

## Community-Engaged Arts as a Tool For Social Change. A Case Study on the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program

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### Abstract:

This Study Aims to illuminate the correlation between civic engagement and community-engaged arts. As art and politics often correlate to each other, in the early 1990's "new genre public art" has developed out of the previous traditional public art movements with decoration purposes (Lacy, 1995). These New genres have functioned as social intervention channels. this essay will carry out the study of the correlation between the new socio-political phenomenon and public art practices as: (participatory art, dialogic art, community-based art, activist art). Using Art-based research methodology the researcher intends to investigate contemporary community-based art practices and its contribution to local communities' development. A case study on the city of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program is carried out in this research.

### Keywords:

Community-based art.  
Art for Social Change.  
Creative Activism.  
Community murals.  
Site-specific art  
Public Art.  
Art and civic engagement.

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### Introduction

#### *Introducing the historical context of the correlation between art and social change:*

Digging into the functional aspect of artistic practices in prehistoric periods and primitive societies, (Anderson, 1961) states that it has always been a product of artists who are not specialists. Art was meant to understand, control then change the environment. Art's function in primitive societies was psychologically related to controlling human fears and emotions, there was an important turning point when the hunting culture itself was left behind and men started to raise crops, art then lacked common utility, but it contributed something of real value to the community (Anderson, 1961). Research by (Pilato, 2016, P 14) suggests that "Community Based Arts has been around since the beginning of human interactions, as communities have always found artistic practices to share their stories and better their lives."

By the middle ages, when man's thoughts were turned inwards, Art served to create images on which beliefs were riveted and secured. Art practices were a strong form of expression of inner thoughts and beliefs of humans. it reflected beliefs and aspirations beyond mere physical existence (Anderson, 1961). It developed into a humane, psychological and more complex process than just a way of expression.

As an indication to the centre of modernism, by the beginning twentieth-century, Visual and Public Arts has been strongly affected – In terms of style

and purposes- with political, cultural and industrial changes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Saler, 1992). These circumstances have highlighted the correlation between change and artistic expression. (Lacy, 1995) investigated the rising of Visual Arts beyond the museum walls, studying the development of vanguard activist, feminist, Marxist and ethnic groups in the late 50<sup>th</sup>. Artists who were sharing mutual concerns of social and political issues as; AIDS, homelessness, pollution, environmental awareness and other social issues produced a new kind of public art that was not commissioned but was an initiative to engage community members, creating a new meaningful relationship between the artist-audience (ibid). A new type of public art has come to the light, that we can call Activist public art.

Since public art is characterized by accessibility to the people, by the 1960s it gained the asset of community involvement and collaboration which progressively led to the involvement of public art with political movements. Public art became more about People (Knight, 2011).

The researcher here investigated this point of view and found out that community-engaged public art is considered a democratic art form as it is a channel to express thoughts and believes. Usually, community-engaged public art is not only about the artist as much as it is a complex reciprocal process between the artist and the community members. This collaborative process enriches the artwork and adds an additive value to this form of art. This research aims to study this complex

process and the impact of public art on the community and civic engagement and vice versa.

**Tackling Contemporary controversial social causes by Community-engaged art Projects:**

As the term Community arts emerged gradually it has been defined by many researchers, (Pilato 2016, P. 261) defined Community art as "participatory art that is made through a collaborative process with artists, educators, and community members, about a shared social issue that impacts the lives of the participants and has social significance that extends to all who engage with the artwork in some capacity." According to this definition, the main axis of community arts that all participants evolve around is the social issue and the social significance, thus community-engaged arts is a tool for social dialogue and consequently social change.

Socially engaged public artwork (SEA) fundamentally includes social interventions (Helguera, 2011), Higuera proposes that "all art invites social interaction, yet in the case of SEA it is the process itself -the fabrication of the work-that is social" (p.11). so here we are facing two sides of Community/ Socially- engaged art, the first is that it is social because it leads to social change by discussing social issues, and the second is that the production of Community-engaged art is a social experience itself. The two modes I outlined above leads us to study the dialogic relation between the three edges of the triangle, the artist, participants, and the artwork. In the case of Community-engaged arts, it is no longer a dual dialogue between the artist and the artwork that we study, a third side is added to the process which is the people.

