Take This Moment: Sexual Violence Awareness and the Art Museum as a Vehicle for Social Change

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ABSTRACT  This article documents Take This Moments: Reflection Through ARTS, a sexual violence awareness project that took place in 2006 at the University of Kansas’ Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence, Kansas. The museum collaborated with the university’s Office of Sexual Violence Education and Support Services and GaDuGi SafeCenter, a local service agency that provides assistance to survivors of sexual assaults, to raise public awareness to issues of sexual violence through artistic expression, education, and community involvement.

Take This Moment demonstrated how art museums can address cultural violence and catalyze community awareness-raising efforts. By not only hosting but also assuming an active role in the project’s development, the Spencer Museum made evident its commitment to being a part of the solution to end violence in the Lawrence community. It also repositioned itself as an organization devoted not just to the collection, preservation, and study of fine art, but as a vehicle for social justice advocacy and effecting change.

A month after I was attacked, I began to reject the word “victim.” It made me feel bad about myself. Instead, I accepted the word “survivor.” This word is full of hope and the will to overcome adversity. A victim continues to suffer at the hands of her attacker. I choose to be a survivor. I choose to heal. I choose to regain my power; I will not be destroyed by an act of evil or hate. (Daniels, presentation of “Healing Hands,” April 6, 2006)
INTRODUCTION

On the evening of April 6, 2006, approximately 150 people gathered in the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. The gallery was silent except for the voice of painter and local high school art teacher, Cindy Daniels. Calmly and informatively, she recounted her experience surviving a brutal rape that occurred in her home on January 27, 1993. Rather than focus on the anger, fear, and guilt she felt after the assault, Daniels instead discussed her journey to self-discovery—a transition from self-acknowledgement as victim to survivor—a journey made possible through the practice of painting.

Daniels’ presentation was one of many that took place as part of Take This Moment: Reflection Through ARTS (Awareness, Renewal, Thoughts, Support), an educational arts outreach project that I oversaw and coordinated with three organizations based in Lawrence, Kansas: the Spencer Museum of Art, GaDuGi SafeCenter, and the University of Kansas’ Office of Sexual Violence Education and Support Services (SVESS). For Sexual Violence Awareness Month in April 2006, we collaborated to bring public awareness to issues of sexual violence through artistic expression and community involvement. The main event, which was a free public program, featured presentations by local artists in the forms of artist talks, poetry readings, and a group art-making project. All of these activities demonstrated how individuals and communities can heal through the production and appreciation of art. Further, Take This Moment became a collective educational experience. By situating it as an art museum, whose staff were active participants in its development, this project revealed not only that art can serve as an agent of social change, but also that art museums can, too.

The Spencer Museum of Art is the art museum of the University of Kansas. Its mission is to sustain a diverse, global collection of art and visual culture to encourage interdisciplinary inquiry and to explore the ways in which people make and express meaning at the intersection of art, ideas, and experience. Engaging with these collections, the context of their creation, and their evolving cultural relevance, the Museum sparks curiosity, inspires creativity, and creates provocative connections involving art, artists, scholars, students, alumni, staff, and the public. (Spencer Museum, 2008)

GaDuGi SafeCenter is a Lawrence-based social service organization committed to the movement to end sexual violence through victim-survivor advocacy and support, community awareness, and prevention education throughout Douglas County, Kansas. In the Cherokee Nation, "GaDuGi" means "working together in a community sense." The University's SVESS office educates the university community to prevent sexual assault and provides assistance when assaults occur.

In 2005-06, I served as a community outreach volunteer with the Spencer Museum of Art. The idea for Take This Moment arose from conversations I had with directors Saralyn Reece Hardy of the Spencer Museum, Sarah Jane Russell of GaDuGi (with which I had previously served as a crisis support advocate), and Kristan Abel, SVESS Coordinator. Take This Moment coordinators (who are referred to throughout this essay) consisted of representatives from these three organizations and myself. We met monthly beginning in fall 2005 to brainstorm, problem-solve, and identify and resolve obstacles in preparation for the April event. Planning meetings were grounded in an agreement to understand and meet the needs of all involved parties.

