Contemporary Art Museums and Social Practice

Socially Engaged Art as a Strategy for Exhibiting Social Issues

Nicole Pollard

"The thing that is most important to us is that contemporary art acts as a free space providing maximum release for people to survive the trying conditions of contemporary life. It is our deep-seated belief that creativity in a free space will truly contribute to the development of the human race."[1]

—Jiro Yoshihara, founder of the Gutai Art Movement, January 1955

While studying to earn my Master of Fine Arts in Museum Exhibition Planning and Design at the University of the Arts, my classmates and I often returned to an important question: how might we rethink how museums are used? We all had a desire to create experiences within museums that would invite in new audiences and challenge traditional behavioral standards (i.e., talk quietly, walk slowly, don't touch), in hopes of changing what kinds of activities can take place within the museum environment. At the same time, we wanted to bring attention to relevant issues, no matter what exhibition topic we were developing or designing.

In writing my graduate thesis, I decided to try to answer this question by exploring socially engaged art projects as a means for museums (in particular, contemporary art museums) to become more actively involved in, and connected with, their local communities and the social and political issues they face. "Socially engaged art" or "social practice" (its umbrella term) is collaborative and community centered, and foregrounds current social and/or political issues.[2] The duration is long-term, commonly spanning from six months to two years. In these projects, the artist takes on the role of a collaborator rather than the sole producer, and social interaction and community dialogue are the primary medium for these projects. Many socially engaged artists feel as though the word "art" may actually be problematic when referring to these projects – which critics often judge by their aesthetic value rather than their social impact. As socially engaged artist and writer Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh points out, socially engaged art's focus on process rather than product "challenge[s] the fetish for totalization, objectification and commodification in a market-driven art system."[3]

1   The Gutai Art Movement (The Gutai Group) was founded in 1954 by Japanese painter Jiro Yoshihara. The movement stemmed from an interest in collaborative, energetic, performative art making that embraced concept over form. For more information, see: Yoshio Katoh, "The World of Shozo Shimamoto," trans. Christopher Stephens (Axel Vervoordt Gallery), accessed July 16, 2017, http://www.artnet.com/galleries/axel-vervoordt-gallery/shimamoto-the-gutai-works/.

2   "Glossary of Art Terms," TATE, accessed October 22, 2016, http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary.
3   Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh, "The Politics of Relationality–Part Two: Ethical Contentions," *I.U.B...*, accessed March 14, 2017, https://iubeezy.wordpress.com/texts/politics-2-2/ and Ohene-Ayeh, "The Village of Arts and Humanities Residency: Project Summary," *I.U.B...*, accessed March 14, 2017, https://iubeezy.wordpress.com/iub-projects-2/2016-2/the-village/the-project/.

My particular focus on contemporary art museums stems from my understanding of these institutions as places that have traditionally addressed the most controversial social and political issues of their day through the display of art. Therefore, addressing contemporary issues is what these museums should be doing by nature. However, contemporary art museums also have a great deal of work to do in regards to fighting the elitist stigma often associated with them; they have a great deal of work to do if they want to bring in audiences that do not typically come. I identified socially engaged art as a means to open up new possibilities for what art placed in contemporary art museum galleries looks like, while also opening up new ways for these institutions to engage with their local communities by working together to create projects that address the contemporary social issues affecting them.

Socially engaged art projects within contemporary art museum galleries have the potential to bring people together through co-creation, expression, and civic dialogue, to allow for the building of communities that grow together to form a greater social awareness, and to support the connection of strangers within museum spaces. By serving as an active workspace for these projects, the gallery can become less of a place of display and more of an incubator or think tank, a place to reconsider how we define art: is it only highly

visual and product based? Or can it also be about social interaction? This new practice may require contemporary art museums to adjust their mission statements to reflect social motivations, deeply consider the role of accessibility for their new community partners, adopt intra-institutional collaborative strategies, and, perhaps, identify a plan for potential outcomes through the development of their own Theory of Change: what the nonprofit Center for the Theory of Change calls "a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context."[4]

The following case study will be used to examine how a small, community art organization – The Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia – has brought socially engaged art practices into its work. Many community arts organizations, centers, and artists without institutional associations have been doing this type of work for quite some time. However, only recently have these projects begun to be acknowledged within the growing field of socially engaged art for their ability to create community cohesion and bring attention to pressing social issues. Although the placement of such a project in a large museum may present different limitations than it would for a small, nimble organization like the Village of Arts

and Humanities, contemporary art museums can still look to this kind of project as a model from which they can learn.

