

The following essay addresses the distinction between 501c(3) arts organizations and unincorporated arts organizations regarding their audience participation in politics. By comparing and contrasting two organizations we were able to distil, via real world examples, the differences and similarities inherent in both forms of organizational governance. P:ear is a non-profit arts organization, located in Portland, Oregon, that works with homeless youth to help them transition out of homelessness, to feel empowered, and to enable them to become valuable members of society. Graffiti Research Lab (GRL), an unincorporated street arts organization, was created by tech-savvy engineers Evan Roth and James Powderly. Since its inception in 2006, GRL has worked to change the public's negative perceptions of graffiti art. Artists working in this collective use the term graffiti to mean anything that happens outside in the city without permission. GRL is interested in empowering people with technologies to address the concept of “mindspace”, the arena in which creative thought pervades. These graffiti artists view the city as an open environment and their work with GRL welcomes opinion and encourages interactive participation. The following essay answers five main questions: How is the organization political? How does the organization address the public perception of homelessness/graffiti? What is the structure of the organization? Who is their audience? How do they use their structure to encourage audience participation? P:ear is first to be considered, followed by The Graffiti Research Lab. In the last segment of the essay we discuss our choices for the transmedia artifacts used for the in-class activities.



P:ear is political because they directly address a polarized and controversial issue: the inherent social value of transient and homeless youth. Their assertion is that, given the right environment, and proper leadership, homeless youth can empower themselves to make socially beneficial decisions that will aid not only themselves, but also the communities they are involved in: not just the homeless youth community, but Portland at large. P:ear identifies that homelessness is a social malady, but not one to be shunned nor ignored, but one that can be remedied, one individual at a time with compassion, creativity, activity, and guidance.

Furthermore, P:ear has established itself as a 501c(3) organization, as such, they have aligned themselves as a non-profit in a specific federally and state recognized tax bracket. They have subjected themselves to specific limitations of activities, both logistically and financially; for example, the six permanent staff members have a cap on their personal yearly income; furthermore, the organization is required to predict their yearly institutional income (donations, grants, and sponsorships) before they were accepted as a 501c(3), and, as such, are prevented from raising money greater than that prediction (though there is a bit of flexibility in this arena). There are a variety of 501c categories, being that they are a 501c(3) they are grouped with “religious, educational, charitable, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, to foster national or international amateur sports competition, or prevention of cruelty to children or animals organizations,” and cannot spontaneously decide to invent a program outside this definition of activity (Charities and Non-profits, irs.gov). Being a 501c(3) entitles P:ear to not simply a tax exempt status, but it also allows them access to state and federal grants only provided to 501c(3) entities.

P:ear addresses the public perception of homelessness, particularly homeless youth, as a social malady that can be remedied, though it is a long and, often, arduous process. They state, “[they] are committed to being there for p:ear youth over the long-haul to share failures and successes, mundane events as well as life-altering milestones... [And that] this is not work that can be accomplished in the short-term. These are relationships based on trust that take years to cultivate and require enormous dedication to sustain” (pearmentor.org/about/). An intrinsic aspect of their organization is that by utilizing their programs (education, art, recreation, transition, and food) they can lead homeless youth to see their inherent value as citizens and contributing members of society. What they are combating is the internalized perception projected by dominant society that homeless youth are “other” or “derelict,” which is, ultimately, dehumanizing. P:ear is in the business of helping homeless youth realize that they are not simply humans, but valuable individuals, that can contribute to society, and as such will benefit not just the individual, but the group.

P:ear has six full time staff members, whom act as Directors; these individuals are paid; however, there are eight individuals who comprise the Board of Directors. Their titles include: Board President, Board Secretary, Executive Director, Development Director, Program Director,

Politics of Participation

Art in Society

Bea Ogden & Lydel Matthews

October 29th, 2013

Development and Community Relations Manager, and Transition Housing

Coordinator/Wilderness Programs Director. They have four Volunteer Staff positions: Art Director/Graphic & Web Designer, Online Communications Coordinator, Restaurant Coordinator, and IT. They work with 128 volunteers who are delineated into three levels: Level I volunteers work in food coordination and improving facilities, Level II volunteers work for specific programming activities (i.e. artist workshops, hosting tours for First Thursday gallery exhibitions, and off-site staff support), Level III volunteers work directly with youth on a weekly basis as mentors, tutors, in meal distribution, and with daily activities. All volunteers are required to submit an application, attend trainings (from one to 15 hours depending on volunteer level), pay \$26 for fingerprinting and attaining a food handlers card, and the minimum age for volunteers is 25 (pearmentor.org/volunteer/). Annually, over 14,000 hours of mentoring is conducted, there are over 1,500 enrolled youth, and an average of 37 youth are enrolled per day.

P:ear offers a variety of programming including establishing safe space, education, art, recreation, transition, and food. They are located in NW Portland and offer a gallery, workshop, and studio space. P:ear hosts many outreach events that connect funders, supporters, families, and homeless youth in a variety of settings, from picnics, to gallery openings, and kayak trips. P:ear also offers a 3-month barista skills-training program in partnership with Café Vitta to enable youth to gain applicable experience to assist in the transition out of homelessness.

