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Philadelphia Public History Truck

Of angels, doves and oral history: Ethics and trucking in Philadelphia

‘Bolsa?’ asked a gentleman at one of my tables. I walked over, held out two plastic bags, collected a meal ticket from two other visitors, and wiped the sweat beads forming under my nose.

‘What are you wearing on your neck?’ asked another man at the table, his thin legs wrapped around the folding chair he sat upon and his bloodshot eyes fixed on my neck.

‘This?’ I asked as I fingered the small pendant.

‘Yeah, what’s that, a bird or something?’

‘Yes, it’s a dove’, I said and smiled.

‘Why you wearing a dove?’ the man asked.

‘What’s your name?’ I replied.

‘I’m John. And who are you, little lady wearing a dove?’

I laughed and said, ‘I’m Erin. The dove is a long story’.

‘Well you can tell it’, he said and lifted his arm up, ‘but you don’t need no dove. You the dove’.

Situated underneath the Market-Frankford elevated train line in the eastern section of the postindustrial Kensington neighbourhood, the St. Francis Inn soup kitchen was oppressively hot in August. I was there,

wearing a volunteer-made apron featuring a puffy-painted cross, to serve meals at lunchtime. East Kensington in 2013 was an enclave of varied ethnicities from Irish American, Laotian to African American, living in poverty or working class standards, some artists, some drug addicts, some families just trying to make a living. In the face of the drug industrial complex, prostitutes and formerly incarcerated individuals adorned the streets by the Inn. This area was not littered with needles in the same way as some of the blocks north, but vacant lots harboured drug paraphernalia.

Still, development was active – eco-friendly architecture firms were constructing or adaptively reusing homes where adventurous, and middle class hipsters attempted to ‘pioneer’ the urban landscape. As the creator, public historian and artist behind the Philadelphia Public History Truck, I decided to use oral history to drive my archival research for an exhibition in and about this section of Kensington. I used block parties and vacant lot activations to understand the contemporary concerns and memories of neighbours. What I learned quickly was that this former ‘Workshop of the World’ featured both revitalized work space and abandoned hearths, former textile mills awaiting their moment to burn. Neighbours were scared that buildings adjacent to them would burn next, that their photos and personal materials of memory would turn to ashes. I decided it was my duty, after learning about this widespread concern, to develop an exhibition which could respond to the immediate needs of the Kensington community.

When I scheduled my volunteer time at the St. Francis Inn in the summer of 2013, I hoped it would help build trust before conducting oral history interviews. I did not expect the exchange about doves that I had with John. On one hand, I remember this conversation with dissension because it stirs Grant Kester’s pot about evangelism and community artists. At the same time, I find it helpful to hear a non-artist shift the semiotic representation of a socially engaged practitioner to a dove, a sign of peace, or in my case, a sign of conversation. If I hold myself accountable for being a dove, if others do also, I am expected to perform certain tasks which are not entirely problematic in terms of socially engaged art. I am to hold an olive branch, to self-sacrifice, to care. I am not expected to save or change or solve problems as angels are. The dove semiotic shifts the responsibility of socially engaged artists to that of the peacemaker, the maker of third space where disagreeable parties can come together and navigate issues even in abstract ways that create new communities. For History Truck, this means that an exhibition about the history of university expansion and community building in North Philadelphia can educate unlikely friends in a way that helps them work together; students seeking better understanding of neighbourhood constituents to improve relationships can use History Truck’s work just as we can place current urban farmers into a longer historical context, which informs them of the legacy in the work. In History Truck’s exhibitions, I attempt to convey complex narrative in the way that Dolores Hayden emphasized the reveal of contradiction and complexity to give meaning to the urban landscape in *The Power of Place* (1997: 82–97).

The issue I see in a dovelike existence is the potential to run interference to community building even when we most desire a positive outcome. Even if we embrace the dove as a symbol for socially engaged artists, we are not without a complex journey. Nato Thompson wrote recently in *Seeing Power*, ‘In order to produce a new community, we must thus not only consider inherent notions of privilege, but also attempt to see power from the position of those

who we are organizing with, and vice versa' (2015: 125). For many doves, and for many social practice artists, we are not able to completely digest the lived experiences of those with which we work. How can we see the issues of power that our community collaborators face? Are we able to meet grassroots partners where they are without distorting their work with our own creative vision? How can we grapple with our own aesthetic intentions and the needs of our community relations?

I am not sure that I have complete answers to these questions, but I do believe that History Truck is at its best when it lifts up the work of others. I also know that it is impossible to avoid moments of friction where my interests as a public historian do not exactly meet the needs of those I work with in Philadelphia neighbourhoods. The compromise in my work where I find balance is in dialogue. By having conversations with community members in which they are recorded and submitted to local university archives shifts the power of production of history from the academy to the street. I cannot assume that I have solved any problems by asking questions and listening with my H4n zoom recorder, but I can say I am attempting to shift the type of resources that future historians have to understand this moment in time in Philadelphia, and I can also say that the exhibitions I co-curate with others place contemporary issues into longer historical narrative with creativity and reflection. To stare down the barrel of ethics in my work, I usually quote Wittgenstein, that 'aesthetics and ethics are one'. If cultural producers provide an ethical aesthetic where diverse classes, races, ages and interest groups are safe to dialogue within structured and purposeful experiences, we might just be leveraging our power as socially engaged artists in a way that we are sometimes worthy of being called doves.

REFERENCES

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