

The Art of Healing: Recovery and Public Art in Kensington, PA

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Our project explores the way that the Kensington community has reflected on its struggles and strives to recover and connect through public art. In particular, we focused on four projects that involved communal participation: *Personal Renaissance*, *THE TIMES*, *Show Your Kensington*, and *Healing Begins Through Connection*. As a neighborhood that has been heavily stigmatized by the media amidst the opioid crisis, art has become an opportunity for the community itself to take ownership of their narrative and for their voices to be heard, which we felt closely reflected the concept of the illness narrative. Heather Box of the Healing Through Connection project expressed that art and storytelling was a way to connect not only with others, but with yourself, and to reconstruct yourself as a whole human being. The artist of Personal Renaissance James Burns expressed a similar sentiment among the recovering service recipients he worked with: of a desire to feel like a whole human being, not just an addict. As Arthur Frank describes, the way out of the “narrative wreckage” of illness, or addiction, is telling “self stories,” from which the self is being *formed*. These public art projects seek to mediate that narrative forming in a similar way, as a way for members in the community to reestablish a sense of wholeness. However, evidently, public art is not the same as an individualized narrative. In many cases, such as in Personal Renaissance and Healing Begins Through Connection, the artist’s own perspective is inevitably mixed in, and the final art piece is a response to multiple stories. However, as James Burns puts it, the ideal is that “public art gives people voice and gives people say, and [the artist’s] role is to play amplifier to that voice.” Additionally, although a sense of individuality is sometimes lost in the final piece, participants expressed appreciation at being a part of something greater, and in particular in forming connections within a community. The story-telling aspect of the art was not focused primarily on responding to or changing a media narrative, but rather in a process of self-healing.

Additionally, at the center of many of the pieces and the initiatives behind them was evidence of continuing structural violence within the community, and how the healing of physical structures reflects the healing of the bodies that interact with them. The vacant buildings painted for *Show Your Kensington* are visual indications of urban blight, a product of deindustrialization and the virtual abandonment of the community, resulting in high rates of poverty, unemployment, and population decline. By making art out of the boarded up windows, the kids at Sankofa Academy who lived in the area expressed that it was meaningful to them that the art “ I created was around the neighborhood. It would be fun walking past and knowing that I made something and it’s hung up.” More than just aesthetic beautification of the buildings, the healing of the students alongside their neighborhood was rooted in a sense of ownership and agency. This connection between the urban environment and the body reminded us of Latoya Frazier’s documentation of Braddock, particularly her piece “Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test),” in which she juxtaposed her mother in a hospital bed with the deteriorating hospital in her town. The close relationship between states of health and the city is addressed directly through murals, which allow for healing in both senses. As Tyrell Guyton described for his piece, *THE TIMES*, the vacant building was transformed by the project from a place of abandonment to a “focal point for social art practice” and community growth.

Interestingly, a theme that continually resurfaced was care--not focused on healthcare or biomedicine, but on self-care and caring for the body. The central figure of *Personal Renaissance* is a man carrying a vessel, which the artist expressed was symbolic for the body, with an emphasis in how we carry our bodies through the world and what we fill it with. This is indicative of the way that we, as human beings, process and heal. Not only does the mural depict care and recovery, but the process of creating the mural and allowing community members to receive counseling and treatment emphasizes the importance of self-care. The artist behind *Personal Renaissance*, James Burns, raises the question “How are you caring for yourself?” Self-care is a form and acknowledgement of recovery. However, it is

important to note that recovery is not limited to those with addiction or illness; everyone is going through recovery, and therefore self-care is an important concept for everyone. In a way, the universalizing of recovery addresses the class concept of the cultural basis of the normal and pathological--by normalizing recovery and self care, even for those that are perceived as healthy, the stigma associated with addiction is decreased, as the lines separating the addict from the rest of society are made less clear. Allowing community members to use art as an outlet and a way to express their healing assists their recovery process.

Public art has played a significant role in allowing voices in Kensington to be heard and giving the members of the community an opportunity to transform their environment. Notably, most of the artists and organizations we interviewed did not go into the projects expecting to make a big change, or, as Margo, an organizer from Show your Kensington expressed, "take away from the grassroots of the neighborhood." They emphasized how they were there to support the community members in articulating their own stories, and were well aware of how murals are not a stand-alone solution for the challenges Kensington faces. It is important to be aware that while these projects allowed for certain community voices to transform their spaces, they are also physical signifiers of power and of who decides what stories should be told. They act as a powerful conduit to better understanding the Kensington community, as well as a reminder to critically evaluate what voices in Kensington still need to be heard.