

**COMMUNITY ART AS AN
INTERDISCIPLINARY CHALLENGE
TO FINE ART**

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ABSTRACT
CHALLENGING NOTIONS OF ART:
DEVELOPING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY UNDERSTANDING
OF COMMUNITY ART

By Abigail King

In the last half of the twentieth century, as much of American society was changing, so were the ways that artists connected to their communities. The American mural movement was simultaneously born in cities across the country, while other forms of the arts reached out to their communities as well. Within a relatively short amount of time, artists and community organizations began to intentionally work together to serve both of their interests. Thus, community art began to define any collaborative art project that builds community. Decades later, it is an art form and organizing tactic that is increasingly being used by grassroots leaders, often untrained in either art or organizing. By more thoroughly understanding the concept and developing the process, more kinds of groups and organizers will be able to employ community art to fit their needs.

As an artist, I was drawn to the community interaction inherent in community art, and seek to build this into my artistic identity. My first attempt, chronicled in Section one, produced a mural for the Springfield Township Fire Station that was painted by a group of local students. Section two uses two landmark pieces—*The Sistine Ceiling* by Michelangelo and *The Great Wall* by Judith Baca—to explain the differences in the traditional art and community art paradigms. Section three searches for more accessible community art processes by integrating art and community organizing. Organizing models are examined and transformed into community art processes with specific goals. The discussion of each model includes a piece that has been done with a similar approach for reference. This investigation allows me to critique my project and offer a more complete understanding of the concept of community art to those who want to practice or use it.

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Introduction: the Development and Significance of Community Art

Community art, in its most simple definition, is art that builds community. It deserves its own genre for the way that it subverts traditional art forms by its very nature. It does not require any special talent. It does not require a certain value or a certain media. And it certainly does not require an educated audience. But, it does require collaboration, a public site, and serious and intense efforts to engage the community in the process of making the piece. It requires “artists” to forget about their ego and share control of the project. It begs for analysis in conjunction with community organizing, so that the process is more accessible to more kinds of people, in keeping with the nature of the practice. These concepts are more challenging for the art world than one would think.

These functions and characteristics of community art are incredibly subversive. “Critics argue a bit about art, trying to maintain the illusion of democratic options, but they essentially define “good art” around a fairly narrow set of assumptions” (Crichton 1998). The current system only pretends to relate to the people, keeping art out of their lives and away from their hearts. Community art is a kind of carnival, turning the world upside down, taking the power to create from the hands of the privileged genius and putting into the hands of common, untrained, and oppressed artists. It takes the prestige away from the title of artist and devalues the commodities that we have come to call art—because everyone can make and everyone can value it. It cannot be worth a million dollars because it is on every street corner; it is not attached to a famous name and therefore it does not have the characteristics of fine art. By eliminating the individual artist as important to the success of the work, community art kills the notion of the genius

artist. Community art breaks down the standards of where art should be made, who should make it and where it should be displayed. Art is called to a higher function, one of daily social, cultural and political importance, and community art makes it possible.

Though wall painting had been around for centuries and perhaps thousands of years before community art, socially engaged murals as they are now did not develop into a movement until the late 1970s. Even then, it was a scattered movement. Direct predecessors include Diego Rivera and the Mexican Muralists, as well as the artists of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) here in the U.S. These Mexicans critiqued society and politics and often painted their political opinions in a mural. Though this was a large step in the art world, these pieces still did not interact with the community throughout the process. When the work of these artists entered the U.S., many Chicanos had not seen valued art by anyone Mexican. Generally, the art world was still shutting out people of color. The WPA was also different. It created jobs, and therefore had a purpose beyond aesthetics. WPA art also brought art closer to home for many Americans. Art was appearing in school, university and public buildings in a new volume. This access was new in the American art world.

These steps were in the right direction and paved the way for the eventual recognition of community art. But, ironically, many of the leaders and founders of community art were unaware of these previous movements. These were artists who grew out of a deep desire for both social change and transformative art, and wanted to reconcile these two parts of themselves. It is a movement that grew organically and simultaneously in many corners of the country. Community art is not a unified

movement; rather it is multi-faceted with some of the individual pieces unintentionally reflecting each other.

This development came at the end of the 1960s. Loud social identity movements encouraged artists to make an artistic life for themselves, even if they were left out by the traditional system of power in art. Many of the issues needed broad public support, so large scale public art was an excellent strategy for disseminating that information. The Anti-War Movement revealed how art can heal, or at least generate discussion about, difficult subjects. Anti-Vietnam art also showed that political art can be both accepted and effective. This movement was a true mother to community art.

At the same time, the art world was perhaps becoming more closed. Still dominated by white men, the styles of the day were drifting from a visual language that the common people would understand. Abstract expressionism has been at its height in the fifties. Color field painting left many common people wondering why these paintings were valued at all. Pop art began to bring art back to common culture, but again, the average person did not understand the subtexts of the work. Commodification was taking over the art world. There was no room for most women or people of color, or even political art. Artists who saw both their content and identity excluded from the art world had to find alternative ways to express themselves and get out their message. Quickly this new kind of public art went from something that merely involved artist, to projects that engaged many facets of a community.

This project researches in depth the nature and practice of community art, in order to come to a better, more accessible understanding of what the genre is. Chapter 1 details

my experience creating a mural with students at Finneytown High School for the local fire station. As an artist, I did not want to take a look at a participatory genre without trying to experience it for myself. Developing and completing a project, in tandem with research, created an experience that gave me a full perspective on community art.

Chapter 2 defines community art by comparing it to traditional art. These two paradigms are exemplified and demonstrated through two pieces: Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling and Judith Baca's Great Wall. In this process, traditional art is shown to:

- have a narrower audience defined by identities such as race, class, education
- is often inaccessible in museums or private collections
- is usually supported by a singular patron, even if that patron is an institution
- requires no collaboration
- is created by an individual genius
- does not depend on impact for value

Community art stands in opposition to these principles, because it:

- has a broad audience
- has a widely accessible site
- has a grassroots support
- is collaborative across boundaries
- does not have one clear artist, either because the artist is also an organizer/teacher or because a team created it
- depends on social or cultural impact for value

The success of community art also rests on these underlying assumptions. If artists or participants are still operating under the assumptions of more traditional art, then their project will not be as successful.

Section Three searches for more accessible community art processes by integrating art and community organizing. Organizing models are examined and

transformed into community art processes with specific goals. The discussion of each model includes a piece that has been done with a similar approach.

To connect all of my learning, the final portion evaluates my project amongst the theories discussed later in the paper. This critique offers a chance at continued growth for me as an artist and organizer.

Chapter One: Practicing Community Art

Over the course of five months, I have worked with a group to take a community art project from inception to completion. I acted as an administrator, advisor, mediator, and teacher, often more than as an artist. The students and volunteers became the artists and the firehouse became the museum. The group took a concept, a theoretical puzzle, and made it a reality. This thing called community art became an experience and a process, as much as a finished product.

From Idea to Project

Our mural began as an inkling. I spent a semester at Mills College, in Oakland California. The program was known as the Institute for Civic Leadership, and focuses on bringing together diverse women to focus on social change through courses, internships and mentoring. I was asked to articulate my vision for social change. I desired to become more than an individual artist. I wanted to use my talent to be of service. I also realized that the place that I can make the most difference is in my own community (Stout 1996). At the end of the program, we were each given the opportunity to receive a thousand dollar grant to use for the project of our choice, I designed a program to create a large, collaborative, public art piece in Finneytown, the small first-ring suburb of Cincinnati that I grew up in. It has shaped me and given me so much, that it only makes sense that I, in the very cliché way, give back to that community. At the same time, I find it a fascinating community. Diversity is on the rise and public housing has been added to the suburb. It is a small community without any industry, struggling but successful schools and widely differing opinions on the future of the community. It has many social issues that I thought would be interesting to deal with in art. From the

beginning, I wanted the community invested in the project, so I tried to leave myself open to their thoughts and ideas as I sought out information and interested people.

Because I am a recent graduate, and the district employs my father, I had enough connections to jump right in. I started talking to people with intimate knowledge of the schools and the populations that I wanted to impact. Naturally, the high school art teacher, Mrs. Ficke, was at the top of my list. I was one of her students and she tends to be very receptive to useful extra-curricular projects. In our initial discussions in September of 2004, she mentioned that Mr. Leininger, the fire chief, had approached her about artwork for the new Springfield Township Fire Station. She connected my interest to his and helped me contact him. This site turned out to be perfect, because one of my goals was to bring art into the community, beyond the schools. Throughout the fall, I met with the fire chief, faculty members at the high school and administrators to develop a program, curriculum and budget for a mural project to be displayed in the apparatus bay of the fire house. The apparatus bay is basically a very large garage. Mr. Leininger noted that it was a

very boring and utilitarian space. He saw art as having the potential to breathe

life into the space. It would do that, and more. Putting art into such a non-traditional space subverts traditional fine art notions of art. All community art is located in non-



traditional spaces like this, so having such a prime space for this project increased its meaning.

Unfortunately, my research on community organizing was not far enough along to influence the decisions I made about what kind of process to use. Instead, I had to listen to the wisdom of the teachers and my own experience to determine the activities and work. This can be heavily criticized. Regardless, the process developed to involve a core group of high school students doing research and design and a larger group helping to paint the final product. The core team met once a week to discuss the definition of community art, look at murals, met with firemen and toured the fire station, sorted through images, and eventually created a sketch. Each student was in charge of the drawing for one panel, though the entire group discussed each effort. Mrs. Ficke helped recruit students, Andy Anderson, the video club advisor, found a student to document the project, and Mr. Volz, the community service teacher, provided some funds. I received five applications from students who wanted to be on the design team. All five students ended up participating, and for privacy purposes, when they are specifically mentioned, they will only be identified with a number. So at the beginning of November I introduced myself to the students, timeline and curriculum in hand. At this early point in the project, there had already been a long list of people involved in getting the project off the ground. I certainly could not be credited for all the work, as a traditional artist would be.

