



THE POWER OF BEING THERE – REFLECTIONS OF A COMMUNITY ARTIST

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Abstract: *Open a window into one artist's experience of working at the grass roots of collaborative community art making. The artist's voice, her experiences and observations of the process of collaborative community art making at the grass roots of a project is not often heard in the end report or documentation. The focus is more often than not on the art product itself or the ticked boxes that show a successful achievement of projected project outcomes. The processes of making art with community can be risky business as it requires the worker to 'Be There'; to be truly present authentic, open, and responsive. So, what does it mean to 'Be There'? Angie will share some insights gained through her practice and describe some of the more poignant moments of 'Being There'. She will discuss practical ways of connecting with others and discuss how sharing the 'risk of relationship' through creative, authentic community collaboration in making art is a powerful way of 'Being There'.*

Keywords: *collaborative community art making, risk of relationship, Being There.*

All community art-making projects have their own shape and life but through them all there are familiar processes and to a large degree outcomes, but every now and then something incredible can take place in a most unexpected way. This can change the way you look at your own practice and sometimes question the accepted way of doing things at the time. I would like to share with you such an experience that I had as an artist employed to work with a community in North Shepparton in central Victoria during 2008 -09.

My role as the community artist was part of an ambitious project run by Vic Urban and the Greater City of Shepparton in partnership with local community organizations and a residents group to redesign and redevelop a public housing estate. The aim was to reignite community pride, create safer streets and develop good public access to new public places within the estate. One of these new public places was the redevelopment of a community park. It is this park and the neighbouring residents that became my focus for more than twelve months.

The brief that I was given was to work with the community to design, make and install art in the park in conjunction with the contracted landscape designers. This seemed straightforward enough and there seemed to be a well established community liaison group to work through who were keen to make this happen in a way that would involve as many of the residents as possible in a consultative and hands-on experience.

Over the year I facilitated workshops to make ceramic tiles for the top of a retaining wall with two groups of students at the local schools who were residents in the houses adjoining the park. I worked with kids in the local youth group to design and paint a street art style stencil wall in the park. The local kindergarten kids made tiles, as did a group of adult literacy students at the local community house. A local indigenous men's group came on board to design laser cut mild steel panels and carved fence posts for the park fences.

All seemed to be going well and many residents seemed to be involved, however It is always tricky being brought into a community that is defined by location, individuals, groups, services, etc., existing side by side within defined boundaries, to create art work that represents that community. Because it is very rare for any community to be cohesive in terms of how they see themselves and define who they are, I am always aware that there may be other voices apart from the dominant voice. I always try to consciously remain sensitive to listening for and hearing these small voices that need to be represented also. The questions that I am constantly asking are.....

- What are the prejudices that I am working with?
- Are there people in this community who are missing out?
- If, so, how do I know who they are and how do I give them the opportunity to be involved?

Early in 2009, feeling that I had done the best that I could do within the bounds of the project and with most of the art-making completed and installed, all that was left to do was install the fifteen hundred community made tiles into the retaining wall. I set about doing this over six weeks or so on site. I had not organized for community participation in the laying of the tiles as it is logistically frustrating for everyone, when only one tile at a time can be laid, so I imagined that this was a solo job and that I might chat to a few of the locals in the park at the same time.

On my first day of laying tiles in the park I was surprised and perplexed to notice that no one used the park during the day and that anyone who walked through it did so without making eye contact and hurried on their way. I also noticed that the streets were quiet apart from the odd person making their way to someone's house and then disappearing indoors, despite the beautiful sunny days.

That same day when school came out, a young boy came along the footpath on his skateboard – I said 'Hi' and he came over. As he did so he realized that the tiles I was laying were the ones that he and his school mates had made with me about nine months before and was very excited. I asked him if he would like a job. He said 'Yes' and set about polishing the tiles and picking out the grout. After a while he asked if he could go and get a friend to help. 'Of course!' I said, and pretty soon there were about ten kids helping. They polished and chatted and then drifted off into a game together on the grass behind me.