As the relevance of the art museum in the 21st century is continually challenged, the museum’s relationship to its community is constantly evolving. Issues of access, authority, audience, and the production of knowledge have frequently been contested, prompting art museums to further consider how they define themselves, their missions, and their relationships to their communities. The scholarly dialogue here is expansive and ongoing, as evident in the work of Bourdieu, Darbel, & Schnapper (1966, 1991); Tucker (1992); Weil (2002); De Montebello (2003); McClellan (2003); Pitman & Hirzy (2004); Cuno (2004); Janes & Conary (2005); and on social change, community involvement, and art/museum education, Irwin & Kindler (1999); Munley (2004); Jeffers (2005); and Garber (2006). Some, such as Fleming (2005), acknowledge not only the importance of but the necessity for museums to recognize their roles in and responsibilities toward social regeneration.

In this article, I explore how a museum such as the Spencer Museum can serve as a vehicle for social change through an analysis of the Take This Moment project. Certainly Take This Moment was not the first public art event to link sexual violence education to art, nor were the artists involved the first to identify the transformative power of making art and engaging with it. In the United States, many violence awareness organizations have developed notable creative projects with educational components, such as Project Faces to Faces: Unheard Voices, an interactive traveling exhibition based in San Francisco that features full-body portrait castings and audience-activated oral histories of sexual assault survivors; The Voices and Faces Project, a national survivor network based in Chicago that seeks to give voice and face to survivors of sexual violence through projects such as a narrative portrait book and exhibition of the same name; Survivors Art Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit organization that works with survivors of trauma through creative outlets such as an online art gallery, exhibitions, publications, and outreach programming; A Long Walk Home: A Story of a Rape Survivor, a project founded by sisters Scherzer and Silushman Tillet that combines performing and visual arts with spoken word and oral history to document rape and sexual trauma; Breaking the Silence, Shattering the Myths: A Sexual Assault Awareness Art Project, developed by the Indiana Coalition Against Sexual Violence; Arte Sana (Art Heals), a nonprofit agency in Texas that works with underserved survivors of racial/ethnic violence and promotes healing through community education and arts such as Covisa Lastimado (Healing the Wounded Heart), a traveling art exhibition of survivor art; Voice Against Sexual Violence, a mural designed by Xavier Cortada in 2005 for the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape; and Interactive Theatre, an organization that uses drama and performance in the New York area to educate on sexual violence.

Various museums and galleries have hosted exhibitions that shed light on sexual violence as well. Some of these include The Subject of Rape at The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1993; Pulse: Art, Healing, and Transformation at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, in 2003; and The Body as Risk: Photography of Disorder, Illness and Healing at the International Center of Photography in 2005. However, Take This Moment marked the first time an event of this nature was made available to the Lawrence community; its taking place at the Spencer Museum signified the museum’s commitment to being a part of the solution to end violence for the betterment of the community at large.

WHY ART? WHY AN ART MUSEUM?

SEXUAL VIOLENCE SUPPORT SERVICES
IN LAWRENCE, KANSAS

Sexual violence is a broad term with many layers of meanings. Similar to the internal meaning-making that takes place when an individual engages with art, how one interprets sexual violence is personal as well. Therefore, people define it in many different ways. Throughout this essay, I use sexual violence to include all of the following: rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, incest, and childhood sexual abuse. In addition to having multiple meanings, sexually violent behavior takes many forms: physical, verbal, emotional, or any combination of these. Its continued existence in society via the numerous cultural, political, and economic systems that perpetuate it is complicated, and it knows no boundaries. Regardless of sex or gender, people of all ages, races, social classes, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and abilities have been victims of acts of sexual aggression.

