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Community Art Installation As An Approach To Art Therapy: A Community Engagement

Abigail Thompson

Lesley University, abigailthompson@lesley.edu

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Running head: COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION AS AN APPROACH TO ART
THERAPY

Community Art Installation As An Approach to Art Therapy: A Community Engagement

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Abigail Thompson

Art Therapy

Michelle Napoli DAT, ATR-BC, REAT, LMHC

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COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

Abstract

In this thesis capstone paper, I advocate for a community art installation as an ethical and engaging way to approach art therapy. I argue that this approach may blur the lines between art therapy, art education and arts activism, but it is a powerful and anti-oppressive way to facilitate healing in marginalized communities. I found this approach furthered my understanding of what it means to be a competent and ethical art therapist. I also found it empowered art therapy group members and made them active facilitators of change in their lives and their communities. Observing the success of this project suggests a paradigm shift in approaches to art therapy.

Keywords: critical race feminist theory, democratic, anti-oppressive, and paradigm shift.

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

Community Art Installation as an Approach to Art Therapy: A Community Engagement

Introduction

“Everything is Art. Everything is Politics.” -Ai Wei Wei

Art therapy is a new field established in the last fifty years in the United States. As a student, we study many different theories of mental health from psychoanalysis, attachment theory, existential theory, and cognitive behavioral therapy. We are encouraged to think critically about the history of its development, the historical time it was developed in, and which population was informing the theorist. A change we have seen in the education of new therapists has been the addition of classes aimed to enrich ones understanding of power, privilege, oppression, and how to work effectively and respectfully with clients of different identities than our own.

This idea of cultural competency, self-awareness, and system knowledge has been highlighted in the field of art therapy and many others. Campana, (2011) wrote that:

an educator must be reflective about his or her relationship to complex power networks and how that influences the ways we interact with students or community members, as well as what we teach. Virtually any space can be pedagogical, and all education is political. As such, he holds that artists and other cultural workers must see their work as political and pedagogical. (p. 284)

We can see these politics and pedagogy play out even within the small field of art therapy. For Example, The American Art Therapy Association’s (AATA) Ethical Principles for

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

Art Therapists (2013) states that the “core principles all art therapists should be guided by in their work is autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, fidelity, justice and creativity” (p.1). They have subsections on protocols for confidentiality, responsibility to clients, assessment, client artwork, multicultural competency, supervision, research, advertising, and networking.

Professional, competent, “art therapists do not knowingly engage in behavior that is harassing or demeaning to persons with whom they interact” (AATA, 2013, p. 8). Yet, when AATA was approached by Karen Pence (the Vice President's wife) to make art therapy her project during the Trump presidency AATA released a newsletter stating that they were “enthusiastic about Mrs. Pence’s commitment and eager to support her efforts” (Saint Louis, 2017) despite awareness that Mrs. Pence has openly endorsed conversion therapy, racist, and homophobic laws. This sparked a backlash towards AATA from many of its members, and heated conversations within the field. This is all related to the ownership of art therapy, and the legitimizing of the field, which is intricately intertwined with systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

More recent theories such as Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory and Radical Feminist Theory argue that mental health and development are inextricably linked to culture and the impact of society on a person’s development. “The individual's own developmental life course is seen as embedded in and powerfully shaped by the conditions and events occurring during the historical period through a person’s life (Rosa & Tudge, 2013, p. 254). Unfortunately, these theories don’t always translate easily to an approach to therapy. If the individual is so impacted by the oppressive systems in their environment does this suggest that political activism is a form of therapy for marginalized people? It surely suggests that political change could improve mental health and be a healing experience for many people.

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

Is it possible to approach art therapy in a way that circumvents history of oppression, privilege, and effects change in systems of power? That task might be impossible. However, I believe that the community art installation offers a unique opportunity to include marginalized populations in therapeutic experiences that are more democratic, holistic, and anti-oppressive. I believe that art therapists using the community art installation as an approach to art therapy offers a multitude of therapeutic benefits such as empowerment, social skills, community involvement, and social change. The community art installation allows clients to become an active participant in their therapy, allowing the power to be shared equitably in the group, rather than held solely by the therapist.