November 8 was the first meeting with the students. Four of them came and it was very interesting. I had mixed feelings over all. I felt like I connected with the students in some ways, and not at all in others. For example, I was very excited about

talking to students about what art is and means. This topic fell like a load of bricks and flopped. But, I was able to step back and find something that the students could talk about and take ownership of: designing t-shirts. This was an important step, because, though I gave some directions, I left the students to do the work. This would prove to be key in giving them the ownership of the larger design work. I gave up some leadership and control, and gave it to them. Though the t-shirts never materialized, this was an excellent exercise that allowed me to see the ways that I would need to direct the students.

I had to sell them on the project. I discovered how important it is to learn how to share your vision and engage people in your ideas. The message changes for your audience. Different parts of the project apply and appeal to different types of people. I had trouble readjusting to talking to high school students. The language and concepts I used to pitch the idea to professors, teachers and the fire department was not effective when communicating with students. Three and a half years of college had given me a whole new vocabulary and perspective that made it difficult for me to use language that high school student could connect to. I needed to step back from that and find a new way to relate to them. I also reflected on the fact that I may have never spoken the language of the typical high school student. I thought of how I was in high school and look at the girls that I worked with on the project, and found major differences in the images. This is a challenge to consider throughout our work together.

By the second week, I began to find significant personal learning in our activities. First, the discussion went much better the second time around because the students had

something concrete to talk about: images. As we went through the slides of murals, the students had many comments. They started to make the connection between pieces. They were looking at characteristics of a good mural. They looked at the style, colors and format, deciding that they preferred the pieces that were unified and mixed both realism and abstraction. Second, it is very, very difficult to work with a contrived group. I had trouble truly engaging students in the idea. I found that students, and many other kinds of citizens, are very wrapped up in their own lives. This was true of me in high school and probably is still true. This makes it very hard for me to retain the students. At this point, it looked as though we were down to three maybe four students. We were potentially losing two to basketball and one to a play. So, the problem seemed not to be that there was something wrong with the project, but that the suburban life style is not conducive to engaging students or people in activities like this. My first reaction was that I did something wrong, I ran the last meeting poorly or I planned it too rigidly, and that was why the kids did not want to do it. But, the situation may have been a larger reflection on the kids and the culture than on me. I am learning that everything I do is a part of a larger vision. Though I need to still do the best that I can, it is a learning experience, a challenge and a step in a journey of art making, change making and living.

Having met with the students for the third time, I was very frustrated and wondered if this is the right approach to have taken. I couldn't find a community artist to come talk to the students. This was an important part of the curriculum that I designed, to maximize the students' learning. My back up plan was to have the students go over the pictures from the fire department as visual research. This led to another conflict of

interest: Mr. Leininger was concerned about losing the pictures and did not want to lend them out, yet I was supposed to complete the lesson. In the end, I did not have the pictures, and planned a day that seemed destined to be boring. The students were supposed to come up with questions for the firefighters, and the format in which they will ask them. Though there may have been value in this, I felt that I was giving too much time to preliminary work and not enough time to drawing. The root of part of this problem was not in my control. For example, Mr. Leininger delayed the day that the students were to visit the firehouse twice. This was an integral step to moving on to drawing. With the slowed pace, I felt like I was pulling teeth trying to keep interest high. The students weren't being fed enough information to keep them on task. I had designed a process that relied on so much from others that I was left to compensate when that didn't work out. The process also included a group that did not grow organically; instead they were just the kids who volunteered. If I had worked with the interest that was already there, without trying to manufacture new interest, I would have avoided some of these problems. But, that would have resulted in an even smaller group. These are the trade offs for a heavily community-oriented process. If I had left most of the responsibility for the work to myself, relying only on the community for input, the process would have certainly gone faster and easier. But, the community involvement would have been sacrificed.

The next week, we went to the firehouse to see the space, learn about the job and talk to some firefighters. Due to scheduling conflicts inherent in high school, I thought we were only going to have three students on the design team. This was a great concern

of mine. But, when the students came to the firehouse, there were five; it was the first time that all of the students showed up on the same day. That was an encouraging testament to the fact that they were finding ways to make this project fit into their lives.

The meeting with the firefighters went well. The kids did prepare in advance, but that didn't take very long and no one brought the list of questions with them to the firehouse anyway. We watched a short video of pictures of the department, and then got

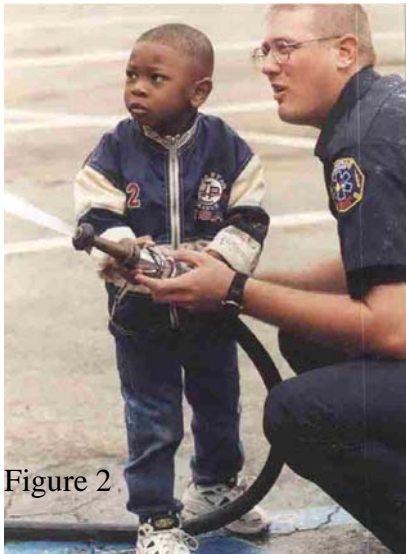


Figure 2

a tour. The kids were really impressed with the whole building, from sleeping and living quarters, to the considerations that had to be taken when designing a building for such a specific use, to the equipment. The apparatus bay was the most fascinating part., because of all the equipment and the fact that it would soon be home to our murals. Mr. Leininger showed us the specialized equipment that the township has for terrorism and

education. Then we played with the thermal imaging camera, which helps to find people in burning buildings. Following the tour, we interviewed Mr. Schwartz, a career paramedic, and Ben Casteel, a Finneytown alum who is now a full-time firefighter. The design team led the discussion, asking about everything from their job to what kind of artwork they would like to see. There was a good connection between the fire department staff and the students, providing the team with much deeper information on their subject. The students were enthusiastic and interested, and represented their school

and the project well. It was the best meeting thus far in the project; and it gave me confidence in the process and its meaning.

Bumps in the Long Road

The obstacles continued to be numerous. The next week we met to draw, but because we only had three students out of the team of five, the group decided that

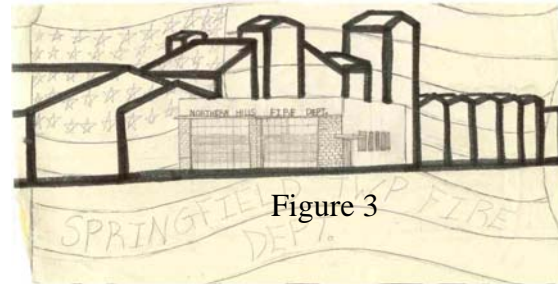


Figure 3

it would be better to draw over break. Again we intended to meet over break, but sickness and schedules prevented that. The whole process became a lesson in flexibility. At this point, I felt very behind. The schedule had been scrapped. We did not have final drawings, and when we got sketches together, Mr. Leininger was not satisfied.

The Monday following Winter Break, we met, again only with three out of the five kids. So, we charged ahead, spending the entire time drawing. By the end of the session, we had three very creative drawings that I felt confident about. The themes for the other pieces had been determined and the students had been notified.



Figure 4

When I met with Mr. Leininger that week, it did not go very well. There had been a large miscommunication from the beginning of the project that surfaced. He was under the impression that the students would be generating

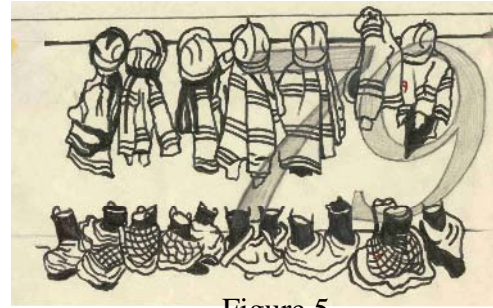


Figure 5

the ideas, but I would be doing the final drawings. I don't know how he got that impression, because the whole point of the project is to give the students an opportunity to make public artwork and for them to feel ownership over the project. I don't feel like that is effectively accomplished if I, and the client, do not trust them enough to do the work. I thought the ideas that they came up with were great and that the finals would be great too. Leininger said they seemed "rustic." I took offense to that. First, they were great drawings for the students' level. Second, I don't have the time to do all the drawing. Third, it drains some of the meaning out of the project and fourth, because I believed that his critique may have come from his ignorance about art. At this point, we were both confused and frustrated about the project. He gave lots of suggestions, or said



maybe he could think of some ideas, but the truth is, we were not short on ideas. That was not the problem. The problem was he had different expectations than I did and we needed to work to make those coincide better. Mr. Leininger was operating under the only understanding of art that he had: traditional fine art. By those standards, art should be precious, and created by a trained genius. Community art challenges all of these notions.

The challenge of the project for me became mediating between the students' work and Mr. Leininger's expectations. negotiating between the community art and fine art paradigms.

Overall, I came out of the meeting feeling unprepared, stressed and frustrated. We needed to rework the drawings so that Mr. Leininger would be satisfied, but could we do that in the time we had left? Were these kids ready to put in enough intense effort? Would he like it anyway? Next time I do a project like this, I will set up a list of expectations for the project, like a contract, that both parties will sign and agree upon, so that all these assumptions are clear from the start.

On Monday, January 17 the students and I met at the high school woodshop. This was our second try at building the panels.