GaDuGi SafeCenter and the SVESS are the two primary support services for sexual violence advocacy and education in Lawrence. The SVESS office serves the university campus, and GaDuGi SafeCenter serves the many communities of and around Lawrence by offering 24-hour confidential support services.

There is a need for such support services in Kansas as there is in communities nationwide. While nationally the number of acts of sexually-based crimes has decreased greatly since the early 1990s, such acts still take place daily. In 2004-05, the number of reported rape and sexual assault victimizations across the country was 200,780 (Catalano, 2006). Further, the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (2007) reported that every two and a half minutes in the United States, a person is sexually assaulted, and that in their lifetimes, one in six women and one in thirty-three men will be sexually assaulted. In Kansas in 2005, there were 1,099 rapes reported to law enforcement (Kansas Bureau of Investigation, 2005). Yet nationwide, acts of sexual violence remain one of the most underreported crimes. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 2005, only thirty-eight percent of rapes and other sexual assaults were reported to law enforcement (Catalano, 2006). It is this quieted nature surrounding sexually-based crimes that Take This Moment sought to proactively address.

TAKE THIS MOMENT THROUGH ART

Take This Moment’s four primary objectives were to educate the Lawrence community about issues of sexual violence and local support services, demonstrate how art functions as a means of healing and a platform for awareness-raising, honor sexual assault survivors and community members who seek to end violence, and show how art museums can become sites of social justice advocacy. Subsequent goals of the project included developing new audiences by extending community knowledge about all involved organizations, broadening the knowledge base of pre-existing audiences by integrating the audiences of each organization, and establishing a strategic and maintainable alliance between the three primary organizations involved. Overarching these objectives was the fundamental desire to enhance attendees’ intrinsic benefits—defined by McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks (2004) as the “effects inherent in the arts experience that add value to people’s lives” (p. 37)—of engaging with art and offering a nurturing space for people to make meaning of art.

Project coordinators were deliberate in setting broad social goals for the project and were aware that in doing so, assessing the impact of Take This Moment on the greater Lawrence community would be difficult, if not impossible. Instead, coordinators looked
it was a way to unite all who were present. She elaborated that it was “about creating a safe and sacred place, for those who were sharing their experiences, as well as for those who were listening” (Stemmerman, personal communication, May 11, 2006). As Stemmerman spoke, her words were accompanied by the percussive instrumentation of Marty Olson. Olson commented that the rhythms of the *djembe*, a chalice-shaped hand drum, and the *niti stick*, a bamboo log filled with beans, reflected the evening’s meditative nature. He selected these instruments because, to him, the *djembe* offered a rich, wide range of tones, and the rain stick, reminiscent of gentle waves, conveyed relaxation by simulating slow, cleansing breaths.

After this opening, teenagers affiliated with Van Go Mobile Arts, Inc., an arts-based social service agency that uses art as a tool to give young adults life-changing experiences, shared poems they wrote during a poetry arts workshop. Van Go works with underserved and at-risk teenagers in the community through after-school and summer arts programs, such as JAMS (Jobs in the Arts Make Sense), a youth job-training program that employs approximately ninety teenagers year-round who earn minimum wage for producing artwork commissioned by the community. For *Take This Moment*, Van Go was represented by six students, each of whom recited poems dealing with the existing realities of sexual abuse in their lives. “A bunch of us have gone through sexual abuse and sexual violence,” stated one of the poets, “It’s time for us to start speaking up about what’s so wrong about it and how it hurts people” (as cited in Paget, 2006, p. 2D).

