

Alone Togetherness and mutual abandon in the city of flowers and sunshine By Elana Mann

I first encountered the idea of an “artist community” as an undergraduate sculpture student. My mentor, sculptor Ron Leax, was a genius at creating a communal atmosphere in an academic setting without forcing students to be “nice” to one another. Ron would constantly reinforce the idea that sculpture could not be made alone, how an artist needed assistance to make big sculptural works, whether that meant holding or carrying, advising or criticizing. The factors that governed the community of our undergraduate sculpture department were routine, physical proximity, common spaces, shared resources, legacy, and need (economic, bodily, mental, etc.). I still feel Ron’s call for social engagement in relation to large ideas and projects. In my art practice I have always valued constant exchange with friends and colleagues and over the years this investment in collaboration and communication has become a major theme in my work.

The art community in Los Angeles functions on many similar principles as my first art community did when I was an undergrad, values that can be applied to most communities in contemporary society. In Los Angeles there are various common spaces for people to gather, a sense of cultural legacy and an awareness of economic, bodily, and mental need. However, the notions of physical proximity and routine are less concrete; the artist community here is more transitory and transient. Resources are scarce. Communities seem to spring up quickly around certain projects or ideas, and then dissolve just as easily when the project, concept or space disappears. Rather than bemoan this phenomenon as a lack of seriousness or commitment, I actually think this makes the atmosphere dynamic and flexible. It is just as easy to mobilize as to drop out and there are as many willing participants as there are eschewing individuals. One of the drawbacks to the feral state of art projects in Los Angeles is this condition sometimes promotes a cultural propensity for forgetfulness. Firmly set institutions create memories, histories and routines that are hard to bend and shift (for better and worse).

Recently, I have been privy to a variety of conversations about “community” and what it means. There seems to be a collective rethink of how to effect change and work out concepts as a group of artists, rather than as individuals. One recent discussion that I participated in at the lounge of REDCAT highlights some of the confusion that arises when using the word/concept “community.” The moderator (who runs a small non-profit) asked the panelists, “how do you [artists on the panel] attempt to reach out to *the community*.” At the time, I assumed that when the moderator said community what she meant was “un-artists,” and upon looking back on that moment I admit that my assumption could have been incorrect. Did she mean a specialized art audience, or a specific group of people collaborating, or a community that is not regularly exposed to art? The moderator’s inability to clarify exactly what community meant to her, or what community she was referring to, frequently occurs in these types of conversations. Thankfully, one of the panelists, who works with a prominent Los Angeles collective aptly replied (I am paraphrasing), “What is ‘community’ anyway!?! That is such a vague and overused term! Let’s be specific here, community means a group of people that do things together. People keep on talking about *community* like it is a mystical thing, when it is really about a number of individuals meeting in one place and deciding to act on something as a collective.” I have since thought about this statement quite a bit, as it

distills the idea of community into “who and what,” a tangible agreement of joining together.

Last month a friend/colleague asked me to send him a sentence about why I lived in Los Angeles, which he wanted to use in an article he was writing for an arts magazine. I kept on thinking how being in Los Angeles is a conversation between solitude and togetherness- a truly fecund condition for making art. Despite all the distance between us in this ridiculous and gorgeous city, or maybe even because of it, a vast number of artists here seem to be interested in figuring out her/his interiority and how it relates to the interior spaces of others. In Los Angeles we're all alone together, constantly moving within and without this land of incomparable light quality.

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