

## *Binding, Together*

Art is a means for discovery. It is not merely a method of expression, although it can be a very effective one. Art, at its essence, is an opportunity for the artist to probe into her mind and heart and, through the act of making, unearth aspects of herself, of others, of the world. And the act of discovery doesn't end with the creation of art. When shared with the public, art becomes a vehicle through which others can glean their own meaning. Traditionally, artists have worked solo, producing work behind closed doors to later be shared with others. However, when other people are brought into the creative process – from a single collaborator to an entire group - an additional layer of understanding emerges. Creating something meaningful and new with another individual allows us to discover things about one another and reflect on the connections between us.

I want to push this idea of discovery, specifically in the context of human interaction. I have always been very passionate about social justice, and as a Community Action and Social Change minor I have been exposed to many approaches for tackling social issues and engaging with communities. In particular, I am very interested in the role that arts can play in social change efforts. I have participated in a number of arts-based community projects, and I am beginning to apply what I've learned to some self-initiated projects as well.

Originally, I had planned to merge my interest in community arts with my passion for book arts by creating handmade books that reflected the personal stories of individuals from underserved or disenfranchised communities. However, not only did I struggle with finding individuals to work with, I also began to grapple with other issues surrounding the project. For example, who was benefitting from these books? Would I really be “helping” the people I wanted to work with by creating an artistic representation of their lives? Would the very act of

making these books actually reinforce the roles of privilege and oppression that I am so intent on combating?

Additionally, I found that a more personal obstacle was holding me back. A great irony exists in my life. I love people; I love learning about those with vastly different life experiences than me; the human spirit and the variations and commonalities between individuals fascinates me. However, for my whole life I have had difficulty talking to people. From my shyness as a kid to my diagnosed social anxiety as an adolescent, this aspect of my personality has followed me throughout the years, and though it's improved with time, I have a feeling it is not going to disappear any time soon. This personal trait was making it exceedingly difficult to get to know, let alone meet the strangers that I wanted to work with.

Understanding how I could tackle these issues was difficult. I began to question the relationship between my own personal art practice and my desire to work for social change. I finally came to the conclusion that it was not necessary to force the two together. Instead, I would create a project that, while still incorporating interaction with others, also left room for self-discovery and the simple joy of creating, two elements of art that have driven me to produce work over the years.

For my integrative project, I created a series of collaborative artists books with people whom I wished to learn from: learn about myself, about them, about what connects and divides us. I no longer limited my selection of people to those who I deem "disadvantaged," because *everyone* has a story to share. One-on-one human interaction is a very powerful tool, and one that I think is becoming less and less appreciated in this age of social media, technological isolation, and individualistic mindsets. I am interested in the book medium for similar reasons; I think that the physical representation of words on pages bound together in a book is one of the

most fundamental ways to engage with a topic or a story. I also believe that books are a perfect vehicle for collaboration. Most traditional books are inherently collaborative: it takes an author, perhaps an illustrator, a cover designer, and a publisher to create this single object. This helped spark the idea of creating books with other people, and seeing what discoveries could be made with two brains, two sets of hands, two life experiences in tandem.

My creative process for this project began with identifying collaborative partners from whom I felt I had something to learn. My relationship to each of the collaborators varied, from beginning as complete strangers to being related by blood. I worked with a visually impaired girl whom I met in a ceramics class a few years ago (see Fig. 1); a friend who, like me, grew up as the daughter of a clergyman, though that of a different religion; another friend with whom I often unintentionally collaborate to pass the time; a high school student from Detroit who I met through a bookbinding workshop that I led; my father and his three siblings, two of whom I rarely see or talk to; and an old childhood friend who I haven't seen in over ten years. Each collaboration varied based on our relationship, our personalities, and our interests. I kept an open mind concerning materials and content, as I wanted these decisions to be determined based on the qualities of the collaboration itself.

I have taken inspiration from many artists and thinkers who have explored the potential of collaboration in art. The first is a pair, printmaker Kiki Smith and poet Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, who worked together on an illustrated book entitled *Endocrinology* (See Fig. 2). When describing this work, Kiki Smith explains that the collaborative process itself was what drove the work. "It was just the vehicle for us getting to know each other and becoming friends...Lots of times work is a byproduct of an activity. It exists in the process and not in the outcome....the outcome is like a residue" (*Kiki Smith*). Though it was a byproduct, the beautiful

piece of art that came out of this collaboration was very successful in itself, made even more meaningful by the manner in which it was created.

George Schneeman was another artist who thrived on collaboration. Starting in the late 1960's in New York City, Schneeman worked with many well-known poets to produce "...hundreds of collaborative pieces that were neither pure visual art nor pure verbal art but something tantalizingly indefinable between the two" (Fox). The literary and graphic elements enhance and inform each other; their aesthetic harmony shows that Schneeman and his collaborators were able to feed off each other's creative ambitions to produce a cohesive piece of art (see Figs. 3 & 4). The artwork is unique in the sense that it could not have been created by either of the participants alone. Schneeman's work also reveals the element of unpredictability that often goes along with the collaborative process, sometimes leading to surprising outcomes.

