

Networking: An Artist's View of Community Organizing

The skills developed by activists for working within communities are applicable as well to sociopolitical art. Community organizing means supporting the development of collective consciousness of people within a certain geographic area, belonging to a specific class, or sharing a common circumstance, and inspiring concerted action on problems defined by that community. A community organizer will generally analyze a situation with respect to the significant systems operating within it, including economic, governance, and media systems. She or he will "hang out" in the area, talking to people who live there, determining the crucial problems from residents. Often the organizer will have an opinion about what changes are necessary, but the real power for determining issues resides with the people in the community. After identifying potential leaders an organizer helps initiate meetings where issues are defined, strategies evolved, and the community begins to change its collective circumstances with the back seat support of the organizer.

Some of the strategies employed by community organizers have been used successfully by artists, who have intuitively used networking, either in the process of preparing for a public art event or, as in Three Weeks in May, as part of the form of the work itself.

The advantages of applying ideas from networking to artwork are threefold. The first advantage arises from necessity, when an artist wants to do something unusual, difficult or in some fashion frightening to the culture. Christo's work is perhaps one of the better known examples of networking applied to enable accomplishment of a difficult project. In the Running Fence Project in San Francisco, he and his wife began soliciting support from the farmers who owned the land, the Coastal Commission who governed its use, and the community who would help to install it. The built upon each successful communication, until they had pieced together a complex network of community support.

Community organizing contains concepts and strategies helpful for developing an artist's audience. Its practitioners suggest actual methods to involve people from different locations, professions, classes and interests - and more important, they provide some tools

for analyzing the appropriateness of the work to its viewers. At the center of such concepts resides the belief that a community, or "audience," can recognize its own needs and act in its own best interests. Substituting the fantasy of a "universal audience" for concrete specifics, an artist can begin to determine for whom the work has been created. She can enhance participation with her work by listening to her audience and by trying to understand her work's relevance to the lives of the people who see it.

As I discovered accidentally in Three Weeks in May, introducing community organizing concepts into an evolving public work can change the very structure of the work. Within the city I delineated four major "audience-groupings," or constituencies, roughly parallel to political or professional affiliations: Elected public officials from the City and County governments; Activists from the feminist community; Women Artists; and Media Reporters. These groups could simultaneously create events, serve as audiences, and increase their political awareness of each other. The identification of these groups originated while putting the piece together rather than beforehand; each evolved through political necessities of the piece and became a distinct addition to the richness of the structure. As the role of each new audience/participant group was clarified in the planning process, my concept of activity appropriate to such performances expanded, until the entire formal structure came to originate with a focus on audience.

Elected Public Officials

After my initial contacts with the Broadway and ARCO Plazas, I decided that some form of official governmental endorsement might facilitate the placement of the maps in one of these shopping complexes. I began by asking friends who they knew in City government (see chart) Jim Woods, director of Studio Watts Workshop and co-sponsor of the piece, suggested an aide to Councilwoman Peg Stevenson. This woman gave me names of contacts in the offices of several Council people, an urban planner working for the city, and a valuable connection in the Los Angeles Police Department. Helene Fried put me in touch with her father, Commissioner of Public Works Sol Marcus, who proved to be a most valuable connection.

I also used the traditional information paths found in the phone book and newspapers, although I found in general it was most expedient to have a reference, a name recognizable to the new contact. In City government, once I had established a relationship with an aide in a Council office they facilitated all further communication. Various aides put me in touch with the Los Angeles City Commission on the Status of Women, the Central City Business Association, public relations people from the Broadway Plaza, the Broadway Department Store, the ARCO Plaza and the Los Angeles Police Department. Each contact was followed up by a phone call and, if it seemed necessary, a personal visit.

At first not completely clear where I was heading, I followed each lead, essentially sculpting a piece out of the interactions with these resource people. Each new piece of information added to my ability to create direction in the event. As I allowed the piece to be shaped by the social environment into which it would ultimately be placed, I found through the process that there is a delicate balance one needs to obtain when working in communities - how to hold on to your vision and yet retain the flexibility which makes it a truly community-responsive art piece. Often in the midst of strain or anxiety created by these projects, it is difficult to understand which "challenges" from the milieu surrounding the piece, are to be heeded and which to be ignored.

