Participate!

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PARTICIPATE!
Experiences With Art + Information

Mikey Kettinger

Art can involve more than aesthetics.
Art can enable actions.
Art can connect people and build community.
Art can involve literal action and participation.
Art can be more than an object that is bought and sold.
Art can involve community engagement beyond simply looking and eating cheese and crackers.
Art can emphasize the talent of its viewers instead of the talent of its author.
Art can be down-to-earth instead of pretentious.
Can art projects that integrate scientific data create interest in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math? Effective disseminations of scientific information have the potential to inform the public of critical information that impacts all of society, but scientists cite a range of reasons for scientific information to be an apparent lack of importance to the public. (Kennedy, Funk) Scientific papers are published at a high rate, but few people outside of the academic world read them. (Dirnagl) Participatory artworks that communicate scientific information may be an effective addition to scientific papers. At the least, artworks that involve scientific information have the ability to communicate scientific information to people who do not read scientific papers, or those who do not understand them. Data visualization specialist Kaye Lafond believes “Data visualizations can force the viewer to look at the data in a new way.”

PARTICIPATE! Overview

PARTICIPATE! is an exhibition of seven participatory art projects, all of which involve Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (S.T.E.M) studies and/or S.T.E.M methodology. Each piece invites viewers to become participants by interacting with the work in some way. ‘Make a Postcard...’ invites viewers to participate by making a postcard; ‘Idle Sounds’ invites viewers to simulate the effects of air pollution on breathing with musical equipment; ‘Closet Patriotism’ invites viewers to participate by handling consumer goods and looking at them to see where they were manufactured.
PARTICIPATE! asks questions through a map/guide that is offered to each person in attendance at the show. The questions on this map correspond with each project in the show. For example, #5 asks “Can you guess which 3 religious groups are viewed the least ‘warmly’ by Americans?” The answer, according to a PEW Survey, is posted on the wall of the exhibition space. Also in that space, performers are preparing and offering hors d’oeuvres as gifts to those in attendance, creating an immersive experience with viewing and interacting socially around the theme of a scientific study about religion. This immersive experience is an example of how PARTICIPATE! combines elements of traditional art exhibition techniques with an experience beyond simply viewing.

Some of the answers to the questions on the PARTICIPATE! map are provided in the projects, while other questions are more abstract and open-ended. #7 asks, “What are TV commercials telling you to do?” The answers vary from person to person in this project, where the answer to “How much do people in Cache County think global warming will harm future generations of people?” is provided as a quantitative statistic with the piece.

PARTICIPATE! Site

The following text was presented at the exhibition’s entrance:
Perhaps the best thing my projects do is to “build community”, as Dr. Peter Howe has suggested. To foster this potential, I have explored various options for non-gallery exhibitions: public sites, community spaces, small businesses that tend to serve as gathering spaces, etc. I have come to the conclusion that the best site for an exhibition that aims to provide an experience of community building is my own home. The context of one’s home communicates a more
welcoming environment than gallery spaces, due to the common perceptions of galleries as intimidating. (Campbell)

No site is more genuinely intimate than my own home, and the concept of converting my own living space into an art exhibition space may end up being the most powerful action of the entire show. As Tuan states, “lasting affection for home is at least partly a result of such intimate and nurturing experiences.” Temporarily giving up my own home demonstrates my commitment to the concept of community building and organizing through creative experiences.

Artworks for the show incorporate the existing structures of my home into site-specific installations that are strengthened by the fact they are being exhibited within (and around) my home. This strengthens the works due to their relation to the home as integral parts of each piece, instead of being plopped into my home out of convenience.

Many artists have commented on domesticity (Martha Rosler, Mierle Laderman, Do Ho Suh, etc., who create domestic spaces within galleries), and many others have utilized their own domestic spaces to exhibit work (usually in order to compensate for the lack of invitations to established galleries, rather than because they want to use their own domestic spaces as integral parts of their projects. The New York Times recently reported:

   Since the 2008 economic downturn, temporary do-it-yourself art galleries have proliferated in apartments, storefronts and other spaces all over the country. Call it a response to an art world in which dealer representation is increasingly hard to come by; exhibitions are costly; and formerly affordable areas like Bushwick have priced out artists, forcing them to seek out scрапpy locations in which to show their work.