P:ear's audience includes not just the homeless and transitional youth they serve, but the greater Portland community as well. During a First Thursday gallery opening, their audience includes the community of people who engage in the open gallery walks that NW Portland has become known for. When P:ear hosts a family picnic, sponsored by *Williams-Sonoma*, and invite Portland families to attend, their audience is homeless youth and local families. When approaching corporate and private donors their audience is expanded even further.

Looking specifically at their arts programming, P:ear encourages their audience to participate in many ways: by providing a gallery space for homeless youth to create and display art they are encouraging engagement that is not only creative, but also empowering for the young artists. Furthermore, by hosting an open gallery during First Thursday, P:ear is encouraging the greater arts-appreciating community of Portland to experience the exhibitions of homeless youth artists. By giving legitimacy to the creative endeavors of the youth P:ear works with, they are, institutionally, recognizing the value of the artist and the value of an outside (often, anonymous)

Politics of Participation

Art in Society

Bea Ogden & Lydel Matthews

October 29th, 2013

audience appreciating the art as art, and not simply as programming designed to alleviate a social ill.



The Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) is political in that participants are motivated by the prospect of combating stereotypes associated with graffiti art. The graffiti artists, otherwise known as “GRL agents”, employ non-violent acts of persuasion with a “hacktivist” mentality to dispel misrepresentations and to encourage open-source urban communication. This unincorporated organization addresses the public's perception of graffiti through publically accessible guerilla style productions. Both the steps and tools required to produce your own version of a GRL project, as well as the achieved outcomes, are documented on their website, www.graffitiresearchlab.com. GRL has gained recognition in the contemporary art world by replacing traditionally recognized tools of graffiti such as spray cans, stencils and felt tip pens with digital tools such as lasers, LED lights and high lumen projectors. This organization is also political in the sense that their installations invoke questions about corporate agenda. For example, GRL agents seek to identify systems and expose their hidden agendas through public art so that people will think more critically about the “systems” unpublicized role and intention. When considering how GRL approaches the relationship between technology and graffiti, founder Evan Roth says, “we were interested in thinking of technology in the sense of the hacker mentality and how hackers treat software sort of the same way graffiti artists treat the city. They [the artists] look for these systems, they identify them and then flip them a little bit to tell the city something they [the systems] didn't intend to tell (<http://vimeo.com/3177642>). Through the web and urban projections, GRL uses creative technologies to seduce a wide audience.

Within the unincorporated context of GRL, participation manifests in the form of guerilla style public art installations and in online dialogues. By using the web as their main tool for communication, anonymous artists have access to GRL project descriptions and tool production and are encouraged to “create their own public interventions all over the world” (http://graffitiresearchlab.com/info/GRL_PR.pdf). Although initially based in New York, GRL

Politics of Participation

Art in Society

Bea Ogden & Lydel Matthews

October 29th, 2013

has inspired project extensions across the globe and splinter cells have formed in Amsterdam, Vienne, Barcelona, Toronto, Tijuana, Mexico City, Hong Kong, Taipei, Minneapolis and Australia (http://graffitiresearchlab.com/info/GRL_PR.pdf). Their audience ranges from active GRL agents participating in projects, to members of partnering organizations, to the unsuspecting public and internet browsers. GRL encourages unstructured participation through spontaneous art tactics in presentation and application. The GRL collective of artists is most recognized for their creation of the LED Throwie. In an interview with GRL founder James Powderly, he explains the basis for his work:

“We go out mostly to neighborhoods where you don't see a lot of public interaction with the environment and we put these up where there are sparse populations and its sort of barren so that if we can lighten up these places then the people that live there will come there and enjoy it a little more... or if we could just give people a chance to alter their environment in a semi-permanent way.”



The two different clips of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* is an exercise to help the audience become aware of the meaning—political, cultural, or historical—they assign what they observe. The first clip of *Cut Piece* a man, then two women, interact with Ono, they remove small pieces of her sweater, and there is nothing extreme or overtly political about what is observed, while the second clip of *Cut Piece*, one man, announces his intentions, and then removes large sections of Ono's clothes, in the end cutting both of her bra straps and leaving her on stage to hold up her bra. The second clip has many obtuse examples of political messages: objectification of women, misogyny, exotification, exploitation, etc.; however, the true intent and message of the exercise is when I reveal that Ono's *Cut Piece*, though appearing politicized, is actually her interpretation of the story of Buddha. *Cut Piece* is an exercise, for Ono, in creating art selflessly and without ego; by doing so, she is allowing her audience to not only participate as observer, but also participate as actor.



The two juxtaposed clips of John Cameron Mitchell—singing “The Origin of Love” in and out of drag—acts as another example of the audience politicizing what they are observing. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is more overtly political than Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, and while Yoko did not intend *Cut Piece* to be politicized, John Cameron Mitchell did intend *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* to be politicized. Initially, hypothetically, the audience will not politicize the first clip of Mitchell singing, but will politicize the second clip of Mitchell singing because he is in drag.



