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An Aesthetics of Collaboration

By Olivia Gude

Within the field of public artworks, there are some of us who identify ourselves as “community artists.” The self-chosen emphasis on “community-based,” rather than merely “public” work, reflects a series of choices about how the artist conceives of public space, of the nature of the artist, and the locus of creativity and authenticity of works of art.

In 1986 my partner, Jon Pounds, and I were approached about the possibility of doing a mural for the Mifflin Street Community Cooperative, in Madison, Wisconsin. My first reaction was to wonder aloud if the Co-op had any idea of how expensive and time-consuming a cooperative mural could be in 1988. The “Hey, I’ve-got-an-idea—let’s-get-a-lot-of-teens-together-and-paint-a-mural-on-Saturday” spirit has made it difficult to explain the complexity, commitment, and costs that are required of artists and community in creating more sophisticated community murals. Yet Norm Stockwell, a Co-op staffer, assured us of the Co-op’s interest and level of support, and so we began to work on learning enough about the Mifflin community to plan a mural project with them.

We were fascinated by the oddly mixed quixotic and pragmatic history of the Mifflin Cooperative. Mike Bodden, a local historian, writes in his column in the *Mifflin Co-op Times* of the unusual Mifflin combination of “flamboyance as well as its skilled, practical grass-roots organizing, its visionary politics, vulnerable humanness, isolated idealism, and blatant hucksterism.”¹ The Co-op’s official motto, “Food for the Revolution,” reflects its genesis in the political commitment of its founders to create institutions for economic self-determination within the community. By all accounts, the Co-op scene was a heady mix of idealism, ideology, politics, drugs, and street people. In those early days, cigarettes and soda pop were among the commodities offered in the store; part of the evolution of the store has been to incorporate in what it carries (and doesn’t carry) a growing awareness of alternative health-care and diet issues.

From its genesis in the sixties, the Co-op’s history has been intertwined with local and national political struggles. The Mifflin neighborhood, with the Co-op as its unofficial headquarters, formed the basis for loose networks of countercultural antiwar activists. At times, the neighborhood and the Co-op became the target of police seeking to establish control or to retaliate for demonstrations elsewhere in the city.

As we planned the mural, we were acutely aware of the problem and potential created by an already existing mural on the Co-op wall. This mural was the last of a series of previous graphic uses for the highly visible wall at the corner of Mifflin and Bassett.

Photos from the early seventies show a commercial billboard advertising 7-Up with a Peter Max-style design. In 1973, the billboard was painted over with an image of a dancing bomb and emblazoned with the slogan, “Solidarity Forever. Free Karl Armstrong.” Armstrong, a former graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, had just been extradited from Canada and was being tried for the 1970 bombing of the University’s Army Mathematics Research Center. Armstrong was eventually convicted and served time in prison for the bombing.

In 1974 the billboard was taken down and a graphic-style one-story mural sign was painted to publicize “Crazy Horse Radio Station,” a short-lived attempt to respond to the events at Wounded Knee by creating a network of broadcasters for programming by members of the American Indian Movement.

These early public art efforts reflect basic attitudes of artists and people in relationship to community public arts. One is a radical redefinition of neutral public space—a recognition by a community or neighborhood of a sense of communal ownership of space, which often disregards private ownership, contractual agreements, or bureaucratic restrictions. Another recurrent theme is the primacy of content, and yet another is the immediacy of the claim for community attention and action.

The next phase of murals at Mifflin began during the spring of 1976. Hope Martin, a member of the collective that managed and staffed the Co-op, recalls being “infused with an idea” for a mural.² After drawing up a design, she found herself confronting the myriad problems of how to paint it. Having received advice from Chicago muralists through the Public Art Workshop, Martin began the mural. It was painted with an odd mix of latex and oil paint and Rhoplex. People from the Co-op area helped with the painting on a drop-in basis (*Fig. 1*).

The central image of the mural was designed within a large ovoid form in which flatly painted whimsical figures depict the work of food production from farming to everyday Co-op tasks, such as stocking shelves and slicing and wrapping blocks of cheese. Also included was a red truck representing food distribution in general and a legendary Co-op vehicle in particular. Surrounding the oval was a design of radiating fields and the slogan, “Control of Our Food Is Control of the Life in Us.”