In this paper I will describe a community engagement I facilitated with a group of inner-city teenagers. Over a period of seven months we worked collaboratively on a final project of a community art installation. I will begin this paper by reviewing current and past literature related to the community art installation. Then, I will describe our specific methods taken to develop and carry out the project. Therapeutic benefits of the experience will be described throughout the method. Finally, I will discuss the overall benefits of the community art installation approach, implications for the art therapy field, and future of therapeutic work.

Literature Review

The community art installation as an approach to art therapy makes two assumptions. First, that art has the capacity to be healing, and evoke social change. Second, that the environment, historical context, and societal structures we develop and live in effect our psychological health. A significant finding in the literature included examples of artists who are making politically charged art that may also facilitate a healing experience and psychological

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

theories that support a more culturally bound approach to art therapy such as ecological theory, and Critical Race Feminist Theory. I will also discuss the similarities and differences between art education, arts activism, and art therapy below.

Art Therapy

Frostig (2011) is an art therapist and associate professor at Lesley University. She wrote about the differences and similarities she experienced between art education, art activism, and art therapy. She wrote, “Among the three interrelated professions of art therapy, art education, and arts activism I have observed three general trends. Art education is characteristically social, art therapies personal or interpersonal, and art activism is political” (p. 55). She also mentioned similar qualities in all three fields such as compassion, empathy, curiosity, dialogue engagement, and ethics. While the community art installation may blur the lines between art education, art activism, and art therapy Frostig points out that art therapists have specific training that provides an optimal experience for our clients to gain a healing experience from this type of approach. Most important to the community art installation being considered a form of art therapy was that Frostig (2011) wrote about how her art therapist training “deepened my understanding of how systems work, how to network between groups, how to empathically approach different populations and how to develop inclusive conversation surrounding areas of conflict” (p.56). While the community art installation may not be embraced by the art therapy community as an approach thus yet, these skills that Frostig points out are essential to the experience being therapeutic. Art therapists are trained to facilitate these types of conversations, build relationships that add to this work, and hold the space for the hard conversations that accompany this approach. It seems that the politics of licensure and legitimization has led us to draw fine lines around the definition of art therapy. What I am suggesting is that we expand our definition

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

of art therapy to prioritize anti-oppressive approaches and less intertwined in a history of oppressive practices.

Artists, Activism, and Healing

There is a rich history of artists who engage in socially charged art, that often offers a healing element. Ulbricht (2003) wrote, “recently, a number of contemporary artists have assumed a new role that includes the reshaping of the world through social criticism. Some artists choose to pick their concerns overtly while others simply present topics and ideas for viewers to contemplate” (p.8). Artists who engage in the work of social criticism include, The Guerilla Girls, Ai Wei Wei, Joseph Beuys, Suzanne Lacy, and Carrie Mae Weems.

Fusaro (2016) mentioned artists like Carrie Mae Weems and Tania Bruguera as examples of artists who engage communities politically and blur the lines between art education, fine art, and community art activism. In Weems’ kitchen series she nods to black history with kitchen objects on the table such as peanuts, and Malcom X posters in the background. Yet, she invites us in to a less stereotypical experience of the kitchen table, doing her makeup with her daughter, or eating dinner with her husband. Weems brings us into this intimate domestic space that is usually private and shares it with viewers personalizing our experience thus humanizing our limited knowledge of black culture through time. Art like this is political, it challenges thinking, and is pointed towards social change by developing a sense of empathy in the viewer. (Fusaro, 2016, p.58) However, Weems is only reaching a certain audience in a museum. There are other artists that expand the activist aspect of their work by taking their work beyond museum walls.

Fusaro (2016) also mentioned Tania Bruguera’s work for its unique ability to collaborate with people and address civil rights. Bruguera is a performance and installation artist who

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

collaborates with organizations, elected officials, and holds workshops locally, and internationally. The workshops range from kids' art, computer classes, art history classes for women and much more. She makes public art, private art, posters, bags, interactive art all to bring attention to immigrant rights. Her works jumpstarted the foundation Immigrant Movement International which continues today (Fusaro, p. 55). Although Bruguera is a fine artist, it appears her work is much more versatile than something to look at in a museum but encompasses community activism as well.