The first time we were supposed to meet, only Student #3 showed up. So, we rescheduled, and Mr. Dickerson, the woodshop teacher, was ever so kind and came in on his day off. Turned out that



Student #2 was in her second year as a woodshop student, and her skill made the project go a little faster. She was in charge of measuring and cutting, and did an excellent job.

Three other students figured out how to get it done assembly line style. They really

turned out to be a sharp group. I helped as a team member rather than as a director.

They didn't really need me to direct. That's the amazing thing about students. They are fairly self-sufficient and if you trust them to get the work done, they will probably do it

well, perhaps exceeding your expectations. It was a pretty straightforward part of the process, but a great expression of team and group work. Their skills made me confident in their ability to direct a small team of volunteers on the day we paint.



Figure 8

Entering the Home Stretch

With some foot dragging, the mural eventually got off the ground. After a couple of weeks of revision and preparation, we began painting on February 5. Eight hours, twenty plus volunteers and four pizzas later, we had

finished two of the panels, made significant progress on two more and started the fifth. Food helped everyone stay happy and focused. Overall, it was a very successful day, involving the students' skills in collaboration and leadership.

To even get to a place where we could start, we had to finalize and have approved all the drawings, trace all the drawing on panels and gather volunteers. The discussions over the drawings were scattered and varied. Some were fully approved by the fire chief, and others needed a lot of work. This required more piecemeal meetings, with the students working independently. I spent a lot of one-on-one time with the students discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the drawing and what challenges they might face in the painting process. To smooth out the approval process, I did tracing of the drawings to clean them up. For some, this help to clarify what they needed to do, while others saw it as an encroachment on their creative process. For example, Student #5 took

a lot of personal ownership over her piece of the project and had a hard time taking criticism or suggestions. She seemed to forget that this was a commissioned project for a client, and that client had the authority to make suggestions or corrections. She saw herself as an individual artist in the traditional fine art paradigm. Mr. Leininger wanted to add symbols of the different stations to her piece, and she took offense to this, and eventually did not take responsibility for the completion of her panel. In contrast to this was Student #2's attitude. He took Leininger's comments in stride, appropriately modifying her idea and still taking leadership for its completion. Student #4 had chosen a very difficult composition and needed help perfecting the drawing and painting, to meet Leininger's standards. She seemed to be able to take criticism when someone else simply made the changes, but was not very good at listening and making her own adjustments based on the critiques of others. These adjustments were the largest challenges in completing the prep work.

The day had finally arrived. We were faced with one hundred and sixty square feet of white space that needed painted. Instead of not enough, we often had too many volunteers and my major job was directing them towards productive work. It took almost the first hour to get settled in—some panels were being painted, colors were being mixed, and the last panel was being traced. The core group of students had mostly shown up, with only one student still absent. Those present were busy directing teams of two to four volunteers. By comparing the students' strategies, we can see what characteristics



helped make the students successful in the painting process.

Student #1 was very focused. She had a color version of her drawing to work with and had thought about the best way to jump into the process. With the help of a couple of volunteers, she taped off lines that didn't need to be painted to preserve the



Figure 10

design while making it easier for unskilled volunteers to help. She was flexible and collaborative, as volunteers moved in and out of working on her piece, using their strengths to complete different parts

of the piece. She asked for help from either me or Mrs. Ficke, the art teacher, whenever she did not know how to do something. This took a certain amount of humility and respect for the project. Step by step, she and her team worked in a dedicated and focused way throughout the eight hours that we painted. Student #1 set a good example for her team for the group, showing the work ethic and energy that it required to finish the piece. As a result of her approach, her piece was within an hour of being finished when we left for the evening.

Student #2 shared many qualities and strategies with #1. He was motivated by his ownership over the piece and his need for help to complete it. He knew it would take a team effort to get his piece done, and out of this, appropriately welcomed and directed his volunteers. He showed



Figure 11

students with little artistic talent or experience, how to use what they did have to be a part of a larger success. He also was very comfortable with asking for help and imposed a high standard of completion on his work. He finished before the rest of the group and left early. Though I wish he had felt enough responsibility to the group to stay and help work on someone else's piece, he had followed through to complete his own. He then came in after school the following week to touch up and clear coat his piece, truly taking the responsibility for its completion, in a way that no other student did. He was very proud of his piece, in a way none of the other students showed. It actually meant quite a bit to him.

Student #3 came late and did not inform anyone that this would be the case. So,



Figure 12

when the time came to start, I assigned a small group of girls to the job of tracing his design onto his panel. This was done, and volunteers had started painting

when he arrived. He appeared taken aback that his piece had been started without him, but dove in anyway. He was very specific about what he wanted done, but rather than making a big deal out of it, he quietly fixed any mistakes that had been made. He directed perhaps the largest group of volunteers throughout the evening. His design was very effective. It very intriguing as a design, but also allowed for a lot of "unskilled" help. It involved a lot of flat color, and so it went very quickly. Student #3 brought his piece within hours of completion by the end of Saturday evening. He was also flexible

enough to lend his help where needed as the process was winding down. Overall, he did an excellent job and used his resources in the most effective way.

Student #4 chose a very challenging concept. At the beginning of the painting time, her drawing was still being corrected and modified. Ever positive, this didn't seem to bother her. Two hours in, it had been traced onto a board and her efforts were directed towards her piece. She had a difficult time accepting help. She definitely felt that she had her way of doing it and that this was best. She seemed unable to take the risk of having others help at times. But, she was neither catty nor rude about this; she simply had her quiet way of wanting to do it on her own. By the end, she had adjusted her attitude



some, seeking help for the difficult parts or not being offended when someone else took over. She took responsibility when she could for seeing her piece through, putting in at least five additional hours after our large painting day. Though it was far from finished at the end of February 5, with concentration and hard work, it was brought around quickly thereafter.

Student #5's drawing was fabulous. It was by far Mr. Leininger's favorite, because it combined the heritage and the current work of the department. Her excellent drawing skills really made the sketch shine. After this initial phase and the suggestions



Figure 14

that Leininger made, Student #5 seemed to lose her interest in the project. She was also late because she was at work, which she had informed the group had to happen. But, upon arriving, she spent a

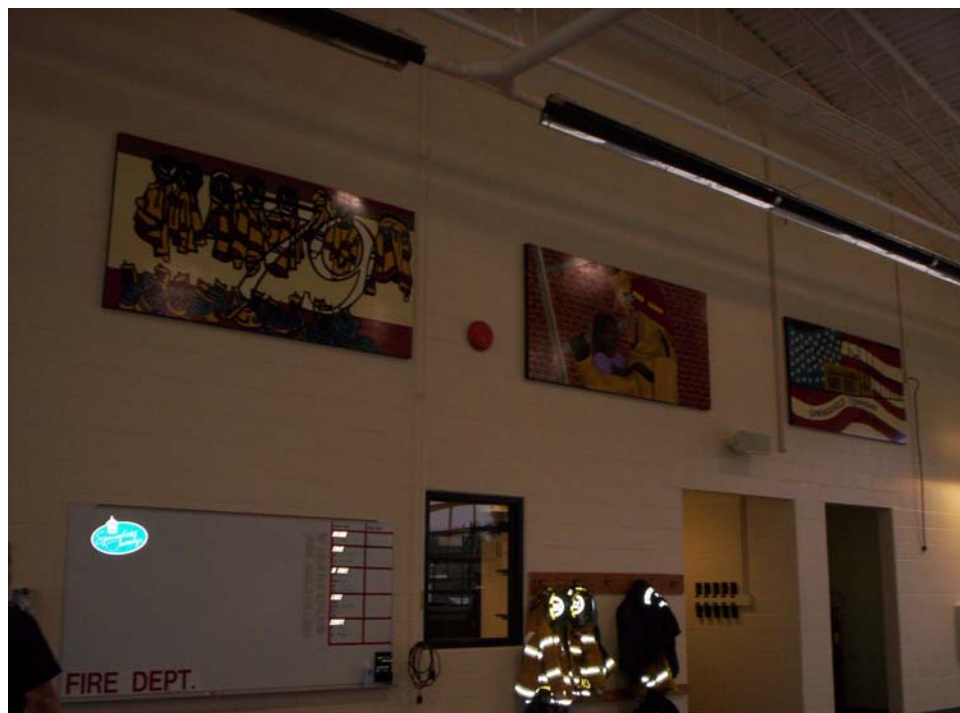
lot of time socializing and working on other people's pieces. She did not take over the direction of her piece, but rather became a painting team member. Many of the parts of the painting that did get finished well were not parts she worked on. She lacked the responsibility, leadership and flexibility that made the other pieces so successful. Her panel took the longest to complete and only was finished because of the dedication of others to see it through.

Whether or not the process was completed without stress, conflict or even some failure is not the measure of success. What truly shows the project's impact is the way that the project built community and changed the participants' ideas about art. Though not dealing with a particular social issue of the community, this project did build a bridge between the fire department and the students that was not there before. The fire fighters have been asked to consider how art can impact their daily routine, while the students examined how a certain profession contributes to and builds their community. This crossover allowed for learning by all who participated. The actual painting process itself

allowed alumni, parents, faculty and students to work together for a common goal as equals. It gave people who consider themselves not artistic a chance to push their understanding of themselves. The students on the design team made a public art piece to be proud of. The fire fighters enjoyed the community's appreciation of their work. Everyone in this process learned about art, their community or both.

All the students and volunteers had strengths and weaknesses throughout the project. The people who worked within a community art paradigm had much more success than the people who treated this project as they treat any traditional art project that they complete for a class. By examining the differences in these paradigms, this project can be used to illustrate what characteristics build a successful community art project.

