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A New View

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A New View

I was faced with the hardest question I would ever meet last semester. In my four years at the University I never encountered a problem without a clear and definite solution somewhere. It was always a matter of time or research, but somewhere, it could be found or made or decided upon. "What is art?" After three and a half years, that shouldn't be a hard question but my fellow classmates and I sat dumbfounded staring at blank sheets of paper that certainly weren't going to fill themselves with definitions. Hadn't I been studying so long so that I could answer that very question without hesitation?

I stumbled through a clumsy definition that day out of obligation but more than stating what art is I simply listed all the things that it isn't. It's not the same thing for every person. It's not beautiful, at least not always. It's not inherently meaningful. It isn't the answer we sometimes want it to be to the questions we can barely ask. It simultaneously is and is not anything and everything around us. It isn't always easy. Those were the things that I knew then, for certain, about art.

There is a limit to how much you can learn about anything in a classroom. I think this is truer about art than any other subject. In class, you can learn how to draw or paint or take technically correct photographs; instructors can instill in their students only the basic skills. On our own, we must learn how to see and not how just to make, but how to make well, how to make physical the truths that we know. In one project I taught myself more about what art is, and what I think it should be than I had learned in all of the

classes I'd taken combined.

The project was simple, or so it seemed at the start. Use art to do something you've never done before, something you're curious about but have never had the courage to pursue. The art that has always interested me the most is that which touches its audience, art that is made not for gallery walls but for the streets and buildings we live in, for the people who may never step inside an exhibition of any kind. I'm less interested in what the artists feel and more concerned with how feeling, any feeling, can be drawn from or given to an audience.

Art, any art, depends on the interest and reception of the public. Without an audience, any piece or project would be unable to operate and it would lose at least some of its meaning. And sometimes, art has the beautiful potential to cross a line with its audience tempting, daring and begging them to participate. With the advent of the internet, the process of finding willing participants as well as viewers only became easier, the public more accessible than ever.

It is on the basis of these principles that I have come to admire a few artists in particular, one being Aaron Koblin. Many of Koblin's projects rely on the participation of different communities/ groups of people. It is through their collaboration that his vision comes to fruition, their contributions becoming just as important as his original idea. The Johnny Cash Project, for instance, is an interactive website that invites anyone to submit their own original portrait of Johnny Cash that will be displayed on the site as well as added to a music video for Cash's song "Ain't No Grave" that is viewable at www.thejohnnycashproject.com

My personal favorite of all his work is "The Sheep Market". For this piece,

10,000 sheep were drawn by online workers. They were paid two cents each to draw a sheep facing to the left, all of which are available on www.thesheepmarket.com From the site you can choose any sheep and send it to another person, buy it on a postage stamp or watch the process of it being drawn. As the story goes, only one out of those 10,000 bothered to ask why he/she was drawing a sheep, and why it had to be facing to the left. Koblin's work simultaneously uses the public and comments on their trends and their relationship to the ever advancing technology that surrounds us, which I find to be more apparent in this piece than any of his others.

Another such artist is the infamous JR. He started his career creating very large, very public pieces that got him in trouble much of the time. With the world as his gallery, JR posted large scale, close up portraits everywhere from Paris to Brazil to Palestine. Frequently these portraits would focus on "undesirables" or the downtrodden in order to bring attention to them in places where they would normally be overlooked or purposefully ignored. His work demanded attention, with faces both haunting and intriguing stared out at the public from the sides of buildings and trains, from rooftops and hillsides. More than anything they are absolutely unavoidable.

Having won the 2011 TED prize JR had been challenged with using art to change the world. His response to this task is the Inside Out Project. Anyone and everyone interested in participating must send in a black and white photograph of anyone they wish or any story they feel should be told. JR (in conjunction with HUGE and the TED project) will enlarge them to poster size and return them to the person who originally submitted them so they can put them up in their own community, where they most need to be seen.

Although these artists are nothing short of brilliant in both their ideas and their use of their access to the public, I think their greatest accomplishment is revealing that the realm of public and participatory art is no longer only dominated by “artists”, in the strictest sense that we may think of them. These artists are daring the public to see what they’ve previously overlooked, to change the world around them. If anyone can access the public and motivate them to respond, why shouldn’t they?