Lastly, the artist Annette Messenger exemplifies many of the artistic sensibilities that I strive towards in my work. Born in France in 1943, Messenger is known for her ability to "[interpret] life - sex, love, beauty, pain, yearning, power - through the eyes of a woman" (Riding). Using images and items from everyday life, Messenger tells stories using humor, satire, and sometimes morbidity (see Fig. 5). I am most fascinated by her interest in documenting the everyday; in particular, her "Album-Collection" series, in which "Messenger maintained fifty-six albums of clippings and drawings, each devoted to a particular subject, created by a character dubbed 'Annette Messenger Collector'" ("Annette"), shows how Messenger took mundane aspects of her life and transformed them into carefully curated works of art (see Fig. 6). Her choice to use the album format makes the material more accessible, because people can easily identify with flipping through the pages of a book. For similar reasons I have chosen to use the book as my medium of choice; since one of the goals of my project is to portray elements of mine and

my collaborators' lives, I want the audience to be able to relate the works and perhaps pick up on aspects of the human experience that resonate with them.

As Dick Higgins notes in his preface to Joan Lyon's anthology *Artists' Books*, the central focus of artists' books is to create an experience for the viewer (Alexander). I hope that my books evoke meaningful reaction in those who view them, and that the collaborative process through which they were created will be evident in the physical outcome. As a result of the work I have done, I feel that I have learned a great deal about those I am working with, in addition to discovering new things about myself. Ultimately this process has led to new perspectives about myself and my relationship to those around me, in addition to a heightened understanding of everyone involved, which I believe is the most fundamental step in creating a more harmonious world.



Fig. 1. *Braille*, Abby Bennett. 2013



Fig. 2. *Endocrinology*, Kiki Smith and Mei Mei Berssenbrugge. 1997.



Fig. 3. *Moving Solids*, George Schneeman and Bill Berkson, 1969-70

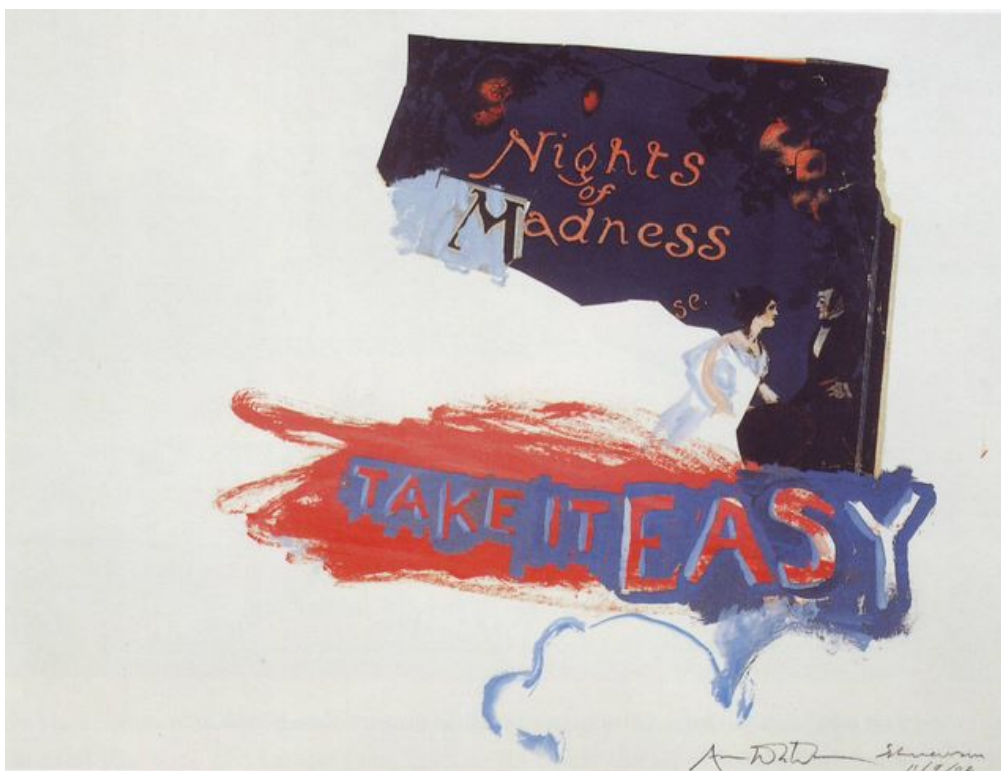


Fig. 4. *Nights of Madness*, George Schneeman and Anne Waldman, 2002



Fig. 5. *Children with their eyes scratched out (Les Enfants aux yeux rayés)*, Album-collection No. 3, Annette Messager, 1971-72



Fig. 6. *Collection-Album Series*, Annette Messager, 1971-1974





Fig. 7. Show Opening, Literati Bookstore April 20, 2013

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