
Art in the Market: Action Research and Participatory Art

Arte no Mercado: Pesquisa-ação e Arte Participatória

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Abstract: This visual essay illustrates a process of community-based art as it unfolds from our experiences in the *Art in the Market* program. We expect to show readers salient dimensions of this work that render it a distinguished form of participatory action research. Weaving images and text, we examine the theoretical underpinnings of this praxis and examine the often mysterious process of creating art together with a community.

Keywords: Visual essay. Participatory Art. Popular education.

Resumo: Este ensaio visual ilustra um processo de arte com base em comunidade que se desenrola a partir de nossas experiências no programa *Arte no Mercado*. Esperamos mostrar aos leitores dimensões relevantes deste trabalho que o tornam uma forma distinta de pesquisa-ação participatória. Tecendo imagens e texto, examinamos os fundamentos teóricos desta práxis e examinamos o processo muitas vezes misterioso de criação de arte em conjunto com a comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Ensaio visual. Arte participatória. Educação popular.

What is community art? Can it be participatory? Can it be research inquiry?

Paulo Freire's (1993) orientation to *popular education*¹ underscores *doing with* as opposed to *doing for* participants of a community of learners. The basis of his work with adult literacy in Brazil and other developing countries is an understanding of the educational act as transformative, political, and capable of engendering social transformation. Recognizing literacy as paramount to educational and life success, a pedagogy of *doing with* is intrinsically collaborative, founded on communication, connection, and service. Furthermore, expanding the skills of writing and interpreting words – the process of literacy – to encompass a critical understanding of the world invites making and interpreting meaning in various texts, including art.

¹ *Popular education* is a term that signifies educational practices that are developed in collaboration with various community groups and are designed to empower these groups to overcome underprivileged situations. The term is also synonym with liberatory education and its meaning is associated to the root of the word popular – of the people.

Figure 1 – During our work on a mural, neighborhood children asked to participate and painted on improvised cardboard canvases (Spring 2001²).



Source: Author

While the program’s commitment to collaboration through a *doing with* orientation has been steady, its structure and leadership have shifted and altered over these ten plus years. *Art in the Market* began as a university-community partnership framed by asset-based community development (KRETMANN; MCKNIGHT, 1993), expanded to include a service-learning course, and finally, recognized participatory action research as significant to the program’s mission of collaboration. The essence of the program is a collaborative artmaking process that leads to a postmodern approach for the creation of public art in the community. The program’s curriculum focuses on the ways in which art as a form of action research can contribute to positive social change. Through art, participants research and learn about the community and each other, negotiating meaning toward the planning of public art that responds to the community’s interests. In the past ten years, more than 50 public art pieces have been created in the neighborhood, with only a few destroyed by a building collapse, a building renovation, and racial tensions that led to protests. Additionally, approximately 100 teens and 60 college students have participated in the program.

In this text, we offer a visual essay to represent the *Art in the Market* program as a place where *doing with* highlights a constructivist, activist pedagogy informed by principles of participatory action research. Each year, deliberate activities promote participatory action research studies focused on locating, considering, analyzing, and representing assets located within the particular neighborhood of Cincinnati known as Over-the-Rhine, and the particular segment of Over-the-Rhine known as Findlay Market. Finally, visual artifacts that remain as a narrative of the process also serve as one method for sharing these research results. As such, each artwork and its process from ideation to completion can be compared to a research report that encapsulates a trajectory from unveiling to addressing issues. In *Art in the Market* each artwork transforms the landscape and has the potential to affect people with a multiplicity of stories and perspectives embedded in it. Each work represents the results of critical research collectively conducted by college students and neigh-

² Because it is difficult to precisely date some of the events, dates will be provided in terms of the quarter-system academic calendar, autumn, winter, or spring and the year, i.e. autumn 2009.

borhood teenagers. The works stand for more than their embellishing and inviting presence in the community; they engender an awareness of the transformative and empowering roles art can play in a community.

1 Findlay Market, Over-the-Rhine

Figure 2 – Facing the Findlay Market Alley on Race Street, site of a community artwork celebrating the program’s 10 years (Spring 2001).



Source: Author

Figure 3 – The urban landscape around Over-the-Rhine.



