

City (Re)Searches

Experiences of Publicness

**THE PURPOSE OF CULTURAL
AGENCY**

Mary Jane Jacob

I will address art and artists. They are part of culture and what we sometimes think of as culture, but that's not all culture is.

Now there's an art that has caught on lately called socially engaged art practice. It's not a new style (though some think it is). It's an affirmation that art can be useful to society, that culture matters.

There was a time when I used to say that this social art could not really change anything. But there was a time before that when I believed it could—it must. Conceding to art world pundits, I burrowed down to demonstrate how this social art could help in small pockets, in particularized situations, and claimed it was at least a more vigorous alternative way of making art. Yet because it is more vigorous and it does change things in certain circumstances, this art matters.

Recent generations of artists have come up with this social art as their history, a given playing field, and have taken it further. Now I see we planted some seeds twenty-plus years ago, and this way of working has taken root and is springing up everywhere. City (Re)Searches are in Belfast, and before in Kaunas and Cork, are seeking to find what is growing in these places.

So why has this *social art* taken off? Because it works in any culture. Because it listens to the heartbeat, tapping into the essence of a culture while at the same time drawing upon commonalities within all cultures. Why has this social art taken root so well? Because many in the world are desperate for change, and change is dependent on the rest of the world. We feel our interconnectedness (a concept that is more apt here than globalism) in art.

Do we need artists to do this? No. Do they have better answers or answers at all? Not really. But they act with imagination more readily than most of us do. And in their way of seeing and practicing, they can also offer moments of insight and real vision. But there's something else—and this is where that insight comes.

Art is the artists' life's work and, in turn, it is about life. We might say this is a basic definition of art: art is a means by which artists give meaning to their lives, and—here's the unusual thing about art—by which we can give meaning to our lives, gaining an understanding of our place in the culture and in our time. This sense of connectedness which art provides—the sense of our individuality as well as of a larger scheme of things—is what we might call culture.

Momentary feelings that we are part of a wider narrative can grow more frequent as art enables a realization of the part we each play. Thus, it can figure into an awareness of the possibility of our own agency, maybe not always in changing the world, but in living our life. We have agency not because we always know where we are going, what's the next step, or have the answer, but because we are conscious of being in the dynamic process that is life. Art can give us this insight, but what matters most is how it connects in everyday ways. What I am getting at is a human pursuit we share, not just an art pursuit that artists undertake or invite us to participate in. We can evade it but we can't escape it. And art can be a partner in engaging life and living it.

In social art, the artist's medium is the things of ordinary life and our being in it. Acting with conscious intent, these artists put care into what they do to look at and provoke some reconsideration of the way things are. This process is not unique to art. While artists live this process in their art, this way of being is available to any of us. We all share with artists this way of being, if we care and are invested in the making and living of life. So the question today is: what do you really care about?

Art is the artist's life work. A life's work is the how we live our beliefs. Our life's work embodies our personal ethos, and this ethos has everything to do with our personal ethics. Now any ethically motivated action—in art or in life—does not take the route of least resistance or minimal effort. Without conflict and striving, meaning cannot be created. Interestingly, artists actually cultivate these conflictual periods because of the potentialities that can be found in the process. So this is where we are, why we are coming together: to find what's worth striving for, because there is potential to be found there.

By living what we believe, through our work, be it art or something else, we give form to our beliefs and communicate them to others. Living our lives is also our life's work. Living, like art, is a life practice. When it is socially engaged art, we practice together—artists and communities.

The Venetian artist collective "artway of thinking" has developed a chart, a sort-of mandala, that they use as they undertake projects in the public realm, that is, making art in life. It is a system of thinking and working, of practicing that moves through phases of observation, relation, action, and integration. Teaching this practice has become in large part of their art practice



artway of thinking
Co-creation Circle

as they share what they have learned though scores of in-depth art projects in communities in Italy and elsewhere.

So what value do artists have? And what is the use of art? To American philosopher John Dewey, art aids us in realizing ourselves as individuals so that we can lead lives that are satisfying because we have achieved a sense of integration with and meaning in the world. Because of art's exceptional ability to evoke feelings of empathy, Dewey thought, too, that art can bring about a deeper understanding of the human condition, and in this, artists are compassionate agents. Finally, Dewey thought that: "The first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art." Art for positive social change—that's

a useful thing that Dewey saw art can do.

We see this in the five-year effort of artist Seamus McGuinness with psychiatrist Kevin Malone as they worked with 102 families across Ireland who has lost family members to suicide. Their "Lived Lives" project was so much about the future that they continue this work and in some ways, I am sure, they will all their lives.



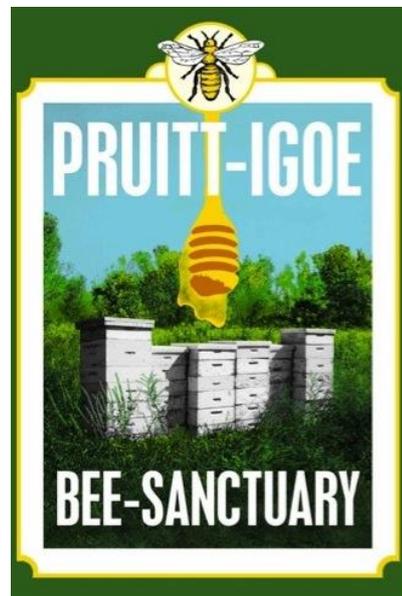
Seamus McGuinness
Lived Lives

We see this in the life's work of Marie Barrett who continually turns the earth that is Donegal. She understands the depth of this place, land and sea. She listens to the citizens who co-inhabit her birthplace and home, and she enables them to share their stories both beautifully and resonantly, to understand and make known what it is to be of and in this place now and into the future.



Marie Barrett
Illuminate

We see that in the work of Juan William Chávez who looked at the vast site of a former low-cost housing project in St. Louis, Missouri. It had been deemed so unfit for living that it was imploded, destroyed, and wiped away; the land was left fallow. Juan reconceived of it as a potentially thriving place for honey production. His unfolding story of industrious bees is becoming an inspiration for change in this city.



e Bee Sanctuary

Juan William Chávez
Bee Sanctuary

We see this with Laurie Jo Reynolds who looked at the inhuman treatment of prisoners in a penitentiary south of Chicago. All the prisoners were in solitary confinement. No consideration was given to whether they needed mental health treatment, or whether their level of this punishment was appropriate to their crime. Laurie Jo imagined treating prisoners more humanely. She reimagined the prison as "closed," and through her actions with families, doctors, and even prison wardens, she did just that. This prison is now closed and all the prisoners have been given fair treatment.

and even engender hope that a creative solution can be found, but we are the agents of our own lives and of our culture. Without agency, we are neither conscious of that nor living life.

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SAIC: "Tamms Year Ten Campaign Office" Fall 2012

Laurie Jo Reynolds
Tamms Campaign

Artists near and far are imagining a different world. But they are not the only agents of culture. We all are in some way, whether through action or inertia, and what we do or don't do makes a difference. So if this piece means anything, I hope it expresses that practicing life and participating in culture is not the exclusive domain of trained and degreed artists. They can join us along the way, provide imagination

PRODUCERS

Blue Drum (IE) is a community arts organisation that nurtures community-led arts practice.

www.bluedrum.ie

Community Arts Partnership (NI) is committed to championing community arts that can transform our society.

www.commartspartner.org

Kaunas Biennial (LT) is a global event for contemporary art, where textile art is a means for interdisciplinary practices.

www.biennial.lt

PAMPHLET

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