Figure 15



Chapter Two: Competing Paradigms— Traditional and Community Art

One small project in one local suburb does not make a movement that will change art, nor does it make a movement that will change community organizing. But it can change the understanding of the concepts of art and organizing for the people who participate. That is the power of grassroots work. When projects like this are done *en masse* across the country, larger change happens. To adequately understand community art, one must consider the underlying assumptions of the more traditional and commonly accepted view of art. By comparing *The Sistine Ceiling* by Michelangelo and *The Great Wall* by Judith Baca, I will first present the traditional fine art paradigm and the community art paradigm. Six major issues can be used to differentiate the two pieces and paradigms: who the artist is, who the supporters are, if collaboration is used, who the audience is, where the site is and what its impacts are.

The Sistine Ceiling

Amongst the most well known artists in Western history, Michelangelo created work that helped shape our understanding of the nature of art. To understand how this is the case, a little of his background must be considered. Michelangelo spent his first five years on property owned by his family in the country. Due to this, he was nursed by a stonemason's wife (Beck 1999). Michelangelo later attributed his love for using a chisel to his relationship with this woman (Condivi 1987). In addition to the country estate, his family owned land in the city of Florence and in the country (Beck 1999). Thus,

Michelangelo was obviously at least of moderate social class. Nevertheless, his family was also in need of money, which caused his father to unsuccessfully try to discourage Michelangelo from pursuing the arts (Beck, 1999). Michelangelo trained in the head studio in Florence, and worked in the Medici Gardens as a young man (Condivi 1987). Whether by talent, connections or both, Michelangelo worked his way into the powerful networks of the art world. He then joined the household of Magnifico de Medici to continue developing his work during his late teen years (Condivi 1987). By the time he was twenty-five, he had completed the world famous *Pieta*, a sculpture of the Virgin holding the dead Christ on her lap. Condivi would later claim that due to the sublime nature of the *Pieta*, Michelangelo was a theologian as well as an artist.

The painting on the Sistine Ceiling was completed from 1508-12 (Gilbert 1994). After his arrival in Rome in 1508, Pope Julius II insisted that Michelangelo “paint the vault of the Sistine Chapel” (Grimm 1969) rather than carve a funerary monument, the original commission. This assignment was strange for a number of reasons. The Pope’s decision was made at the recommendation of Bramante, the architect in charge of the completion of St. Peter’s. This annoyed Michelangelo. He envisioned Bramante making this recommendation to keep him from getting part of the profit to be made from St. Peter’s (Gilbert 1994). Michelangelo had never before painted in color (Grimm 1969). In addition to these problems, the ceiling of a chapel was traditionally used for minor decoration and the walls held more importance. Famous Italian artists had painted the walls of *the Sistine Chapel* thirty years earlier (Gilbert 1994). To Michelangelo, it must

have looked like he was being set up to fail. Of course the story does not end up this way:

The Sistine Ceiling is the work of an artist at the height of his powers: it is the titanic flight towards the heavens of a man in his prime. By glorifying the boundless creative force of God, Michelangelo has at the same time made an image of his own supreme aspirations during this period of activity (De Tolnay 1975).

At the beginning of the project, Michelangelo was only to paint the central part of the tall and narrow vault, but upon making designs, he and Pope Julius II decided that the work would cover

the whole ceiling (Grimm 1969).

From here on out, the artist had full authority over the plans and sketches and completion (Grimm 1969), though for awhile, he had a team to help him paint. How

Figure 16



much the team helped is a question that has plagued scholars for years (Manicelli 1999).

How much of the ceiling was influenced by other artists if at all? One version, recorded by Vasari (Manicelli 1999), as well as Grimm, states that the six artists chosen were not

kept on for the duration of the job. When Michelangelo was no longer satisfied with their work, he simply locked them out of the chapel (Grimm 1969). One recent museum book gives the assistants credit for only “material” help, such as mixing the paint (Zuffi 1999).

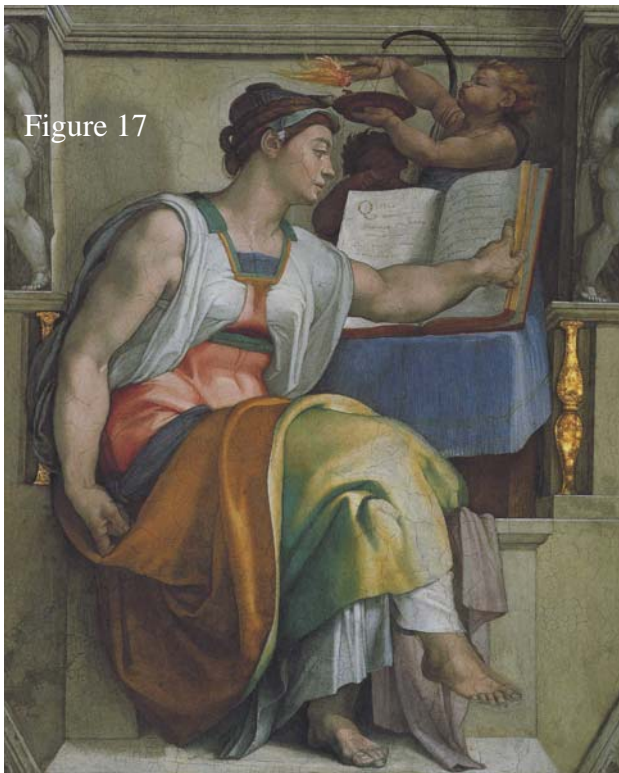


Figure 17

These stories, though popular since they support the image of Michelangelo as a “solitary genius” (Manicelli 1999), cannot be reconciled with more recent analyses of the painting, which since restoration, show portions of the work that most certainly were not done by Michelangelo’s hand (Manicelli 1999). However, it is sure that Michelangelo controlled his workshop more than most artists, allowing assistants no room for

interpretation from his detailed drawings (Manicelli 1999). There are numerous places in the ceiling that for no known reason, show corrections or were painted over twice. This seems to indicate the significant use of assistants (Manicelli 1999). The first third of the vault, completed through 1509, shows these signs of help (Manicelli 1999).

Important to the way the project was finished were the conflicts between the Pope and the artist. The Pope continually became impatient, eager for the completion of the work and Michelangelo’s response was that it would be done “when I’m able to”

(Condivi 1987). The elderly Pope Julius II was known to climb up the scaffolding to nag the artist (Grimm 1969), and finally opened the unfinished ceiling to the public on All Saints Day in 1509 (Grimm 1969). At one point, when the artist requested a leave of absence, the Pope “struck him with a stick” (Grimm 1969), and Michelangelo stormed out. Though eventually pacified, the artist must have been stressed throughout the completion of the project. In 1510, a war delayed the job’s completion more because the Pope had left Rome and was no longer paying Michelangelo (Grimm 1969). Through intermittent unveilings and interruptions, the project was declared finished on October 31, 1512 (Gould 1980). This was probably a relief to both the Church and the painter.

The concept of the artist in the Italian Renaissance has in many ways carried through the modern era.

Michelangelo is the model of this conceptualization of the artist. Because of the length and challenges in *the Sistine Ceiling*, this

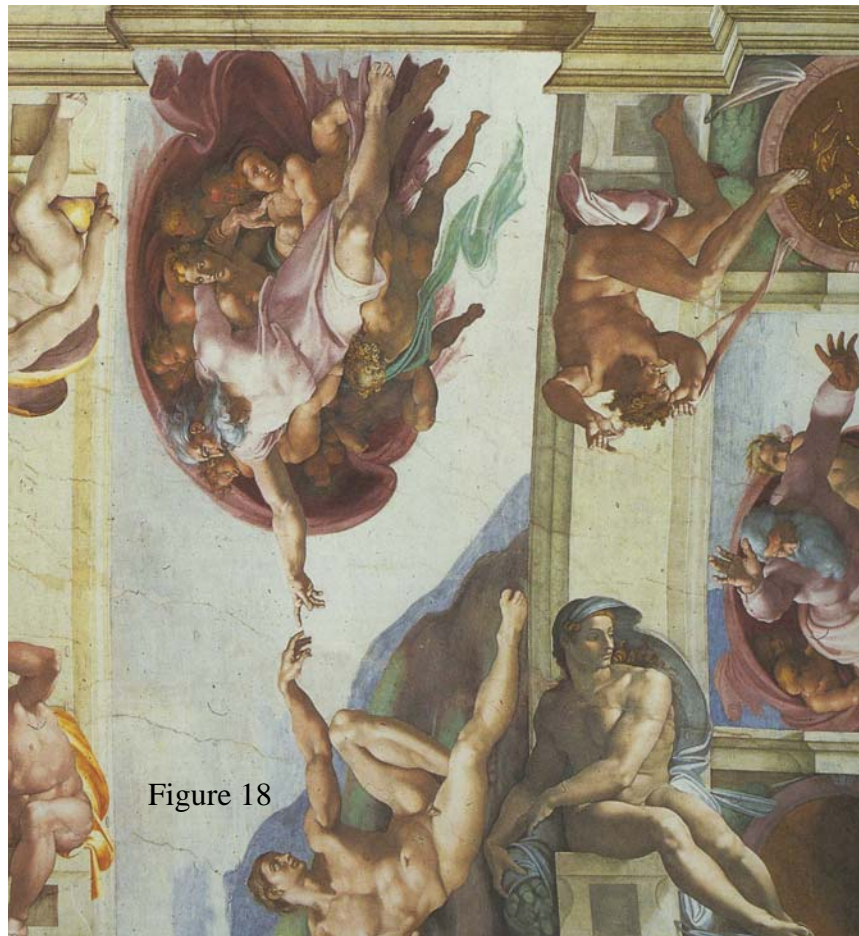


Figure 18

piece demonstrates who Michelangelo was as an artist. By almost all accounts, Michelangelo was a messenger from god, if not an incarnation of god himself. “‘Divine’ is appropriate, uniquely among his contemporaries, only for Michelangelo” (Beck 1999). Beck goes on to list the artist’s references, from famous historians and critics, as well as his contemporaries. “An artist, he is quoted as saying, ‘must maintain a good life, and if possible be holy, so that his intellect can be inspired by the Holy Spirit’”(Beck 1999). Condivi agrees, calling Michelangelo divine for his “love of virtuosity, and the continuous practice of fine arts, that made him solitary” (Condivi 1987). His tomb reads : *Il Divino Michelangelo* (Beck 1999). The artist and his audience obviously had a sense that he was completing God’s work. Current art historians have not forgotten this title or concept. Janson sees Michelangelo’s creative process as akin to “divine creation” as he worked to free figures from their entrapment in marble. The category of divinely inspired genius includes many Renaissance and modern artists, but limits the definition, process and function of the artist. Currently, the most influential philosophical model of the artist is Kant’s idea of the “genius as exemplary, free and originally imaginative” (Eldridge 2003). Though this does not include divinity in the artist’s nature, it does still assume, as the divine model does, that the artist was born talented. Thus, the divinely inspired artist, even if no longer a literal concept in our society, shapes the way that we think about the artist (Staniszewski 1995). Seen above society, artists enjoyed, and still enjoy, this separation from the public. This was heightened by the way that their work was isolated, often hidden away in churches, government buildings and now museums.