Source: Author

Art in the Market seeks to connect theory and practice through community-based research that targets visual improvements as well as social issues relevant to a particular Cincinnati community, Over-the-Rhine (BASTOS; HUTZEL, 2004). From its earliest development in the late 1700s, the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood has served as port of entry for immigrants to Cincinnati. The population grew rapidly, as the city attracted settlers drawn by the promise of the Western Empire. Flat-boats, rafts, and later steamboats brought continuous waves of immigrants, especially Germans, to the city. By 1850, Cincinnati was the largest pork-packing center in the world, known as Porkopolis. The Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, named because of its proximity to the Erie Canal reminded first residents of the Rhine River, is full of references to its German heritage in architecture, signage, and businesses. Today, Over-the-Rhine residents are primarily African Americans who began moving to the area in the late 60s when the city expanded to the suburbs. Adjacent to the University of Cincinnati campus, it can be characterized as an underprivileged neighborhood facing challenges similar to other inner city communities nationwide, including, among others, unemployment, crime and drug abuse, police brutality, and poor quality housing (CHEEK; CHEEK, 1993).

“There is a good vibe in this place.” – *Art in the Market* former college student

Findlay Market is one of the oldest operating public markets in the United States (established in 1855). Located just blocks from downtown in Over-the-Rhine, Findlay Market is home year-round to about two-dozen indoor merchants selling meat, fish, poultry, produce, flowers, cheese, deli, and ethnic foods. From April to November, the Market also hosts a thriving farmers market, with dozens of outdoor vendors, numerous street performers, and many diverse special events. Findlay Market is a gathering place for people from all over the city, attracting one of the most socially, economically, racially, and ethnically diverse groups found anywhere in Cincinnati. People come for the sights and sounds and smells of an old-fashioned public market, for the great variety of fresh foods, for bargains, for people watching, and for a quintessentially urban shopping experience (FINDLAY MARKET, 2009). This marketplace environment, with its material and immaterial exchanges among people, provides a rich site for a program that is based upon interactivity between participants and community.

2 Art in the Market in Action

Figure 4 – Excited teens Britany, Cherelle, Michael, Sasha, Latasha, Antonio, Diondrey, Dana, Kenny, Reggie, and teaching assistant Darren, on the last day of the program. July 2001.



Source: Author

Figure 5 – Tired-looking teaching artists Natalie, Drew, Karen, Patrick, and Aryn on the last day of the program. July 2001.



Source: Author

"Art, to me, can be either a reflection of the society we live in, or a vision for what we want our society to be."– *Art in the Market* former college student

"And you know we didn't always get along but eventually we all had to listen." – *Art in the Market* former teen

Art in the Market partners University of Cincinnati college students in art-intensive majors with urban teenagers to create collaborative, public art in the Findlay Market District. Beginning as a partnership between the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning's Community Design Center and several segments of Cincinnati's civic and political leadership, *Art in the Market* has continued in activity for more than ten years through additional partnerships with several organizations across the city and various university departments and faculty, in particular the Art Education Program of the School of Art. Utilizing an interdisciplinary methodology to conceptualize and execute lasting works of art in the Findlay Market District, the program has achieved a nuanced and complex legacy. Significantly, the images shared in this text reflect a collaborative process that allowed for college students and teenagers to co-create and co-conceive of public art that would highlight their findings in the community. The teens did not act as apprentices by aiding college students in realizing a singular vision. Both groups of students together conceived of the art pieces represented in this text, chose locations, and executed designs and plans. Participants were primarily involved from conception to completion, with multiple visions negotiated to fit within a single art piece. Here is the visual story of this process as it highlights important program characteristics.

Figure 6 – Students, called interns, kept a reflective journal in the form of a sketchbook to document experiences, ideas, and their research. Here, the sketchbook shows studies for a program logo (Summer 2001).



Source: Author

Figure 7 – Brittany, a longtime participant of *Art in the Market*, designed the program logo in between her time spent conceiving of approximately three public art pieces (Summer 2001).