In addition to works like Weems and Bruguera, Nancy Coyne (2014) spoke at a Ted Talk in Minneapolis about her work in the public art sphere that certainly blurs the line similarly between art, politics, and healing as well. Coyne projected images of immigrants in Minneapolis across panels of the skywalks that connect buildings in the twin cities. She points out that in museums the experience is mediated, and public art expands our experience of viewing the art. She even collected statistics on the success of her works. For example, sixty percent of the population reported that the public art piece that she installed increased their awareness of diversity in their community (Coyne 2014). This response that her public art created is a testimony to the potential that art has in building empathy with people, which in turn leads to social change.

With these examples of artists work we can begin to see where the fields may begin to merge between fine art, art activism, and healing of communities. The powerful techniques we can observe through these artists are the use of public spaces to deliver messages and the democratic approach to their work that facilitates community organizing. Their research supports that art can develop empathy in the viewers. I argue that when an art therapist takes this

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

arts-based approach within a community, it becomes a highly effective and anti-oppressive approach to art therapy.

The community art installation can also be considered from a systems-based theory perspective, which supports individuals impacted by the historical oppression in their environments via identifying, addressing, and potentially enacting social change. I will elaborate on some of these systems-based theories below.

Ecological and Systems Based Psychological Theories

Critical race feminist theory is an example of a psychological theory that acknowledges that the social, political, and historical environment in which the individual develops cannot be underestimated as influencing psychological health. It also encourages therapists to advocate and empower clients because ultimately empowerment and the ability to advocate for oneself and cause social change is healing for our clients (Sajani, 2012). Frostig (2011) wrote:

Feminist critical theory derives from philosophical and political movements. Feminist arts activism was initially situated between conceptualism and the environmental movement, writing that these artists were engaging in active process of representation attempting at the very least to change the conversation, to empower individuals and communities and ultimately to stimulate social change. (p. 52)

Frostig (2011) pointed out the parallels between psychological theories and artistic movements that are situated within the same historical time frame. These trends are not coincidences but are a product of the political climate and social systems in place at that time. Co-occurring with feminist political movements was the development of feminist psychological theories as well as feminist art. Currently, we are situated in a historical context of strife in the

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

United States. People who live in this country are marching, protesting and speaking out. If the field of art therapy does not acknowledge this climate and change our approaches to meet the needs of our clients, we will have fallen on the wrong side of history. Prioritizing anti-oppressive and critical race feminist theory supports an ethical and benevolent approach to our clients.

Sajnani (2012) also wrote about a critical race feminist paradigm for the creative arts therapies. She argued that the “personal is political” and “individual change is linked to social change” (2012, p. 188). This theory acknowledged that power and oppression not only exist but also causes psychological stress. She emphasized that when we work alongside our clients to bring about social change, they can also make individual change. Sajnani (2012) even goes so far to say that internal distress is a product of external factors.

Sajnani (2012) argued for the integration of critical race feminist theory into the expressive arts, as she points out we have been lacking in these approaches. What her writing also made very clear is the link between the personal and the political. These two things are not separate entities. If we can empower our clients to challenge systems and oppressive power, they can also be empowered to make smaller changes on a more personal level. So, if arts activism is political and art therapy is personal a critical race feminist theory would support the integration of both. A critical race feminist lens as a therapeutic approach would therefore support the community art installation.

Another example of a systems-based approach which supports the use of the community art installation is discussed by Jill Fish (2018). Fish (2018) spoke in a Ted Talk in Minneapolis about ecological psychology theories in relation to her identity and her work as an Indigenous woman and psychologist. She argued that Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory that situates the

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

developing individual in the middle of its layers of environments such as family, school, neighborhood, nation, and historical time is not enough. She argued that by seeing the individual as influenced by these layers leads to a deficient way of thinking about clients. Fish argued that the different experiences, such as the unique experience of being an indigenous person in America makes the individual deficient and lacking in this theory. Fish argued that we should see historical and cultural contracts as central to the individual, not in the outside layer. This perspective critiques how we understand the individual's way of being in the world through the context of the historical, social, and political influences that are affecting individual's development before they are even conscious of it. This allows clinicians to see historical, social, and political contexts as strengths to an individual's development, rather than deficits.