Case Study: The Politics of Relationality (Relational Strategies) – Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh at The Village of Arts and Humanities

In 2014, the Village of Arts and Humanities introduced a new artists-in-residency program, SPACES. The program supports one visiting artist and several members of the community, referred to as "Neighborhood Artists," in creating a four-to-nine-month long project that "[identifies] gifts and challenges in the neighborhood, and [creates] an arts-based response."[5] Neighborhood Artists are paid collaborators who help support the visiting artist in creating artistic and sustainable solutions to the community's issues of concern.[6] The visiting artists are expected to live and work full time on the organization's campus in order to best facilitate community engagement and get the most out of their stay.

Curation becomes a shared understanding at The Village.

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4 "What Is Theory of Change?" accessed April 5, 2017, http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/.

5 Lillian Dunn, "The Village of Arts and Humanities Receives 2014 ArtPlace America Grant for SPACES Artist-in-Residency Program," news release, June 24, 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, http://villagearts.org/Files/Village-ArtPlaceAward2014.pdf.
6 Village of Arts and Humanities, "About," *SPACES: Artist in Residence Program at the Village of Arts and Humanities*, accessed April 5, 2017, http://spaces.villagearts.org/about/.

fig. 1. Artist Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh (second from right) and Neighborhood Artists (left to right) Tamia Garcia, Tiyanna Scott, Aaron Sawyer, and Jaquan Fields/Quany the Clown.

Staff, board members, Neighborhood Artists, and neighbors work together as a committee, gathering to vote on and choose future visiting artists, based on the applicant's experience and initial proposal. Artists are encouraged to visit the organization before their residency so that their proposal reflects basic awareness and knowledge about the surrounding community. Once the artist is chosen, and on location, the proposal is collaboratively edited and workshopped with the artist and the staff of The Village to ensure that the project will fulfill mutual interests. The Village is interested in projects that make art in conjunction with serving as a form of community development. Each project aims to satisfy three goals. The project must (1) produce "good" art, (2) provide opportunities and connections that impact the community's daily lives, and (3) speak to a larger issue or condition affecting the lives of those living outside of the North Philadelphia community.

One of the first international artists to be accepted into the SPACES program was Ghanian conceptual artist and writer Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh. From June 2016 to January 2017, Ohene-Ayeh worked to form a series of relational and engagement strategies that would help organize and mobilize members of the community, in new and creative ways. In his blog, the artist reflected upon this decision: "I thought to adopt these relational procedures as experimental methods of introducing myself to members of the community, creating avenues for interaction and exchange so we could then move on to begin to develop some kind of project through the relation[ship]s we were forming."[7] The artist used four months of his tenure forming relationships with the four Neighborhood Artists, with whom he eventually formed a collective: Jaquan Fields, Aaron Sawyer, Tamia Garcia, and Tiyanna Scott (fig. 1).

To build relationships and encourage community engagement, Ohene-Ayeh created monthly

7   Ohene-Ayeh, "The Politics of Relationality–Part Two: Ethical Contentions," and "The Village of Arts and Humanities Residency: Project Summary.

open mic nights, community artist talks, and an open studio/interactive creative space. Open mic nights (fig. 2) brought together a diverse range of talent from the neighborhood. Singers, musicians, dancers, comedians, poets, and other performers came together in the same place to share their talent, and identify potential opportunities for future collaboration. Artist talks, hosted monthly at Ohene-Ayeh's residence, brought together local artists to share their ideas and practice through presentations, demonstrations, and discussion. (fig. 3) The open studio was used as a "temporary 'exhibition' and collaboration site" for Ohene-Ayeh and his collaborators, where they could reflect upon the relational events they'd held, using the visual arts as a means to visualize literal and conceptual connections (fig.4).[8] Members of the community were welcome to "drop-in" to the studio to create alongside the collective, using their medium of choice, whether that be painting, graphic design, photography, or something else.

Ultimately, the project's funder, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, was interested in a project that resulted in a final public art piece, as the original proposal specified. The process-focused and less product-focused change in direction presented a tension between the artist and the organization, in the The Village's efforts to fulfill the interests of the

8   Village of Arts and Humanities, "About."

fig. 2.

Audience members and waiting performers at the August 2016 open mic night.

COURTESY OF THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

fig. 3.

Community members meet at one of the monthly artist talks, also known as "2512 Sessions" (named for the address of the artist-in-residence's home).

COURTESY OF THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES/LORI WASELCHUK

fig. 4.

Artist Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh and collaborators working in their "Drop-in Creation Space."