" a pre-requisite for an artwork that manifests a counter consciousness is that the separation which existed between the artist and the audience is closed, that they become mutually engaged, to the point where the audience becomes the rationale in both the making and reception of the work" (Willats, quoted in Kester, 2004, p. 91). Stephen Willats is a London based artist who had art projects across Europe integrating the audience in the process of art production. "Willats has postulated a concept of "socially interactive" culture that redefines art in term of the discursive relationship that it establishes with the viewer." (Kester, 2004, p.91). As engaging participants and audience in the community engage arts is

essential, this engagement ought to be in every stage of the art process, from conception to implementation and even to documentation and reflection (Helguera, 2011). The success of a community-engaged art depends on how the artist study and understand the community his working in and how strong is the communication between him and the participants to establish this unique Artist-Audience relationship.

As community- Engaged art is meant to induce social change, it is considered a form of Activist Art. Activism in Art is a wide term and this leads to the question of what exactly activist art aims to achieve. (Duncombe, 2016) Imposes in his essay "Does it Work? The Effect of Activist Art." that Activist artists mainly aim to Foster dialogue, build communities, make a place, Invite Participation, Transform Environment and Experience, Reveal Reality, Alter Perception, Create Disruption, Inspire Dreaming, Provide Utility, Political Expression and Encourage Experimentation. "Good art always contains a surplus of meaning: something we cannot quite describe or put our finger on, but which moves us nonetheless. Its goal, if we can even use that word, is to stimulate a feeling, move us emotionally, or alter our perception. Art is an expression that generates affect" (Ibid, p118).

Although academics have not been kind to the community arts over the past two decades, socially engaged art practices have been evolving widely in different communities "building a critical mass in terms and its tangible real-world thinkers and educators" (Cartiere and Zebracki, 2016).

Community arts programs – even if it was not intended to be - has been a channel to address social issues, at this point it would be helpful to have a closer look into art projects that managed to actively engage the community, for example;

**1- The Chicago Mural Movement**

Coinciding with the civil rights movement in the united states, by the late 1970s, a new Community Murals Movement was born in Chicago, Influenced by Mexican revolutionary artistic expression in the murals of Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, 40 years earlier, a group of African American in Chicago's underprivileged black communities introduced this new language of a combination of art and social consciousness through mural painting (Townes 2002). A form of creative insurgency

was induced due to political oppression and congestion. The Chicago movements started

with a collaborative mural titled "The Wall of Respect" that was completed in August 1971.



Figure 1 The Wall of Respect. Photo by Robert A. Sengstacke 1967-1971

## 2- Project Row Houses:

PRH is a community arts organization located in Houston, Texas. it is a "neighborhood-based community art and cultural organization. Established in 1993" (Keller 2014). In their mission according to their website, "The setting of a community of shotgun houses provides a unique environment for the creation of works that engage our visitors in the creative process, celebrate African-American history and culture, and address educational and community needs" (Project Row Houses, 2010). PRH brings artists in residencies programs to engage, interact and communicate with the local communities and

produce community artworks. The residency period is 6th months for national and international artists, where each artist is given a local house to renovate.

## 3- Higher Ground Harlan County Higher Ground (HGHC) Project:

HGHC was launched in 2001 in Kentucky, U.S.A, as a community- based art organization that encouraging locals to civically engage in art projects- particularly photography and documentary film- as a form of subtle political resistant to concerning social and cultural issues in their communities (Mullinax, 2012)



Figure 2 2018 Mural Fest participants, Harlan County Kentucky



Rather than introducing an individual artistic experience by the artist, Community arts are dialogical, that implements process-based method, “They are ‘context providers’ rather than ‘content providers.’” (Coler 2012 p. 28; Kester 2004)  
***Case- study of the city of Philadelphia, USA, Mural arts program and how they used murals as a tool of community building.***

One of the unique cities across the world artistic wise is the city of Philadelphia. The number of murals in the streets is noticeable to anyone who visits or any street art fan. After researching, I found out that most of these Massive murals are a product of one entity called "The Mural Arts Program (MAP)". Graffiti pervaded many areas of Philadelphia in the early 1980s “reflecting gang activity and intercultural tensions” as Moss describes (2010 p.378) . In 1984 MAP was founded creating an alternative path of Participatory practices through using a well-known public art form, aiming to study the socio-political aspect of public art (Cartiere and

Zebracki, 2016).