Source: Author

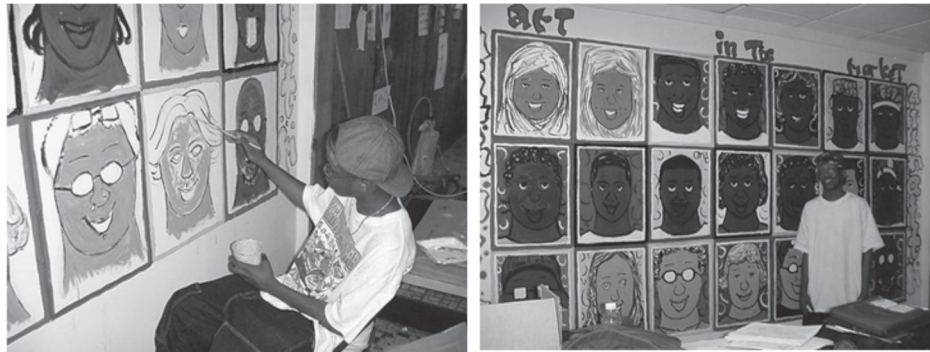
2.1 Empowering teens

Participating in *Art in the Market* offers urban teens new experiences in art that go much beyond what they are accustomed at school. They often take leadership roles in which their creative vision enhances the program’s experiences for all. They are also ambassadors of the community in their partnership with the university. In our interactions with the community, the teens’ community ties render our presence of university professors and college students legitimate. We are validated as researchers, and generally not associated with the negative stereotype of the researcher who will use the community for his or her academic/professional ends. Overall, teens are much more knowledgeable about life in Over-the-Rhine than university folks. This knowledge and various degrees of community connection are invaluable assets in the process of investigating possibilities for our work.

In the course of our engagement with these teens and the community, they became more aware and proud of what they know and can contribute to the program.

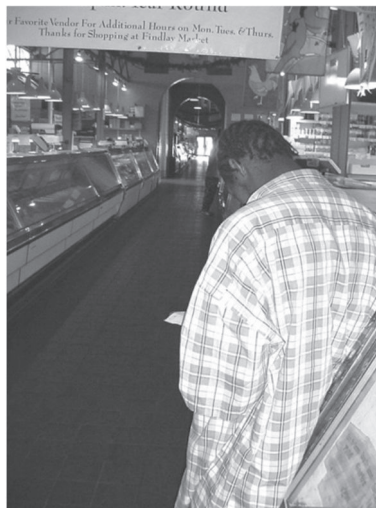
“We met people from everywhere.” – *Art in the Market* former teen

Figures 8 and 9 – Kenny, in his second year in the program, developed a mural independently, which represented all of the *Art in the Market* participants of that year. Kenny also designed the *Art in the Market* t-shirt seen on the participants in the group photo above (Summer 2001).



Source: Author

Figure 10 – Darren, another long-time participant of *Art in the Market*, gathered data by sketching the inside of the market house for a cartoon project that ultimately told the story of market vendors through graphic narrative.



Source: Author

2.2 Generating ideas

Typically, ideas for works of art come from the minds and visions of artists. In a modernist tradition, this artist is typically an individual, working in isolation. *Art in the Market's* process of generating ideas for participatory works of art involves an intense dialogue among program participants and the community. From that interaction and in consultation with the community, projects are conceptualized and executed. As participatory action research, information/data necessary to engage in the creation of works of community art is gathered by program participants in a deliberate and ongoing fashion. Each proposed artwork starts with a public presentation that invites input. Ideas and concepts from all stakeholders – teenagers, college students, university's and community organization's personnel, artists, professors, and community residents of all ages – art taken into account in the design, selection, and execution phases of each project.

"I still have some clothes [with paint on them]; I look at the paint and it has a story behind it." – *Art in the Market* former teen

Figures 11, 12, and 13 – Teenage boys gathered data through photographing locals around Findlay Market. They selected several photographs to paint as monochromatic images on six-foot tall panels. A series of the paintings were hung on construction walls around the market for several years (Summer 2002).



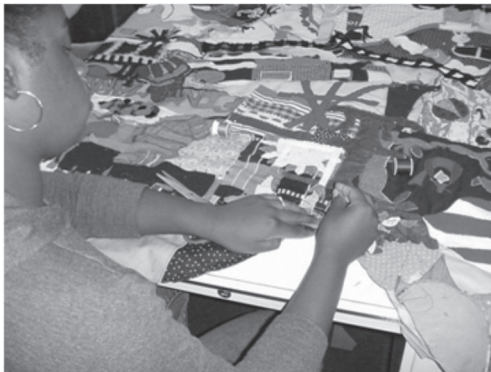
"This ability to unleash our 'social imagination'—to help us envision the world differently—makes community-based arts a uniquely important type of social change strategy." (KNIGHT; SCHWARZMAN, 2005, p. xxiv)

Figure 14 – Teens prepare for a recognition event and unveiling of their completed public art pieces. Each year, participants are recognized for their work. In this case, the teens are creating a display board to educate observers about their art pieces.