Maintaining awareness of the historical context is important, but just as important is to see the influence of these systems as affecting the individual's strengths and resilience. I believe that the community art installation specifically allows more room for this strength-based perspective by incorporating democratic conversations, social organizing and celebration with art making as representation of empowerment and strength rather than deficits.

Based on ecological theory, placing the historical, and political oppression as the central focus to be highlighted and addressed in the community art installation positions the clients to be empowered. This is a strength-based rather than deficit-based approach. Based on critical race feminist theory, empowering our clients to see themselves as people who can make change in a larger community supports their ability to make changes personally. By allowing clients to become active agents in their own therapy, the community art installation as an approach can empower them to make changes personally.

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

Methods

In this section I will describe in detail the process and method of the community art installation, and its participants. I will also describe the therapeutic benefits I observed throughout the process. The method was carried out throughout an eight-month placement as an art therapy intern at an after-school program in a neighborhood of Boston. The mission of the after-school program is to promote equity in education, employment, and opportunity through long-term relationships with young people, families, and communities. They run after-school programming, summer programming, hire teens and college students, provide mentoring, community organizing, college prep, and much more. The program emphasizes community and social justice by employing community organizers, and actively participating in school board meetings, parent mentoring, and law making that affect their communities. Much of these laws that impact their communities are related to gun laws, education budgeting, and immigration issues. They offer all their services for free, or income-based prices.

I worked for about four hours one afternoon a week at the site with a group of ten ninth grade students who lived in and around the community. I was instructed to facilitate an hour-long art therapy group during this time. They were mostly fifteen years old with a couple that turned sixteen during the year. Most of the group members were female, but there were two males. All the students were young people of color, and many of them had been involved in the program since a very young age. Our space was the third floor of a church building. This church is located on a notoriously dangerous street, which is adjacent to housing projects where there have been reported problems with gangs, violence, and drugs. A few blocks north, gentrification is prominent, and the stark contrast is visible.

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

The interests, concerns, and participation of these bright, and passionate young people directed this method. When I began working with them, I knew I was an outsider to their community. While I don't have experience being a minority in a city, I know what it is like to come from a community that has limited access to education and resources. I also know what it is like to have people come into your community from outside like saviors and offer solutions. I know the anger, frustration, and resistance that bubbles up when you feel like someone is trying to fix you or take pity on you all too well. For this very personal reason, I walked into their community transparent about whom I was (and was not) and what I had to offer. My approach to any potential resistance involved was inviting the students to be active participants in what they wanted to do in their time with me and respond to their needs. The result was an art therapy approach that can be recreated within communities who are marginalized and put the power of healing directly in the hands of the community being served.