In addition to this genius concept, as shown above, Michelangelo took personal initiative and ownership over the piece, sometimes not even answering to the person who commissioned the piece. There was as little collaboration as Michelangelo could sustain, and even then, that was too much for him. He desired complete control over all aspects of the project. Individualism goes hand in hand with the sense of divinity and separation of the artist. This divinity is not unique to Michelangelo; it is, in fact, a characteristic of the traditional artist. This separation from the rest of society and the sense that their talent is “god-given” or “natural,” positions artists above everyone else. This treatment was compounded by the fact that Michelangelo was born with some connections and resources. The art world of Renaissance Italy and the modern art world are similar for the political atmosphere that often connects success with networking and power.

The supporter of *the Sistine Ceiling* project, its audience, and its site show how the art world has long been immersed in a system of power and privilege. The Pope, the head of the Catholic Church and the largest landholder in the world, requested this piece and had the money to pay for it. There was no broad base of support, nor was there complete artistic freedom for Michelangelo to create whatever he wanted. Money can buy even the greatest art. The site reveals this same kind of restriction. This painting was commissioned for a chapel that is not used for daily or weekly mass. This location meant that the piece was not just accessible to anyone, but only those who attended or were invited to special events. It was never open to all Catholics, or even all Romans. Instead it was restricted to those of a privileged place within the Church. Now, anyone

with the admission money can go to see it, if you can afford to travel to Italy. This site limits the audience greatly. This keeps art in the hands of the powerful only for the enjoyment of the powerful. This is symbolic of the current museum system. Those with access and money can see as much great art as they want too. Poorer people may not even have fine art in their culture, and thus may not even consider art worth seeing. Power consumes this process. Perhaps if Michelangelo were born in different circumstances, he would not have been a famous and powerful artist at all.

The Great Wall

Judith Baca, a leader in the American mural movement, has worked her whole life to help recapture Chicano identity. But, many of her projects transcend her own culture to bring people of many different ethnic and racial backgrounds together. *The Great Wall* is certainly her largest, if not most successful, project, and an excellent example of the issues that define community art including: artist, audience, support, collaboration, site and impact. To understand the way the piece confronts these issues, the artist and the piece's background must be understood first.

Judith Baca's development differs greatly from Michelangelo's. Her matriarchal family greatly influenced the way she was raised. "The struggle of this family of women became a model for the artist's latter structures of feminist empowerment" (Sperling Cockcroft and Barnett-Sanchez 1993). The following information on her life comes from an interview with Amelia Mesa-Bains (1986), unless otherwise noted. Her first years were spent in Watts, Los Angeles, living with her grandmother, her mother and her

mother's disabled sister. She entered school barely speaking English, but loving to move color around on a surface. She fell in love with painting in kindergarten. Though she went to public and Catholic schools and took art classes, she did not have a Western sensibility of what great art was. Her aesthetic involved what was cultural to her neighborhood, such as tattoos. Her family expected her to go to college, as the first one from the family, but to be a typist, not an artist. This may have been the only experience that she shares with Michelangelo. She was affected by science, philosophy and art history classes, but struggled in her art classes. Tired of working so hard to commute, work and study, she quit school and began to work at Lockheed as an illustrator when she was 19. From there she moved onto a job in East L.A. teaching art at recreational centers. Doing so, she was able to connect to the Chicano community, beginning to collaborate with her culture to make images. She had never seen any of the work from the Mexican mural movement, so this was not a revival or reference to art history or theory. Instead, she was just taking the skills of the young men in the community and organizing them. She became known as the longhaired hippie who was bringing together gang members around the city to make art. In 1969, she graduated from Cal State Northridge (Doss 1995). Suddenly she was the artist that she never pictured herself becoming.

In the mid-70s, the Army Corps of Engineers approached Baca about a large-scale mural. They were in the midst of redeveloping the Tujunga Wash Flood Control Channel in the San Fernando Valley (Doss 1995), as an end to the "concrete blight" (Bond 1982). The project became *the Great Wall*. At a mile long, it is the world's largest mural (Doss

1995). Though Judith Baca is always credited with the work of *the Great Wall*, 215 teenagers and a number of professionals completed the project over five summers. This is one of its largest differences between Michelangelo's work and Baca's.

The first step of her process was to seek out young people to fill out her crew. This time, rather than just uniting young people across gang lines as she did in her other projects, she wanted to bring together youth of different races as well (Bond 1982). Community meetings were the initial outreach tactic, as a way to gain insight into what collective knowledge had to offer the research team. This also invested the community in the project from the very beginning (Bond 1982). While a team of four was organizing the greater project (Bond 1982), eligible students were recommended by local agencies.

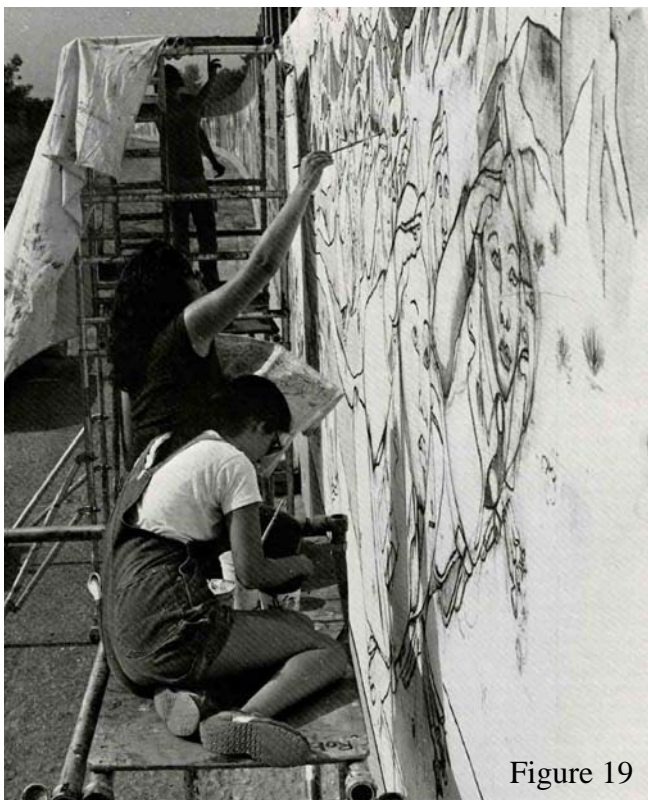


Figure 19

Youth were interviewed and selected on the basis of their willingness to contribute and assembled to reflect the “ethnic, racial, and sexual makeup” of the Valley (Bond 1982). Fundraising was one of the hardest parts, but donations from businesses, schools, and other organizations provided everything from food, paint and supplies to scaffolding (Bond 1982). Each of eighty student workers would be paid

minimum wage from CETA, Comprehensive Employment Training Act, funds (Bond 1982).

Simultaneously, design work was being completed. “A visual history of California, the wall emphasizes the role of racial minorities” (Doss 1995). The wall rewrote California’s history from a largely unheard of perspective. It spans from prehistory to Olympic athletes of the 40s, 50s, and 60s, and can be viewed on foot, on bike, or by car. It is very political and makes the story of conquest and domination of the native people by whites very clear. The mural ends positively, with hope brought on by the strides made by in civil rights in the 50s, 60s and 70s (Doss 1995). This “reclaiming history” was a large part of the Chicano movement of the 60s and 70s (Doss 1995), so her project fit into the larger scope of action in California. Eventually, Baca would like to extend the mural to catch up with contemporary history (Doss 1995). Each summer session required two years of planning (Bond 1982).

The programming was very impressive; the mural was not just painted as a color-by-number exercise. Baca designed the program to intentionally include educational and relational components. She used three tactics to promote healthy racial boundary crossing: mixed race crews and leaders, study days and improvisational drama (Bond 1982). Crews painted four days a week and, on Friday, community members gave presentations on culture, economics, history and politics. These sessions were intended to instill a sense of “cultural self-determination” in the teens (Doss 1995), and were always related to the content that the students were painting. Study days had to be “dynamic” to hold the attention of high-energy kids. Field trips and reflections on lived

experience broke up the monotony of academic lectures (Bond 1982). These programs reinforced lessons of the self-determined cultural identity that was present in the painting. All of these sessions were wrapped up in skits. The kids used teamwork to demonstrate something about prejudices and lessons learned (Bond 1982). Healthy informal interactions and structured conversations grew out of this programming structure (Bond 1982).

