

Visualizing A More Perfect Union: Social Science and the Visual Arts Building Just Futures Together

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In New York City public housing, small paper notices reminding residents to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are posted next to elevators. The notices were hastily posted and were there to protect housing management from legal repercussions, but they share little written or visual information on how residents can protect themselves from COVID-19, leaving the poorest among them to wade through rumor, fact, and the information in-between.¹ Perhaps it comes down to decreasing attention spans and competition for attention, but capitalism, marketing, and advertising do visual communication very well. Why then, do governments often fail when it comes to inclusive and effective communication?

Public health communication is just one issue that requires attention, but society is also struggling with understanding and discussing issues like social unrest stemming from ethnic or racial oppression, economic inequality, and violence in our communities. Unfortunately, the 24-hour news cycle, social media, and increased amount of time online due to the pandemic, means that verbal communication is reduced and competition for our attention is increased. When it comes to designing public health communication and dispersing general information effectively to diverse

audiences, governments should consider the radical idea of employing social scientists and artists to help them do it.

THE PROBLEM

Information about the state of the world is gathered and disseminated so rapidly that certain values needed for democratic governance and effective communication are stretched or are ignored. Transparency, equity and inclusive participation, and accountability, are compromised for the sake of quick delivery and short attention spans. There are urgent needs and systemic problems, like the ones experienced by the residents in New York City, that go unaddressed because they require time and consideration. Consequently, for democratic governance to be effective with respect to an issue like communication during a pandemic, government employees and citizens alike can contribute to the solution by doing the hard work of sitting and working with an issue or problem.

THE SOLUTION

The solution to this issue encourages new methods of communication that dig deeply into the problems: Combine the research expertise of the social sciences and the communicative power of the arts to create

1 The New Yorker, 2020

Visualizing a More Perfect Union

partnerships with communities experiencing social and economic issues and to produce new, artistic methods of communication. This means that a government would hire trained social scientists like anthropologists, sociologists, peacebuilders, historians, and psychologists to work in partnership with hired artists, painters, photographers, and sculptors. The goals are to create effective visual communication regarding public health, social problems, and helping communities imagine a future where they thrive. In its ability to accomplish better communication and information sharing, this seemingly radical proposal will be able to address social issues through meaningful and productive community engagement.

RADICAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In order to understand the root of what a community experiencing misinformation, violence, or socio-economic inequalities needs, it is critical that we

of others and experience issue fatigue³. Social scientists and artists can help uncover and address social problems while also helping governments communicate more effectively with the people they serve. This kind of community engagement is radical in that it is rare for federal governments to hire visual artists and social scientists who seek to engage a community for an extended time, uncover issues, and then create art that helps the local people and the global community continue to discuss those issues or find ways to solve them. Furthermore, rather than artists developing public art alone, their work should be created in collaboration with the social scientists and the community itself. In this way, the created content can help communities conceptualize and articulate their experiences of violence or inequality, and may help make sense of a conflict, reveal roads to navigate it, and transform living conditions⁴.

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involve social scientists who know how to uncover the root causes and drivers of conflict and how to transform them. We then need to combine deep listening, which involves listening to understand and connect and not just to reply, with the arts, which have the power to create a discursive space for the oppressed public and provide areas for hope, such as the Black Lives Matter street mural did in Baltimore, MD².

As our lives are lived increasingly online or in isolation, we are less compassionate and alert to the experiences

RADICAL, BUT NOT NEW

While the idea of utilizing the collaborative efforts of social science and visual art to effectively address complex social issues may seem radical, it is not new. During the Great Depression in the United States, through arts-related programs incorporated under President Roosevelt's New Deal, artists documented and revealed issues around poverty and socio-

2 Campbell, "A Lifeline of Hope," 2020

3 Reiss, "The Empathy Effect," 2018

4 WochenKlausur, "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention," 2011

economic class. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) sponsored the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), which employed artists who were struggling during the Great Depression as well as the Federal Art Project, which brought art production to under-served communities while also providing opportunities to previously disenfranchised and unemployed artists, particularly African American artists. Similarly, the Farm Security Administration, a new agency created under the New Deal to address rural poverty, hired photographers and writers to document and portray the lives and issues of people living in these areas. While these programs were not intended as cultural projects, they nonetheless had significant positive impact on local and national communities through engagement and visual communication. Owing to their efforts, the US now has socially and culturally influential works like Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother,"⁵ which created awareness of the plights of impoverished farmers, as well as "Washington, D.C. Government Charwoman" also known as "American Gothic"⁶ by Gordon Parks that made visible the hidden labor done by many African Americans at the time.

Visual arts used in this manner can diversify the stories a country tells about itself. New images that incorporate multiple stories can help people make sense of the conflicts or social issues they encounter by diversifying understanding and inspiring empathy. They can make people consider for the first time that multiple, contradicting stories exist at the same time. Using visual art to communicate a story not only creates new communication pathways, it also pushes people to reconsider how they imagine others, and that then informs new actions toward them.⁷ Blues singer-songwriter and activist Nina Simone famously said, "An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times."⁸ Society needs more than just news media or government accounts to inform us. Events are experienced through a diversity of viewpoints, but many, particularly those of marginalized groups, are either erased or deliberately forgotten. We need visual art to help communities reflect, engage, and remember.