You don’t need to be an artist to touch someone, to become important to them, to make them believe in what you’re doing. Frank Warren is commonly known as the “most trusted stranger in the country”. It all started in 2005 when Warren handed out thousands of postcards to individuals explaining his vision and imploring them to respond to him, to send him their secrets that they’d never told anyone before. I don’t think anyone, even Warren on his most optimistic day, could have guessed how many responses he would get; though they started slowly, he now, even six years later, receives about 500 responses a day. They come in all forms; some highly decorated, some on bags from fast food restaurants but all infinitely important.

Although surely he’d like to make them all available to the public, Warren updates the PostSecret website every Sunday with about twenty new postcards, and has published five books to date. He tours the country speaking mostly at colleges and universities about his project and the various institutions he supports. Warren, through his project, has touched and changed more lives than many artists could ever hope to, and, realistically, he’s hasn’t created a single thing. All of Warren’s success and his hopes for his project relied upon average people and their secrets.

Though it may be the most notorious, PostSecret does not have the corner on the

online market on this sort of project. Many sites have since been created as forums for individuals to discuss and disclose the happenings of their daily lives. These exist in the same spirit of bravery and honesty, and perhaps in the hopes of achieving release and comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone. Sites like “MyLifeIsAverage”, “FMyLife”, “MyLifeIsTwilight” and even “MyLifeIsHarryPotter” have become wildly popular as both consumable products as well as outlets for the participants.

One site in particular stands out among the rest, though it is one of the newest. “LettersIllNeverSend” operates on the premise or assumption that everyone has something to say, maybe not a secret but thoughts and memories they are harboring that they can never disclose. “LettersIllNeverSend” invites the user to write a letter; to whomever they wish, saying whatever they need to. The letters are then posted and may be commented on by readers if they choose. What is most important is that the contributors are able to get their feelings out in the open, said to the world if not to the people who need to hear them most, because sometimes the world is listening even when they are unwilling. At times, it seems like the letters or posts are even more beneficial to the readers than they are to those writing them. Undoubtedly, this site is art almost unwittingly made by the public for anyone who needs it.

This art, these words, these pictures touch average people and, in fact, touch all people. To paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, I may not be able to define art, but I know it when I see it. I have come to believe that art shouldn't always live on a gallery wall and be made for people who want to buy it. These artists and these collective websites have shown me that I want to make art that's fun, art that says something, and art that is for all people. It was just a matter of how.

I'm twenty one years old, about to graduate from college and presumably start life "for real". I'm curious about the world. But that was too big. I'm curious about people. That's still too big. I'm curious about all the people I'll never meet, the people who walk anonymously through my life every day. I'm curious about the way I'll touch them without them ever knowing and vice versa. I'm curious about the thoughts they hold inside them and never share because I'm bursting at the seams with my own and I don't know what to do with them. From these curiosities, a strange and wonderful idea was born.

Not many people know how to successfully blow an egg. It isn't a terribly hard process but it is, overall, a fairly useless talent to have. First, you must make holes at either end of the egg. I've found that the best tools for this are an unraveled paperclip and a pen. The key to this process is to make the hole you are not blowing into slightly larger without cracking the egg so that the yolk and the rest of the egg filling will come out easier. After setting for a few days, anything remaining inside will either ooze out or harden leaving you with a perfect, if a little fragile, capsule for your thoughts. Well, in this case, for my thoughts.

Inside the eggs I placed my own thoughts. I included beliefs that I have come to hold true, things I've heard and can't forget; all small paper pieces of me. I specifically chose feelings that I never voiced before, that I had perhaps written in a journal or the margins of a notebook to be recorded and forgotten; important enough to be thought, but not shared. In writing them down again I realized they may not even be anything remarkable, but they were mine, and most of the time it's the little things that can make the most impact. I wanted people to know that, if to no one else, I thought that the little

inconsequential thoughts that they held were important to me.

I placed my eggs wherever I went in hopes that the curious and the brave, the cautious and the disbelieving, would pick them up. Make no mistake, the art wasn't in the making, the art was not the eggs or what they said inside of them. The art is in the breaking. The art is the discovery; it is what my "finders" feel, what they learn and how they change because of what has transpired between us. This project was about what I could give to people, my audience, the individuals with whom I share space, if only briefly. I gave them a piece of me; an experience that I hope was as meaningful to them as it was to me. I may never know for certain, but I can hope.