A. The goals of this project were to establish a sustaining photography workshop at Caracas’ Tiuna El Fuerte cultural park. In hosting these workshops, we hope to add on artist community talks as another layer to the art education program, centering conversations around personal agency and culture. Lastly, we worked to host a traveling photography intensive in various cities throughout Venezuela and – in the conclusion of this route – showcase a larger public exhibition.

B. Thankfully, I did not need to find outside funding for this project, however I am looking to return next year for a follow up and will most likely look for fundraising support via GoFundMe.

C. When coming across images I encountered in international newspapers regarding Venezuela’s situation I thought to myself: who is taking these pictures? Do they understand the context? Are they flying in and leaving or living the reality of the everyday Venezuelan? These questions paired with an understanding that photography continuously needs to be a democratized, accessible medium led to the seed of this project. Due to my Venezuelan roots, this project was motivated further by a personal desire to understand and uplift the perspective of everyday Venezuelans, specifically considering the political and economic tensions the country is experiencing. How can one understand their agency? How can the world more deeply understand the Venezuelan reality? The answer, to me, was rooted in learning about, applying and having access to, photography.

D. As my project works to not only increase accessibility to photography as a medium, but also uplift the perspectives of every day citizens, I would identify the problem as a combination of both political polarization and the tragedy porn phenomena. Specifically, in Venezuela right now, the tension between political ideologies is high and affects not only how people are understanding their reality, but often defines who they associate with. With my workshops being open, students come from various parts of the city and from different experiences. In this space, students are not forced to one side or the other, but rather work as a group to learn and support each other. More than this, in teaching young people how to use the camera, both as a tool and artistic expression, they are learning to hone their point of view and to speak about it with confidence. This speaks to agency: everyone’s photos, everyone’s perspective matters.

E. Tiuna El Fuerte was the first cultural park in Venezuela, founded 13 years ago and has started a movement among other artistic/political groups across the country. The completely recycled green space continues to motivate artists in a difficult time and push a narrative based in public power and cultural transformation. I chose to hold my project at Tiuna because of their reputation, reach and political analysis that pushes the power of art to the forefront of any societal changes.

F. The host site, physically, is a reconstructed lot of containers and studio spaces in the beginning of the barrio El Valle. What is interesting is that on the outside it looks like a regular urban park, but
on the inside – in each respective office – are sub-collectives of various artistic focuses working to uplift the culture of Caracas and Venezuela at large. It almost resembles a quiet ecosystem where everyone is slowly, intentionally working on a project or an event. However when the project launches or the event starts – everyone from within Tiuna and the outside community show up. I find it a great demonstration of community power. For me personally, working in the audiovisual sub-collective called Semeruco, I was welcomed immediately. The environment is one of support and collaboration, which my coworkers have given me plenty of. Working in the physical space, I also found the skill of invention key to using the maximum potential of the space: how can we host workshops that are interactive within the park? That push students to rethink the space, and how to photograph it? Through some invention, our classes were able to not only be held in Tiuna’s spaces but move within it and respond to the space in an intentional way.

G. While there are artists working to persevere in Venezuela, the material realities are difficult. In terms of workshops in Caracas, once we got the word out on social media, word spread and interest rose. However, there are days with blackouts and no or little phone signal. When things like this happen on a semi-constant basis, the process of rescheduling or cancelling can be deterring. Yet, the students show and somehow, we persevere. In terms of the traveling aspect to the workshop, securing transportation proved to be difficult. While we were able to travel to two other cities – Maracaibo and Barquisimeto - I spent a week and a half waiting to confirm one trip thinking, “Is this even going to happen? Am I wasting my time?” In moments like this, I simply focused on what I could impact: re-opening office hours for previous students and further designing lessons. I had to remember that, even if it wasn’t on my expected schedule, we were doing the work and students were learning. At the end of the day, that was what mattered.

H. While my Spanish is practically fluent, each Spanish-speaking country has their dialect and phrases. What I found difficult in terms of communication was not in understanding or speaking, but in expressing concepts with the right amount of relevancy. For example, one day we hosted an open workshop at a public plaza in Maracaibo, but the city was on day two of a three-day blackout. Kids were playing in the street and we thought, “Why not ask them if they’d like to join?” Well, how do you communicate fluidly that photography was a relevant skill to learn?

“I don’t have a camera,” they would often respond.

“That’s okay, we have plenty for the day.”

“But why should I learn how to take a picture when I don’t have a camera at home? Nah, I’ll just stay here playing soccer.”
The issue was that photography was still assumed to be an elite medium – something out of reach. How can I, as a workshop facilitator, start a conversation that shows photography can be beneficial to everyone and – at the end of the day, even if only for a day – fun as well? This moment of difficulty in communicating helped me understand this aspect of exclusivity had to be addressed if these workshops were to reach a fuller potential.

I. While the concept of peace can be applied to various contexts and scales, I believe peace comes from both learning and understanding. In order to achieve peace within ourselves, within our lived experiences and among others, we have to understand ourselves, our point of view and learn to understand others’ as well.

J. This project has just begun, in my opinion. We have worked to establish a fixed photography workshop in Caracas as well as connect with five other sites across Venezuela, visiting two so far, to host workshops. This is a first step to implementing their art education programs. In the long-term, I see this project expanding to hosting regular artist talks and exhibitions – both being piloted within the month – that can push the public to think about the power of perspective. With these three moving parts of the project, I believe there can be stronger connections made across the network of artist groups working in Venezuela as well as an ongoing discussion of perspective based on the workshops and events. In the promotion of this discussion, I believe that the community can achieve a deeper level of understanding which will contribute to the goal of peace.

K. This project has pushed me in many ways, for the better. My most prominent take-away is the power of art to bring joy and spark curiosity. When teaching young people, I was amazed at how much a student could learn from one simple exercise. In turn, I was surprised at how much I could learn from a student without inhibitions, unencumbered by rules. Beyond photography, this project has taught me the resilience of people: despite the worst or most unstable of conditions, young Venezuelans – my co-workers – are pushing to provide artistic outlets for their community. This reliance has also shown me how much we can achieve, how much we can give, with a small concerted effort – when we think and move as a collective rather than as individuals.

L. In teaching photography to young people in Caracas, Venezuela, I learned the reach of art’s power in terms of bringing joy, sparking curiosity and validating one’s lived reality. Photography is not just an elite artistic medium, it can be democratized and brought to show another truth; in this moment of Venezuela’s history, it is extremely vital that we continue to push that possibility.
Truth in Image Making: Empowering Caracas’ Youth through the Art of Photography
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