An example of the former took place when I eventually switched the intended location of the maps. Having pursued letters to presidents of various boards, interviews with promotional directors, general managers, affirmative action agents, and the Mayor's advisor of business affairs, after looking for endorsement and support in both the government and private business sectors, it finally became clear that my persistence with the Broadway and ARCO Plazas was not paying off. I could have changed the time frame and continued to look for sponsorship in the commercial centers, but decided, with great reluctance at the time, to change the space to the City Mall. This change opened a series of opportunities for involvement from City Officials, the Police Department, and the media, expanding the whole concept of the performance - an expansion which could never have happened in another location.

There were several instances when the premise of the piece was severely challenged by people who wanted to change or completely cancel it. It was important to be able to hear and clearly evaluate criticism from the community, to be able to sort the constructive feedback from the hidden agendas, even though both may sound the same initially. Early in my search for endorsement, I appeared before a meeting of the Los Angeles City Commission on the Status of Women. One of the senior Commissioners questioned the use of maps, expressing the fear that the reports would demonstrate a higher incidence in black neighborhoods thereby supporting a racist analysis of violence. She wanted me to schedule the events, but leave out the maps. Her criticism was based on an important political issue in the anti-violence movement. Black men are more frequently apprehended and convicted for rape charges due to biases in the law enforcement and judicial systems. (See An Open Letter to the Anti-Rape Movement in the Appendix.) I was distressed by her strong insistence that I give up the maps, and her inferences that she might try to stop me from using them. The maps had become central to the art of the piece. However, since she might be right I explored her objections first with the Police Department statistician and then with women from the rape hotlines. From the statistician I learned it was probable that the highest rate would occur in Hollywood, a mixed-racial community. Women from hotlines concurred that the maps were important as a way to bring the reality of the crime home to their audience.

Generally, the resolution of community-raised objections leads to an alteration of the piece which enriches the whole, although in some instances the objections appear to be based on either fear of the art or artists involved, a territorial dispute, or a personal power struggle. In this instance, the map was just too important an idea to me - it was the visual image which was motivating all my other political efforts. Also, I felt women had the right to know when and where rapes were occurring in Los Angeles. I decided to stay with the map image and gamble that it would not provoke racist associations. Since I was only seeking an endorsement from the City Commission on the Status of Women, I simply dropped my appeal to

the Commission and proceed with obtaining endorsements from the Mayor, the County Commission on the Status of Women, and several Councilpeople. In the end, shortly before the opening of the event, when publicity and several official endorsements had already been obtained, the City Commission came through with an endorsement.

After the maps were secure in the Los Angeles Mall location, endorsements from political agencies and officials continued to come in. Although they were no longer needed to facilitate the event actually taking place, these endorsements were publicized to sanction women who were active in organizations protesting violence against women. The mayor, several councilpeople, county supervisors, various city and county commissions all officially agreed for the first time in public that rape was a serious crime in Los Angeles.

Feminist-Activist Community

While looking for contacts within city government, I called several women who were active in women's organizational work. These contacts referred me to women's groups who would be interested in the issues. This was early in the project, at a time when I was having second thoughts about the single rape map.

In the beginning of the feminist art movement, images such as those in Ablutions exposed violence to an audience unaware of the existence of such acts against women, at least of the magnitude of them. Several years later public disbelief about rape had lessened, although the extensiveness of the phenomenon was still not fully comprehended. While it still seemed valid to construct an image to show this unremitting violence, by 1977 the media environment had been significantly skewed toward violence and one needed to be more cognizant of the effect of these images on their viewers. One map showing women's victimization was not enough; it seemed important to demonstrate ways to transcend the crime. A parallel map, exactly the same in color and size, was installed in the Mall to graphically illustrate where and how women could reach help. This was the beginning of a new and important aspect of the piece, to involve women and their organizations as participants.

In Los Angeles, rape hotlines, shelters and public infor-

mation groups such as Women Against Violence Against Women lead the radical forefront of violence intervention. Many other general service organizations such as the Los Angeles County Commission on the Status of Women and the National Organization of Women have special projects on this topic. In addition, many hospitals and counseling centers have programs geared to the victims of sexual assault.

In much the same fashion as I had contacted city officials for endorsement, I began to call every such organization in town. The calls extended my networking deep into the women's community, creating an informal communication system. The community response was generally immediate and enthusiastic. As I spoke with these women, I began to see a new possibility for the performance. Why not create a theatrical element, heretofore contained in the act of stamping the maps, which included the real-life activities of women organizers throughout the city? As my collaborator Melissa Hoffman and I called women's organizations to tell them about the piece, we explored with them ways they might participate. An interdenominational churchwomen's organization, for example, decided to have a "Moment of Concern" on Mother's Day, Sunday, May 7, coincident with the beginning of Three Weeks in May. The "Moment of Concern" took place as a silent meditation in several churches throughout the city. It was prefaced by an introduction on the piece and the issue of violence against women.

