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"Lately, she's been seeing
things differently"

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BIG VISIONS: Navigating Community and Mural Making

Kimberly Ellen Hall

Abstract

From billboards to graffiti, cave paintings to wallpaper, people draw big to tell meaningful stories. When you have big art on the wall, you look at it every day, and over time you begin to look at it without 'seeing' it at all. The images seep into our brains this way. Over time those images start to form stories and become a part of our lives and who we are. Storytelling helps humans understand who they are and what they believe. Artists who make images hold power as authors of these image-based stories.

When community groups commission mural art, how do they manage the power of authorship in the artists they hire? How do communities get a say in what they have to look at? How do artists have a vision if they have to answer everybody else? This paper will be a survey of experiences, techniques, processes, and examples gleaned from projects across the US and UK, examining similarities and differences and considering not only good working practice, but how to navigate these complex ideas with an open mind to the possibilities of future visions of how public art by an individual artist and community experience might intersect. Lastly, a variety of the projects will be illuminated by photographs of the projects with extended captions in order to explore murals that reflect community and artistic intent in a variety of ways.

I'm not really a muralist, and I'm definitely not a graffiti artist, but my work has spanned these areas through collaboration with community organizations. Through this combination I'm curious to look at the connections and differences between street art and mural art through the lens of community organizations that deliver public paintings with a community focus. I'll be exploring this through the Bristol and Philadelphia street art and mural art scenes, looking at festivals like *Upfest* and *See No Evil* in Bristol and several projects led by The City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, shortened Mural Arts. I'll examine arts projects that utilize a range of techniques to make art in public spaces in Baltimore and Philadelphia, New York; all places where my own practice has been connected.

These investigations aim to illuminate the ways in which communities and artists navigate meaning-making in public spaces in order to create pieces of public art that are driven by multiple stakeholders. I'll discuss the benefits and difficulties of bal-ancing the roles between an artist's vision and a community's sense of place. In this paper mural art refers to large scale paintings created by an artist for the side of a building or outdoor public space created by an individual artist, but permitted by the building owner or community, whereas street art refers to similarly sized public paintings which are usually not permitted. Graffiti is often smaller text-based paint-ings in public spaces that are not permitted. Many artists who create mural art have also participated in street art or graffiti scenes, but not all. Public art in this paper refers to any painting or image making that is public, whether street art, graffiti, or mural art.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia is the noted starting place for modern graffiti writing in 1967 (Mitman 8) and the development of public art in the city can be directly traced to these roots. The Mural Arts program of Philadelphia began as part of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN) but embraced artists and writers who wanted to become part of the permitted system of public art as an alternative to illegal graffiti tags. Since 1984 Mural Arts has been responsible for over 3800 murals in all neighborhoods of the city. The program straddles the acceptance of city and business leaders and the artists' intentions by focusing on the community that lives with the murals it supports. Instead of letting artists make any work they like, but also avoiding the control of the city at large, Mural Arts explains their point of view saying, "[i]n the United States of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most architectural murals were government commissioned and made by officially sanctioned artists. Today's murals, however, generally derive their authority from another source – the public will" (Golden et al. 20).

This focus on the public will to drive the meaning and selection of mural arts projects allows the other two viewpoints (both artists with a vision and business and city leaders with money) to have space in the process without taking over. Mural Arts has leveraged community participation to promote art in many forms to both the corporate and government agencies that have the money to fund ambitious projects and to encourage artists out of their studios and independent practices into dialogue with communities. "And we wanted to evangelize about how art, created with neighbors' eyes and input, could nourish a sense of what is possible" (Golden and Updike 30).

This "sense of what is possible" is the product of the collaborative approach of the Mural Arts team that puts the community at the heart of the process. Many mural art projects can be driven by the money of the business community or even civic leaders. They hold access to funds that are not often easy for grassroots and community organizations to lay hands on. Street art projects are often realized by the drive and intention of an artist with a vision. They have visual storytelling skills that make meaning and connect to an audience. Community can be an unwieldy group that has trouble coming to consensus or finding leadership around a project. What the community does have is history and place. The Mural Arts process leverages this to the other stakeholders as a way to bring all the threads together in a project. It allows for unique, inclusive projects to develop and execute with the strength of all the participants.

