

# Mural Arts on Social Practice

Jane Golden 22 May 2012

Social practice, community-based art and socially engaged practice are all terms that have been used to describe art-making that changes the relationship between artist and audience, the audience and the work of art, and the artist and the work created. From the perspective of Mural Arts, social practice at its core means engaging its closest audience—those who know most about why a work of art is made—directly in the creation of its meaning.

Understanding the social implications of Mural Arts' work requires consideration of several shifts in art practice over the past 50 years or so: the activism that re-ignited muralism in the 1960s in Los Angeles and Chicago and sought to represent struggle and milestones around social equity and racial identity; the art world's evolution away from making objects toward creating memory and experience, whether as part of the art-making process or as someone who simply encounters the work in the midst of his or her daily experience; and finally, dramatic changes in what is considered art and who makes it.

Mural Arts' genesis was in its social purpose. Amid the effort to address deficits of investment in education,

housing, economic revitalization and rehabilitation that resulted in blighted, trash-strewn, gap-toothed neighborhoods, it quickly became clear that the graffiti-writing youth we served early on also had a lot of talent and determination behind their spray cans. They had intuitive (and carefully honed) skills in graphic design, deep intellectual curiosity about contemporary art and artists, a knowledge of the city and its neighborhoods born of hours devoted weekly to wall hunting, and problem-solving skills developed in the service of painting in "challenging" locations. While rarely acknowledged for its value, the willingness of these "writers" to participate in mural painting along with graffiti removal was the seed from which Mural Arts' "asset-based" social practice has grown.

After 27 years, Mural Arts continues to recognize the challenges in its community. Many are the same as they were in 1984, but what we can bring to the table to stimulate change has grown dramatically. We now have multiple "asset" partners as we work to reclaim empty lots for the larger community, restore neighborhood pride and revitalize commercial corridors. In our Art Education work this year, for example, our A2O program (Art and Arts Outdoors) engaged six artists-in-residence to work in collaboration with Recreation Centers across the city to create site-specific work that highlights nearby green space. Beth Clevensine has worked at the Hawthorne Recreation Center at 12th and Carpenter Streets to build

and design a communal planter made out of cob, a material consisting of clay, straw, sand, water and earth. She has led workshops in creating the planter and in designing handmade tiles that will be inlaid into the cob. The youth workshop participants take field trips to nearby FDR Park to observe the details of local trees, shrubs and grasses to learn why soil was one of our first and most versatile art materials. In the northwest section of Philadelphia, artist Leah Reynolds is working at Awbury Recreation Center to lead workshops focusing on the transformative properties of "trash." Youth and other community members have learned how to braid, weave and connect old plastic bags, bottles and other recyclable materials into a large, hanging spiral in relief. By the end of Reynolds' residency, *Plastics are Forever/Trash Makes Me Dizzy* will be installed temporarily on the outside of the recreation center with the hope that the memory of weaving these modest materials together with one another will endure as a powerful reminder of a fragile environment.

By contrast, as part of our three-year partnership with the city's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services, The Porch Light Initiative seeks to remedy multiple human and community ills through art while developing an alternate model for delivery of social services. Substance abuse, homelessness, alcoholism and fragmented neighborhoods are problems that cannot be solved by a single mural. They need a comprehensive

approach, careful methodology and rigorous assessment and evaluation. At three sites in North Philadelphia, teams of artists (visual artists, poets and spoken word artists) have spent two years working at specific agencies, offering sequential workshops that seek to engage clients where they are in their personal recovery, begin to harness their creative capacity, and consider the physical, affiliative and spiritual implications of community. In this second year of Porch Light, clients, agency staff and artists are learning to re-construct new lives from the fragments of their old lives by focusing on images and ideas that provide meaning for them as individuals and community members.

The images that have emerged from these workshops are powerful metaphors: a grand collaged composition of a community table at Sobriety Through Out-Patient (STOP) at which everyone has a seat; a three-story embrace that speaks of reconciliation at Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM); and a monumental wall quilt at Ridge and Diamond with Project H.O.M.E. that will translate letters into bars of color that form words, phrases, and ultimately the collective visual expression of the neighborhood. Fashioned from strips of paint, aluminum cans, snack wrappers and plastics, this "community quilt" re-frames the discarded visual landscape of their everyday lives.

The lead artists who designed the final product of these processes (James Burns, Betsy Casanas, and Ernel Martinez and Kier Johnston) have learned again and again

in their work with Porch Light and Mural Arts that co-creation—creating a space and a place where everyone has something at stake—builds assets and makes for better art, changed perspectives and ultimately the capacity to see what's possible for all concerned.

For more information about Mural Arts and the variety of programs they offer, visit [www.muralarts.org](http://www.muralarts.org) or contact Jane Golden at [jane.golden@muralarts.org](mailto:jane.golden@muralarts.org).