Martin describes her desire to paint this mural as being deeply rooted in a sense of communal feeling. She notes, however, that she didn’t feel the need to consult with others about what the theme of the mural should be. She felt deeply that her mission was to depict the essential character of the Co-op with its politics rooted in an understanding of the grassroots change that comes about from making intentional choices about everyday matters like our food supply.

The content of Martin’s mural (the dignity of everyday life) and her style of working exemplify a strong trend in the seventies’ mural movement for the collectivity of the works to be manifested not so much in the openness of the original process, but through the desire of an integral member of a community to act as an audience spokesperson, imaging forth the felt, essential qualities of a time and place.

By 1986 Martin’s mural was faded and was rapidly beginning to flake off the wall. Within the Co-op community,

the decision had been made that replacement, not restoration, would be the best course for the Co-op, because it wanted to reflect a fresh, evolving sense of its cultural and political mission. As artists, Jon and I wanted to extend the possibilities and potential of contemporary murals, without being disrespectful to the work that would be replaced.

The duration and preservation of large-scale public murals is a multifaceted issue. The impermanence of painted surfaces in harsh northern winters, and the customary lack of funds for maintenance or touch up, limit the lifespan of outdoor murals. The temporary quality (five to twenty-five years) of community murals can be seen as a political and technical problem that is potentially solvable.

Another possibility, however, is to consider the duration of work that is made in response to evolving community needs an intrinsic part of the conceptual understanding of the nature and meaning of the work. Even as I cringe at the thought of some beautiful works being destroyed, I recognize the validity of a viewpoint that works whose *raison d'être* is connected to a particular space and time and cultural-political conditions may be necessarily transitory in nature.

The search for the thematic concerns of the current Mifflin group began appropriately enough with a series of potluck suppers with musical, conversational, and image-sharing interludes. We used brainstorming to encourage people to share even fleeting or half-formed images and ideas. In this group, we were impressed early on with the obvious success of the long-standing goal of the Co-op to educate people about the political-social implications of food. We found ourselves learning a great deal about the subject and being impressed with the Co-op community's clear analysis of the environmental, ethical, social, cultural, and economic issues of food.

Jon Pounds and I are particularly interested in extending the legacy of collaboration, which we inherit as artists of the community-mural movement. A traditional method of community collaboration is for the artist to interview the community members about what they want the mural to express, and then the artist or artist team goes off to work artistic magic and come up with fresh ways of imaging the community's themes. The assumption seems to be that community members, while able to articulate the issues of their lives, are unable to exercise creative artistic powers to image these conditions dra-



Fig. 1 Hope Martin and members of the Mifflin Street Community Cooperative, *Control of Our Food Is Control of the Life in Us*, 1976, mural. Madison, WI.

matically. This division between artists and “regular people” is a fundamental legacy of the modern European art tradition.

We began with group discussion, but were committed to developing styles of working that encouraged community members to participate more fully in the artistic design of the project. Over a period of three months, we scheduled Artist Design Meetings. The fifteen people who participated in the design stage were self-selected. They brought to this phase of the project a wide range of artistic training and knowledge.

Design sessions always began with quick, large, communally designed paper murals. These warm people up to one another and to making marks and images on paper. We alternate series of exercises that generate the image and elicit abstract design ideas, which are the raw material from which the mural design will be formulated. Techniques for designing and structuring the four-hour sessions are drawn from creativity enhancement, meditation, and human relations group processes.

We work by consensus; an idea or image is not accepted unless everyone in the group agrees. When differences occur, the aim is to avoid creating fixed, opposing positions and to look for ways to harmonize and reconcile oppositions. It is our belief that this way of working creates high-quality decisions. One often hears that “art by committee” will result in bland, impoverished work. This

may be true of art by committee, but it is certainly not true of “art by consensus,” which in our experience promotes work that is rich and varied and accessible at many levels, and draws on and creates a contemporary iconographic tradition.

The dominant image of the Mifflin Community Cooperative Mural is a multifaced Nature God/dess spreading a cloth for a feast of life (*Fig. 2*). The feast is, however, a potluck. People come to the feast, not only as guests, but as fellow providers. The tablecloth becomes the ground of life, eventually blending into a verdant, rolling Wisconsin landscape. The cloth, banners, hills, clouds, spirits of ancestors at the feast, and other dominant elements of the composition are arranged to create swirls of line, to suggest the recurring natural cycles of life and sustenance. The gesture of spreading the cloth also reveals underneath the techno-skeletons, a black-and-white image of economic oppression, environmental degradation, and unhealthy food.