For nearly a decade, Baca and the organizers persisted, until an entire mile was painted. Though the program had its share of problems, it was a huge success. The simple aesthetic accomplishment of completing a piece on that scale made the piece successful. But, when the other facets of the piece are more thoroughly examined, its success as an organizing effort also shines through. Because of this dual nature, it is an excellent example of the nature of community art through six issues: artist, site, audience, support, collaboration, and impact.

Artist

The concept of artist is constructed in very different ways between the more traditional fine art and the community art paradigms. In a



Figure 20

community art piece, who the artist is can be a contentious issue, either because the artist was also an organizer and teacher. or because a team created it. Michelangelo's identity as a divinely-inspired genius has already been discussed. Opposed to this is the image of Baca sweating next to dozens of student artists much younger than her, working equally as hard as they under the hot sun. Organizational and physical demands on Baca were as great as the artistic demand (Bond 1982). The two years that were spent organizing before a summer painting were essential to the project's completion. In addition to these differences, Baca is a Chicana—a Mexican-American woman. Individuals with such an identity are usually excluded from the art world in a way that Michelangelo never was. His talent surely won him favor, but being born in an active art city and being able to access the powerful people in the art world certainly contributed to his ability to be a successful artist. Baca was without these resources and the power that it takes to get in. Instead, she created a new way for herself to be an artist. Of her identity as an artist and growth during the Great Wall she says:

“It's hard for a woman to take leadership; at first, I was afraid, unwilling. I didn't want to be a leader like the leaders I had seen; it took a while before I realized I could make my own definition of leadership. It's the same with art. For a long time, I didn't call myself an artist—didn't even know if I *was* one. I wasn't like the artists I saw—I wasn't white and I certainly wasn't a boy. It's only recently that I've realized that I could make my own definition of an artist, too” (qtd. In Bond 1982).

In order for Baca to be an artist, she realized that she needed to find a way to distinguish herself from artists like Michelangelo. And in redefining what it meant to be an artist, she became very successful. This is essentially the task of any community artist: redefine

and rethink what the role of the artist is, because artists who conceive of themselves as a traditional fine artists will never be successful at community art.

Site and Audience

Site and audience are issues that are inextricably bound because where the site is can largely determine who the audience is. Community art is usually placed in a publicly accessible place, and therefore tends to have a broad audience. Traditional fine art is often kept in institutions of power, the most prominent being museums. For example, *the Sistine Ceiling* is only viewed by people who come to *the Sistine Chapel* in the Vatican—at one time this only included church-goers and now it includes mostly tourists. Today to get to see this piece, an American must be able to afford a flight to Italy, lodging, meals and entrance to the museum. More importantly, the traveler must also decide that the experience of seeing *the Sistine Ceiling* is worth more than the money that was paid for the trip. The audience of *the Great Wall*, is much more broad, not needing cultural knowledge, or resources, because the piece is part of the urban landscape. It can be viewed by car, bike or on foot. The public nature of the piece and the audience in most of Baca's work is integral to the meaning that she assigns her work. "Art is not just for the rich, the educated, or five of my friends... Art is vital to the spirit of human beings, rich or poor" (Bond 1982). Intentionally reaching a wide, and perhaps uneducated public, is new in the art world. This is often considered the alternative perspective, but is prevalent in new movements such a community art. Supporters of the fine art paradigm would argue that museums are not exclusive, and show work of value. If it is not in a museum then it is not as valuable. In the same way that being an artist can

be restricted to certain cultural identities, so can access to a museum (Staniszewski 1995). The community art perspective would state that Baca's work still functions as excellent art by impacting her audience not just with content but also with visual techniques. By making small things become monumental images, Baca forces the audience to rethink and relook at familiar things (Doss 1995). She employs an artistic convention to direct the learning of the viewers. The color and fluidity attract attention, making style "the principal tool used to engage and raise the consciousness of its audience" (Doss 1995).

Support

Broad and diverse support are integral to the successful completion of a



community art piece, while a traditional fine art piece might only need the individual artist's support, though a patron would be beneficial. Of course, Michelangelo had a patron for *the Sistine Ceiling*: the Vatican, the world's largest landowner. Baca on the other hand, was supported by both government and community organizations. She had a larger base of support that invested many facets of the community in the project from the beginning. The community also played a large role in establishing their needs and

initiating the project. These characteristics are essential, because without this support, a piece cannot be successful under the community art paradigm.

Collaboration

Community art is collaborative across traditional societal boundaries.

Collaboration can also be defined as community participation in the art process.

Traditional fine artists often involve no one else in the creation of their work.

Community artists, on the other hand, are obliged to work with the community if they are to earn that title. Michelangelo, threw what little help he had out of the chapel early in the process. He often corrected the work of this small team of craftsman, and eventually just did it all himself (Manicelli 1999). Baca did precisely the opposite. “The community participatory process Baca developed, which involves input from historians, cultural informants, storytellers, community residents and young artists, has become an important model for collective murals” (Sperling Cockcroft and Barnett-Sanchez 1993). She found ways to use the knowledge and skills of the broadest population possible, reducing her power in the situation. None of the work was done without input from the community and lots of help. Traditional art does not value the input of others in the artist’s process, but instead values the artist as an individual genius who is best off being left alone to create work. Community art only becomes community art if the community is given maximum participation.

Impact

It is impossible to know what impacts *the Sistine Chapel* had on its viewers soon after its completion. Since traditional fine art values that piece regardless of social impact, the impact of *the Sistine Ceiling* is irrelevant. The Baca piece is valued almost solely for its social impacts. The students were obviously the group most directly and deeply affected. This ranged from social growth to skill building. Art doesn't just teach



Figure 22

art skills. Baca notes that some of the students could not use a ruler when they began the project. When they left, not only could they use a ruler, but they could do math with fractions and use it with blueprints and plans. The skills they acquired range from reading and writing to using heavy equipment (Bond 1982). Because students were allowed into every step of the process, they were given the agency to learn and to be proud of their new skills. "Painting the channel has widened their scope" giving them a sense of new possibilities (Bond 1982). She also intended the project to be a "rehabilitation of self-esteem" through the work, drug therapy and job counseling (Doss

1995). She saw that the teens were not just workers but integral parts of the process and needed to be taken care of as valued members of the community. The program was a summer job, but as one participant put it, “identity and pride” were the greatest lessons (Doss 1995). Another participant loved how the project brought the community together as a “big family” (Doss 1995). Baca wanted her mural to combat racism, especially among minority groups. She recalls students who refused to work with one another at the beginning of the project, but at the end shared leadership across ethnic lines (Doss 1995). As Baca had intended with every intentional design and programming decision, the wall became a “catalyst for the regeneration of the community” (Doss 1995). She successfully implemented a large-scale community art project that will carry meaning with it for decades.

Comparing the two pieces of art that were created within different paradigms gives a better sense of what community art is and how to make it. With this information, it is easier to understand how students, who have been told their whole lives that great artists are artists like Michelangelo, have a hard time transitioning into a place where they can fully collaborate. They want to keep a hold on their art, making it theirs instead of ours. They want to have full authority over what they create, rather than listening to the needs of the community. Before students, organizers and artists can be successful at this process, they need to be able to wrap their mind around the concept of collaborative and community-driven art. Without that understanding, they will struggle the whole way. This is not to say that there is no longer value to the traditional art paradigm. It is needed

to make art that expresses one individual, but when building and engaging the community are the intentions of the project, it is no longer adequate.

Chapter 3: Successful Community Art Processes—

Integrating Art with Organizing Theory

As discussed in the previous section, one of the defining characteristics of community art is its intersection with community organizing. The artist's work goes beyond the visual to extend to the planning, logistics, finances, errands, outreach, publicity, and whatever else may need done. The impact of the work goes beyond a limited audience to include anyone who may be included in or sees the wider efforts. This extended impact is much more characteristic of community organizing than fine art. The site is often a street in a disadvantaged neighborhood, also indicative of organizing. These connections are not complete. Organizing does not just influence the form that this art takes, but if the two are really integrated, it influences the decisions in the process. To create a truly successful process that can be used by artist or non-artist, organizing and community art theory must be fully integrated.

Community organizing is a field characterized by action, but what kind of action is . disputed The assumptions made about what community organizing is, or even what community is, impact the way organizing is practiced. Community varies from a geographical entity, to a social entity based on groups of people (Frazer 1999), to practice.

Community is a buzz-word that seems to have no meaning these days. But as it is used in literature and programs, it varies based on the person's perspective and the community dealt with. At a basic level it is "an entity: a group of people or an institution or a group of institutions" (Frazer 1999). Other schools of thought extend community to

include a human aspect. “Community is not just a place, although place is very important, but a series of day-to-day, ongoing, often invisible practices. These practices are connected to, but not confined by place” (Halperin 1998). The way that people define community impacts the way that they define and practice community organizing.

The definition of community organizing is as fluid as the definition of community art. The discourse on the topic is scattered and usually embedded in texts with other focuses. Fisher and Kling (1993) discuss community organizing through its history. In their interpretation, organizing has no politics and “cut[s] across [the] political spectrum” (Fisher and Kling 1993), but should restore civic life, empower individuals and groups, and challenge institutions of power. Rivera and Erlich (1991) find community organizing very hard to define, but say it can include all social work practice. Their conception of community development is basically what others label as organizing: “*Community Development* refers to efforts to mobilize people who are directly affected by a community condition” (Rivera and Erlich 1991). The Midwest Academy doesn’t directly define organizing, but lays out the goals of organizing: “1. win[ning] real improvements in people’s lives, 2. [having participants get] a sense of their own power, [and] 3. alter[ing] the relations of power” (Bobo et. al. 2001). With a sense of what community organizing is, specific models may be discussed. Each of the following models is defined, related to art, and discussed through a successful community art piece that demonstrates this method. It is most clearly laid out in Appendix 1.

