of the artists marching in solidarity with the taxi cab drivers rushed out to a nearby hardware store to buy a snow shovel to sell at exorbitant price, poking fun at Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. Is this critique of art's complicity with big money an apt one?

The idea that the art market is synonymous with 'business as usual' is an idea that is as pervasive today as ever—if not more so. As Eleanor Heartney reminds us in her lecture on art and labour, one move made by activists of the recent Occupy Wall Street movement was to set up occupations in a number of New York City's museums. The organizers of the Occupy Museums march declared in a public statement that "for the past decade and more, artists and art lovers have been the victims of the intense commercialization and co-optation of art." They further claimed that "art is for everyone, across all classes and cultures and communities" and not merely for the cultural elite, or the 1%. The artist activists closed their statement by exhorting museums to open their minds and their hearts: "Art is for everyone!" they claimed. "The people are at your door!"

These two protests demonstrate an abiding and perhaps growing suspicion of the received idea that market system art can change things. But while market system art is placed under intense scrutiny, a growing field of artists and educators have been working to disseminate the practices and techniques of art making in order to sow the seeds of change. This community based art (sometimes referred to as 'dialogical art' or 'community arts') seeks to place in the hands of the marginalized, the worker, or, in the words of the Occupy Movement, the 99%, the means of cultural production. The hope is that providing someone with the tools to tell her story in her words, will foster the sort of change that some fear art has become incapable of.

Community based art: a voice of change, a voice of one's own

A term popularized in the 1960s, community based art, and community based art education quickly became a popular practice of cultural enrichment in community centres, union halls, and educational institutions across North America, parts of Europe, and Australia. Although the recent economic downturn and the resulting deep budget cuts have led to the stemming of funds to such programs, the success stories and the tangible production of meaning and pride that have resulted from these initiatives show us art really does have the power to make change; indeed, commentators such as Mcleod might well argue that the sorts of cuts we see happening to arts budgets are not merely the result of necessary 'belt-tightening', but instead represent an active effort to undermine the change provoked by such community based art work.

The idea behind community based art is simple: it is meant to give voice to the otherwise voiceless or silenced. Two fundamental and related claims lay at the foundation of community based art: 1) that the canonical, or market system art of the cultural elite neither speaks to nor for the experience of marginalized or under-privileged groups, classes, or communities; 2) that art and the means of its production are not the exclusive property of a creative or initiated class. To put it in somewhat less politicized terms: community based art allows folks to tell their own stories, in their own words.

Community based art in practice

Community based art involves an artist or art educator working within a classroom or community to teach the techniques and practices of artmaking. Equipped with these tools students and community members are able to engage with their own experiences of their culture, workplace, and daily lives. Such work documents these experiences and allows for such newly empowered artists to paint, narrate, play, sing, photograph, sculpt, or act *their* stories *their way*. In the process of this expression one is invited to reflect on oneself and one's values, and a new relationship with one's place in the larger social context is fostered; one is invited to open both to one's own creative processes and that of others. In sharing in these explorations with others, one encounters both the similarities and the differences between oneself and the community with which he or she works.

Community based art is often created with specific goals in mind. Some work is produced to raise awareness about certain a certain cause or community concern such as bolstering labour relations, or the prevention of gang violence, drug use, or the spread of STDs. One recent community based art program has taken up the cause of making people more comfortable with the idea extended breastfeeding. Far from being prescriptive, these goals are arrived at organically by members of the community.

Other work is meant to document the story of an under-represented segment of society. The photographs of Hurmuses, the WDI photography program, and those available on the websites of unions such as OPSEU's do just this work. They show people on the job, on the picket line, on the march on labour day, and otherwise sharing in and working with their community. Documentaries like *China Blue* and *Maquilapolis* by Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre (discussed by Eleanor Heartney in this week's second video) also do this sort of

work; Funari and de la Torre, for instance, invited the maquiladora workers documented in their film to themselves shoot footage and conduct interviews.

We have already had a taste of the sort of work community based art programs do today, in the shape of the photography produce by Gayle Hurmuses, and in the rap, graphic design and photography programs of the WDI. Eleanor Heartney in her video describes some market system artists whose work can be productively read as taking up the practices of community based art, just as the work of John Ahearn (taken up in our third reading) can be. Throughout the remainder of the semester we will continue to explore community based art both as it was practiced in decades past, and as it is practiced today.

Reading 3: Whose Art Is It?

“John went home from the meeting with “community” approval— though it is probably accurate to say that a community board of thirty-five people appointed by their borough president is no more and no less “the community” than a block on Walton Avenue.”

– Jane Kramer

In this the third reading of module 3 & 4 Jane Kramer explores the controversial work John Ahearn produced for New York City’s Percent for Art program. Ahearn is a white artist with an upper middleclass background, who moved to a South Bronx neighbourhood to work in and with a community he’d grown to love and be a part of. The work he produced for the 44th Police Precinct, featured painted bronze castings of members of the Ahearn’s Walton Avenue neighbourhood. The response to Ahearn’s work raises a number of question about who the artist works for (especially where his work is meant to represent a community); To whom the art work belongs; how the race and privilege of the artist impacted upon the work’s interpretation; and otherwise challenges us to think about the conflicting and overlapping values of market system art and community based art.

While Ahearn is undoubtedly an exponent of the art market and the gallery system, he has nonetheless tirelessly worked to embed himself in his South Bronx community the better to work through and with it. He views his effort to produce work that he felt represented the community— indeed, work that was produced with the community— as a failure precisely because of the ways in which it upset a number of parties. He even going so far as to alter the work to better please the work’s critics. Yet, despite the harsh and emotionally charged criticism of Ahearn’s work, both his subjects (Corey and Raymond) and his appointed jury of artists and officials deemed the work good, or even important.

What do you think of Ahearn’s work? Was it a misguided attempt to speak for a community he had no business attempting to speak for? Was he misunderstood by his detractors? Did the community ultimately gain or lose by the removal of his short lived installation?