Sometimes the democracy of group decision making can initially work against the sensibilities of the professional artists. Early in the design process, the Co-op members clearly stated that they wanted images of bulk foods in the mural. Since bulk foods are among the most prosaic and uninteresting pictorial elements we could imagine, Jon and I repeatedly “forgot” to develop any sketches for the concept and were grateful that the other participants also

hadn't brought in any images along these lines.

On the last day of the group-design process, people were huddled together over the large-scale drawing, pasting together the bits and pieces of developed imagery. Someone noticed the lack of bulk foods, and the artists were good-naturedly, but firmly, wrestled into providing an appropriate image. The finished mural contains a sepia-toned interior scene of the Co-op, in which members weigh out their own produce and scoop grain from a barrel in front of shelves of spice and herb jars. After living in Madison for six weeks during the painting of the mural and shopping regularly at the Co-op, we became so accustomed to the lack of excess packaging in buying from bulk bins that we were appalled by the plethora of paper and plastic that is generated by a trip to a conventional supermarket.

Community art seems to call for a new aesthetic, an aesthetics of collaboration. Of course, this type of work has ample worldwide historical precedent. What is, perhaps, unprecedented is the twentieth-century community artists' prior awareness and conscious rejection of an aesthetics based solely on the myth of the individual genius. Community public art thus seems to be a separate genre from more traditionally conceived contemporary public art. It would be well for critics and historians to be attentive to its special characteristics by considering it through criteria generated from within its own imperatives. Like conceptual and performance art, community art cannot be understood fully if it is discussed only within past models of creation.

One of the most prominent characteristics of an aesthetics of collaboration is the weaving of diverse images into a unified whole. The goal is not the subordination of the individual, but the harmonizing of alternative visions. The source of authenticity of collaborative work does not come about by paring down to a single essential image; it is created through the accrual of important detail, through the accumulation of varied points of view. Thus, communally designed work extends the promise of the modernist convention of multiple points of view, from representing the fracturing of individual consciousness to the reuniting and reweaving of social, collective consciousness.

As an artist of community collaboration, part of one's artistic process is to become cognizant of and to support the diverse ways in which meaningful collaboration can occur. At Mifflin, the collaboration extended into the past by

including images and themes from previous murals. This was done not only as a tribute to the earlier work but as a vital part of the meaning of the mural by suggesting that the future is created through remembrance and reconsideration of the past.

In all, seventy-eight people worked on designing, organizing, and painting the Mifflin Cooperative Community Mural. The cartoon was projected and drawn onto the wall during one frenzied, incredibly hot night by a dozen or so volunteers. Weekends were particularly busy times at the mural site. The artists often set aside their own painting in order to keep volunteers supplied with paint and advice. There is a wonderful feeling of celebration that comes from this collective work on a beautiful day.

Volunteer painters worked at many levels of difficulty. We are often asked, "But what if people choose to do something they can't do?" Our experience is that, for the most part, people have a very good grasp of their own capabilities and, when asked, give a fairly accurate account of what they can handle. Painting tasks range from the underpainting of large, flat areas to painstaking detail work. Some people who are not trained painters contribute wonderfully to the brushy, painterly quality of the work by following the artist's instructions about direction and style of strokes using pre-mixed colors. Every project has volunteers who come frequently and enter into an apprenticeship-type relationship with the artists, gradually increasing their skills and tackling increasingly difficult passages.

Among my favorites are the "detail

people," who become attached to one small section of the mural and spend whole afternoons or days developing minute areas. Nestled in a valley of the tablecloth hills, one finds a tiny Wisconsin farm. Look closely and you'll see not only a farmhouse and barn, but also, in this tiny square-foot area, flower beds, plants in the windows, curtains, and paths.

Painting alone, a muralist would probably have suggested the barn and house with a few broad strokes. From a distance the effect would have been the same. As part of a collaborative effort, this area became a little surprise—a fascinating fragment and a wonderful testament to the harmony and intensity that can be created through individual contributions to a shared vision.

Notes

1 In "The People's Grocery: A History of the Mifflin St. Community Coop" (a compilation of articles reprinted from the *Mifflin Co-op Times*, a newsletter), pt. 1, p. 1, n.d.

2 Interview with Hope Martin, September 1988.

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Fig. 2 Olivia Gude and Jon Pounds with members of the Mifflin Street Community Cooperative, *The Mifflin Cooperative Mural*, 1987. Madison, WI.