Elizabeth Schullz and Caryn Mirrnav-Goldberg gave additional readings. Schullz, a retired University of Kansas Professor of English, shared poems grounded in themes of survival and heroism, citing examples of everyday heroes from her own life. Mirrnav-Goldberg, a certified poetry therapist and a breast cancer survivor who uses writing as a means of coping with her personal struggles stated,

*Poetry* allows readers and listeners to enter into the poem and see what they find while dwelling there. Poems that tell (and mostly, show) important truths in true voices can help listeners more clearly see their own experiences, and perhaps see their experiences in a new context that gives them a bit more freedom, lightness, understanding. (Personal communication, May 15, 2006)

Having led numerous sessions to help others grow through poetry, Mirrnav-Goldberg has witnessed the power of healing discovered through writing. Most affecting to her has been observing how participants in her writing workshops, when dealing with personal experiences with violence and suffering, use writing as a way to “navigate through their own healing” (as cited in Paget, 2006, p. 2D). For Mirrnav-Goldberg, poetry serves multiple functions as a healing agent: as a vessel for personal expression, it enables writers to explore their feelings; when shared with an audience, it inspires others to tell their stories, value their voices, and know they are not alone.

Cindy Daniels and Margaret Weisbrod-Morris led individual and group-interactive visual presentations. Daniels spoke from personal experience about how the act of painting was a catalyst for personal healing. Just as violence may result in a “disorganization of the self” (Bard & Sangrey, 1979, p. 35) for the victim, the process of creating art may lead to a self-reorganization or rediscovery. She explained,

On the path from victim to survivor, I learned that pain can destroy or pain can transform one’s life. Painting helped begin this transformation for me. Before the attack, I had been a potter. After it, my creative light

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*Determining a more specific breakdown of those in attendance is not possible. Demographic information of audience members—how they self-identified (as "survivor," "victim," "artist," "social service worker," "friend") and what motivated them to attend—("to heal," "to support," "to learn")—was not sought by event organizers, as it was not pertinent in assessing the overall success of *Take This Moment*. Further, due to the sensitive nature of sexual violence and to respect attendees who did not wish to be publicly acknowledged, all three organizations agreed to take steps to protect the identities of audience members. Attendees were not asked to register, nor were they asked to identify themselves or provide personal information in any way. No photographs or digital recordings other than those of the presenters (who had agreed ahead of time to be photographed) were allowed.*
just blew out, and I could not touch clay. Not being able to create threw me into a deep depression. In frustration, I picked up my old watercolors from a class I took in college. Through painting, I was able to express my pain, and only through painting for me, did the expression of this pain finally begin to feel like healing. (Daniels, presentation of “Healing Hands” at the Spencer Museum of Art, April 6, 2006)

As a result of her engagement with painting after the attack, Daniels created Healing Hands (see Figure 1), a multi-media-based work rich in symbolism that she shared with the audience. A golden triangle, symbolizing unity, houses tornado-like figures, perhaps reflecting the destructive forces produced by humanity. Pink folds appear within as soft and vulnerable. However, these figures are encompassed by hands, representing the ability to heal; jewels to remind viewers of the daily beauty and gifts to be treasured; and fabric, seemingly stitched through the pain, holding the entire work together.

Margaret Weisbrod-Morris, an art therapist and the Director of Education at the Lawrence Arts Center, discussed the use of art as a treatment method for survivors of trauma. She organized It's in Our Hands, an artwork that engaged audience members as creators, during the Take This Moment evening (see Figure 2). Each person was given a marker and a 5"x5" square sticker imprinted with an image of a hand. The hand images varied—some were children’s hands, some were older and wrinkled, some were adorned with jewelry, some were formed into a fist, others were fully extended, and all were of diverse skin tones. Weisbrod-Morris asked attendees to write a message on each sticker. As people wrote, she read the following text:

Take this moment: to find your voice, or lend your voice to someone else not here tonight.
Take this moment to think about being in this place tonight, together.
Take this moment to reflect on the message you, we, and our community wants to, or needs to, remember about tonight.
Take this moment to give yourself permission to write a word, sentence, or paragraph on one of the papers provided to you. Please choose whichever hand you prefer.
Take this moment to give yourself the courage to add your paper to the canvas—if you wish, you can hand your paper to someone else to add it for you. (Weisbrod-Morris, presentation of “It’s in Our Hands” at the Spencer Museum of Art, April 6, 2006)

After they wrote their statements, they added their stickers to a 49x64-inch tea-painted canvas. Through this process, the canvas became a physical record of the evening, documenting the memories, voices, and feelings of those present. Examples of some of the messages included “Where there is fear, let healing begin. Where malice resides, let compassion creep in,” “I am a survivor, too, and I need to learn to forgive,” and “Our most fragile moments help us discover strength and power.” Each person’s message marked an individual and unique statement. Combined, they became a powerful testimony of unity, strength, and transformation through participation.

