

Painting for Peace: Art Workshops in Salvador, Brazil

Project Location: Brazil

Nominated by: Colorado College

Project Team:

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Summary:

Our project united high school students with local artists for a series of educational and hands-on workshops. Through the creation of murals, smaller works of art and discussions, students explored issues of peace, identity and systemic racism.

Project Description

Having studied in Salvador, Brazil before, we approached this project with a working understanding of the history, context and challenges that shape the city. We used this context to shape our discussions with students about peace and what issues we sought to address. We chose to use art as the mechanism to approach these challenges. Graffiti, alongside music and dance, is popular in Salvador. Students were excited about the opportunity to work with artists whose works are visible throughout the city. The choice to center our project around drawing and painting helped to keep students engaged.

During the project we spent seven weeks at the Colégio Estadual Evaristo da Veiga, located in the Ondina neighborhood. Although the school houses classes for all ages, we decided to work with four high school classrooms. We chose to work with high school students since they were open to engaging with social challenges they faced but are still optimistic about the future. We worked closely with Professor Fred Bomsucesso, who we knew before the beginning of the project, and Professor Nerize Portela. Professor Bomsucesso welcomed us into his school and immediately connected us with other faculty members and students. This relationship allowed us to establish trust within the community. The school principal, Ana Rita, along with a variety of teachers provided immense support.

Although the project closely resembled our original vision, we made a number of changes to better work with the students. We initially planned to jump directly into hands-on workshops with students. However, we instead opted to sit in on classes for our first week to understand the school's structure and build rapport. For the following three weeks, we led three different art workshops alongside Professor Nerize. These workshops involved diverse mediums of art, including portraiture, landscape drawing, and poetry, with guided discussion questions to stimulate reflections on the relationship between art, peace, and identity. At the suggestion of Professor Fred, we also decided to add a guided field trip to the Modern Art Museum of Bahia to inspire students and stimulate them with a plethora of references of Bahian artists.

Working with artists Ani Ganzala and Eder Muniz was exciting for us and the students. However, both the artists' busy schedules and the school's tight class period time frames required us to adapt our program. During the last week of our project, an unanticipated teacher strike closed the school and we needed to reorganize logistics. Since the strike coincided with the artist workshops, we were still allowed to invite the artists and have approximately 30 high school students participate. Though teachers were absent, the security guards, lunch workers, and administrators were still present. Thanks to the joint dedication from students, the school staff and artists, students were able to create self portraits to take home as well as complete four large murals around the school with spray paint. All of the underlying issues that stand in the way of peace in Salvador are ongoing. Future projects should continue addressing these issues and work to make art supplies more accessible.

Reflection

We challenged ourselves to approach this project with open minds. Through discussions with students, we gained a better sense of what peace meant there and now. For students, poverty, inequality, and violence are not abstract challenges but everyday problems that cause real suffering. Consequently, many students thought of peace not in global terms but in local ones. Peace means having the ability to live without fear, to walk safely through one's city, to enjoy simple pleasures in life and to work towards one's goals. Defining peace in these terms provides a starting point for working towards it.

One of the biggest conflicts within the school that we observed was finding out that police had killed a student weeks before our arrival. This act of violence left a rift in the community where many of the students were grieving and angered by the response of the administration. When we arrived, we noticed tags that had been spray-painted on the front of the school with the initials of the student who passed away. Alongside the student's initials were other messages such as "Bala no sistema" ("Bullet to the system") and "Jamais será esquecido!" ("He will never be forgotten!"). Throughout the classrooms and school we saw similar markings. The principal and other staff repeatedly talked about the student in a negative light, saying that he wasn't a good student and that his death was likely due to his involvement in gang activity. We heard from students that he was a friend to many of them and that he wasn't involved in gangs. Many students wanted to use the mural we were planning to pay homage to the student. School administrators, however, didn't want to take a public stance on the student's death. This refusal to take a stance was partly due to their own bias against the student, but also due to the police's tense relationship with the neighboring community. We were told not to put his likeness or full name up on the wall, only his initials or indirect references.

When it was time to create the murals, we were able to have one of the artists, Eder Muniz, paint an elaborate and vibrant bird that represented the student, and a banner across it reading "Para vida toda P.b.," which translates to "For life P.b.". P.b. is the student's nickname, in reference to the Portuguese word "pombo," which means dove or pigeon. We believe this process was healing for the students. It allowed them to feel a sense of ownership over their school and know that their friend will not be forgotten. During this time, we had to be very careful with how we communicated with the school staff. Though we disagreed with some of the things they said about the student, we also recognized that our project depended on their support. We were always respectful and did our best to accommodate the wishes of the staff, students, and artists we were collaborating with. In addition to this larger mural that is on the front of the school, students developed multiple portraits of other individuals and also self-portraits. This was an important step in the creative process because students could produce their own art to take home and keep as references, given that works of art are often inaccessible to lower-income and Black communities. Students also developed their own ideas for murals. Many of them paid homage to the *orixás*, the spirits or entities that are present with in the *candomblé* religion prevalent in the state of Bahia. Many murals created by students also emphasized the importance of preserving nature as essential to peace.

This project opened our eyes to police violence on a global scale. Learning about the over-policing of Black and brown communities in the United States helped provide some context for what we saw in Brazil. We learned how police violence is prevalent in other parts of the world and how poor communities are targeted and often stereotyped for the failures of the government.

Although our project failed to solve the underlying social conditions that prevent peace in Salvador, we believe that art is a precursor to change. Art offers an outlet for social frustration and is a tool for reimagining an alternative future. While the murals students created are small in contrast to the problems they depict, our project reinforced the value of the artistic process. Through communicating, problem-solving, collaborating and making art, the project helped students exercise the steps of creative resistance.

Personal Statement

“Throughout history, art has been one of the most powerful engines of social change. This project provided an excellent opportunity to test the power of creativity and push students to reimagine alternate futures. Much like creativity, peace is a constant struggle. While peace is often portrayed as an abstract and unachievable ideal, this project has reinforced the idea that peace is achievable through small, tangible actions.” Cormac McCrimmon

“I felt inspired by the resilience of the students and their demands to be heard. I also appreciated their interest in the project and learning more about the process. Their ideas and participation made the project possible and we are very grateful for that. After working at this school I have considered working in a school in the United States and applied to teaching fellowships like Fulbright.” Andres Madrigal

“Continuous learning and humility have been important lessons that I continue to reflect on completing this project. Many of the colonial, White supremacist systems that were implemented centuries ago and continue to impact daily lived experiences in the Americas are bigger than what we could hope to resolve or fix through our project. However, continuous education for myself, collective learning, and artistic production are essential to continue resisting and taking down these systems and to create more peaceful ones. I hope that our project has contributed to this mission in a positive way.” Manuel Uribe