Dirty Hands and Soaring Hearts

Vicki Anne Sienczuk
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School of Drama Fine Art and Music
Faculty of Education and Arts
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Certificate of Authenticity

The work presented in this exegesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Name: Vicki Sienczuk

Signature:
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ABSTRACT

WITH DIRTY HANDS AND SOARING HEARTS

Joseph Beuys believed that art should facilitate change, individually and socially and that spectator could become creator by tapping into the creative impulses dormant in all of us.¹ This concept encompassing democratisation, increased availability and extension of creative practice to the many rather than the elitist and insular protection of the status of artist as special informs the investigation of the benefits and drawbacks of community based public art in this exegesis. The idea that all have creative capacity is not new. The belief that all should have access to the creative experience and the understanding of the potential for positive community development as a result of ethical, well-considered and well executed projects is growing. This exegesis investigates notions of, and analyses examples of best practice in this growing field as well as describing and evaluating personal experiences in the field of community based public art.

The traditional role of the artist as independent originator and creator bringing to life their sole vision as a work of art is broadened and enhanced by community based arts practice. Good community based practice demands that artist and community develop a relationship based on trust and communication. This forms the basis for working collaboratively to produce an outcome that is relevant and reflects ownership by the community.

In the last 30 years Community Based Arts has developed into a strong field of practice with many high profile artists now choosing to work within communities and producing significant works. A major challenge for artists working within communities is to ensure that community participants have every chance to develop the skills and knowledge base to enable a work

¹ Claire Bishop (Ed), 2006. Participation Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel and MIT Press, p 125
of high standard to develop. A plethora of regulations surround the management of public/community art projects and this can often result in compromise which subsequently affects the quality of the work:

There is obviously bad community art: there is, after all, no shortage of bad art, (or bad education, medicine or government, if it comes to that). The argument that community art debases standards raises questions … Who defines quality, value, meaning?²

Matarasso touches on vitally important points in the above quote:

- Who is this work for?
- What is the desired impact of the artwork?

Community based art is relevant to the community that produces it and often has other beneficial outcomes which are not considered in critical analysis of the artwork. Neither are these factors given much consideration by developers or public housing authorities who are the instigators of many suburban precincts which are aimed at attracting new home buyers. This results in the creation of an artificial community whose members are isolated and who have no sense of social or cultural history.

In this exegesis I explore the notion that involvement in community based projects has the potential to begin the development of networks within fledgling and established communities and provide a sense of pride and belonging. Investigation and analysis of examples of community based work will establish factors inherent in successful projects and identify elements that contribute to failure as well as assessing the relative success or failure of a selection of projects.

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