I was aware that they were playing, even though I was not actively involved in the game. I just continued on with my work but at the same time I felt a connection to what was going on around me. The kids kept playing, stopping every now and then to momentarily check my progress. I then became aware that they were playing differently than they otherwise would if I had not been present. They were playing a 'vulnerable' type of game – rolling around on the grass, chasing each other, laughing and giggling rather than the separate and nervous individual play I had witnessed at other times or as many people were doing; just passing through the park to somewhere else. It struck me at the time, that my presence as an adult afforded a sense of safety and created an

invisible umbrella – ‘a space’ to enter into relaxed play. This summation was strengthened when, at the moment I had finished my work and began to make moves to pack up, the playing instantly stopped and the children begged me to stay a bit longer. I noted that even though I had not been actively involved in the game, my presence was some how very important.

I did however have to go, and spontaneously the children helped me pack up, lugging bags and buckets into the trailer and taking charge of packing it in the space for me. They wanted to know when I would be returning. I told them that I would be back in a couple of days and they could once again assist me. They said they would be here when I arrived. As I drove off down the street, in my rear vision mirror I could see the children running down the road after me, waving and yelling. It reminded me of the circus or something coming to town and the magic and promise of something ‘other’, a new experience, or exotic imaginings that it would bring to one’s ‘ordinary’ life.

During the installation phase of this project, I worked on site for one or two days a week over about six weeks, always allowing for spontaneous involvement by the locals and hoping that at some point I may get to meet some of the children’s parents who seemed to always stay in doors. One day when I asked one of the children who lived next door to the park, if she might like to go and get her Mum and show her what we were doing, she said ‘*Oh, she won’t come, but she has been watching us from the window everyday, she likes that.*’ By the last day that I was on site, her Mum had come to the front verandah and tentatively waved at me. If my work there had been for longer she may eventually have come and spoken to me.

During the six or so weeks on site, I found that kids would come and go. I was constantly meeting new children and I did eventually get to meet a couple of parents who expressed their approval of their children working with me, however, they themselves declined to help or even stay and talk and quickly hurried away.

Doing – Not Talking - Talking while Doing!

What is it about working alongside another that is so satisfying?

I worked alongside the kids who came to help install artworks in the park for many hours in the hot sun and some days as the cold wind blew from the west; yet it was a happy little bunch who chatted as they worked, gave advice to others as they learned to grout tiles, polish tiles and prise unwanted grout from the relief work on the tiles that had been made by many members of the community over the space of a year. The fact that these kids had made some of these tiles was one thing, although none of them remembered exactly which one was theirs! It was something far less self-centred that motivated these children. They were not paid for their work, nor were they forced to be there, yet they turned up regular as clock work and stayed until we were done.

As we worked there wasn’t much said, just the odd suggestion about how to do something, or ‘*Pass me the brush*’ or ‘*Can you get another bucket of water please?*’, but every now and then a question would arise, like ‘*How did you get to do this stuff? Did you learn this at TAFE? Do people pay you to do this with us?*’

I answered their questions as directly and briefly as they answered mine and together we built a relationship and together we worked and built the artwork in ‘their’ park. There is such simple power in this simple thing yet it is hard to analyse it into smaller parts for fear of dissipating the

magic of what it is to truly make a connection with others through the action of physical work toward a common goal. Many of the children who worked with me would be a challenge to teach in a classroom, possibly labelled as disruptive and defiant toward the structures imposed on them. In the unstructured context of working in the park at their will they became a constructive, dynamic, creative, and enthusiastic force although there was never a danger of any of them becoming little Angels!

When I first met many of the children, I asked them what they liked doing and what they wanted to do when they grew up. Most of them shrugged, responding with '*Dunno*'. During the course of the work over the weeks a couple of the boys asked me about trades such as bricklaying, building and tiling and if I reckoned that they could do that when they were older. One of the girls who had not said a word directly to me for the entire six weeks, saved all her questions to the last day when she knew I wasn't coming back again. Her questions were well considered, about where she could study if you wanted to do what I did and as well as that, she wanted to learn how to mix the cement and how to put it on the tiles, along with many other questions.