Far fewer documented cases show uses of domestic spaces to create site-specific, participatory projects in domestic spaces, especially when the involved artists have ample gallery opportunities available.

This show uses specific parts of the domestic space as they already exist, instead of recreating them, or pseudo versions of them in galleries. For example, the kitchen wall is now incorporated into ‘Gifts From Atheists, Mormons + Muslims’; The basketball hoop is part of a video data visualization ‘About 37,000’; The bedroom is now a participatory installation ‘TV Commercials Translation Project’; the driveway and lawn host ‘LXII %’; the
Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art Mobile Art Truck hosts ‘Idle Sounds’ on the street; ‘Closet Patriotism’ aka ‘USA Merch’ is in the closet.

Hosting the exhibition at my home helps the concept of the exhibition because it effectively creates an environment that encourages interpersonal interactions by the participatory elements of the projects, as well as the projects’ placement in a small, domestic space. Studies have shown a variety of behaviors from people, based on their proximity to others, gender, age, domestic vs private spaces, etc. (Gifford) Exhibiting the works in my domestic space will likely generate more interaction among those in attendance than a generic gallery space would.

PARTICIPATE! is not an exhibition that may as well have taken place in a traditional, generic gallery, which could threaten to unintentionally undermine the purpose of art that seeks to educate and connect, rather than advertise and sell. As Kwon interprets art historian Lucy Lippard, “the particularity of places is continually being homogenized, genericized, and commodified to better accommodate the expansion of capitalism via abstraction of space.” (Kwon p. 158)

Creating an experience and environment that involves moving through and around the house should create a better learning environment, due to the involvement of physical movement. (Thurston) Furthermore, inviting movement within the confines of my home and yard aims to facilitate interpersonal connections among exhibition-goers, inspired by and informed by the scientific information presented in the artworks.

Experiences With Artworks

The typical experience of consuming art involves entering an art gallery that has traditional artworks hanging on walls and placed atop pedestals. Patrons will usually wander around and spend a few seconds glancing at the artworks. If there is a reception happening, fashion, eating/drinking and social interactions (possibly better described as schmoozing, networking, etc.) become part of the experience of the experience of viewing art.

My goal with most of my participatory projects is to enable literal actions beyond looking. (‘TV Commercials Translation Project’ asks participants to watch commercials and interpret the message from each commercial, ‘Make a Postcard For Someone...’ instructs participants to make a physical postcard) Providing means by which viewers can take an action based on prompts (some
blatant, and some subtle) allows for much more surprises and excitement from the viewers who would normally feel a separation and hierarchy between artist and audience. Breaking the barriers between artists and audiences implies a sense of responsibility and/or opportunity onto those who may have perceived themselves merely as the audience and consumer, encouraging and enabling them to treat themselves as creators, like a teacher would.

**Galleries vs Non-Traditional Exhibition Spaces**

"Relational aesthetics" has been questioned from different perspectives. One of the more immediate criticisms was that is enclosed “social relations” in the sphere of art spaces, galleries, and museums, where these ephemeral events took place; its criticism of mass culture appeared as an elitist reaction (Thompson 2012; Kester 2011)

By offering my personal living space to be part of the experience, I am creating an environment of intimacy for those who attend the exhibition. Everyone who attends will not only be attending an art exhibition, they will also be entering my home, which is probably the most intimate place I can offer.

Intimate places are places of nurture where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss. (Tuan 1977: 137) Home is an intimate place. We think of the house as home and place…(Tuan 1977: 144)

Experiences that occur within my home, in the context of this exhibition, will be memorable in a different way than if similar experiences were produced within a traditional art space.
Recruitment for Participation

Participatory projects that invite submissions of content involve some level of recruitment. For ‘Idle Sounds’, the participatory component of the project was advertised through digital and physical posters, word-of-mouth, and visits to local arts and environmental organizations, resulting in several submissions of audio recordings that are included in the piece.

‘Gifts From Atheists, Mormons + Muslims’ involved a more elaborate recruitment campaign of visits to local religious centers (Logan Islamic Center, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), meetings with secular leadership from Utah State University’s Secular Student Alliance club, ultimately resulting in overwhelming interest in the project from Atheists, Mormons, Muslims, and individuals of other religious identities.