In more recent years the team at Mural Arts Philadelphia has created two initiatives to reach beyond their city's boundaries: The Mural Arts Institute and the Public Art Civic Engagement (PACE) capacity building initiative. Both of these projects aim to share what Mural Arts has developed over the years with other cities and communities. The PACE initiative has worked with The Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), Louisville Visual Art (LVA), and the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC) in Chicago on a 30-month program to create two socially engaged works of public art, offering them a range of tools and knowledge in support. Participants learn through workshops with the cohort and are part of an incubator program with grant opportunities and an annual public symposium. They also work directly with artist catalysts who will lead programs and their communities together. The goal is "to strengthen a national network of socially engaged public art practitioners, and produce and disseminate research, case studies and useful advice to a national audience" ("Mural Arts Institute – Mural Arts Philadelphia").

As the success of the Mural Arts Philadelphia process drives towards sharing their system of collaborative public mural art, we can easily lose sight of the central issue in making public art. The program's origins are as an anti-graffiti network. The transition from graffiti and street art to mural art holds many competing interests and influences. The boundary between permitted and prohibited image making in public is where community work gets really interesting. In the graffiti documentary *Bomb It*, professor of urban studies from Pitzer College Susan Phillips says, "People think they live in a kind of neutral public space. What they don't realize is that what is neutral to them may actually be excluding a lot of people" ("*Bomb It* Trailer" 0:36). The control of space is a central issue in the making of public art, as control itself is a pivotal force in all collaborative work.

"Graffiti cannot be tolerated because it [is] the expressions [sic] of one individual forced upon others, where murals are gifts given to the citizens of the city once some sanctioning body has approved of their aesthetic and content" (Mitman 54). This is the key conflict Mural Arts Philadelphia seeks to address in its process: control. The question of who has control is key in a large project like a public painting. Elected officials or business leaders who often control the purse strings have the power to determine what kind of artwork goes where (or whether it is funded at all). Artists have some amount of control of what images go where because they are the hand of the maker. Community members often feel the control of these two groups because community can struggle with consensus, membership, and finance. This tension is in play throughout the public art process and is key to understanding the ways that community members, artists, and leaders work together.

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Bristol

The street art scene, and subsequent commodification of street art to promote tourism in Bristol serves as another view from which to see the connections between artist, leadership, and viewer or community. How can mural arts utilize the value of graffiti and cross boundaries between what is permitted v. what is not?

> While the city [of Philadelphia]'s long war against graffiti is about keeping its walls clean. It is also about creating a state where only those expressions that are in line with the city's officials and their associated corporate backer's can be publicly expressed. It is about maintaining a specific (and bland) aesthetic construction of the city and having it remain unmarred by offending images and names to keep it appearing friendly to tourists and investors (Mitman 55).

The Bristol scene began similarly to Philadelphia where the expression and images created by disenfranchised youth was illegal and actively clamped down on, but the community development of spaces where graffiti writing was transitioned to socially engaged art practice happened in festivals and community events rather than the city-supported agencies and programs that developed in Philadelphia. Groups that were formed, like *The Peoples Republic of Stokes Croft*, weren't agencies of local government but grassroots organizations that began in opposition to it. Mural making became a community event, not in the conception of the murals themselves, but in the action of producing them in front of an audience and for a community.

The exhibition *Vanguard: Bristol Street Art: The evolution of a global movement* at the M Shed in Bristol in 2021 explores this evolution in much detail. Bristol photographer Beezer says of its beginnings: "In the 1980s street art was a form of social commentary. Some of it still is. The difference is that now many galleries and some cities are supporting street art but back then it was all illegal and there wasn't so much of it" (R. Jones 43). The exhibition chronicles the changes in this movement to the commercial boom of street art in the early 2000s as a capitalist possibility. "A home-made commercial infrastructure exploded [in Bristol]" (R. Jones 97). Galleries, publishers, print houses and paint festivals became important and notable.

Two important street art festivals developed to connect the work of street artists to the community and the sanctioned mural-making process that connects artists with broader society and neighbors. *See No Evil* in 2011 and 2012 was a short-lived but internationally known paint festival on Nelson St in the city center of Bristol begun

by Bristol City Council Director of Placemaking Mike Bennett who teamed up with local artists, galleries, and music producers to put on a fest that aimed to regenerate an area in the city center as well as be flagged as the biggest street art event in Europe at the time (R. Jones 131). *See No Evil*'s location in the center of the city and the support of the City Council made this an event that was meant to highlight all the great art in the city of Bristol and bring viewers to the art itself.

