

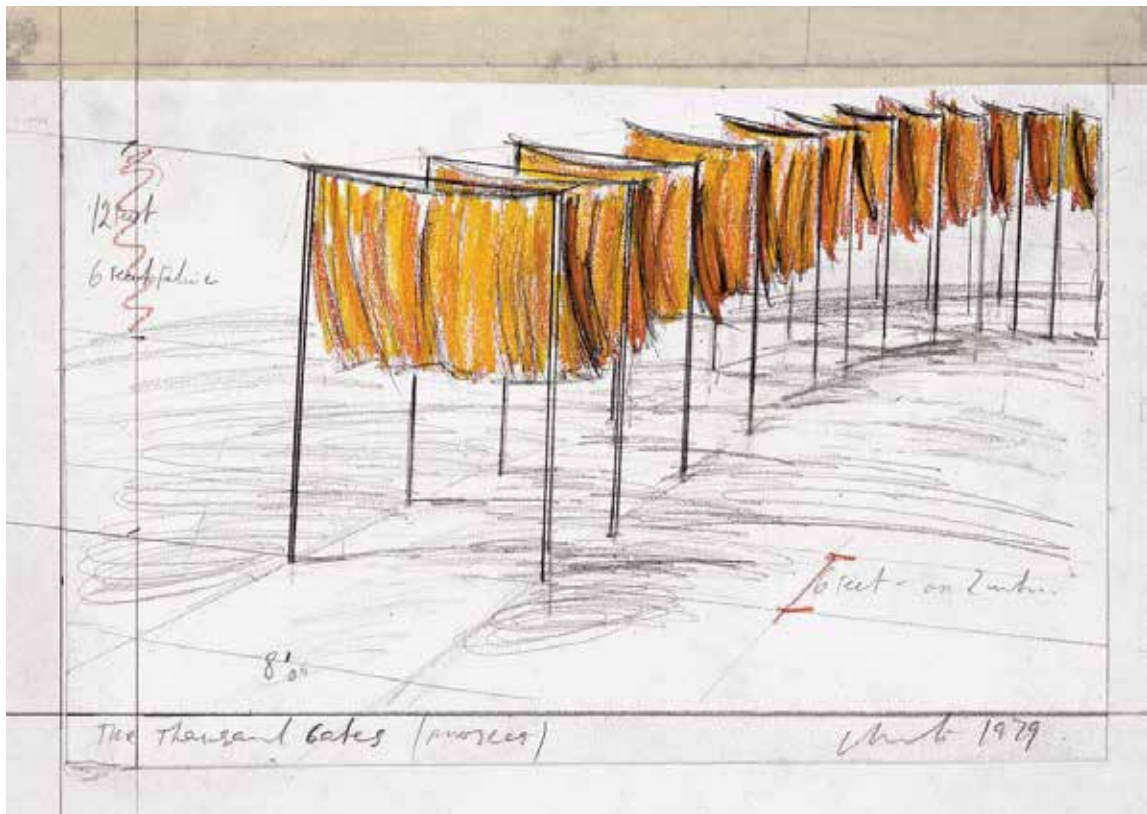
Community in Creative Process

Carrie Scanga

Convocation 2021

As we return to in-person learning, teaching, and living this year, many of us have a heightened awareness of community. We may be questioning how we'll find it, understand it, or rejoin it after a period of isolation. Artworks that engage audience participation may provide us a useful perspective. Because these works invite viewers to actively shape the art, they can help illuminate the nuances of community and offer guideposts as we chart this extraordinary academic year.

Emergence



In our individual ways, students, faculty, and staff have conscientiously prepared for the start of the year.

And yet, like artists in the studio preparing for an exhibit, we know on some level that our vision will only be fulfilled when the semester is underway.



Similarly, in art, a project only becomes whole when it leaves the studio to be publicly viewed.

When an artwork is seen, it plants a seed in its viewer's imagination that grows in their mind, heart, and body. Whether beautiful, repellant, healing, moving, or inspiring, it takes on a life of its own via these connections to its audience.



An artwork or a community is enhanced through many connections and relational exchanges.

The richness of a community emerges from the complex behavior of many interacting components during instances of exchange between generators and receivers. Since there is no single brain but rather many independent operators at work, the defining vision for all of us is still unknown, and the outcomes are unpredictable. What I find most exciting about this moment is that our emergent community can surpass the hopes for the future that any single one of us could possibly dream up on their own.

Hope



A couple of years out of college I made this piece, called *Existing in Possibility*. I was thinking about the future, and I wanted to create a visual representation of the feeling of hope.

These are folded paper forms, reminiscent of bricks, and they are stacked out of reach on a manufactured “horizon line” of almost invisible strings that stretch across the room from wall to wall. The paper bricks are not glued in place, so while the structure looks massive, there’s also an awareness that it is precarious.

