

Chapter 4

Significant Spaces of Freedom Summer: Recognizing the Power of Community Art as the Inbetween

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ABSTRACT

During the 2014-15 academic year, Miami University celebrated the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer with a plethora of events, exhibitions, and visual reminders of what it means to be called to action. As the university-wide theme, students, faculty, and staff became involved in a communal call to remember, reflect, and participate. The goal of this chapter is to describe how various communities came together to remember and celebrate an important part of local (and national) history through interwoven visual experiences and dialogue. The authors highlight several key art forms that took community members from a place of simple recall, to a more empathetic and compassionate space and attitude concerning events of Freedom Summer. The chapter consists of four examples of spaces that utilized different art forms: the individual/preparatory space, museum space, conference space, and experiential classroom space. Each section weaves through and around the idea of curriculum, communities present, the art form itself and implications for teaching, learning, and civic responsibility.

Activists had to train new volunteers in how to, first, survive in Mississippi and then, secondarily, how to register voters, teach in Freedom Schools, or organize community members. How could they transfer all of their knowledge from their previous struggles to the new recruits? How could they create a shared understanding of their goals and a unified sense of purpose? How could white students of privilege begin

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to understand the institutionalized oppression that the people of Mississippi had experienced? Because the project took place all over the state, the orientation was the one moment when all of the activists were in one place and time, making it an important opportunity to develop group solidarity... (50 Years After Freedom Summer: Understanding the Past, Building the Future, Conference Program, 2014, p. 6)

COMMUNITY ART AS THE INBETWEEN

The way the authors approach community art in this chapter includes a range of visual experiences including the literary arts of a communally-read book, a public art museum space, a public talk from an artist surrounded by his work, a guided theatrical experience, as well as a public outdoor memorial. These visual experiences serve as places becoming spaces (Cheng, 2014) in which participation is a requirement of attendees. The active nature of how these visual experiences bring about questions, concerns, empathy, and compassion from their viewers/participants is only possible because of what May (1991) describes as lingering; taking the opportunity to reflect on how we relate to the world, “and what it means to be in it” (p. 140). The community art/visual experience becomes the space between viewer and other; between viewer and self; between viewer and greater understanding and thus action.

The Individual and Preparatory Space

The freshman class of 2014-2015 at Miami University, along with all other members of the campus community, were asked to read Bruce Watson’s book entitled, *Freedom Summer* prior to the start of the academic school year. Watson (2010) called Freedom Summer “the savage season of 1964 that made Mississippi burn and made America a democracy.” The book was an impetus: a catalyst, to get students and faculty into a newer, and broader frame of mind. The book asked readers to reconsider what they thought they “knew” about the 1960’s, civil rights, prejudice, and the plight of African Americans living in Mississippi during that time.

Through the events of “Celebrating Freedom,” the summer of 1964 was described many times, through many lenses. While this chapter aims to present some of those perspectives through the lens of various art forms, here is a brief introduction to what is commonly referred to as “Freedom Summer”: In 1964, around 800 men and women, mostly northern U.S. college students, came to Western College (now part of Miami University) in Oxford, Ohio to be trained to aid in registering black Mississippians to vote. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, spoken as “snick”) was the central group conducting the week-long training and had three focuses for their volunteers which were:

1. Educate and register black voters;
2. Establish Freedom Schools that emphasized black history and citizenship skills; and
3. Build community centers focusing on health care and other important social services.

The student volunteers who applied and were accepted, were told to bring money for housing, food, and bail (should they be arrested). As the waves of students arrived in Mississippi from Oxford, the difficult and appalling truth unfolded. One of the students (Andrew Goodman) and two civil rights activists (Michael Schwerner and James Chaney) would never make it home and are honored in the memorial on the Western Campus at Miami University.

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