Source: Author

Figures 15, 16, 17, 18 – The college student and teenagers above developed a heart-shaped quilt through sketching ideas, hand-sewing, and using a sewing machine. The final product was a dense array of images of both personal memories and city scenes (Summer 2001).



Source: Author

2.3 Making a personal contribution

Artworks are shaped and enriched through the individual stories, gifts, and skills of participants. A quilt project illustrating landmarks of the city, for example, was created by a group of interns. In addition to thinking about distinctive features and places in their city, each intern investigated their own experiences with these places. The result of the twofold research process was lively and detailed textile work in the form of a community quilt, featuring personal memories alongside significant city landmarks. Data collection for the quilt included trips around the city to sketch various landmarks and individual sketching to work out designs of personal memories. Interns collected old fabric and clothes from community members to use in the quilt while the backside of the quilt was an old patchwork quilt found by a community member in a basement of the temporary *Art in the Market* summer space.

“I think community is first and foremost very important because I can’t say that if I was in other communities that I would be where I am today or on my way to where I am today.” – *Art in the Market* former teen

“A lot of planning went into them.” – *Art in the Market* former teen

Figures 19, 20, 21, 22 – Teenagers and college students attacked technically challenging projects such as a poured metal chair full of inscriptions by the teens, a tiled table and benches consisting of tiles made by more than 100 community members, and a concrete abstract sculpture highlighted with found objects (Summer 2001).



Source: Author

2.4 Learning to face problems together

The process of executing works of art is fraught with problems. Artworks often involved pouring and sculpting cement, pouring hot metal, breaking and laying tiles, mastering new media, and preparing the work to withstand outdoor conditions, such as harsh weather and human interaction. Teenagers and college students were fully involved in all of these tasks. Occasionally, artworks fell apart or failed to be installed due to problems encountered along the way. College students usually learned the process as they went, consulting with more experienced students or instructors. Teens, gave their all and, just like life, there were no guarantees that what was intended was going to happen. If the college students and university professors had perhaps more knowledge of the technical dimensions of making art, we depended on our joined resources to *get the job done*. This is a critical dimension of PAR and of community art. Creativity involves the ability to solve problems. Community-based artistic work approached as research goes beyond problem-solving, becoming an instance of problem-posing, problem-revealing, and problem-reflecting.

"I learned how to develop a new skill. I learned how to try new things. I learned more how to interact with others. And like I learned how to have fun doing a good thing." – *Art in the Market* former teen

Figures 23, 24, 25, 26 – A 300 foot-long tile mosaic with the theme *Growth* included images and ideas about community assets the teenagers deemed important. The finished piece became a sense of pride for community residents who spend time in the park nearby (Summer 2002).



Source: Author

2.5 Enacting a transformative vision

A tile mosaic incorporated designs from each participant to represent the theme *growth*. The mosaic allowed for additional community involvement as anyone in the community could stop by to adhere broken pieces to the wall. The images represented in the mosaic were gathered through looking and sketching exercises in the community. Walls become spaces of possibility. Trees are recognized as assets in a city dense with paved parking lots. The work transformed a long corner of the Findlay Playground, a neighborhood park favored by residents to play sports or hang out when the weather is nice for a picnic or barbecue. Virtually all *Art in the Market* participants were involved in some way in this project, from breaking the tiles into mosaic-shaped pieces, arranging them by color, preparing the wall, transferring designs onto the wall, or simply bringing water and snacks to the installation team. As it is the case with many projects, but certainly was the case of this one, everyone was required to be involved to ensure the desired result.

3 Celebrating a History of Participation

Figure 27 – Recycled pieces of wood from the college shop provide the basis for a collaborative work of art to celebrate the ten-year history of *Art in the Market*.



Source: Author

Figure 28 – Local artist, Deb Brod worked with AITM participants creating the artwork that celebrated the program.