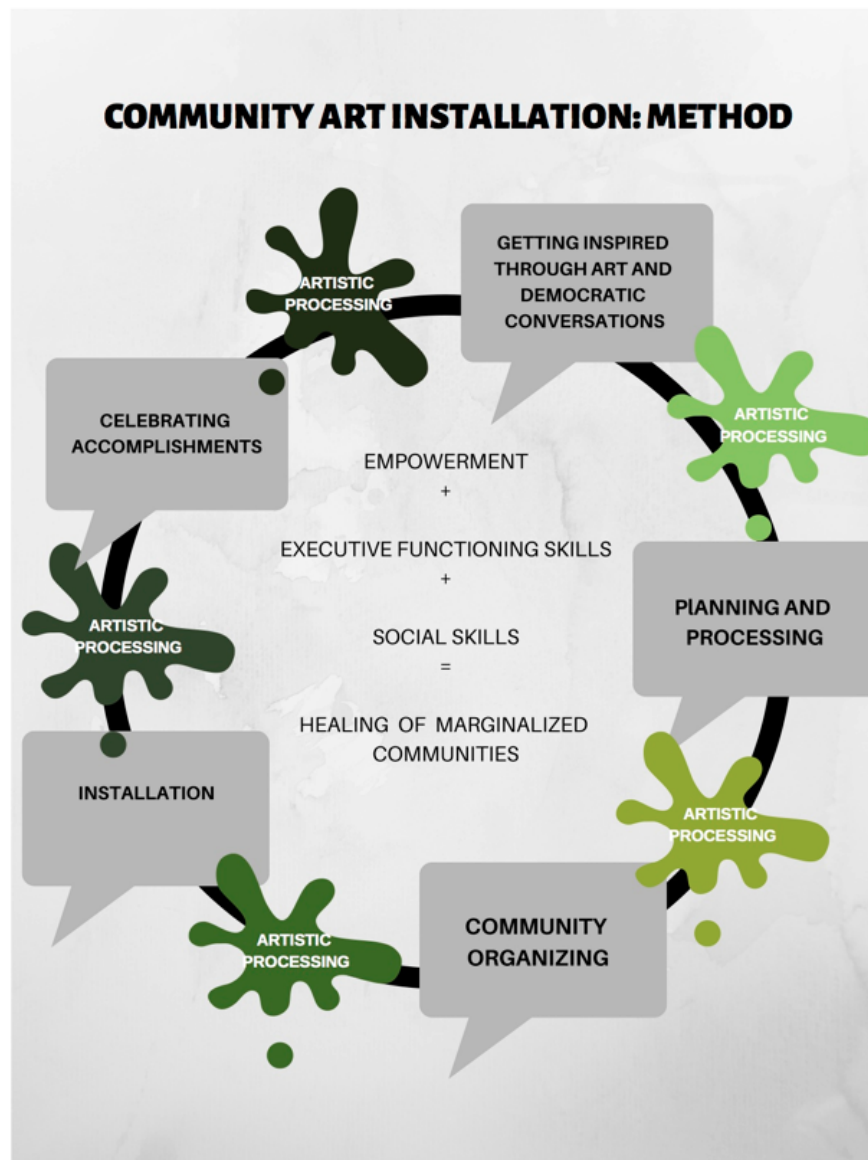


Figure 1. Community Art Installation Method

Getting Inspired: Art and Democratic Conversations

The beginning of this approach came from a gallery walk. I collected images of controversial artwork. Artists like Banksy, Ai Wei Wei, Basquiat, and Joseph Beuys spoke to the students. In these times under President Trump's administration, they were enthralled with artists who had been jailed, exiled, and hated for the big impacts their art was making. We spent

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

time looking at the art, discussing the art, picking individual favorites, and discussing the issues presented by the artists. We conversed about things that surprised us about the art, biographies of artists, and many other interesting aspects of the pieces. They expressed how they felt connected to the powerful statements reflected in the artworks. This activity sparked imagination and conversation. This group of adolescents were struck by how performance art and modern art were so radical and accessible.

After the enthusiastic conversations and positive responses from the gallery walk, I decided to ask them if they would be interested in making their own installation. They doubted it would be possible at first or wondered what they had to say. I had my own ideas about what we could address in the community, but I really wanted the message and theme of the project to be their choice. This democratic approach remained an essential aspect of the community installation project.

This aspect of supporting the group to not only to think critically about what they cared about in the world but also come to a group consensus on what they felt unified about was held respectfully and scaffolded significantly with much support from my specific art therapy training. We kept the structure of our groups the same, with warm-ups, creating in our altered books, and holding discussions throughout. However, the material I provided was purposefully designed in hopes that it would contribute significantly to the project. I offered activities with themes regarding utopian societies, empathy, safety, identity and community. After an activity about designing our own islands we all sat down and brainstormed a list of things they would want to change about the community they live in now. The top three responses were related to drugs, homelessness, and gun violence. As a group we all decided this related to feeling safe in

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

their communities. That is when we decided we would do our installation on neighborhood safety. Tim-Bottos & Reilly (2011) wrote:

The success of community arts initiatives is often dependent upon implementing actions in a manner that involves, and includes local people as equal, or leading partners.