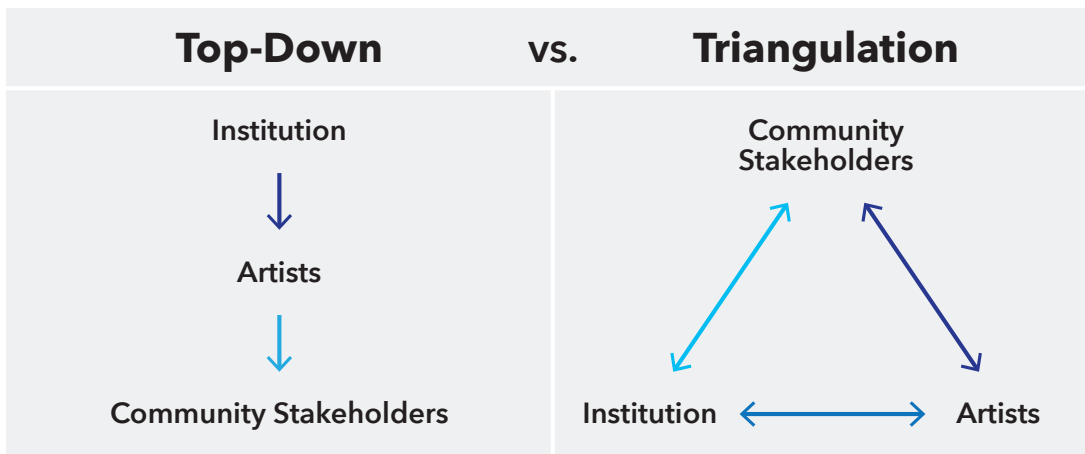COURTESY OF THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES/LORI WASELCHUK

Top-Down vs. **Triangulation**

Top-Down	Triangulation
Institution ↓ Artists ↓ Community Stakeholders	Community Stakeholders / Institution ↔ Artists

fig. 5.

Diagram of top-down working relationships versus equal triangulation.

funder. Ohene-Ayeh and his team of Neighborhood Artists, however, "were successful in inventing simple, effective and sustainable procedures for mobilization and collaboration within the community which could outlive the period of [the artist's] residency."[9] Despite the momentary tension, The Village recognizes these relational strategies as a success, specifically the open mic nights, and plans to continue to host them even now that Ohene-Ayeh's residency has come to an end (for example, Neighborhood Artist Jaquan Fields has an interest in co-producing a series of open mic events with some of the younger students who are involved in The Village's arts programming). To close the project, The Village held debriefings and summative interviews with the Neighborhood Artists involved, completed a final report for the Pew Center

for Arts & Heritage, threw a big celebratory party, and put photographs documenting the series of relational events on their website – soon to be accompanied by a documentary film.

Considerations and Recommendations for Application

From Ohene-Aveh's work – and my thesis project research into that of others[10] – I've identified the following criteria that I feel are most critical in planning and implementing socially engaged art projects within contemporary art museums.

Build Relationships

Relationships are the foundation of any socially engaged art project, and can require a significant amount of time to be genuinely established. Local community

groups need to be defined differently and with specificity. A local artist can utilize their own, existing community base to help form partnerships for the project (although new relationships will still need to be made). An artist's familiarity with a particular community and its social and political environment can serve as a springboard to get the project moving. Should a museum wish to bring in an outside or international artist, though, as with *The Politics of Relationality*, it is important that the project's timeline allows for a less alienating insertion of the artist into the particular community.

Socially engaged art projects commonly develop a triangulation between institution, artist, and community stakeholders to avoid falling into a patriarchal, top-down model in which the museum, to a certain degree, operates through the artist (fig. 5). They also demand a high level of transparency.

9   Ohene-Ayeh, "The Politics of Relationality–Part Two: Ethical Contentions," and "The Village of Arts and Humanities Residency: Project Summary."

10 The project *reForm* at Temple Contemporary, by artist Pepón Osorio, was also used as a case study within my graduate thesis.

Those involved in the project will be challenged to be as transparent as possible when describing what their interests are, and what they are willing to give to the project. The museum should be transparent in explaining just how complex institutional practices – such as funding and evaluation – can be, and it should invite community stakeholders into all stages of the process. It can be advantageous for all of the collaborators in the project to be involved in creating the formal proposal to be sent to a proposed funder. Artists, who will want to explore the issue in ways that are based on their own artistic experience – as well as the community's needs for the project – may find their autonomy challenged when working in a group. It is important for them to have a degree of responsiveness and adaptability as their typical role shifts within this setting.

Initial collaboration might involve the artist, the museum, and community members holding several meetings of active brainstorming and ideation. The artist can utilize this information to help guide the group towards an artistic or creative intervention that addresses their collective ideas and concerns. Within the planning process, extreme generosity is required from all parties involved, in recognizing that – within reason – interests will not be completely aligned.