Upfest is another street art festival that is still running from its beginnings with 20 artists in 2008, to its current incarnation in 2022 as a free festival over two weeks with 450 international and local artists painting in the context of the history of Bristol street art (R. Jones 115). *Upfest* is very different in intention from the *See No Evil* festival. It is centered in the residential neighborhood of Bedminster in Bristol, and began as a handful of artists wanting to paint together as a community themselves rather than a formalized city-wide program.

Both of these events bring a kind of community collaboration that anchors art to place through history (Bristol as a center for street art and artist individualism) and invites the community into the world of art rather than the approach of the Mural Arts program in Philadelphia which invites the artist into the place where the mural will live.

Projects: Baltimore

Artists stretch ideas around community and collaboration within their own groups and working partners, instead of simply an inside/outside point of view. It's often not as simple as just being in the community or out of it, but that lots of nuance can often be found connecting an artist to the community and partners they work with. A collaborative group of artists working together allows for deep connection to clients, communities, and partners because of the doubling of the collaborative work.

House of Ruth, an intimate partner violence shelter in Baltimore, Maryland reached out to the Maryland Institute College of Art, where I was on the illustration faculty, for a mural to adorn its new community center in the North Avenue area of town. The community center was meant to be outward facing unlike the other buildings occupied by House of Ruth (understandably shelters must be hidden and unfindable). The team wanted the mural to be a place of understanding that welcomed all members of the community and offered safety and support to anyone touched by intimate partner violence.

The mural was created by a team of 16 students I led in the MFA Illustration Practice program to develop a single mural collaboratively. We developed several areas of practice to create dialogue, share work, and build understanding that began with site visits and volunteering at House of Ruth, local street art and mural research, and readings around design thinking and trauma-informed practice. Furthermore, students had to develop collaborative methods of creating art together: balancing individual work with team work, creating collaborative presentations for the House of Ruth team, and managing feedback and revisions amongst the group. Lastly everyone had to figure out how to contribute to the practical work of drawing, design, and installation.

In this system, students examined their artmaking process from two perspectives; first, as a group of artists that must find ways to work together, and second, as a group that must work with collaborative partners to fulfil a community need. Student-artists worked with executives, staff, and clients in addition to each other and the school. One student reports,

> It was a challenge to work as such a large group to accomplish the project. In a group of 16 it's easy for some voices to be heard more than others and for some to fall to the back. After rounds and rounds of drafts I think the image we created far exceeded my expectations and will hopefully meet the client's needs and be a positive contribution to the community (Luscher 55).

This form of collaborative public art making, where the artist group not only work with each other but also fan out to engage with partners outside of the artist group, allows for a variety of responses to what the community or client brings to the project and it creates space for artists to work deeply with each other and foster not only understanding of a client or community outside of their own group, but also reckons with differences among internal partners to create deeply nuanced work. As Luscher notes above, it is hard work and sometimes leaves the artist feeling unsure, but can also lead to work that exceeds expectation and takes the artist to new places.

Projects: Philadelphia, New York

Eleanor Childs, Project Director, Brandywine Workshop/CityKids project talks about the connection between artist and community in the video about the mural by Keith Haring. She says,

> Brandywine has a history of working in the community, bringing together professional artists and community members who are interested in the development of their neighborhoods. The basic purpose is to get away from the notion that the artist is alienated from society or separate and apart from the community but in fact is an integral part of the community ("Keith Haring – We the Youth." 4:20).

Neighbors also feed in to the video news clip about how the mural is controversial but it also uplifts the community and gets people talking to each other about it. Neighbor Jean McNair says, "[i]nteresting conversation for the passersby" ("Keith Haring – We the Youth" 4:05).

The project they are referring to is the We the Youth project with lead artist Keith Haring and the City Kids organization in New York. Haring painted outlines in his iconic style and the kids from both cities filled in all the motifs with their own paintings and colors. Haring talks about this kind of collaboration as "pretty half-and-half." It builds on Childs' notion of what happens when the artist is brought out into the community and uses participation to grow and develop the artist's own work without impinging on style or message in the process ("Keith Haring – We the Youth").