Therefore, it is crucial for students in professional education programs to develop skills that promote inclusion. In partnership, students also need opportunities to experience these skills in action in order to foster their own creative ways of working that support people in community. (p. 112)

Planning and Processing

Even after we had picked a topic democratically the next steps continued to emphasize the community approach that maintained the young people as leaders in this project. We made a timeline for the project, picked an installation space, decided on materials, and a date to install. Each of them was tasked with holding each other accountable and myself accountable to our deadlines. This democratic approach to planning and decision-making functioned to empower group members but also provide social skill learning, and executive functioning practice. Their ability to plan, communicate scheduling, and coordinate with their group members increased throughout the project as evidence by texting each other reminders and planning absences ahead of time with our deadlines in mind.

We also researched statistics about their neighborhood, talked to people in the community, and with each other. I would scribe the things they were saying, process, and reflect alongside them. In this moment, they appeared to realize the power of their own words. We made art to process these heavy conversations, which informed our ideas about the installation as well. As an approach to art therapy, this is an essential part of the process. Talking about gun

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

violence, oppression, racism, and poverty is serious and significant. It is a delicate balance to hold the space for young people deeply affected and aware of these systems. Check-ins were often, and conversations were balanced with quiet art making. This step is where, when an art therapist leads the community art installation, I would argue a higher level of healing and safety is present throughout the process due to our specific training in group cohesion, systems knowledge, and ethics. Conversations were continuously heavy, and laden with tough emotions such as frustration. It was imperative that the facilitator be able to hold the space delicately and assess when individuals needed more support. This process being supported by an art therapist and artistic processing appeared to improve their abilities to articulate their feelings, use therapeutic support, and bind the group. I observed this through their increased ability to use their altered books creatively about these complicated subjects and increased interaction with each other inside and outside of our group times.

Community Organizing

Once we had all the logistics planned, the community involvement began. We made flyers, invitations, and picked a title for our art piece “Change Will Come”. Students passed out invitations, posted them up in their community, invited teachers, and shared on social media. This appeared to offer a time to practice and develop their social skills as well as they promoted the project to their own social circles.

Next, we visited the site we would install our piece. We took pictures, measured, and imagined. We noted the hypodermic needles, loitering, beer bottles, and the general feeling of safety in a community park for children in their own neighborhood. Then, we created a playlist

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

for the day of the installation. Each student submitted songs they thought would resonate with our cause.

As the installation date got closer, we prepped more and more. We created an artist statement and decorated a banner. We ordered materials, and some students wrote poems to read aloud on the day. We chose to use flagging tape, a material used to mark off borders and boundaries, to install the words “change will come” on a chain link fence by weaving the material through it. We used group time to write on the flagging tape their experiences, lyrics, poems, hash tags, and words they had to say about this neighborhood and its violence. Therefore, it was all ready to be weaved the day of the installation. This process of building towards something, working on one project for weeks, and prepping held the potential for therapeutic and educational lessons such as empowerment, social skills, and executive functioning skills. I observed their abilities to organize together, plan according to our timeline, communicate needs, and articulate their emotions increase throughout this project as evidence by making creative decisions without my input, texting each other about their roles, and persevering through any unexpected problems that came up. Their poems and their words on the flagging tape for the installation presented to me their emotional and creative growth.

Installation

Before we knew it, the day had come. We all met at the installation site and began weaving the words written ahead of time into the chain link fence around the park. We set up tables and ran to the grocery store for last minute items. Our tables were decorated with brochures, bracelets, and pins about our organizations cause, food, sparkling cider, and more. Community members passing by stopped and talked to us, curious about what we were doing.

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

Community members who were loitering and drinking left the park. Family members and friends filtered in with flowers for their children and appeared curious about the unveiling.