Direct Action

Direct action seeks to attack the system of power using actions with quick and measurable results. It is the instant gratification model of organizing. The Midwest

Academy has been training activists since 1973. Their guide, *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists* (Bobo et. al. 2001), provides the following information on direct action. Their curriculum is based on three principles: win attainable goals, allow people to realize their power, and alter relations of power (Bobo et. al., 2001). They assert that direct action begins with self-interest. Generally everyone working on direct-action campaigns participates because, in some way or another, they receive emotional, intellectual or material benefit. Understanding this theory will allow the organizer to actually get people to act on their principles. The most important resource in recruiting, mobilizing and initiating effective action is personal relationships. These relationships should flow directly out of the organizer's values: love, care, compassion and understanding. People detect sincerity and will be turned off from an issue by a bad relational or organizational experience. The effective organizer is always respectful and open to anyone. Direct action does not work for all organizations or issues. It is intended for use when the affected community gets together seeking a solution to their problem and is usually used to seek a specific solution to that problem. These campaigns have power in numbers that must be effectively used, by negotiating with opponents and electing supporting officials. This power is real when it is perceived by the opponents to be strong enough to create change by going around them rather than through them. *The Midwest Academy Manual for Activists* lists the steps in such a campaign: choosing an issue and a strategy, open communication with the opponent, announcing the campaign, outreach activities, direct meetings with decision makers, and building an organization. These should be fully developed and considered before the

campaign begins. Because of the level of detail in this model, it is easily integrated with art to create a new way of approaching problems.

When looking at a problem, a community group can choose art as their strategy for solving the problem. It is a way to attract people to work on an issue that they would not otherwise have noticed. Suzanne Fischer (2004) and the Peaslee Neighborhood Center, in Cincinnati, Ohio, teamed up for one such project, a series of mosaics that have been placed around the neighborhood. The opponent was the gentrifying forces in the neighborhood and the issue was the neighborhood's ability to hold onto its identity and space. Fischer began the actual art project with a series of image gathering sessions that provided the visual information that she used to design the mosaic. Once designs were complete, it was taken back to the community for feedback and to invest the public in the project. Apprentices were trained and volunteers were gathered. Using this team, the artist and the community worked together to create a bench covered in the mosaic designs. This is a different kind of direct action than meetings and negotiations, but it has



Figure 23

similar impact and acts on the same problems when meetings and negotiations no longer work. The bench sits in a contested park that needs “redevelopment”. It is the people's way of saying, we are here and we are not moving. Installing the bench and completing such a project is what the community needed.

Broad-based

Broad-based organizing is appropriate when very large action is desired. It consists of a large networked organization made up of diverse member groups that want to accomplish the same specific goals. As described in *Roots for Radicals* by Ed Chambers (2003), United Power for Action and Justice in Chicago is an excellent example of broad-based organizing, that can be used as a model for other work. As of 2000, it consisted of 330 member organizations working locally in assemblies and sending representatives to the board of the entire organization. This group determines projects and policies. The administrative team handles paperwork and research. This effort requires huge mobilization, funds and training on a scale that has never been tried before. It is also inclusive in a way that is unique. The members range from suburban to urban, across all races, among different kinds of faiths, and across class background. It is an action-oriented organization, selecting issues and setting concrete goals for certain phases of their programs. Through this organization, thousands and thousands of people are working together for common goals, multiplying their effectiveness. For example, United Power initiated a meeting of 2,000 Muslims and 2,000 non-Muslims in the Chicago area in response to 9/11. It was huge success, ending with 2,000 one-on-one sessions between the groups. These sessions gave individuals an opportunity to hear from kinds of people they may never have heard from otherwise. Each person who attended walked away with additional cultural knowledge that they could share. The event was a huge success. The trade off is autonomy of each organization, but singularly, no organization could have this impact. These large projects, including art projects, can

touch more individuals and organization in an unified effort to create change that a single organization could not.

The NAMES Project, also known as the AIDS memorial quilt, is another excellent example of a broad-based art project. It is an excellent example of what can be done with



resources and administration. In the first year, the quilt went from one panel to five thousand (Crichton 1998). Now, 44,00 panels make up

Figure 24
the quilt, enough that it can no longer be

displayed all in one place ([www. http://www.aidsquilt.org/history.htm](http://www.aidsquilt.org/history.htm)). The panels take on a certain function for both those who made them and those who were memorialized.

Some people even made their own quilt squares before they died (Epstein 1989). For some, the act of making a square is a grieving process (Epstein 1989). The making and visiting of the quilt is a coming together that is an accomplishment. But, perhaps the quilt's greatest accomplishment is making the public aware of a disease that had many social stigmas attached to it.



Though it has involved more individuals than organizations, its scope still qualifies it as a broad-based effort. Part of the Quilt's current mission is to raise money for AIDS service organizations, placing it in the larger fight against the AIDS pandemic. A large art project like this, as with many other broad-based efforts, can have a huge impact on those involved and on future generations.

Kristina Smock identifies five models of community organizing in *Democracy in Action: Community Organizing and Urban Change* (2004): power-based, community building, civic, women centered and transformative. These processes are used in different situations according to the goals and needs of the project or group.

Power-based

The problems in communities result from the community's lack of power. A power-based model sees this as the community's greatest challenge and therefore seeks to gain power for the disadvantaged community within existing structures. Change will come when the community is respected and has power. Large traditionally structured organizations generate respect and act powerfully on behalf of the community. This model seeks leaders who are publicly engaged and can engage others. Public speaking skills are highly valued. These leaders are trained through mentoring and more formal learning. These characteristics were most famously developed by Saul Alinsky (1972), perhaps the most influential neighborhood organizer in American history. The community is engaged in the effort through self-

interest. By intersecting these interests and showing people how they will benefit, the community can better attack issues and solve problems. Art projects under this model can bring people together to network and see their common interests. Taking over a public space with art is also an act of power that will garner respect.

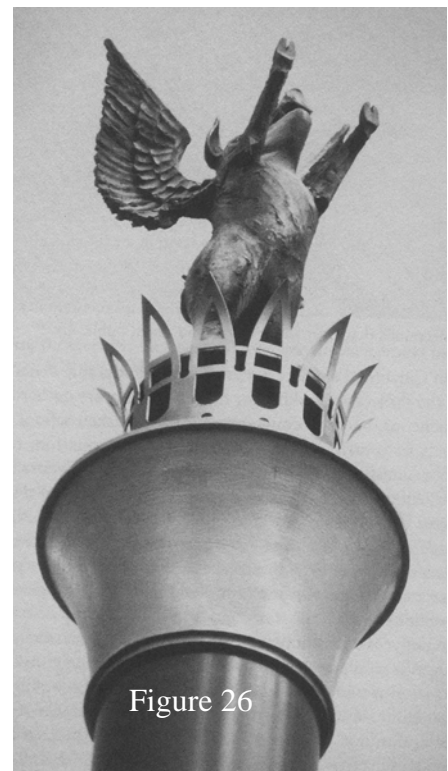


Figure 26

Andrew Leicester's *Bicentennial Commons Gateway Project* is an example of a piece of art in Cincinnati that functioned in this way. The plan called for community participation at many levels, "to establish an interaction with the community and the

Figure 27



individual visitor" (Doss 1995). In order to also connect the piece to the city's history, Leicester wanted to include bronze flying pigs as a tribute to the city's history of the pork industry (Doss 1995). Well, this brought on public interaction that he never intended. People were up in arms over whether pigs were funny, enjoyable and representative, or simply insulting (Doss 1995). The common uniting interest was that everyone wanted a public piece that they could be proud of. The combination of

Leicester's commitment to the community and the community's shared interest led to a public meeting on the piece, in which "a volatile civic controversy over public art was transformed into a meaningful episode in community mobilization and participatory democracy (Doss 1995). Controversy can be a way to draw attention to an issue and make it something everyone cares about. Now, Leicester's sculpture may not have been an important issue in itself, but as a redevelopment project, it had wider significance. The public debate over the sculpture, even though the ultimate decision sided with the artist, allowed the wider community to feel it had a stake in the city's landscape and usable space. This created a sense of agency that altered the relationships of power.

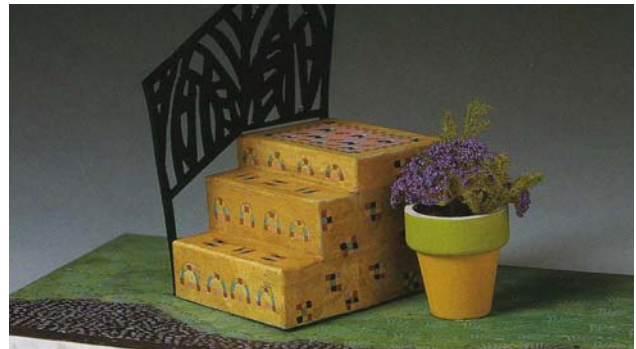
Community Building

This model focuses on changing the community rather than changing the society that defines the community. Community builders develop social and economic resources

through the standards of the mainstream. This requires networks of "stakeholder" groups in the community, collaborating for a common cause. Leaders in these movements come from already established organizations and are not necessarily formally trained. Instead, their personal strengths allow them to coordinate the movement's efforts and communicate well. Collective vision holds together large networks that cooperate to achieve this vision. Community capacity is developed through access to resources. Collective art develops social resources by promoting teamwork and communication and economic resources by redeveloping a neighborhood.

