

ABSTRACT: SILVER STORIES INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The power of ambiguity: The collaborative story of a radical intervention located within a sheltered workshop in the United States

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Abstract

The US, as much of the world, has failed to provide an equal environment and life to people labeled as “intellectually disabled”. Historically, this group suffered forced sterilization, institutionalization, exploitation, and abuse. While the disability rights movement has improved the conditions for many, people continue to live out their lives in segregated environments such as group homes and sheltered workshops (vocational training facilities that offer rote piece work for pennies per hour). In 2009, I co-founded a radical space of possibilities within a sheltered workshop located in Portland, Oregon. This art studio, community gallery, event space, and functioning urban farm was collaboratively shaped by the participants (formerly occupied with factory related work in the sheltered workshop) and myself, as well as dozens of community members and volunteers. We called it Project Grow. Before this space could morph into a space of possibilities we had to interrogate the language we used to define others and ourselves. We felt that all available words and categories were not only inadequate but inflicted significant epistemological violence. At the core of our space was the elevation and appreciation of ambiguity. Rather than seeking an alternate label for the group that was historically segregated (and in many aspects of their life continues to be so) we resisted categories. Project Grow curated gallery events involving artists from all over the world, ran a monthly lecture series that provoked conversations related to our experiences as system transformers and other topics relevant to our world. We grew vegetables year round and delivered them by bike to our members of the community and restaurants who supported us. We directed monthly art workshops that problematized the meaning of teacher and student, art and learning. On Halloween we crafted a fantastical Haunted House in our studio, directly pushing back on disturbing stereotypes related to people whose bodies may not fit the norm. In short, with love and joy and curiosity we sought to create a world that elevated possibilities and diverse, fascinating abilities.

Messy chaotic experiments such as Project Grow are difficult to capture on paper or even in words. From the beginning I documented to experience through photographs and videos. These archive videos and photographs are not just to tell the story but to inspire others to embrace ambiguity and provoke change. I would love to share the story of this intervention in a system that has been formidable and resistant to change.

Keywords: Disability, systems change, intervention, collaboration, human rights



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