Identify the Issue
One of the biggest limitations of active community involvement

is the inability to identify issues that are truly relevant to the communities we serve. Why, we need to ask ourselves, would community members we wish to work with care about a museum's project? Is it something that will not only fulfill their needs but their wants? In Nina Simon's recent book, *The Art of Relevance*, she describes the importance of providing experiences that allow for "learning about someone's needs" rather than "prescribing."[11] But how can we determine needs and wants collaboratively?

At Temple Contemporary in Philadelphia, director Robert Blackson created a community advisory council with which he works closely to determine the direction future programming and exhibitions will take. The council is comprised of a number of Philadelphia's civic and cultural leaders, local North Philadelphia high school students, and Temple University students, faculty, and administrators. For each meeting the advisors are asked to bring "one question of local relevance and international significance that they do not know the answer to."[12] This process helps determine broader issues that may then be refined once community and artist relationships are built.

At the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, the C3, or Creative

Community Committee staff actively worked collaboratively to plan an issue-driven art exhibition about transition-age foster youth, entitled *Lost Childhoods*. The museum hosted monthly C3 meetings for creatives and activists in Santa Cruz, at which they brainstormed to help to determine big ideas and goals for the exhibition. These meetings helped the museum to "infuse [their] exhibitions and programs with diverse perspectives, creative ideas, and relevant partnerships."[13] They also helped it locate advocates in the foster care system, foster youth who helped inform the content, and forge collaborations with artists, who created new works for the exhibition.

Set Goals and Develop a Theory of Change
Developing goals and a Theory of Change for a project will help the museum, artist, and community stakeholders manage expectations, allowing them to more effectively plan and evaluate their project. Success is difficult to measure in highly process-based projects like socially engaged art, but specificity about the change the group hopes to make allows for a much stronger possibility of achieving it. A clearly developed Theory of Change provides collaborators with a means to identify potential outcomes that they may categorize as fulfilling the goals they have previously established. Goals

11 Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0., 2016), 93.
12 "Our Advisory Council," *Tyler School of Art: Temple Contemporary*, accessed March 14, 2017, https://tyler.temple.edu/our-advisory-council.

13 Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, "What Is C3?" *Creative Community Committee*, accessed April 2, 2017, http:// c3.santacruzmah.org/.

should communicate intent but not necessarily dictate a final outcome, to allow for a more organic process. For example, a very generic yet noteworthy goal that may be applicable to many socially engaged art projects might be to raise a sense of awareness around a particular issue within the community – rather than specifying the particular intervention that will be used, which could limit the group's creative process.

Create Sustainability

Socially engaged art projects should provide opportunities for an aspect of the work to be continued even after the project comes to an end. Instead of returning to the way things previously were once the artist or institution are no longer involved, it is imperative to leave the community enriched by the experience and with a sustained sense of empowerment and autonomy, allowing them to gain more control over their own social and political situation. Ethical considerations concerning the morality of socially engaged art, such as the understanding of sustainability, can be used as a motivator rather than an obligatory limitation within the planning of these projects. After the conclusion of *The Politics of Relationality* (*Relational Strategies*) project at The Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, one of the strategies that artist Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh had introduced to organize and bring together creative people in the neighborhood – the open mic nights – were purposefully continued

by The Village and Neighborhood Artists he worked with.

Reflect and Evaluate

Reflection is something that should occur throughout the duration of a project, as the group reevaluates its work in relationship to the goals it initially set. A final reflection is extremely important to determine if a project was successful in achieving its goals and desired outcomes. There are many forms this can take: an organized and facilitated group discussion; personal interviews; a short writing exercise; a discussion in the museum's gallery space; or a formal review by a trained evaluator. Generating measurable results, though, can be extremely hard with arts and culture, especially when the impact desired is one that is more emotive, affective, or qualitatively driven.

Conclusion

Community engagement is a top priority for many museums; socially engaged art projects can help them build towards it. They expose community members to the possibilities that can take place within these spaces. Initially, projects may be initiated by the museum, but ideally, as community members and artists have opportunities to find a sense of place within an institution, they will propose projects. Museums could then be perceived as institutions that do not necessarily posses all-knowing "truths," but rather places that

bring people together through co-creation, critical thinking, and discussion about social issues, places where the "art" is defined not just as paintings, prints, or sculpture, but in the dialogue that happens around art and social issues.

While there are many challenges presented with this kind work, the benefits can outweigh them. It will certainly challenge the way museums currently work, and their existing, institutional practices regarding funding, longevity of projects, and staff responsibilities. Most importantly, it could help rethink what museums do and challenge traditional behaviors, making the museum a place for its communities to actively address and combat the contemporary social issues affecting them. ▍

Nicole Pollard is a recent graduate of the Museum Exhibition Planning + Design MFA Program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. nicoledpollard@gmail.com