

Connecting with Community: Contemporary Artists Making Art and Building Bonds

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Pinterest Board: Making Art while Making Connections with Society

<https://www.pinterest.com/ylobuzova/making-art-while-making-connections-with-society/>

The wonderful variety of artists gathered in this contemporary artist resource packet all focus on using their art and artistic endeavors to make connections with people and communities. The artforms discussed include diverse installation art, a performance piece, and social change photography. The artists differ in gender, race, and nationalities in order to broaden the scope of what's possible in the artistic world. Many artists explored learn something about themselves while creating artworks in and for their communities. This resource packet contains a collection of social action artists who embrace the struggles within the system and break the barriers to help those around them. When art and artists make connections with people there becomes a greater understanding of the world around us.

1. Olafur Eliason

Ice Watch

Date: 2014

Size: Unknown

Medium: Ice installation

Description: Olafur Eliason is a Danish–Icelandic incredibly talented artist who approaches his creative process from multiple angles. Much of his work focuses on light, reflections, and perception. Some of his projects create interactions among people and the artworks leave a lasting impression on the viewer. *Ice Watch* is an installation of twelve boulders of ice harvested as free-floating icebergs in Greenland which were then transported and installed in a clock formation at the Pace du Pantheon (“Ice Watch”, n.d.). Eliason is fascinated by the environment and climate change becomes a crucial subject in his artwork throughout his evolving artistic career. Eliason’s *Ice Watch* is part of this collection because of the way that the installation

communicates with its audience. As the explanation about the work on the website points out, the art is a “tangible and immediate testimony” that “raises awareness” of the “dramatic effects” and “reality of melting arctic ice” (“Ice Watch”, n.d.). The artwork is exhibited in an outdoor plaza where people may interact with the melting ice. Viewers may approach the installation and touch the ice. Their sense of wonder is increased when they realize that the ice is actually frigid to the touch. Eliason created an exhibit filled with interaction where the community has a first-hand experience with the dire consequences of climate change. Eliason believes that “art has a crucial role to play in the public discourse” and his installation truly allows for the public to watch the ice as it melts just as it does in the colder regions of the world (Doran & Page, 2019).

2. Olafur Eliason

Little Sun

Date: 2012

Size: 4-5 inches

Medium: High-grade polycarbonate plastic, solar panel, LED, and rechargeable

Description: As an artist, Olafur Eliason creates aesthetically beautiful pieces, but he balances the beauty of those pieces with socially conscious work. Eliason’s *Little Sun* is a functional sculpture that acts as a humanitarian work of art. *Little Sun* is a small, plastic, solar-powered work of art that emits light without the need for direct connection to electricity. The project is an explosion of communal benefits that has changed the lives of many people. “*Little Sun* is at once a global project, a social business, and a way of connecting the world through sharing light” which provides “clean, affordable light to 1.2 billion people worldwide without electricity” (“Little Sun”, n.d.). Eliason creates a connection with communities through his adorable, yet

powerful, project by providing a small fraction of light into the homes for families who can now embrace the night and spend time together. When the object is sold to a country with electricity, one other object is delivered to country in need of solar energy at an affordable price. Beyond that, the Little Sun lamps may be purchased by off-grid entrepreneurs to be sold in their own businesses to help with local profits and economy. Eliason's project is not only a beneficial piece of artwork, but an incredible tool for educating people about electricity, its consumption, and the impact on society.

3. Callie Currie

Konbit Shelter

Date: 2010

Size: Unknown

Medium: Unknown

Description: Callie Currie, Swoon, is a street graffiti artist with a philanthropic heart. Swoon desired for her art to be outside of galleries and museums and looked for interactions and feedback with and from people about her artwork. She looked for opportunities that could create a unique space larger than herself and rare enough for her audience. Connecting with people was the ultimate goal. The opportunity for the *Konbit Shelter* landed on her lap where she wondered what she can do to help people in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. As the world tried to understand what happened in Haiti, Swoon along with “a small group of artists, engineers, architects and builders realized that [they] had spent the last decade developing a skill set which might be of use” where they could employ “creative problem-solving skills to build unlikely structures in uncertain and difficult circumstances (“Konbit Shelter”, n.d.). Swoon and her team