The *New Land Marks* project in Philadelphia was a citywide effort that sought "to understand the community not merely decorate it" (Balkin Bach 2001). "Each project will be the outcome of a partnership, combining the artist's imagination, creativity, skill and energy with the knowledge, experience, commitment, and enthusiasm of Philadelphia's communities" (Balkin Bach 2001).

Figure 28



The goal was not just community engagement, nor just excellent art, but to create both at once (Balkin Bach 2001). Dialogue was a large part of the work between the artist and the communities, because communication was essential for a successful outcome. It required both an intense commitment on the part of the community organization and the artist that were paired to work together (Balkin Bach, 2001). It is an ongoing program that involves completed projects and projects still in the works, but it is still a successful

way to discuss issues that are important to each individual neighborhood. Each individual artist communicated with each individual community, creating a huge variety of solutions to the challenge. Most of the artworks are also solutions to an issue that the neighborhood dealt with. One, in the neighborhood of Manayunk, sought to connect the residential community to the canal, currently separated by gentrification. The artist listened to the community's needs and created a landscape project full of stoops, symbolic in the neighborhood, along a pathway to the canal (Balkin Bach 2001). Another group wanted to move an important neighborhood organization to a new building, yet incorporate a positive vision of the Latino community in the new building. The artist came up with a solution that was both innovative and extremely functional by spending a lot of time with the community (Balkin Bach 2001). Not only did the artist and the communities connect with each other, learning and dialoguing, but they also created solutions to real problems and redeveloped the city in a giant networked project. Each individual program, community or organization that was involved developed its own capacity for communication, cooperation and action. As such, the New Land Marks project is an example of art used in conjunction with the community-building model.

Civic

The civic model asserts that change will come when order is restored to the community. This can be accomplished by unstructured efforts by the community to get to know each other and problem solve as a group. Leaders are chosen from those who already have the appropriate skills, and don't need training or support. Close networks develop through self-interest and "neighborly relations" to create change in a fairly homogenous group, with a lessened effect. This effort encourages the individual and

community to interact and participate, strengthening the identity of the community, and therefore its ability to solve specific problems. Spontaneous collective art, such as graffiti, grows out of the community this way, creating a collective sense of identity and ownership.



Because of its organic development, *the Wall of Respect* in Chicago discussed earlier is an example of a community art project that fits the civic model. Completed by a team of artists lead by William Walker, it was a tribute to African-American leaders. The project was funded by the artists, and began in an unorganized manner, simply with permission from the owner of the building (Gude and Heubner 2000). Though the community didn't necessarily have a say in the process, the artists were members of the community that others identified with. This caused the whole neighborhood to take ownership of the project. They protected it from both police and vandals, and celebrated its completion. It brought positive publicity to a neighborhood that usually only received negative press, allowing the neighborhood's self-image to change from negative to

positive (Cockcroft et. al. 1998). It empowered the greater African-American population in Chicago. William Walker's action on the behalf of his community and culture inspired murals across Chicago. Soon, adapted versions of *the Wall* appeared in cities across the country (Cockcroft et. al. 1998). *The Wall of Respect* generated neighborhood identity in the way that a civic organizing project should.

Women-Centered

Society under-serves women and families. By focusing more on the needs of women and families and connecting the public and private, the roots of these problems will begin to be exposed. This builds a women-centered model that requires teams to create safe places for support of the community members. Leaders in this kind of movement come from the low-income residents of a community, or other citizens who don't have a voice in decision-making. They are then trained in personal and family issues, and encouraged to connect these to community issues. Relationship skills are paramount. Friendship creates bonded networks that generate support around common aspirations that expand the community capacity. These bonds tend to be the focus of the group's attention. Art can be used to create the safe space, project the message of the movement, or increase the relationship skills of the community.



Interestingly enough, the leader of a program that is a local example of this kind of organizing is a man. Jimmy Heath runs the Center for Community Photography at the Peaslee Neighborhood Center in Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati's poorest neighborhood.

Perhaps because of Peaslee's matriarchal atmosphere, or because of Jimmy's gentle and

welcoming nature, the photography classes for children function as a mix between a home and school environment. In six weeks, the kids learn how to use a camera, but also increase their reading, writing and speaking skills as they work one-on-one with tutors to complete artist statements for a series of photographs (Heath 2004). It is a safe space to make mistakes and share about their lives. It is a place where they know people care for them. Because the sessions are short and the children love the program, they are always bothering Jimmy about when the next program will begin. Often when serving families or children, the women-centered model is effective because of the needs specific to this group. Jimmy's program fills these needs well.

Transformative

The transformative model tries to create large solutions that attack the root of whatever is causing oppression. Injustice is the root of many social problems. Changing the institutions that perpetuate the injustice is the general solution. The basis of the movement must be ideological and action should be broad. People with no leadership experience are sought to be "transformed" into leaders through one-on-one and workshop training, working specifically on critical thinking and organizing skills. Common ideology creates small networks that build the community's capacity, by pushing the general worldview. Political art can support the movement in a unique way. Eva Sperling-Cockcroft sums it up: "Painted images cannot stop wars or win the struggle for justice, but they are not irrelevant. They fortify and enrich the spirit of those committed to the struggle and help educate those who are unaware" (qtd. In Raven 1989).

The La Lucha Murals, directed by Artmakers in New York City, were completed by twenty-six artists who came together as a community to make a political statement.

They donated their time and much of their materials. The subjects of scrutiny were: U.S. involvement in Latin American, Apartheid and gentrification (Raven 1989). Though it was a fairly straightforward design and painting process, its impact extended beyond its site. It was seen at exhibitions in and out of the country, distributed on postcards and open to any photographers (Raven 1989). The artists intended the piece to be educational and an encouraging part of movement. By working collaboratively and not protecting the piece's copyright, while they were encouraging political movements, they were also working to bring down the institution of the art world.

Integrating art and organizing not only rationalizes the community art process, but helps create a way for that process to be accessible to more people. With these models, professional organizers can understand that they can actually be the administrator of an art project without having an artist's help. Similarly, if an artist is making decisions about organizing a community art project, he or she can now be more deliberate about what decisions to make and why. These new advantages will simplify and improve the current methods. Eventually the models can be transformed into standards that will help evaluate project. This is not to say that all these processes should be standardized, because that is not the case. Most projects will have completely different needs than previous projects, making it difficult to repeat the same process twice. But, these guidelines will help the artist/organizer along the way.

Conclusion: Reconciling Theory with Practice—Evaluation

The use of this information comes in applying it to real projects. Ideally, I would have used all of this information to design my process, but I was unable to do that. Instead, this information can be used to critique the project and look for better practices to implement the next time I want to conquer a project like this.

My first mistake was not being clear about my goals and underlying assumptions for the project. This caused miscommunication and misunderstanding between myself and many of the other participants. But, I am not sure that I was even clear enough in my head to articulate these to all the stakeholders. I wanted to challenge conceptions of art. This obviously was not part of Mr. Leininger's understanding of the project, and may not have been part of the students' either. I wanted to see them discover this goal on their own, but perhaps that was a fool's dream. My second goal was to teach teamwork, leadership, and service. This was built into the curriculum, and was probably apparent to the teachers, for whom these are almost always learning goals, but perhaps remained unseen to the students and the Fire Department. My third goal was to allow the students to build confidence in their work. Telling the student this doesn't necessarily help accomplish this goal, but explicitly explaining this to the Fire Chief would have eased some conflict over drawings. My last goal was to build connections between the Fire Department, the high school and the larger community. All of these goals were process-oriented, as community art is. Mr. Leininger's goals were obviously product-oriented, as traditional fine art tends to be. By not explicitly and clearly explaining the intentions of the project, I made it nearly impossible for him to move between the paradigms. He may

have never heard of community art before this project, so it was naïve to think that he would make these jumps on his own.

This discrepancy was the largest problem with the project. I think that a number of people involved did not understand the differences between community art and traditional fine art. The assumption was that community art is simply fine art that is placed in the community, but this is obviously an inadequate definition. There was no unified vision, which also made it difficult to sustain enthusiasm and engagement in the project. There were seeds of two kinds of community organizing models in this project: direct action and community building. This project commanded a space as direct action art should, but did not work to attack the system of power; if anything, it reinforced it. It was a part of a larger redevelopment effort and tried to encourage the capacity of the youth, one of the greatest social resources. With this in mind, it perhaps could have been a community-building project, except that we lacked a collective vision. One of the solutions to these problems would have been to pick a model and use it to guide the process and as a benchmark to participants. The models lay out goals and intentions that would have been useful for everyone involved to have known.

The impacts of the project indicate a level of success. But, the impact should not be measured against some standard, but against the project's goals. That said, any evaluation of the extent to which an impact was made is subjective. From my perspective, we succeeded in building new connections among the fire department, school and community. Some of the students and their parents look for the murals as they drive by. The firemen and women are proud of the piece and are more than happy to

let anyone in to show it to them. Mr. Leininger feels honored to have the project complete. I do not know how much the students learned, but their comments certainly showed that they are very proud of the work. To one student, I could see that having her work displayed in such a public place gave her confidence and made her feel appreciated. The value of the project due to this impact can be debated. My disappointment is that the content of the pieces, though the process went well, only reinforces cultural norms about what it means to serve your community and who can do that. I had hoped for a piece that at least made the community think past the obvious if not push them to realize new things about the world around them. This kind of change is a large part of community art to me. But, perhaps supporting the community is not so bad. It could have a larger impact than I know.

Overall, this experience has been invaluable to me as a developing artist and community member. I have made mistakes that I am sure to learn from in future work and found that the research shows me connections in the process that I would not otherwise see. The interdisciplinary nature and multi-faceted approach of this project truly demonstrates the nature of community art.

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