Each of the students stood in front of the words “Change Will Come” hanging on the chain link fence. The students and I decided that I would introduce the project first, and two students wanted to read a poem out loud after. Together, a student and I held hands and cut a red ribbon while other students held it up and the crowd applauded. The playlist they curated began to play and we invited all members to add words about their experience to the installation. People participated, children played, and many took pictures. The students introduced their parents and received flowers for their hard work.

As I stood, observing the crowd it appeared that the installation was a success indicated to me by the estimated forty people who attended. Out of those forty people at least thirty-five contributed their thoughts to the fence. The age of attendees ranged from four years old to sixty years old. In an organization where parent interaction can be scarce due to many complicated reasons there were multiple parents who attended and brought flowers for their child. This suggests that the event was expressed to parents as important. Nine staff members approached me expressing their enthusiasm for the project, and their awe at the young people’s work. Out of those nine staff members a theme that arose in our conversations was their surprise at how much the teen’s public speaking skills improved and their ability to articulate how they felt about the topic. With many of the staff members having worked at the program for years, and knowing these adolescents since they were young, I took their feedback as essential indicators to the installation’s success. The body language I observed by most of the crowd included smiling, leaning in towards one another, and there was a lot of hugging. When each person took his or her turn to add to the fence, I noticed a seriousness, and solemnness to their process. Even

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

younger attendees often stopped, read the fence, took moments to ponder, and silently added their own thoughts. Staff, parents, and students took countless pictures. Again, this suggested the importance of the event for so many. Younger children were running, laughing, and playing in the park, making the park appear to be a safe place where children play together. Based on the observed number of attendees, body language of those who attended, observations of attendee's behavior, and feedback from them, it appeared that the installation was a successful community-organizing event.

Debriefing and Celebrating Accomplishments

The next week we processed the community art installation and social action together. We talked about how it made them feel. Then, we wrote up a summary and picked our favorite pictures to submit to the local newspaper. It was published the next week on the front page. We all went to the store and got copies. Many of them expressed to me that they had never had their family name in the paper for a good thing. I noticed the importance of this publishing in the paper for them, and the smiles it created as they held their own copies in their hands. For this reason, it appears publishing the installation can be a significant way to empower participants. We had the article framed and hung on the wall in our room. This was also further processed with more artistic reflections in our altered books, and democratic conversations.

We saw the installation as a success because we had about forty-five people present, we had conversations with local community members, children were playing, and people were hugging. There was a feeling of pride shared and reported within our group. I will elaborate on the results of the installation in the next section. While I was able to receive direct feedback from the participants on this approach, due to ethical standards their voices and artwork cannot

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

be directly included in this capstone. However, these results will include arts-based research on my observations of what happened to me as an art therapist working in this approach. I will attempt to honor their truths through my own artwork as well as I can. It should also be noted that participants have also been an active part of this paper. A few participants have read this paper and provided feedback for me throughout this process so I can keep the experience centered in the democratic approach as depicted in Figure 1. For the purposes of this paper, what became important in analyzing results was recognizing the paradigm shift that took place within me as an art therapist because of the success of this approach. This paradigm shift is what I will elaborate on below.

Results

The day of the installation the sun was shining, people gathered on the grass, people came together as a community. Hugs were shared, people laughed, children played, food was eaten, and in front of us on a chain link fence the words “Change Will Come” shown through a series of weavings. Written on these weavings were the experiences and thoughts of an art therapy group. The young people’s families, siblings, and other community members added theirs as well. Ritualistically people stood, weaving their thoughts into the pattern. Adding to the healing piece of art that felt like empathy, and truth. Cold chills ran across my skin as I watched the weaving, heard the playlist of music curated by the group, and young people read aloud their poems. I knew it was a success to me when I shared hugs with these same students a year later, and they gasped in delight when I told them I would in fact be writing my capstone thesis on our work together. I saw the growth in their ability to speak about how they feel, be proud of themselves, and believe that they can accomplish something big. It was weaved through our conversations and in all the pictures taken on that day.

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

Since no identifying information or artwork can be shared in this thesis, I will only include pictures of my own artistic process in reflecting upon this approach that emerged through my work with this group of young people. I have created a series of portraits that reflect my growth as an art therapist throughout this method. Rather than talk about what I think was the experience of other people, I will talk about the paradigm shift that developed for me as an art therapist after facilitating this approach.