Graffiti is still argued to be a fine art form with aesthetics standards. Back in the late 19 80s, due to the widespread of graffiti in the city as a form of expression an initiative called "Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network" was founded to substitute the graffiti form of expression with a more agreed-upon form of art which is murals ( The Mural Arts Program, August 2019). The Artist Jane Golden was appointed to redirect graffiti practices to public art practices (Ibid). (Pilato, 2016) stated that the first on-ground attempt was by inviting Los Angeles based artist Kent Twitchell to make the Julius Erving (Dr. J) mural. The goal of this mural was to use fine artwork as a medium for community concerns, it was the first time that The Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network uses the parachute technique cloth (The Mural Arts Program, August 2019). The MAP started as a constructive initiative to beautify the city and engage the people which is a unique form of creative insurgency and activist art practice.



**Figure 3 Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN) team painting over graffiti at Broad and Spring Garden streets.**



**Figure 4 Dr. J by Kent Twitchell. Photo by Jack Ramsdale.**

Describing Dr. J Mural, (Gyekis, 2009) says that this huge mural has played an important role in levitation the standards of public art excluding graffiti in the city.

Fleming (2007) states that the Mural painting segment of the Anti-Graffiti Network has become an independent entity in 1997, in its current state known as the Mural Arts Program. MAP has managed to change the city by professional Murals that both carries a social message and meets the high-standard aesthetic values (Fleming, 2007). It is interesting how MAP has constructively subsidized graffiti with proposing an alternative channel for expression that is more appreciated by the audience and engaging community members. MAP's Projects are mostly funded by local government, corporations and foundation without interfering its mission, Benefits of the local community is Maintained to be the center of their work (Moss, 2010). MAP claims that every public dollar invested in their projects corresponds to 1.5 dollars from private investors and around 10% of these funds are from outside the city (the Mural

Arts Program, 2018).

Building the cultural identity of cities is also an important approach for community arts. Moss (2010) discusses how the Mural Arts program has contributed to building the identity of the city of Philadelphia through its iconic murals, engaging communities to compete against the social stigmas while at the same time. The author notes, "Even murals that simply beautify spaces challenge prescriptions of how struggling neighborhoods look and the inevitability of decline, acting as resistance tactics" (Moss, 2010, p. 390). Through 3,000 murals the Murals Arts has manage to decrease the gap between different ethnic groups in the city of Philadelphia through participation and collaboration.

Tribute to Herman Wrice (Figure 4)

The Mural portray a community leader who worked against drug dealers in his neighborhood (Moss 2010). The artist David McShane Painted this mural in 2000 following the death of Herman as a memorial of his honorable journey (The Mural Arts Program, 2014).



**Figure 4 Tribute to Herman Wrice by David McShane. Photo by Steve Weinik.**

### Common Threads (Figure 5)

The viewer gets caught in the complex composition from the first sight, many figures in different sizes the provokes the question of who they are and what is the story behind. It was painted in 1997 and completed in 1999 in central Philadelphia. This Mural is one of the most famous and important murals of the MAP as it is viewed by huge number of people daily due to its location (Moss 2010; Golden et al. 2002). Saligman (2004) Explains on her website ([www.megsaligman.com](http://www.megsaligman.com)) that the inspiration behind this artwork was during her residency in the neighborhood where she noticed the different

hairstyles of students which reminded her of her grandmother's. The artist took photographs of the students and painted this mural guided by them; students participated in painting their own photos. The mural discussed human similarities across time and culture (Moss, 2010). The artist here used a mixture of traditional and modern styles to represent the diverse people, not only the diversity of style she used but also clothing, colors and sizes (Ibid). the artists choice of real student figures and representing them in this large scale in their neighborhood is such a significant choice, it could be culturally controversial but she succeeded to reach out for the community member from the



inside, which is a unique intercultural experience.  
**Migrant Imaginary (Figure 6)**