Haring's 1987 collaborative mural with New York City and Philadelphia teens was supported by the Brandywine Workshop whose mission was to build collaborative practice among diverse partners and participants. "While many individual artists and newly formed art groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s chose to align their practice with a design to identify with a racial agenda, others such as Brandywine Workshop, chose collaboration and cultural diversity, using art to promote ethnic pride and social integration" ("Operating Outside the Lines" 0:28). The mural was created by Haring painting the overall image in linework and then letting the kids have at it with any fills that they chose for the characters. This participatory practice kept the overall vision of the lead artist, but allowed for participants to make a real impact on the visual outcome, especially in its detail.

This kind of straightforward, even simple, collaboration brings the artist and the community in direct contact with minimal interference from community groups and feedback processes. Yet it still leaves room for the development of a piece of art that is outside full control of any one partner in the process.

To conclude, the variety of methods available to artists and community groups in the creation of art for public spaces is rich with possibility. Direct communication, collaborative making, audience participation, and community-led practices are contemporary methods to connect artists, community members and officials in the process of big images that live in the public realm. These connections don't shut down any individual or corporate practice, but rather offer openings for the development of new ways of negotiating shared public and private spaces in a more socially engaged and aware way. These collaborative practices are alive with possibility for future engagement across many disciplines, and could be picked up by artists and communities to bend and shape in new ways that reflect their needs, desires, and future goals.

Photos with extended captions

Fig. 1: "Nana Blankets – Mural Arts Philadelphia." *Mural Arts Philadelphia*, 14 Dec. 2018, www.muralarts.org/artworks/nana-blankets. Accessed 20 Jan. 2023. Photo credit: Steve Weinik.

Ribbon cutting for the opening of the *Nana Blankets* mural in North Philly. This was a project of Mural Arts Philadelphia that collected its source material from community members directly. Neighborhood residents submitted images of handmade blankets and afghans that were cherished and made by family members. The textiles were painted on the Diamond St bridge in all their detail to remind passersby of their own blankets made by grandmothers, aunties, and mothers to give us a feeling of warmth, welcome, and love.

Fig. 2: "Journey2home." *Journey2home*, 10 Mar. 2013, journey2home.org. Accessed 20 Jan. 2023. Photo credit: Steve Weinik.

Journey2Home is a deeply collaborative project from Mural Arts in 2013 that is not only socially engaged with community but includes a wide variety of partners across many disciplines. This photo shows two project participants involved in community outreach in the middle of the two-year project. It included lead artists Ernel Martinez and Shira Walinsky; artists Nema Etebar, Michael O'Bryan and Jared Wood; Dr. Carolyn Cannuscio and her team at the University of Pennsylvania; and local public media station WHYY. People's Emergency Center, The Attic and Covenant House, organizations with considerable experience in working with homeless youth, served as advisers. "The project provides an interdisciplinary framework, based in artistic co-production, to illuminate the stories of young people impacted by housing insecurity and to generate dialogue among diverse stakeholders" ("Journey2home"). During the course of the project, an empty row home in the Mantua neighborhood was transformed by 50 teenagers into a multi-arts installation with several outcomes beyond the development of a visual piece of art. The actions and activities developed by all the participants transformed the block but also culminated in a journal article and white paper that aimed to generate formal policy change in the city.

Fig. 3: "Our Grassroots – Mural Arts Philadelphia." *Mural Arts Philadelphia*, 6 Oct. 2021, www.muralarts.org/artworks/our-grassroots. Accessed 20 Jan. 2023. Photo credit: Steve Weinik

For this Mural Arts project, *Our Grassroots* at 4500 Wayne Avenue in Philadelphia, artist Rebecca Schultz selected local fauna as the starting point of her design and asked local residents to develop artwork from these through collage, line drawing, stamping and scratch prints. She then brought the images together in a unified

design. This engaged and even playful back and forth between residents and artists not only allows the community members to participate, but offers an opportunity for visual development to the artist by working with images and motifs that they cannot control in their usual way.