Some organizations wanted information, some had information to share. A small parent-teacher cooperative wanted information on child abuse, and we arranged for a lecture by a nurse specializing in the area. A large employee organization of a utility company hosted a film and discussion by a member of the rape hotline. The affirmative action office of ARCO Plaza sponsored free self defense demonstrations to employees on their lunch hours. Whenever possible, we arranged for the speaker to be paid by the hosting organization.

Often we worked with an organization to develop a program especially for their membership. The Women in County Government was an organization which was floundering for lack of response. We created a very full noontime program of a hotline worker, a self-defense instructor, and a woman from the Sheriff's Department to

boost interest in the group. The Rape Hotline Alliance was a coalition of hotlines which had done very little work in sponsoring collaborations between member groups. At our urging they sponsored a speakout on rape at the Woman's Building. Between 30 and 40 women attended the day long event, many of whom had never had a connection with feminist activity. Political differences between groups were gently overlooked as we attempted to create "tactful" interfaces between organizations and people who did not always agree on strategy or philosophy. Police lieutenants from the Rape Detail were paired with rape hotline activists, poets with elected officials, self defense teachers with artists. We hoped through the exchange with each other, participants would experience a sense of community in spite of their differences.

The neutrality, or at least the strangeness of the art context of Three Weeks in May allowed a safe space to explore relationships between these women. A "banquet" to honor representatives from several organizations was a model for this idea - a dinner in the midst of a performance, in which prior associations and expectations had to be suspended while we rediscovered the original commitment we shared in stopping violence against women.

We couldn't reach everyone, although we sponsored or advertised over 30 events during the three weeks. We might not even have reached the most important people or organizations. Our goal was to create a "checkerboard" of different kinds of activities throughout the city. The entire event structure of Three Weeks in May was as much a model for possible action as it was an action in itself. While I was aware of the potential impact on people who attended each event, I was much more intrigued by the event structure as a model for future projects. Thus the size of the audience that attended each event (varying from 5 to 200) was not as crucial to my estimation of its success as how the event fit conceptually into the model.

Artists in the Community

Artists do not involve themselves deeply with the effect their work has on its audience. To do so is almost contrary to the isolation deemed a necessary and inherent part of the role. Instead,

from school onward an artist learns to create independent of a mass consciousness, while catering instead to a selected (artworld) audience. A typical art audience is sensitive to the use of metaphor for expressing those states of consciousness which the artist herself does not fully understand. The audience attending avant garde performance is most willing to accommodate not only hostile metaphors but actual assault by the performer. The experience of performing for this audience generates fantasies about audiences in general, making the translation of many art works into a public sphere difficult at best.

Public art must use forms and information accessible to a broad range of people who have been brought up on mass media. The difficulties of adjusting anyone's sensitive and unusual perceptions into a mass visual language are complex; when artists attempt to do so we run the very real risk of recreating popular culture cliches, divesting our images of their real power.

Before 1977 I had struggled with two apparent poles in creative expression: how to remain loyal to one's imagery, experience, and perceptions (which often seemed rather extreme, given the propensities of performance artists) versus how to translate at least part of one's experience into a mass language. In my life the dichotomy was played out between my image-making process and my organizing activity. In One Woman Shows, I had begun to resolve this dilemma by producing work which accommodated both, simultaneously, within the same time and space. In Three Weeks in May this solution of juxtaposition became more viable by simply inviting viewers to separate events with a selective attention to their needs and sensibilities. I could speak coherently to a mass audience with certain images (the rape maps) and with certain information (lectures, news articles, etc), and the structure of events also provided the space for me to create an intensely personal statement aimed at other artists (She Who Would Fly.) An audience of feminist women and artists might well understand what a flying lamb carcass and four red-stained women Valkyries had to do with rape: I was fairly certain that a red-stamped rape map of Los Angeles would carry more meaning for a mass audience.

As we lined up events for the three weeks we included several women artists who wanted to express themselves on the subject of violence. Each woman chose her own audience according to what she wanted to say, while contributing to the larger whole of the event. Works ranged from street performances in the City Mall, to rituals for a selected women's community audience, to pieces done in complete privacy without any audience. The resultant performances were woven together with other non-art events - self defense, lectures, media appearances - to form a complex tapestry, the "performance structure" of Three Weeks in May.

(See Appendix for complete description of scheduled activities.)