Expanding Imagination: The Potential of Art in the Everyday

Moira Lascelles, Deputy Director, UP Projects interviews Justine Ludwig, Executive Director, Creative Time

ML—What do you think happens when art is placed beyond the walls of the gallery in the public domain?

JL—When you are working in the public sphere you are inserting art into the continuous rhythm of people’s lives. So, when located beyond the white cube – where encounters with art are intentional and expected, given the space – the work instead takes hold in the everyday.

The other aspect of placing art within the public realm is that it calls for a much more nuanced understanding of audiences and communities. The work really has to reflect and respond to the site in which it is situated. It calls for a different kind of communal buy-in and collaboration between the artist, site and audience. This participation changes the way that people process and respond to art and also augments their sense of ownership and involvement with the work as a whole.

As someone who has been based in different parts of the United States throughout their career, I would say that there are different kinds of art-goers and different kinds of public art. What I find as a common through-line however is that public art can offer an experience of wonder or something unexpected – creating moments of rupture, joy and reflection.

ML—Your projects have often looked at tackling tough issues that our society faces today. Why do you think art is so powerful in raising awareness and bringing about change?

JL—Art has the ability to challenge the way we look at the world and even engender different perspectives. Often, when dealing specifically with the presentation of challenging social justice issues, artists offer personal reflections. This entry point is a radically different approach to reading about these issues as news items. It allows us to engage with pressing issues in a deep and intimate manner that privileges personal perspectives.

Alternatively, artists can help us envisage the world of tomorrow, creating projects that serve as a dry run for what could lie ahead of us. The arts provide spaces that allow for expansive imagination. It is a strategy for facing not only our issues today, but also those that we will face in the future.

By way of a tangible example, perhaps I can speak to a project that wasn’t formally a public art project, but was something that I worked on before I came to Creative Time. This was a project with Nadia Kaabi-Linke in Dallas, Texas titled Walk The Line as part of a solo exhibition by the same title. In the piece, community volunteers collectively walked the length of the border between Texas and Mexico within the confines of the exhibition – unravelling spools of thread in the process and wrapping them around two columns in the gallery. What began as an abstract line drawing in space slowly built up, over two months, to become a thick wall of thread.

Each of the individuals who volunteered had a very personal connection with issues of immigration, in some cases specifically between Mexico and the United States. The project became this powerful reflective moment – in some cases defiant, in others, healing. Participants had the opportunity to treat the walk as they wished, so their involvement could be personal; they could be very quiet and reflect inwardly or they could have the opportunity to speak with the general public. Therefore, it became an opportunity where individuals that were walking – maybe in honour of someone who had been deported or in celebration of their family history of immigrating to the United States – were able to have conversations with people in the community who maybe held radically different views on immigration or the potential of building a wall between the United States and Mexico.

Therefore, the work ended up creating these deeply intimate and generative discussions.

I find that art and projects like Nadia’s have the ability to create a safe space where people are willing to engage in challenging dialogues that in other settings could be volatile. Through artistic intervention a space of understanding and exchange is often created that can be really powerful. And often those exchanges unfold on an intimate, one-on-one level, so they can lead to ripples of small-scale change. Often the power of art exists in the fact that it creates a space for dialogue between two individuals.

More recently, at Creative Time we inaugurated our emerging artist open call program with Risa Puno’s The Privilege Escape, an escape room that distils the complexity of privilege by placing it in the context of an exciting game. Upon arrival, participants found themselves the subjects in a study conducted by a cutting-edge institute and were split into two groups, based on the arbitrary factor of their date of birth. The two groups faced the same tasks under different conditions, one being significantly more challenging to overcome.

Projects like these directly implicate audiences. Puno’s aim was to use this disarming playful environment to create pathways of exchange and understanding around social inequity. Under the guise of an interactive game, audiences first learned to dissect issues of privilege around a shared experience, and then – after unpacking the project in a conversational debrief with an ‘Institute Researcher’ – consider their own experiences with social inequity.
ML—Are there any projects you have experienced that you feel particularly showcase how art can be a tool to move and engage with people?