The purpose of comparing the Shepherd Fairy *Obama* “HOPE” image with the Maoist propaganda is to illustrate that politics are aestheticized. While Mao’s message and Obama’s message differ, they both benefit from projecting a certain image in a certain way. The profile image of Mao is a modern interpretation of his communist propaganda, while the *Cultural Revolution* poster was created and distributed in 1970, a time when Mao’s hegemonic dominance was concretely in power. It is useful to compare and contrast the iconography that works as political propaganda, whether the audience is Americans circa 2003 or Chinese circa 1970: similar tactics are employed because of their effectiveness.

Politics of Participation

Art in Society

Bea Ogden & Lydel Matthews

October 29th, 2013

As part of our module presentation we will incorporate a bumper sticker activity in which teams will create meaning from a group of deconstructed political slogans. These bumper stickers are transmedia resources that present the viewer with a biased generalization and therefore provoke an introspective and personal response. By merging transmedia of the unsophisticated bumper sticker with the constructive process, we hope to illustrate how people assign meaning.

In conclusion, while P:ear is a 501c(3) organization and the Graffiti Research Lab is not, they are both organizations working toward legitimizing politicized segments of society through empowerment and audience participation. Both organizations work toward providing resources to individuals to encourage them, through creative endeavors, to foster self-expression and self-worth.

References

About Cut Piece (1964), Yoko Ono, “Infinite Universe at Dawn”, Retrieved October 23rd, 2013, <http://onoverse.com/2013/02/cut-piece-1964/>

About Exemption Requirements - Section 501(c)(3) Organizations. IRS. Retrieved October 25th, 2013, [http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Charitable-Organizations/Exemption-Requirements-Section-501\(c\)\(3\)-Organizations](http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Charitable-Organizations/Exemption-Requirements-Section-501(c)(3)-Organizations)

About Open Lab. Eye Beam. Retrieved October 24th, 2013, <http://eyebeam.org/research/open-lab>

About Graffiti Research Lab in New York Times. Retrieved October 24th, 2013, <http://www.woostercollective.com/post/graffiti-research-lab-in-new-york-times>

About GRL. Graffiti Research Lab. Retrieved October 24th, 2013, <http://www.graffitiresearchlab.com/blog/>

About GRL Public Relations. Graffiti Research Lab. Retrieved October 24th, 2013, http://graffitiresearchlab.com/info/GRL_PR.pdf

About P:ear. P:ear. Retrieved October 23th, 2013, <http://pearmentor.org/>

Image Cultural Revolution Propaganda Poster. Retrieved October 26th, 2013, <http://www.leslieforman.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/cultural-revolution-propaganda-poster-500x337.png>

Image. FAT Labs Pig. Retrieved October 26th, 2013, http://fffff.at/fuckflickr/data/FFFFFAT_MISC/fffffat_pig.jpg

Image. Going Out of Business. Retrieved October 26th, 2013, http://graffitiresearchlab.com/liquedation/blog/IMG_3043.JPG

Image GRL Bus. Graffiti Research Lab. Retrieved October 26th, 2013, http://graffitiresearchlab.com/images/bus_web-1.jpg

Image GRL. Graffiti Research Lab MOMA. Retrieved October 26th, 2013, http://www.moma.org/poprally/images/_20_grl.jpg

Image GRL Laser Tag. Hacked Gadgets. Retrieved October 26th, 2013, http://hackedgadgets.com/wp-content/Graffiti_Research_Lab_laser_Tag_7.jpg

Image Impeach Bush. Graffiti Research Lab. Retrieved October 26th, 2013, <http://graffitiresearchlab.com/impeach/Bush.jpg>

Politics of Participation

Art in Society

Bea Ogden & Lydel Matthews

October 29th, 2013

Image. Mao 2. Retrieved October 26th, 2013,
<http://www.americanthinker.com/mao2.jpg>

Image. OBAMA HOPE. Retrieved October 26th, 2013,
<http://forthesomedaybook.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/obama-hope.jpg>

Keough, J. (2010). Graffiti Research Lab: Bridging the Canonical and the Criminal. Master of Arts in Art History and Criticism Thesis, Stony Brook University.

Sartwell, C. (Winter 2010). Art and Politics, *American Society for Aesthetics*, Dickinson College, *Volume 30 Number 3*

Video "Cut Piece" Yoko Ono. Youtube. Retrieved October 23rd, 2013,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Sc47KfJjcl>

Video GRL: The Complete First Season Part 1/3. James Powderly. Retrieved October 24th, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/3177642>

Video Hedwig and the Angry Inch, "The Origin of Love." Youtube. Retrieved October 23rd, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29fiaLgXTfA>

Video John Cameron Mitchell performs "Origin of Love," Youtube. Retrieved October 23rd, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kh7Us-iR92Y>