

Community and ritual art: Public participation for the preservation of cultural heritage

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Public participation projects in art and cultural heritage are often geared towards increasing public affinity for art and history, or as a whole, for cultural heritage. While this is certainly a legitimate objective, it is arguably a top-down process, see Laurajane Smith's "Uses of Heritage" (2006). Professionals develop activities to teach the public what it is meant to know. However, the individual members of the public play their own personal role in the development of the cultural heritage of their neighborhoods, cities and countries. The combination of each of their stories, memories and histories, but also emotions and concerns, makes up the fabric of the physical neighborhood.

Bringing out this immaterial cultural heritage is the realm of community art, which provides art forms to allow the public to participate at a much deeper personal and emotional level than just appreciation. In the past two decades community art has established itself, in particular, in The Netherlands, as a well-developed art form, not only to (co-)create art, e.g., the ICAF (International Community Art Festival, Rotterdam) initiative, but also to bring out the social fabric and cultural heritage of neighborhoods. Artists such as Jeanne van Heeswijk, Ida van der Lee, Adriaan Nette, and Merlijn Twaalfhoven, as well as the CAL-XL platform, use art principles to develop modes of communication for the public to tell their stories in a meaningful way.

The artist, Ida van der Lee, has discovered over the years that common everyday activities and objects can be used to develop rituals, which, if properly designed, help people break out of their shells and relate their stories from deep within. One of her first projects, "Wasgoed is goed" (1998) used the daily ritual of hanging laundry to strengthen the sense of community and shared cultural experience for residents of the then run-down Vrolikstraat neighborhood (Amsterdam).

Since then, Van der Lee has continued experimenting with the use of art to open two-way communication. She has designed a broad spectrum of rituals with ingredients that are linked to the particular individuals in a community; the participants are the source of her art projects. A ritual is a structured event in which objects, decoration, sound, actions and words all play a role. Beauty and the poetic strength of art are key ingredients. People are touched by the fact that something beautiful has been made just for them. When the ritual feels like a gift, people participate, open up, and relax; there is an atmosphere of trust. Participants go through a visualization process to reach the authentic heart of a question or issue. Rituals are thus powerful mediators between participants and their heritage.

Examples of how ritual art brings out individual and collective stories include “Sloophamer Schatkamer” (2003-2006), which ritualized the demolition of a working-class neighborhood, “Allerzielen Alom” (2005-2015), using rituals such as “Memory Things” and “Dining with the Dead” to help people commemorate their dead, and “Namen en Nummers” (2012-ongoing) using rituals to bring the public in personal contact with individual Dutch Jewish victims of Nazi deportations.