found a rural village in dire need of their help to bring a sense of community back into their lives. With the help from fundraiser money and local artisans, the team constructed a wind-resistant, three-room community center for the Komye village (“Konbit Shelter”, n.d.). While many building challenges had to be answered, the problems had to be solved in new and unique ways due to limited resources. The building experience of the community center solidified a bond between Swoon with the people of Haiti, and “the construction of the community center cemented a bond that would continue for almost a decade” where “the creation of meaningful, well paid work did as much to help people rebuild their lives as any structure ever could” (“Konbit Shelter”, n.d.).

4. eL Seed

Perception

Date: 2016

Size: 50 buildings

Medium: Paint

Description: There is something special about an artist who creates not for themselves but for others. El Seed in his own words explained, “as an artist, I had this humanist intention of beautifying a poor and neglected neighborhood by bringing art to and shining light on an isolated community” (“A project of peace, painted across 50 buildings,” 2016). While in the neighborhood of Manshiyat Nasr in Cairo, Egypt, el Seed discovered a community of people who collect and recycled trash from the city in an extremely efficient level. While the trash collected was not created by the people in the community, the people were still seen as dirty and the neighborhood was completely marginalized. El Seed, with permission of several

neighborhood leaders, created an anamorphic piece of art that stretched across several buildings, and can only be fully visible from one point, the pride of the community, a caved church in a mountain. El Seed and the community he worked with became like a family, and as the project moved forward the community's perception of the project changed, and the artist's perception of the community changed as well. Intrinsically, the project was not about beatifying a community, because the community was already beautiful. It was about changing perspective and making connections with the people to realize their worth. As the messages across the buildings read, "Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eye first" (Perception, 2016).

5. Agnes Denes

Wheatfield – A Confrontation

Date: 1982

Size: Two-acres

Medium: Wheat and soil on a landfill

Description: The *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* is a transient installation created in a two-acre landfill in Lower Manhattan by the Hungarian-American, environmental artist Agnes Denes. As the work is no longer available to see outside of pictures, it is easy to believe that the wheat field was a digitally manipulated artwork because of its surreal nature. In reality, however, the landfill was prepared to host the wheat with meticulous intervention in order for the seeds to sprout and stay as healthy as possible until their eventual harvest. As the wasteland was restored, it began to connect with the community by inquiring about difficult topics such as "food, energy, commerce, world trade, and economics" along with "mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological concerns" (Denes, 1982). Outside of asking tough questions of its audience, the wheat field made

a physical connection with the viewers once it was harvested. Once it was collected, the wheat field “yielded over 1000 pounds of healthy, golden wheat” which then “traveled to twenty-eight cities around the world” where the “seeds were carried away by people who planted them in many parts of the globe” (Denes, 1982). Denes confronted the world by asking difficult questions about the privilege of having food on the table and the way we consume without thought.

6. Tyree Guyton

Street Folk

Date: 2011

Size: 1 city block

Medium: Shoes

Description:

Among the wonderful artists in this collection is Tyree Guyton who created the *Street Folk* installation. Across one city block, Guyton covered the street with shoes donated to him from all across the world. The idea behind the installation is about bringing the issue of homelessness to light to the neighborhood and to the world. Guyton explained that the “shoes symbolize life on the street and also those who use the streets and pass by homeless people every day” (Anglebrandt, 2011). While the installation is created in Detroit, Michigan, the concept is universal where it is possible, at any moment, for anyone to become homeless. Guyton took the artistic liberty to paint some donated shoes while receiving contributions from all across the world. While the installation is temporary, it is also ever changing, because anyone who needs a pair of shoes is welcomed to take them. While living in the same neighborhood, Guyton took it

upon himself to acknowledge the prominent issue in his community. In order to set up the installation, Guyton “paid the homeless to help him with various tasks” and would “let them offer up a figure for their compensation” (“Anyone lost a shoe,” 2011). The shoes tell a story of a journey taken, and the greatest aspect is that many stories may be told from all those that wear them.

7. Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn

The Favela Painting

Date: 2005 - 2016

Size: Unknown

Medium: Paint

Description: As eL Seed beautified a neighborhood in Egypt, Koolhaas and Urhahn worked with multiple neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The idea of social divides does not solely pertain to one community, but people experience the divide all across the world. Koolhaas and Urhahn “imagined the possibility of building a bridge of understanding through art” as they wanted to “plaster and paint an entire hillside favela together with the inhabitants” (“The Favela Painting Project,” 2005). The artists hoped to reimagine the way the people lived in their environment, to create jobs, and progress the economy of the neighborhood. While working on the painting that stretched across a multitude of buildings, war broke out between the police and drugs lords, forcing the artists to take shelter within the home of one family. During the hardship, the effort of recovering and coloring the homes was communal as the people of the community helped with the revision, but the artists and people walked away with more than a beautifully designed community. In the end, a bond was created symbolizing the unity of one family.

8. Sethembile Mzesane

Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell

Date: 2015

Size: N/A

Medium: Performance art

Description: Taking a step back from installations in this collection, Sethembile Mzesane created a performance piece about body positivity, self-representation, and the masculinity of society.

Cape Town, South Africa is a place that is crowded with colonial symbolism that can especially be seen in the monuments and statues. Mzesane felt dislocated and invisible because she was not able to see herself represented in the society she was living in. She imagined how other women and girls must feel, how their self-image is threatened, and the negative way that society treats them. A gender and racial divide exists, especially for black women, and Mzesane decided to create a performance piece to alert society of the injustice. Mzesane focused her attention on Cecil John Rhodes, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, whose monument sat in Cape Town. The artist dressed as Chapungu, a “soapstone bird that was looted from Great Zimbabwe in the late 1800s and is still currently housed in Cecil John Rhodes's estate in Cape Town” and stood for four hours in the sun on day that Rhodes’ monument was being removed (Mzesane, 2017). An incredible connection was forged with the spectators who witnessed the fall of the statue and Mzesane on that day. Mzesane explained that when the “crane came alive, people did too, shouting, screaming, taking pictures” as her “wings rose along with the crane” and she then stood still in awe after the removal of the statue.

9. Shweta Bhattad

I Have A Dream

Date:

Size: 38.5 x 507 x 3.5 in

Medium: 11 wooden letters, vegetable and fruit plants

Description: Shweta Bhattad's, *I Have A Dream*, collaborative project stretched 27 countries in an incredible achievement that created a cross-cultural dialogue. Initially, Bhattad wanted to provide a voice to communities who needed a way to be recognized. Bhattad drew "inspiration from the Biennale's Residency program theme from Martin Luther King's speech she innovated the 'I Have a Dream' community project and global farming initiative" (Gupta, 2018). Bhattad saw the effects of decreasing farmland and wanted for her society to notice the farming communities and their practices while encouraging artists to work with their farmers to cultivate gardens in the shape of "I have a dream" (Gupta, 2018). The farming land is used not only to grow seeds, but to also make the farmers shareholders in Bhattad's collaborative project. Artists all across the world worked with their farmers to spread the message about farming practices, environmental action, and human rights.

10. Vik Muniz

Irma the Bearer

Date: 2008

Size: Unknown

Medium: Garbage collage

Description:

No artist list is complete without including Vik Muniz. Muniz is a Brazilian artist who went back home for this project. Muniz wanted to bring attention to the people who live in Jardim Gramacho, the world's largest garbage dump on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. The portraits who are featured in Muniz's project are non-other than the garbage collectors who seek recyclable items that work in the landfill. Muniz used the garbage collected from the landfill as the medium for his enormous collages which featured the workers' portraits. Each piece of trash seen within the collage can tell its own story, just like each individual person who works there. Muniz mentioned that trash is something people normally don't want to see, and this could also be said about the people who work with this trash; the world has discarded them as well (Linnenkoper, 2019). Muniz takes photographs of the larger-than-life portrait collages while simultaneously opening the eyes of the workers to see themselves in a different light. In the end, Muniz sold the portraits at an auction where he returned "100% of the proceeds to the subjects so they can improve their labor union to educate and protect the workers of Jardim Gramacho" (Moakley, 2011).

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