JL—Creative Time’s project A Subtlety by Kara Walker is a really good example of this. It is a work that dealt with the legacy of labour and slavery within the context of the United States. Walker created a giant sugar sphinx that was constructed within the former Domino’s sugar factory in Brooklyn, New York. Due to the project’s popularity, in order to gain access to the project you had to wait in line.

The project happened before I was part of Creative Time, and I travelled to New York expressly to experience it. What I found so interesting was that while you waited in line, you started having conversations that you wouldn’t normally have with anyone else in any other context. You started talking to the person standing next to you in the queue and you started unpacking the issues that the project was addressing. You had this instant sense of community – it reminded me of a term that is normally associated with pilgrimage, ‘communitas’. You immediately became part of a group of people who were collectively experiencing and engaging at the same time with the same thing. It was those conversations, in line before even experiencing the project, that ended up being truly profound and really challenging. For me, this is a beautiful example of the kind of conversations that art can lead to.

ML—How do you feel art can be used to reach audiences or communities that might not usually engage in ‘the arts’?

JL—Quite simply when art is sited outside a traditional art-going space, it radically changes your audience and your community reach. Right now, especially within the context of the United States, we are questioning just whom cultural institutions are for and whom they serve. You pull yourself outside of that conversation as soon as you place work within the public sphere and site projects in unexpected spaces. It makes you think differently about the work and at the same time allows you to connect with a radically different audience.

Creative Time’s most recent project, Jenny Holzer’s VIGIL, shed light on gun violence by foregrounding the voices of those directly affected by this issue. For three nights these new projections took over Rockefeller Center with text from Bullets into Bells: Poets & Citizens Respond to Gun Violence, stories from Moments that Survive collected by Everytown for Gun Safety, and poems by teens who have grown up in the shadow of mass shootings. VIGIL emphasised the unique human toll of gun violence. It was an intentional shift away from statistics that have come to dominate the news and our understanding of the national devastation wrought by gun violence. The intention was to serve two simultaneous audiences, the one that came intentionally to experience an artistic intervention and another that just happened to be at the New York City landmark.
The result was a surreal silence overtaking the usually cacophonous plaza. Holzer’s project transformed a tourist attraction into the projection screen for a work of art. While many audience members came to the area with the intention of viewing the work, a number of viewers encountered the work unwittingly. Holzer was able to spark conversations around this issue by those who were not even expecting it, underscoring how fundamental this issue is in all of our daily lives.

ML—How important do you feel it is for people to trust creatives and is the role of the curator in this instance important?

JL—I have found it to be very important to trust creatives. As an organisation, Creative Time is very mindful of our collaborators. We bring in people who have a sincere and deep connection to the issues that they are addressing in their work. They have a proven commitment to what they are speaking about.

As to the role of the curator, I often see their responsibility as serving as translator and producer: supporting the artist to realise their greatest dreams, while also making sure that there is a strong understanding of, and connection to, the community and audience that is going to be engaging with the work. It is also the responsibility of the curator to facilitate that safe space in which the artist can create at the highest level.

I find that there is a beauty and strength in establishing spaces in which individuals can truly dream on the larger scale. That is precisely what we aim to do at Creative Time.

ML—Do you ever get asked to justify the value of public art, and how do you tend to approach this if or when it comes up?

This isn’t exclusive to the context of public art, but rather the arts at large. People want to understand what the direct return is, or what the outcome is in a very tangible and straightforward manner. Yet that is in direct opposition to what is so powerful and poignant about the arts. So, yes, it is something we experience and when we do, we cite the value of engendering spaces for productive thought and exchange, creating moments of wonder, and allowing for transformative moments—these are things that go beyond financial value. It isn’t possible to assign a monetary value to the impact that this kind of work can have upon the world.

ML—If you could come up with a manifesto for why we should work with artists today – what headline points would you include?

In a deeply fraught sociopolitical moment, art has the ability to serve as both burn and balm. Through public art and the vision of artists, we are able to foreground challenging issues that in any other context would be deemed simply too divisive.

Artists enable us to challenge the status quo.

Art allows space for poetry and transcendence even when confronting the most difficult subject matter.

Artists can help envision a better tomorrow.