Fig. 4: "UPFEST 2018 | Upfest." *Upfest*, www.upfest.co.uk/photo-gallery/2018. Accessed 6 Sept. 2023. Photo credit: Kineta Hill

Bristol *Upfest* is an ongoing street art festival in Bristol that brings big crowds to the city streets to watch artists paint as well as listen to music and party together. This photo shows the crowds around the artist Soker working in Bedminster at the 2018 event. Bristol is well-known for its rebellious vibe and the work and implications of the festival often reflect the old skool ethos of graffiti writers: "They think of graffiti as providing a counter-narrative, and serving as a counter-hegemonic form of self-expression that says both, 'I exist' and 'You do not want our graffiti here? Well, we do not want your wall, or building, or advertisement here and no one asked for our opinion when they were being put up'" (Mitman 183). *Upfest* began as a group of local artists and has ballooned over the years into a giant festival that goes far beyond its local roots, attracting artists and tourists from around the world.
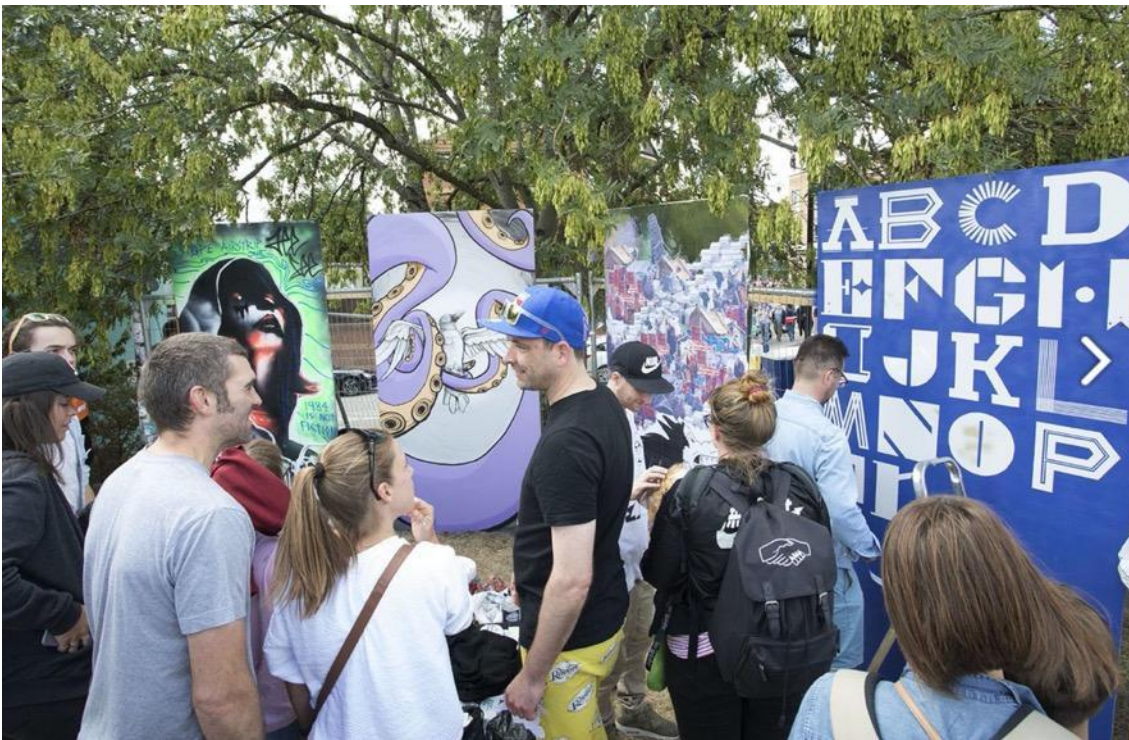

Fig. 5: "UPFEST 2018 | Upfest." *Upfest*, www.upfest.co.uk/photo-gallery/2018. Accessed 6 Sept. 2023. Photo credit: Paul Box

Further, the festivals and sanctioned artmaking connect with the satisfaction of the graffiti-writing culture and history: "… writers write to feel empowered, as an act of catharsis and self-prescribed art therapy, and as an effort to shake off urban ennui and anomie" (Mitman 192). Here, artists engage with the public in an exchange on equal footing, exploring and investigating their common ground, or lack thereof, in a positive and meaningful way.

Fig. 6: Photo courtesy the author.

The collaborative mural by Maryland Institute College of Art students in the MFA Illustration Practice program created innovative collaboration between the makers to make room for depth of connection with the client, House of Ruth, Maryland, in 2018. This image shows the end of the group installation where students got the chance to chat with passersby and members of the community about the work they were doing. Student practitioners developed confidence and connection by working together to develop nuanced viewpoints of how the client and community would understand their work.

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