For me, this perhaps impossible floating mass effect was activated/ completed by the viewers’ internal visual experience as they visited the installation in the gallery. Upon seeing this piece, a viewer could have chosen to embrace the illusion of the golden stack hovering in the distance, participating in the sleight of hand.



10 years later, I began rethinking the merits of hope. Hope is like luscious gold bars, visual opulence dangled just out of reach, an abstraction, a thought or feeling.

I wondered, what if instead of growing thoughts of hope in our individual imaginations there could be a space where many people could actively manifest this together in real life.



Also titled *Breathe: the emergent colony*, this is a space made of paper that was installed in cities and towns throughout the United States between 2011 – 2018. Inside this space, the golden color seems to envelop anyone who enters. Visitors are invited to inflate a paper box, write a wish to use as the stopper in the box, and hang the inflated box in the installation.



Wherever this piece has been exhibited, local creatives collaborate with and transform it. In this version, the project was in Kansas City, where dancer/choreographer Jane Gotch performed amidst the gallery visitors, chef Craig Howard made honey candies, musician Simon Fink created sound art with violin and synthesizer, and writer Hadara Bar-Nadav gave the experience dimension through poetry.

In every version of *Breathe*, every visitor can generate longings and thoughts for the future, and then watch as the individual imaginings take up physical space together. We watch as hope fills the room. We can't know exactly how this will look or feel, can't manufacture a successful outcome. But we can commit to participation.

Participation

Participation requires opening up, listening in real time, making the effort to mentally walk around in other people's ideas. This participation makes the borders between us more permeable.



Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations*, what she once called “recipes” for deep listening, provide a blueprint for creative participation, and spurred a movement of listening as healing and activism. Oliveros’ *Sonic Meditations* began as sound and body practices to soothe herself in the midst of Vietnam War-era pain and upheaval.

A couple of years into this practice she shared the *Sonic Meditations* with a women’s group, which continued to practice together. She published the meditations in 1971, stating her intentions of an “expanded consciousness” and “humanitarian purposes, specifically healing.”



We'll now go to YouTube for a recording of Oliveros's *Tuning Meditation*, performed in 2017 at the Met Cloisters. This practice begins with a single sung note and builds as participants contribute new and complementary tones, contributing to a communal chord mass. Listen for the voice of the moderator who reads Oliveros' instructions at the beginning of the piece.

Café con Leche: Conversations on Skin Color

Ingredients: Coffee and Milk

Directions:

1. Mix coffee and milk
2. Try to match your skin color
3. Reflect, Discuss



Participatory artwork can enhance and transform how we think about “the public”. Understanding multiracial identity has long been a theme threaded through Carmina Eliason’s studio practice.

Her project, *Café con Leche*, frames a conversation with a comforting sensory ritual, and it brings the participants’ minds, words, and bodies to the table.



To participate in this artwork, viewers mix coffee and milk together to initiate a reflection and conversation on skin color as a social issue and construct.





This project, *Future Mothers*, by artist and Bowdoin staff member Colleen Kinsella and her collaborator Elizabeth Jabar, offers a physical space for “uplifting participants and community members through dialogue and co-creation to imagine other possible futures.



On the project’s website, Jabar discusses “the importance of women’s experiences, ideas, and activities expanding representation of a multitude of identities and narratives through art to generate situations where people would interact in human ways.”

Co-imagining

Something that happens in the practice of art also happens throughout the college experience: We try things, and we often try them in public. We invent a new idea, propose creative solutions, and when the artwork, or the learning experiment, is successful it is successful because the audience answered that proposal with their own imagination, possibilities and participation.



In college you'll taste the critical process of several disciplines, and you'll pick a major and become versed in the critical analysis of your major area. I propose that alongside critical processes, especially in this unique year, we all delight in co-imagining. Co-imagining is my word for uninhibitedly, fearlessly generating ideas, proposals, pathways, trajectories, and possibilities.



What if in our classrooms and casual conversations we found ways to luxuriate in possibilities? What if we could suspend critique, just for an extra moment, and allow for the existence of many possibilities, limited only by our collective imaginations?

Our community

If we each can generate possibilities as we also receive and uplift one another's possibilities, we will surpass our own individual hopes for the future. At this moment in time, we can't really know what to hope for. We can't predict what the successes of this year will be, because today we are at the beginning of this new *emergent* Bowdoin community. We can only commit to participation and then watch as our imaginings coalesce.



Participating could be fun and it could feel equally awkward or raw. We can consider these as an artist would risk bringing a new artwork out of the quiet studio and into the world. Trust the audience to complete the artwork. Trust co-imagining as an answer to individual, solitary hope. Here's to our emergent community and rich participation and co-imagining at Bowdoin this year.

Thank you