Figure 2. Emerging

Much like the first stages of a portrait (figure 2) I came to this work full of good intentions, good instincts, and a very limited understanding of the way in which my ethical principles would expand, crystalize, and be affected by becoming an art therapist in this historical time. Much like the first sketch in a portrait, there was still a lot to be filled in. I was

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

being transparent and waiting to see where the process would take me at this point. This first image represents that stage in my artistic process and personal process through this experience.



Figure 3. Integration And Instincts

In the next phase in my process (figure 3) I began to shade in and start to see the contrast that makes an image. Then, intuitively I started merging with the background by blending the image, creating texture, and adding collage elements. This stage in my artistic process represents the way I started to view my role as an art therapist within the group. Being inherently in a position of power, I made decisions about how to integrate myself into the community consciously and respectfully. Similarly, to this stage in drawing, I was observing the setting, noticing contrasts, details, and deciding what to blend or what to emphasize. This image represents my decisions to make art alongside the group rather than only give directions. It also represents my decision to have democratic conversations sitting in a circle, rather than standing and lecturing. It represents my decisions to walk around their community with them, hug them,

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

share food and attend soccer games. I felt this tension between the traditional approach to art therapy that I had been taught and read about and my instincts about how to remain true to my ethics as well as what I knew about truly forming relationships with people.



Figure 4. The Big Picture

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

The last image (figure 4) in my process represents the paradigm shift that took place for me through this process, and why I am advocating for the community art installation as an approach to art therapy. This image is multi-layered where my epistemology is framed in the background. Holding true to my rural roots where I experienced a community with a lack of resources, in need of alternative ways of therapy reminds me of why I am an art therapist. Then, the next layer is the portrait with collage of many hands representing what I learned about this tension of the reality of working in communities and the training art therapists receive about it. Lastly, I layered the ethical words that have now become the forefront of my practice as an art therapist who worked in this approach. This final image in my process represents the paradigm shift I experienced and one that I am proposing for the field by using approaches similar to the community art installation, centered in Critical Race Feminist theory.

Discussion

After facilitating an eight-month process that led to a culminating experience of a community art installation with a group of inner-city youth, I learned that this approach centered in democratic group decisions, community organizing, installation art, and artistic processing is a unique approach to art therapy. This approach can be supported by Critical Race Feminist theory; essential to the historical time we are giving and receiving therapy services in currently. This approach is unique because it may blur the lines between arts activism, art education and art therapy. It may even challenge traditional psychological theories or deconstruct the pedagogy of the field of art therapy. However, I believe it is a powerful approach to maintaining an anti-oppressive, and engaging approach to therapy. The art therapist is in fact what enhances the therapeutic aspect to this work. When a conscious art therapist holds this approach, it offers an approach to art therapy that widens the box on what therapy can look like. It widens the box for

COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION

marginalized communities to feel that approach is centered in their own strengths, and not constructed by a history of oppression. On the contrary, the community art installation aims to empower individuals to become active participants in their healing and growth. This paradigm shift is essential, I believe, to the development of the field to a higher standard of ethical practice.

I hope to recreate this approach with an array of communities, and locations in order to enhance evidence that the results are accurate. With the addition of the direct feedback I received from the participants my results could have been more powerful and inclusive. Due to the purposes and limitations of this assignment they were not included. In further research, I would involve the participants in the results of the approach as well. To prove the results with quantifiable data questionnaires throughout the process could be administered and analyzed. Also, in further research of the field of art therapy I hope to find similar approaches. For the art therapy field to think critically about how we best serve our clients and honor our ethical principles to ultimate attempts in our approaches is a constant development. With the community art installation as an approach to art therapy I believe it takes the field of art therapy one step closer to an engaging and anti-oppressive way of working with members of marginalized communities who may be resistant to traditional psychotherapy approaches.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Student's Name: _____ Abigail Thompson _____

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: _____ Michelle Napoli _____