After the stickers were added to the canvas, Take This Moment attendees were invited to take part in Nighttime, a self-guided gallery walk organized by the museum that highlighted selections from its permanent collection. Included works, such as Landscape with Four Trees by Birger Sandzén (1920), Jonas Lie’s After the Concert (1900), and Nuns in the Certosa Cloister (ca. 1823) by Franz Ludwig Catel, focused on the theme of light in ways reflective of the violence awareness theme of reclaiming the night. The featured images presented night as a serene time in which light, in the forms of candles and moonlight, not only
"SPIN-OFF" PROJECTS: EXPANDING THE DIALOGUE

Take This Moment created a ripple of awareness-raising efforts throughout the Lawrence community, and several individuals and organizations developed spin-off arts projects. These on- and off-campus projects included a print exhibition of Charles Hall's This is Not an Invitation to Rape Me awareness campaign; a student-organized poetry slam: Goodnight Moon, an art benefit organized by local artists; an on-campus display of the Panty Line Project; and a panel presentation by sexual trauma survivors as part of the University of Kansas's annual Oral History Workshop.

Charles Hall's print series, This is Not an Invitation to Rape Me, was displayed in one of the main hallways of the University Student Union from April 3-17, 2006. A rape awareness initiative intended to combat the myth that women ask or deserve to be raped, the series consists of a collection of provocative black-and-white images, each a snapshot of a potentially dangerous or vulnerable situation. To introduce the series to the public, Hall joined with the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women (LACAAW); his prints were first exhibited in 1996 at the Kreckhoff Art Gallery at UCLA (Tanaka, 1996). The images, diverse in their subjects and stories, are all tagged with the same caption in bold red letters: "This is not an invitation to rape me."

During the 2005-06 school year, the University of Kansas's Student Union Activities Board hosted monthly poetry slams during which readers presented five minutes of original poetry and spoken word compositions. For Sexual Violence Awareness Month 2006, this slam was devoted entirely to the themes of sexual assault, survival, and expression.

Goodnight Moon, an art benefit held on April 8, 2006, featured the work of six artists: Carley Dooree, Becca Ramsport, Sara Rich, Paula Richardson, Elizabeth Rowley, and Shana Rossi Talley. This benefit for sexual violence awareness support services was held off-campus, and participating artists created works of various media that drew on themes of night. Ramsport, organizer of the Goodnight Moon benefit, chose the title from the book of the same name. She explained,

[Goodnight Moon] recalls a favorite children's book that celebrates how magical and beautiful night can be, and the sense of innocence, safety, and love we associate with childhood. Similarly, the goal of the Goodnight Moon art benefit is to honor and celebrate those same feelings and experiences throughout our lifetimes, in the context of personal empowerment, creative expression, and community support of sexual violence awareness and prevention. (Ramsport, personal communication, February 6, 2006)

The Panty Line Project, a controversial display of women's lingerie decorated by sexual assault survivors and strung across a clothesline, was originally created by Lori Minick to allow survivors a creative outlet through which they express themselves by embellishing and writing messages on women's undergarments. This project, similar to the Clothesline Project that was initiated to raise public awareness of issues of domestic violence (Russell, 1997), was on view in university dormitory hallways and campus green spaces to remind passers-by of the prevalence of sexual violence in our communities.