Source: Author

"I like this program, it changed me."– *Art in the Market* former college student

The tenth anniversary of the **Art in the Market Program** provided cause for celebration, and an opportunity to note the continued history of engagement of this program with the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. Embedding the bridges created between university and community two artworks were created: one in Over-the-Rhine and one at the university. With support from the Ohio Arts Council, local artist Deb Brod worked with program participants conceptualizing and creating these works. The works were designed with input from the artist, college students and teens and involved a great deal of community involvement.

Fingerprints, brush strokes, more than 100 painted names. Every color of the rainbow is represented on the long, narrow wooden boards – scrap material discarded by someone else. At first, it doesn't look like a work of art. And, in fact, it isn't just art. It's a bridge between communities. (HUGHES, 2008, p.26)

The fingerprints and brush strokes are those of 15 Hughes High School students who worked with students in the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning to create the piece of fine art for the DAAP building. The names represent all those who have participated in the Art in the Market program, which pairs teens from Cincinnati Public Schools with UC students and faculty to make public works of art that not only add aesthetic beauty to the city, but also bring two worlds together (HUGHES, 2008).

Figures 29, and 30 – At Findlay Market on Saturday mornings, community members are invited to participate painting the wood.



Source: Author

Figure 31 – At the university, college students and teens write the names of past program participants in these wood boards (Spring 2009).



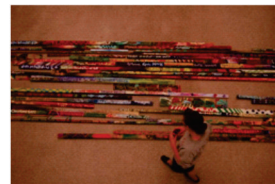
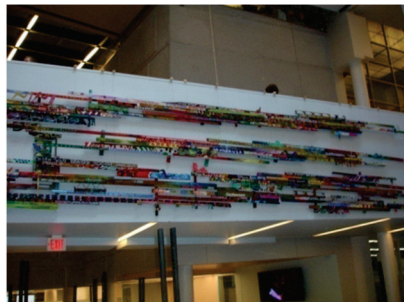
Source: Author

We facilitated painting sections on campus and in the community. Our goal was to include as many participants as possible. To that end, we varied the times and places of our sections and in Over-the-Rhine involved market goers and residents, shoppers and vendors, children and adults; at the university we engaged students, professors, visitors, custodians, librarians, and administrators. Each participant had the opportunity to paint on a piece of wood that would later be assembled into a larger installation.

After the boards and pieces of wood were painted, the names of all *Art in the Market* participants up to that point in time were included in the work, approximately 100 teens and 70 college students.

Gradually, with input from and relying on knowledge of all participants, the final work began to take shape. We used the atrium space to envisage the final design because the artwork transcended the classroom space. Architecture students were very important in helping us solve the technical difficulties of temporarily hanging the work on a high wall. The work was so well received that has not been removed from its very central location in the college building to this day. This is the first collaborative *Art in the Market* artwork to be installed at the university. This bold gesture embodies the *doing with* orientation that marks this program, evidencing that not only is the community changed as a result of the project, but also the university is transformed.

Figures 32 and 33 – The final work is installed at the college, reflecting the connections the program creates between university and community.



4 Redrawing Boundaries, a Conclusion

The possibilities inherent in the experiences described here exemplify how a program such as *Art in the Market* and its emphasis on *doing with*, enacted as collaborative artmaking, can reflect action research principles and inform a new genre of art practices. According to Lippard (1997), a keen awareness of the places artists come from, reside in, and interact with has direct impact on artistic work. In that vein, art involves a revisited construct that links practice and reflection, the personal with the social, and, most importantly, challenges preconceived notions of *otherness*. Furthermore, implicit in this new approach to art is a notion of connective aesthetics, a desired direction for art actions that are fundamentally collaborative. In parallel fashion, the craft of participatory-action research also requires a reconfiguration, a redrawing of traditional notions of researcher and participants. The affinity of these two praxis – community-based art and participatory-action research – involves challenges to conventional boundaries between self and other. Therefore, considering boundaries as fluid rather than fixed (GABLIK, 1995), art-based participatory research demands that we redesign our roles of artists, researchers, participants, scholars, and collaborators. We find ourselves located in a space of possibilities from which articulation of individual voice leads to unveiling collective voice. Working with others the processes and products of research and art making become fused. Our deliberate actions seeking to build community and create art that is socially responsive, we redraw boundaries and reinvent ourselves.

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