**Figure 5 Common Threads by Meg Saligman. Completed 1999. Photo by Tom Crane (MAP, 2004)**



**Figure 6 Migrant Imaginary © 2019 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Layqa Nuna Yawar & Ricardo Cabret, 1902 South 4th Street. Photo by Steve Weinik (MAP, 2019)**

This mural is one of the most recent works of the MAP, it has been completed in October 25<sup>th</sup> 2019

according to their website (The Mural Arts Program, 2019). With the harmony of colors and



will constructed composition this Mural gives the viewer the dreamy feelings of a young girl wondering about future. The Ecuadorian artist Nuna Yawar – who self describes herself as an immigrant- tackled the issue of the future of

immigration the U.S.A (ibid). The artist worked in collaboration with Art education students to produce this mural (ibid).  
Process photos



**Figure 7** Artist Layqa Nuna Yawar works with Art Education students at the Southeast by Southeast hub space in South Philadelphia. Photo by Steve Weinik. (MAP, 2019)



**Figure 8** Artist Layqa Nuna Yawar works with Art Education students at the Southeast by Southeast hub space in South Philadelphia. Photo by Steve Weinik. (MAP, 2019)



**Figure 9** Migrant Imaginary by Layqa Nuna Yawar in-process, October 18, 2019. Photo by Steve Weinik (MAP,2019).



Figure 10 Migrant Imaginary dedication, October 29, 2019. Photo by Steve Weinik (MAP, 2019).

The city of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program’s Journey and projects are a very inspiring example of Community-engaged Public art practices and their journey could be a road map for artists to achieve their projects around the world.

**Conclusion and practice**

Through theory, Practice and research we can conclude a road map for artists who would like to carry on a community engaged art project in a certain community. Getting into the community and being familiar with it’s concerning, and issues can be challenging for the artist, then inviting community members to engage and participate and finally reaching out for the bigger audience through the visuals and the final artwork.

Community engaged art practices is a long journey with different phases.

A researcher called Natalia Pilato developed 15 steps through her practice and research that can be a manuscript for implementing an inclusive and collective community art project (Pilato 2016);

1-Engaging in conversation with the targeted

- community.
- 2- Hold Community Meetings.
- 3- Create a core group.
- 4-Build Partnerships.
- 5- Assess data with participants.
- 6-Develop the design process.
- 7- Begin brainstorming.
- 8- Create visual representations.
- 9- Create Promotional Materials.
- 10- Find a Studio space.
- 11- Invite participants and make art-.
- 12- Install/exhibit the work.
- 13- Celebrate.
- 14- Reflect.
- 15- Breathe deeply, admire all that has been accomplished, and begin again.

Pilato’s (2016) steps are a more detailed version of what Holler (2019) has identified - in his article *Reintegration, Community Building, and Revitalization: An Examination of the Community Arts and Reintegration Project* - as “a coherent and concise blueprint for program delivery” (P.125s).

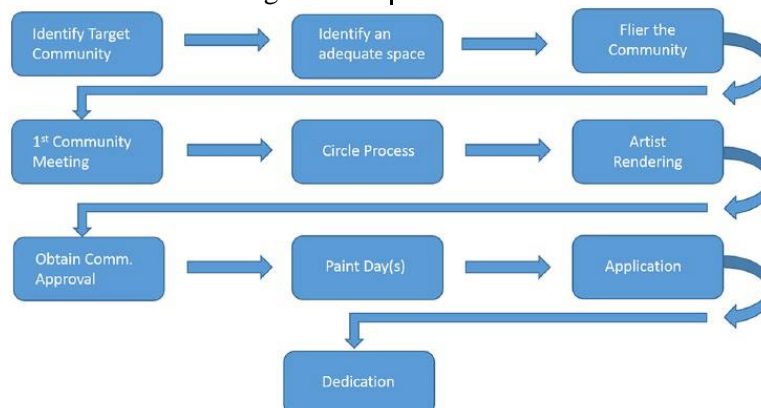


Figure 11Community arts and reintegration project—implementation plan (Holler, 2019. p.126s)



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