

We Are Here: Engaging in Art for Resilience and Reclamation of Space
United States
Brandeis University
Sienna Bucu, United States, Brandeis University

Summary

“We Are Here: Engaging in Art for Resilience and Reclamation of Space” is an art installation of four permanent mural cycles in three public schools in Union, New Jersey. Over the course of several weeks, middle and high school students worked collaboratively with me to execute a student-driven work of art in the hallways and classrooms where they attend school.

Project Description

From the outset, I knew that I wanted to engage in art as a tactic to promote peace within the Union School system. The district I grew up in has endured many changes and a lot of upheaval in the last few years. In choosing sites for the project and themes, I knew it was most important to help allow students to give themselves a sense of ownership of place. This was especially important in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic where students were and are expected to learn from anywhere – including volatile home environments. The shift back to traditional mechanisms of schooling has proved very difficult. I approached this process with patience and hoped to extend the students as much grace as possible while still navigating a very tight timeline.

I chose to work in the Township of Union because I grew up there. I know intimately the difficulties that exist in my own community and felt that a person my age with the knowledge of the town would be best suited to serve the students of the community. I also felt it was important for students to see what it means for someone to be able to leave Union and still come back fully invested in its success. This project for me was an implementation of some of the goals I wished to accomplish when I unsuccessfully ran for the Board of Education in Union in 2020. The relationships I built in campaigning were assets in navigating the heavily bureaucratic system that is public schools. Teachers whom I knew were committed to the success of this project both for my sake and for the sake of the students, current and future, who would benefit from this mural cycle.

Initially I had aimed to include the youngest students served by the Union school system by dedicating a portion of my time to the seven elementary schools. In the end, I focused this project on the two middle schools and the high school. The students in the high school required more care and attention than I initially envisioned being necessary. I felt that a higher frequency schedule with more stability would be of greater benefit. Union Schools also created a new position this year called the Dean of Restorative Practices, and for the first week of the project I got to work closely with her and some of the incoming freshman class. Flexibility with my schedule in the beginning of the project allowed me to do so.

Education is something that I am extremely passionate about. In the future, it is my goal to continue this work more broadly in making sure that young people’s voices are heard on their own account. Students do not need to be spoken for but rather listened to, as their knowledge is representative of their needs and their experiences. In continuing to do public work with my art, I hope to be a vehicle for expression of needs, wants and desires moving forward – especially for those most marginalized.

Reflection

I believe that peace is a moment where needs are being met. The only way to ensure a lasting peace is to understand the needs as they are being presented, and to create a flexible structure to meet them. I hoped that in executing my project, I could do that in a small way for the students. While my project had physical results – murals on the wall– it was much more about building relationships and creating different tools for communication. Every day at the end of our painting session, we would have

lunch together from a local restaurant. At first it was quite difficult to get the students to engage with each other, but as the summer progressed, they became a community. The group of students at the high school ranged from an incoming freshman to an outgoing senior who saw this project as a goodbye. The students left the project less fearful of what is to come (and potentially more prepared), and so happy that they were able to see something through to its completion.

In conducting this project, I had learned that some students were working on murals that had been dropped either due to Covid or because the teachers were working without a contract. Not only was there disappointment in the halting of projects, but it also resulted in decreased connection or ownership of the space. The level of commitment from students varied greatly. There was a drop in option available for students due to other responsibilities during the summer. This meant that some days I would have over ten students, and when working with incoming freshmen, upwards of twenty at a time. Other days I would have just a core of four students who showed up every day. I found out during this project that the mural did not have to be “high art,” it just had to be theirs. Collective production was more important than output, but it also meant that I had to find ways to honor the different levels of engagement present within each student. The Mural Project started with an open prompt – “draw a symbol that helps represent you.” This ensured that the student could draw what they wished to add and have a piece of themselves present in the hallway.

I was also able to facilitate relationships between adults and administration in the school building. A new incoming team of administrators for the high school was announced during the execution of the project. I was able to coordinate a sit-down meeting between the new principal and the students. The needs, desires and expectations of the students could thus be expressed and heard. In the process of the conversation there were avenues of communication opened to both the incoming administrative team and students who have been experiencing the building, which allowed them to listen to one another in a non-threatening or adversarial way. It also helped ensure that students who often fly just below the radar knew that they have a place to voice their concerns.

I learned that many of the issues regarding education stem from the inability to meet students [and teachers] where they are. Being able to work outside of the traditional educational expectations that arise during the school year meant I could allow the students to work at the pace that was right for them. Confidence in my own skill as an artist enabled me to relax when students needed time or were frustrated. Expectations of perfection often precluded students from wanting to start. One of the best ways I was able to reach students was to model problem solving in my own painting during the project.

These murals have challenged me to de-individualize my own art practice, which can often become very solitary in the meditative trance of the studio. Working with students at varying levels of engagement meant that I had to let go of my own notions of a final project while still providing clear guidance and process-based instruction. While it would be an overstatement to say the project changed the way I think about the world, it has made me reconsider the way I engage with my own art practice. Public art has always been a passion of mine; however, it was always self-referential. I am now excited to create more opportunities for others to join me in my practice and shape the direction it goes into. I firmly believe that art can hold space for tough conversations, escapes and, when at its best, healing.

Personal Statement

Over the course of the summer, I was able to return home to a place that I had always felt personal responsibility for saving. I learned, in working with students, that they are more than capable of saving themselves – if we only listen to them. The Davis Projects for Peace allowed middle and high school students of the Township of Union, New Jersey to create work that was representative of where and who they are right now. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to be a part of and bear witness to the creation of four murals. I hope that they can be a source and site for inspiration and respite for Union’s public school students in the years to come.