After generating interest, several meetings were held to organize and plan the execution of the ‘performers’ for ‘Gifts From Atheists, Mormons + Muslims’. These interpersonal engagements took place weeks before the official exhibition date, culminating with individuals of the three least ‘warmly’ viewed religious groups in the United States working together to create and offer edible gifts.
Recruitment Posters for ‘Gifts From Atheists, Mormons + Muslims’

Calling All Muslims, Atheists, Mormons

This is absurd, but this is sincere.

Research indicates that Americans have negative feelings toward Muslims, Atheists, and Mormons. I am creating a project to spread awareness about this and to promote unity among people of all religious backgrounds.

On 4/14, I am bringing Atheists, Mormons, and Muslims together to prepare food together, and to give gifts to people in attendance at my Thesis Exhibition.

If you are a Muslim, Atheist, or Mormon, and are interested in learning more about this project, please contact MikeyKettinger@gmail.com

I have no intention of ridiculing or offending people.

Notes from recruitment pitch at meeting for Students Organizing for Society and Natural Resources, February 14, 2017

Data Collection, Data Inspiration, Studies

Scientific studies have led to art projects such as ‘Gifts From Atheists’ and ‘Gifts From Atheists, Mormons + Muslims’, which were inspired by a PEW survey in which respondents were asked to rate their feelings toward various groups of Americans of different faiths: Jewish, Evangelical Christian, Mormon, Atheist, Muslim, etc.

Respondents indicated that the three groups they felt ‘coldest’ toward were Mormons, Atheists, and Muslims. I found it funny that Mormons and Atheists were next to each other on the thermometer infograph, and decided to create an artwork in which Atheists could offer gifts to people as a gesture of community-building and relationship-building.

‘Gifts From Atheists’ has taken several forms in terms of aesthetics and sites, all
of which have generated positive reactions from viewers and participants. Many individuals have created handmade ‘Thank You’ notes and left them with the piece. Others have donated food and drink to be used in future iterations of the piece. Many Mormons find ‘Gifts From Atheists’ to be thoughtful and kind, while secular viewers find the piece empowering and encouraging.

Projects like this one depend on the artist’s willingness to accept the idea of giving up control of the project once it is installed and receives participants. Participants will likely treat the artwork less like a traditional artwork and more like a consumer product at a retail store. Objects that were neatly pressed and hung on hangers at the beginning of the day may end the day bunched up on the floor. Inviting viewers to become participants who actively handle objects in art installations requires an acceptance of collaborations, good or bad, with participants who have varying levels of interest and respect for the project as an artwork. This component of participatory artworks is perhaps the most compelling one, as it allows for surprises that are connected to and prompted by the project. These surprises often lead to new iterations of projects, dialogues, and in best-case scenarios, strengthening of relationships among people who share the experience of interacting with the artwork.

**Precedents and Historical Context for Participatory Artworks**

About a hundred years ago, Marcel Duchamp explicitly proposed a “non-retinal” art (Tomkins 1997: 158), in reaction to the formal experimentation that
preceded him, from impressionism to cubism. This “non-retinal” art would not be directed just to the senses, but aimed to produce a critical reaction and a response beyond immediate sensory experience. (Sansi 2015: 7)

A hundred years after Duchamp’s infamous ‘Fountain’, The work in Invitations to Collaborate enables its audience to become collaborators with its projects and other audience members, inviting all in attendance to step beyond typical behaviors of art galleries, and to actively participate in making, instead of simply gazing.

PARTICIPATE! is not what the primary artist or author can do alone. It’s about what authors and audiences can do and create together.

Conclusion

PARTICIPATE! suggests that hands-on projects have the potential to generate interest in scientific studies, statistics, and other information when the projects directly reference scientific information. PARTICIPATE! attracted 150-200 people in 4 hours, many of whom participated in various projects by discussing religion, recording information from commercials and hanging it on the wall, writing postcards, manipulating the simulated sound of breathing, examining retail goods, and playing basketball while reading scientific statistics.

Text in PARTICIPATE!

The following segments of text appear in Didactic panels of text that accompany each artwork in PARTICIPATE!

