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Playing with Clay: Art Video as Documentary, as Story, and as Satire

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The AoMO conference in Bled, Slovenia in early September, 2016 engaged attendees through a variety of unique experiences. In addition to traditional academic conference paper presentations, participants relished Slovenian dinners in a town square and a castle, watched an artist in residence crafting a chair from indigenous materials from the local countryside, were treated to a poetry slam, were captivated by an address by a Sarajevo based artistic director sharing reflections on producing a play during the early 90s occupation, heard a music/leadership performance while sitting within the orchestra, watched a play about capitalism, took part in morning stretch activities and for some, attended a session entitled "The Art of Doing Nothing".

One unconventional, yet compelling shared experience was the creation of art using claylike plasticine. Individual models were created and then displayed on a table in the public space. Over the 4 days of the conference, participant/artists could move/arrange their individual pieces on the table as they saw fit. From individual creation to finding one's place in the emerging three-dimensional collage, participants engaged with the art both actively and passively over time as maker, placer, mover, and observer.

This commentary is a review of the video (<http://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/oa/vol6/iss1/6/>) produced about this art experience - *The Artistic Studio*. This reviewer was an attendee at the conference and a participant in the art experience. As a professor of management, I also design and use art and nature based experiential activities in the classroom and consulting engagements. The challenge is to answer the question did the video capture the experience? And, is it art?

The urge to classify an art video into one of the typical movie categories – drama, comedy, thriller, musical, sci fi, animation, or documentary – can limit one's perspective. The video defies categorization. Because it cuts across a couple of movie genres and because it does more I would like to suggest another approach.

Let's look at the work from three different video lenses:

Documentary – at its most basic level this video is a still photo montage with narration and music overlay of an art experience produced over 4 days by 140 conference participants. It describes the **context** (beautiful Bled, Slovenia at the kickoff session of the AoMO conference with a mix of academic faculty in management with practicing artists given the invitation to make something out of the modeling material). The **content** was simply the plasticine with a

square piece of cardboard. The **process** had two parts – the creation of the individual models/objects and the sharing of the models on a large table in a public space in the building. Over the 4-day event, participants could move their own objects anywhere in the bigger collage. Over time, various scenes and spaces became defined. Materials from nature such as dried flowers, twigs, and leaves were introduced as new elements. One could engage with the emerging diorama as they liked. The visible **outcome** was a 20x20 3d collage of dozens of different figures and models in an eclectic scene. The less visible outcome was a set of personal experiences on how one's individual piece became incorporated into the whole. The video documented the basic elements of the process and shared a sampling of reflective insights by participants.

Story/narrative – in the words of the narrator, this is a story of using an experiential art process to “explore unconscious patterns of thought and behavior and to create a sense of community”. The plot is set in motion by the initial creations and placement on the table. The rest of the story is created by the audience. Such a story is open to a variety of interpretations – you get out of it what you put into it, you are not forced to conform, the experiences vary widely and may not all fit into the narrative that is offered. Here is the magic – the story conveyed in the video is one social construction (the artist/convener) with a number of reflective anecdotes by participants/artists sharing what they made and offering other interpretations of what they got from the experience. It allows for others to do their own meaning making. Without pressure to conform, without the need to question meaning while in the middle of the process, without concern about how my piece will fit into the new “whole”, one gets a sense of freedom – to be, to play, to let go, to color outside the lines. The story of the experience is as varied as the participants with one element in common – participate by making something and submitting it to the collective. From there, choose to engage as you see fit – no script, no formula, no pre-conceived role to play. Step in and out of the process whenever you want. Again, the magic is that the experience captured in the video allows for the variety of stories about the experience and what it meant to people to emerge.

Satire/comedy – hidden under the guise of an academic conference where rigor, relevance, and tradition drive many programs, the art experience captured in the video must be carefully protected. If our traditional academic colleagues were to see this, they would question our professional standards and likely be more rigorous when approving conference travel and attendance particularly Arts and Management conferences. Just think – we were playing with clay and elements from nature; we made symbolic images of animals, buildings, flowers, bodies and body parts. We were allowed to move our creations around the table like kids playing in a sandbox. Some would suggest such freedom must be controlled. After all we weren't in our seats, there was no paper and pencil, we engaged by choice, and we didn't measure learning outcomes. And where are the references, citations, and documentation that this actually encourages learning, creativity, and community. Like the words from a poem:

Beginning, middle, end

Linear illusion

Confusing message

Like coloring inside the lines

Much of the making of work, work of meaning, meaningful work, meaning making

Exists in stages of incompleteness

A limbo

Until liberated, made real, touched, and set free...

The video is approached as a conscious endeavor to capture the process and outcomes of the art experience. It does that by taking a serious cut at the “art play” we were given permission to step into. Yet, by some it may be viewed as elementary and derivative. In their own words, the creators saw “a release of spontaneous conversations, a work in process, and one step towards international connection and community”. Perhaps. Call it the artist prerogative. It is one point of view.

To be sure, the video captures the essence of experiential learning – that of suspending judgment, stepping into different, albeit unique, situations and taking notice of how one interprets what happens and what it means. The 4-day art experience was offered as an opportunity to engage in an unstructured process, to dance and improvise with other participants, and to notice the outcome in both the physical product and in our own interpretation of the process and outcome. The video captures the experience and invites us to reflect on how we engaged and what meaning we give to our piece of the whole. As a piece of art, the video opens the door for us to reflect on this and other experiences in life where we don’t know the answer, might be worried about looking good, are timid about stepping in or noticing what is happening around us. As art, it allows us to quiet our mind, and just be present to what was created individually and by the other 139 people from other parts of the world.

In a subtle way, the video invites ongoing dialog. For those attending it forces the question – was your experience similar to the ones shared in the video. Perhaps you have a different take on what you saw happen on the table. You now have permission to reflect and share what happened for you.

The video also provides sufficient description to replicate the process in other settings. Imagine it being used in a classroom where the emerging collective art evolves over a regular semester. Or consider a session with executives in a change process where the exercise might open them up to letting go and recreating their enterprise where resources are redeployed in a better way. Perhaps it might find its best use in a community wide problem solving effort where differences of color, scale, or role get redefined out of the conversations that the exercise generates.

Good art compels us to ask whether we were touched, moved or inspired. The answer is yes. Not because the video or the experience at the conference hit me over the head with an insight or shouted out what I was supposed to get from the experience. It worked because of its subtlety, its invitation to share and engage however I saw fit. It reminds us as teachers and dancers, as visual artists and academics that the simple (and perhaps the unconventional) may be profound. As with the video, our job is to set the stage for “scheduled serendipity”. It is those moments where real learning happens.

About the Author

Larry Lad is Associate Professor of Management in the Lacy School of Business at Butler University. He teaches MBA and undergraduate courses in Strategy, Leadership, and Social Enterprise. Larry has taught in Executive Education Programs for Indiana, Purdue, Louisiana State, and Harvard and has international teaching experience in the Netherlands (Wageningen), Germany (Zeppelin University), Finland (Helsinki School of Economics), and China (Nankai University). He is also a practicing artist and poet.