The theme of the seventh annual University of Kansas Oral History Workshop, Healing Narratives, Undying Words, centered on stories of healing and health care. Sherrie Tucker, Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas, who was also one of the workshop's coordinators, approached Take This Moment organizers to suggest
that the workshop, which was sponsored by the University’s Hall Center for the Humanities, could provide a platform for local sexual assault survivors to share their stories. On April 10, 2006, women from the Lawrence area recounted their experiences with rape and sexual abuse. Their panel was called “Remembering Who We Are: Survivors Telling Their Stories.” By raising awareness of rape and by challenging people’s perceptions about violence, these projects asked people to reconsider their assumptions about rape and how current social structures exist and perpetuate sexual violence. In this way, all Take This Moment spinoff projects offered powerful examples of additional dialogues that conveyed awareness of violence.

CONCLUSION

Take This Moment and its related projects revealed that individuals and groups, art, artists, and art museums are all able to address cultural violence and catalyze community awareness-raising efforts. Of course, there is always room for further development. As this was the first collaborative project between the Spencer Museum, GaDuGi, and SVESS, organizers identified three primary ways to grow the program in the future: expand the project to other university campuses throughout Douglas County; generate more programming geared toward younger audiences; and develop a digital/web component. In addition to the University of Kansas, Douglas County is also home to Haskell Indian Nations University (Lawrence, Kansas) and Baker University (Baldwin City, Kansas). While both had been informed of the project, more could have been done to encourage involvement from these two university communities (for example, organized transportation from their campuses to the Spencer Museum). Further, through the poetry presentations of Van Go Mobile Arts students, the often unheard voices of sexual violence survivors were heard—those of youth and teenagers. Working with them in mind, organizers were eager to develop a violence-awareness-through-art program with area middle and high schools that would actively engage students to consider issues of sexual violence through art. Finally, having a Web presence could extend the themes of healing and learning through art as well as the role of the art museum as an advocate for social justice to a broader, global audience.

But despite the potential for improvement, this first-time project broke ground in Lawrence by providing a new, unique opportunity for the community: a collaborative sexual violence awareness art experience that was educational, aesthetic, and healing. For example, one attendee, a female rape survivor who attended Take This Moment, provided the following testimony of what the project meant to her:

This event was a real turning point in my life. I have begun to feel very empowered by the experience. In response to that experience, I have decided to go back to graduate school. This was something that I quit after [I was attacked] because I was just so fearful of being alone, driving alone, [and] going to class at night... I felt an opening in the universe and stepped through it into something new. I am exhausted but feel really alive. (Personal communication, May 16, 2006)

Museums exist to engage the public with works of art, and as cultural institutions, they are able to reflect current changes affecting society as a whole. David Fleming, Director of the National Museums Liverpool, has stated, “Museums are social constructs, and powerful ones at that, and they need to assume their place in the mainstream of contemporary life, not sit eccentrically on the margins” (2005). Today’s art museums have become increasingly multifunctional. At their core, they are sites devoted to the collection, conservation, and the academic study of fine art. They also have become multi-use recreational spaces and entertainment venues. Further, as presented in this essay, they may serve as agents of change toward more just socio-cultural practices. In particular, through Take This Moment, the Spencer Museum demonstrated that it is an organization that is not only dedicated to the collection and preservation of works of art, but also one that is committed to improving its community by providing an awareness space where experience and understanding are made available as a framework for individuals to heal and learn through personal engagement with art.

Victims and survivors of sexual violence deserve the opportunity to know that they are not alone; while the past cannot be changed, individual and communal healing processes can be initiated, and art museums can function as important sites of instigating such social transformations. At the beginning of this essay, I asked how a museum can actively initiate social change. Take This Moment at the Spencer Museum demonstrated how this is possible. The Spencer offered a place for people to make meaning of art, actively promoted social change through education and awareness-raising, used its collection and resources, and by partnering with social service groups, became a powerful vehicle for effecting change that impacted individual lives and communities.

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