About 37,000
Scientists Peter Howe, Matto Mildenberger, Jennifer R. Marlon, and Anthony Leiserowitz recently published ‘Yale Climate Opinion Map’, which shows a variety of Americans’ perceptions of scientific information.

Their survey estimates 37,058 adults in Cache County believe “global warming is happening”.

Karl Malone, who is 2nd all-time leading scorer in NBA history, and played for many years with the Utah Jazz, scored 36,928 points in his career.

Idle Sounds
The sounds coming from the boom box are recordings of idling car engines in this area. The large speaker is playing a recording of a person’s breathing.
Changing the effects pedals’ settings changes the sound of the breathing, similarly to how breathing is impacted by air quality.

In ‘Idle Sounds’, participants can control and change the intensity of effects on the breathing sound, as well as the levels of idling car engine sounds.

In life, we can control and change the intensity of effects on the breathing of people by adjusting actions and spreading awareness about science as it relates to air quality and its impacts on health.

Scientists Peter Howe, Matto Mildenberger, Jennifer R. Marlon, and Anthony Leiserowitz recently published Yale Climate Opinion Maps, which shows a variety of Americans’ perceptions of scientific information.

The Yale Climate Opinion Maps study indicates that 62% (LXII in Roman Numerals) of adults in Cache Valley believe ‘global warming will harm future generations of people a great/moderate amount’ and ‘global warming will harm plants and animals a great/moderate amount’.

Inside the greenhouse, there is video showing a member of a future generation, struggling plants, and unnatural air.

Additionally, a hose runs from the exhaust pipe of a car into the greenhouse. Deliberately pumping one’s direct environment full of exhaust fumes is a common method of committing suicide.

Make a Postcard For Someone You Care About
The feeling of making and receiving a handmade postcard is very beautiful. Bridget Murray’s research showed that “expressive writing is commonly used as a means of helping heal” from stress and trauma. (American Psychological Association)

Psychologist Dr. Becky Spelman says: ‘Research strongly suggests that sender reactions to a handwritten letter are more emotionally engaged than if a letter is created digitally, so if the desired outcome is to communicate on a very personal human level, then it would suggest that this method is more successful.’ And, she adds, the effect of doing it just once can last for weeks. (Psychologies)

Gifts From Atheists, Mormons + Muslims
Recent surveys show Muslims, Atheists, and Mormons to be viewed least “warmly” of all religious groups in the USA.

This project encourages social engagement among members of these groups with each other and others through giving gifts of food.

Engage with someone who is wearing a black apron to receive a gift.

Closet Patriotism aka USA Merch
1. These USA-themed items were collected and documented over the past 3 years. Their countries of origin span several continents. Handle them to find out where they were made. The white stepstool is available to help you reach items that are over your head. The magnifying glass is available to help you read small text.

2. How much USA-themed merchandise is made in the USA? This is a mystery. Part of the answer is on these shelves. Other parts of the answer are on shelves of retail stores and in the closets of millions.

TV Commercials Translation Project
The scroll of receipt paper on the pedestal was created by watching hundreds of TV commercials and recording interpretations of their messages.

1. Carefully watch each commercial.

2. On the receipt paper, write a simple statement of what each commercial is encouraging you to do. (Buy car, visit website, buy pills, etc.)

3. Then, hang your receipt on the wall. Feel free to take it with you when you leave for the night.

PARTICIPATE! Map/Guide
Maps were created for the show on April 14, 2017 with a single question for each artwork.

Institutional Review Board
USU Assurance: FWA0003395
Request for Determination of Non-human Subjects Research
Approved

FROM:
Melanie Domenech Rodriguez, IRB Chair
Nicole Vassalis, IRB Administrator

To: Michael Ketinger
Date: April 13, 2017
Protocol #: 8471
Title: Participate Art Show

Based on the information provided to USU’s IRB, it has been determined that this project does not qualify as human subject research as defined in 45 CFR 46.102(d) and (f) and is not subject to oversight by USU’s IRB.

Statement from IRB about PARTICIPATE!
Detail From ‘Gifts From Atheists, Mormons + Muslims’

PRESS

Herald Journal/Salt Lake Tribune article:

PARTICIPATE!

Sources:


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