

Crehan, Kate. 2011. *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective*. Oxford and New York: Berg. 224pp. Pb.: £19.99. ISBN: 9781847888334.

Crehan's excellent and accessible book examines the work of the "Free Form Arts Trust" in the United Kingdom. This forty-year-old trust sought to bring art to working-class communities, but did so in a different way than other projects: the art was done with and for the people living in the communities. These efforts engaged preconceived ideas on art, perspectives held by both viewers and artisans, and in doing so developed a social commentary on communities and the art establishment.

The trust had several motives in launching community participant art projects. Crehan points out that those in the working class were sceptical of contemporary art and that to overcome this perspective, artists had to establish a relationship with people in the community, using this understanding to form a definition of the particular community. In many ways, the trust was conducting ethnographic fieldwork by working with community members to develop an understanding of self-definition that could be used to guide future interactions and facilitate the exchange of ideas.

An interesting and critical element both of Crehan's narrative and the concept of community art is the presence of two art forms: performance and visual. At first, community art efforts in the United Kingdom included both forms. Crehan points out that performance art had an advantage in that theatre held a more entrenched position in British cultural identity. However, the performance arts, as they were involved in community arts projects, were not as open to community participation and thus ran afoul of the uniting concept of community art. Crehan highlights how performance workshops held during community festivals were open to professionals only and that despite drawing in newly minted theatre students who wanted to try something new, the lack of community participation caused a rift and destined the trust and similar activities to be visually focused from that point. Further, Crehan notes that the performance artists were more interested in radicalism and commentary, a move that the visual artists thought might alienate some and pose an issue for the group's charity status in the eyes of the government.

The motives of these efforts were more than merely artistic; rather art, as it often is, was a vehicle for a broader social philosophy. Social change, change in social policies, and developing partnerships were all elemental to the community art efforts. However, changes came at all levels and presented unique issues. An interesting facet of the Trust's efforts was its rejection of the art establishment, a move that led to issues of defining expertise, a concept of paramount value and importance to the mainstream art community. Expertise is a sensitive issue. Crehan writes, 'The reality is that "expertise" does not simply mean a given bundle of skills and knowledge: those skills and knowledge have to be socially recognized' (p. 29). In art, this recognition comes in the form of gallery showings, study, and public recognition. What happens when an artist produces a piece that is not in a traditional gallery, but in non-art spaces like community areas? This requires a shift in a values system regimented by centuries of tradition, but when it does change, the exchange of ideas and perspectives between experts and non-experts is transformative.

Crehan does an excellent job of getting the reader to understand the complexity of

this entire movement. As the performance artists left and the movement focused on visual arts, these efforts were further refined and geared toward addressing the built environment. As noted above, the art establishment was generally dismissive, but some of the gallery crowd liked the idea of art outside of four walls. Redefining environment and making previous distressed areas more visually appealing seems straightforward and clear, but it is rather complicated considering the need for community participation and influence. Crehan notes that these projects sought to have professional levels of construction, and in creating something more durable, the artists needed to understand the community as the piece would most likely be present for decades.

The great value of Crehan's work, which at its core is a study of a process of community identification and expression, is that it highlights something that has been missing from several community art movements in the United States and elsewhere. Unlike the work of the trust, community art efforts seen by this reviewer have not involved the community closest in proximity to the art. Rather, the efforts consisted of an outside entity (planning board, charity, or other effort) bringing in art and placing it in an established community with little or no input or participation. This is not the process of empowerment that fuelled the trust; rather it is a missionary effort, one that seeks to force conformity.

As students (and protectors) of culture and the human condition, anthropologists must recognise that there are groups near us that need understanding, study, and assistance. Anthropologists can play a critical role in helping community efforts understand the people in the community and can facilitate efforts to include them in shaping their space. Thankfully, Crehan's book, through its study of the trust, shows the way.

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