THE SKEPTICS

Those with libertarian views or an interest in "small

5 Lange, 1936

6 Parks, 1942

7 Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons, 1998

8 Stroud, "Nina Simone Great Performances." See also, Nina Simone Music.

government" politics may be skeptical and say that this programming could lead to government propaganda or the use of the arts for an authoritarian agenda. But the intention of this kind of project is to reinvigorate values of inclusive participation in civic life, information sharing, and accountability, not to induce nationalist sentiments. The community engagement and the art product should not be colonial in nature nor should it turn into state propaganda. A de-centralized power structure that is immune to political pressure is a way to protect against the art against being used as government propaganda. This is a chance for citizens to engage in collective imagining, to discuss issues beyond meme-sharing and tweets, and to visualize a future that needs and includes everyone, not just those in power.

THE PROCESS

In order to listen deeply to the concerns of a community and then produce visual art that tells a story, educates, or diversifies the dominant narrative, the people hired for this programming will need to be diverse. Multiple voices and a range of identities and backgrounds are necessary to create inclusive, democratic participation and give all people the opportunity to contribute to a social movement and civic life.

Step 1: Community Input

Understanding the issues within a community is a first step for the social science/artists teams, which would involve community interviews and listening sessions to determine how people make meaning in their lives and what their struggles are. The social scientists would use their skills in dialogue, qualitative research, and deep listening to work with community members or informal stakeholders. These community members should also be paid as consultants and working with them should be collaborative, not extractive. Using this information, the scientists and artists can work with the community to create art that informs, celebrates, educates, remembers, or inspires discussion.

An example of this comes from the city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where brightly rendered murals appeared during the COVID-19 quarantine that equated loving one another with social distancing, and advocated for the use of technology to foster connection, utilizing messages in both English and Spanish to express community unity. The Office of Public Art paid artists

Visualizing a More Perfect Union

to contribute to the “PSA Temporary Mural” program⁹, but the effects of the program reached beyond the artists’ experience and out into the community to share essential health information, while also uplifting spirits. The value these murals held was not only in the aesthetic work itself, but also in sharing information where it was lacking, and inspiring feelings of collectivity during isolation.

Step 2: Creating the Art and Considering the Space

The space a piece of work resides in is as important as the piece itself. A space cannot help but be transformed with the addition of art, and sociopolitical work can open metaphorical and physical space for a diversity of voices that may have been previously pushed to the margins or excluded completely. It can redefine space as politicized and claim it as an active part of a struggle, and in turn, their messages are enhanced by the space, but they also make visible a cultural pride that may have previously been inaccessible due to marginalization.¹⁰ Furthermore, the space chosen and the message conveyed by the art must be purposeful and intrinsically linked to place. For example, in Northern Ireland, the public art created during The Troubles gave voice to both sides of the conflict, but were also meaningless when taken out of their contexts. It is imperative that these works reside in spaces where people can interact with them free of charge. For example, in Chicago the AMENDS project, created by artists Nick Cave¹¹ involves the surrounding community that experiences racism, asking participants to dig deep into themselves and take responsibility for their own roles in racism. Hand-written, deeply heart-felt reflections are posted on windows where people acknowledge and apologize for their complicity. It is intended as a call to action that involves participants and viewers alike to participate in addressing racism together.

Including the social scientist’s and the artist’s description of the project and a statement of intent is important as viewers will bring their own experience to viewing the art and that can leave open the possibility of misunderstanding or risk co-optation. Having community discussions, publicly accessed videos, or blogs with QR codes on or nearby the art that explain

the project can be used to inspire conversation around misunderstanding. Descriptions of the project and its meaning will also help future community members to understand the struggles and celebrations in their neighborhoods and inspire them to continue imagining a better, more perfect future along with their elected leaders.

CONCLUSION

The Founders of the United States sought to form a “more perfect Union,” by establishing justice, domestic tranquility, and promoting the general welfare of citizens. At the time, these privileges of an American citizenry were only extended to white, male, property owners. While progress has opened democratic participation to many more demographics since then, the US and countless other democracies remain far from perfect. Minorities voices and their needs are routinely ignored, and social issues or conflicts are not addressed from multiple angles. As the title of this piece suggests, it is possible to visualize and create a more perfect union when multiple voices are heard and complex issues are given the long-term consideration they need. Deeply listening to a community and helping them imagine a just future or visually communicating with them can open pathways for new relationships and alternative ways of understanding our world. This program will ask people to be vulnerable and to share their lives, but it is in this space that transparent communication can also move from the bottom up and democratic participation can flourish.

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10 LaWare, Encountering Visions of Aztlan.: 1998; Jarman, “Painting Landscapes,” 2005].

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