Through the simple experience of working together and chatting together, these children extended their understanding of the world. It became a little larger and offered a view they had never considered before. Imagine if these kids and kids like them could have the space, and the prompting by someone just 'being there' to allow them to ask questions that they never thought of and maybe dream, dreams they didn't know they could dream more often?

Even though I had worked with some of these kids in their school to make the tiles for the park, this activity was not connected to their world. The other children I met on site went to different schools away from the neighbourhood, sometimes after experiencing challenges with the local schools. Some kids I worked with didn't go to school at all and were unaware that there was an opportunity to make art for their park when the workshops were on. They and many of their parents had not attended the organized community art-making sessions with the lure of a free lunch and ice cream and nor were they visitors to the local community house.

Although these people were local residents,

- why was it that they had not responded to invitations to be included in the art-making?
- What was it that was stopping them from coming out of their houses?

And ultimately

- what would have happened if I or another arts workers could have sustained a visible and consistent presence in the park doing something that allowed for spontaneous community involvement for longer?

The community of North Shepparton was described to me as one of the most consulted communities in Victoria. The big question that I have after this extraordinary experience and will leave you with is

- How can we design sustainable collaborative community projects that contain processes that don't look like projects or programs, and do not necessarily conform to a predetermined shape or even have a predetermined outcome in mind? How do we sustain the very important, unglamorous, not media worthy, not a photo opportunity, not a spectacle, long term work with communities to create environments and meaningful hands on art making that allows for

spontaneous community participation; that create an opportunity for individual and collective meaning to develop and build authentic relationships and trust through which growth may take place and still tick all the boxes for the funding bodies and those who employ us as community artists and arts-workers?

I believe that the creativity of the artist in a community context is not only to do with the resultant artwork that a project may yield but with the way that the artist facilitates the group work and responds to and moulds what he or she has to work with into a positive expression of the collective. As I write this, I am reminded of the words of Milenko Matanovik, a community landscape designer/ builder and founder of Pomegranate Centre in America.

Creativity is always based on interaction. It is a two way street. It is always mindful of context. I use the image of the meandering river that yields to the terrain in order to accomplish its journey as being a better metaphor for how creativity works best. In yielding to the obstructions, the river becomes intimately connected to the landscape. This gives the river a beauty and power much different from the canal that is cut through the land in a direct line. The river's meandering spreads the water across a wide area, prevents erosion, provides habitats for vegetation and wildlife. Floodplains are very fertile, yet farmers often straighten streams to get more usable land because they believe this will control the flooding. The opposite is true. Straightened streams cut deep channels that are cut off from the surrounding floodplain. During the floods the concentrated water flow increases the erosion.

Creativity operates with a kind of grace similar to the way a meandering river responds to its terrain, yielding to it yet amplifying both itself and the landscape. I have found that when humans engage in this way, we are often able to balance our growth with the powerful influences of the world around us. As creative sojourners, we find ourselves guided by intuition and by events and people around us, with our vision adaptable and flexible, ready to connect with our environment rather than impose our will on it. We learn that force is self defeating (Matanovik, 2007).

References:

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Biography: *Angie Russi is a freelance visual artist and community cultural development worker. She holds a Diploma in Fine Art Ceramics, a Graduate Diploma in Community Cultural Development and has recently completed a Masters in Community Cultural Development at Victorian College of the Arts. Her professional practice as a studio and community artist in the Goulburn Valley Region spans almost thirty years. Angie also works as a community education officer for the Shepparton Regional Art Gallery. Her ability to invent, design and create processes that express collective ideas, dreams and dialogue has lead her to be involved in the development of collaborative art-making projects with local government, state and local organizations and directly with communities. angierussi@mcmmedia.com.au*