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Community Arts Case Study: Machine Project



For my case study I've decided to look at Machine Project. On their web site (machineproject.com) they describe themselves as "a non-profit community space based in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles investigating art, technology, natural history, science, music, literature, and food." They operate out of a storefront where they host artists in residence, events, workshops, and site-specific installations using "hands on knowledge to make rarefied knowledge accessible." (machineproject.com) They also work as a "loose confederacy of 30-40 artists" both locally and nationally producing shows and developing visitor experience centered projects for museums. In their mission they state:

"Machine Project exists to encourage heroic experiments of the gracefully over-ambitious. We provide educational resources to people working with technology, we collaborate with artists to produce site-specific works, and we promote conversations between scientists, poets, technicians, performers, and the community of Los Angeles as a whole." (machineproject.com/faq)

They fit my definition for a community arts organization because they are working to create creative community by making non-traditional and sophisticated knowledge more accessible through classes and interactive events. They've collaborated with formal art spaces such as LACMA and The Hammer Museum, to stage short term takeovers, creating fun and whimsical programs that allow visitors to experience these spaces in new and playful ways. Examples of

projects they've done in these spaces includes staging concerts in closets under stairs, and creating soundtracks for the museum experience.

Through their "hands-on" approach they use their storefront space as a place for people to participate in the creation of art. They are one of the few places outside of universities that teach classes on rare and technological art practices such as MIG welding, basic electronics, sci-fi writing, millinery, eel synthesizer building, Paleolithic net-making, circuit-bending, robotic art, Disneyland's Haunted Mansion effects, and more. The classes aren't free, they range from \$20-\$250, which blocks access to numerous populations in the Los Angeles area, yet when compared to the cost of formal education, it makes a large knowledge base available for a relatively lower cost comparable to fees from a community college. These fees also form a large portion of the basis for covering operating expenses.

All of the events housed in the space are FREE and include, movie nights, poetry readings, ghost story telling, and pancake breakfasts. These events are only limited by the capacity of the space, which only fits about fifty or sixty people at a time. This smaller scale "creates a bubble of community enclosing both the audience and the participants"(Allen 2008, p.10). In planning their events they assume that "curiosity, joyfulness and play are the most important parts of an interesting conversation."(Machine Project Brochure)

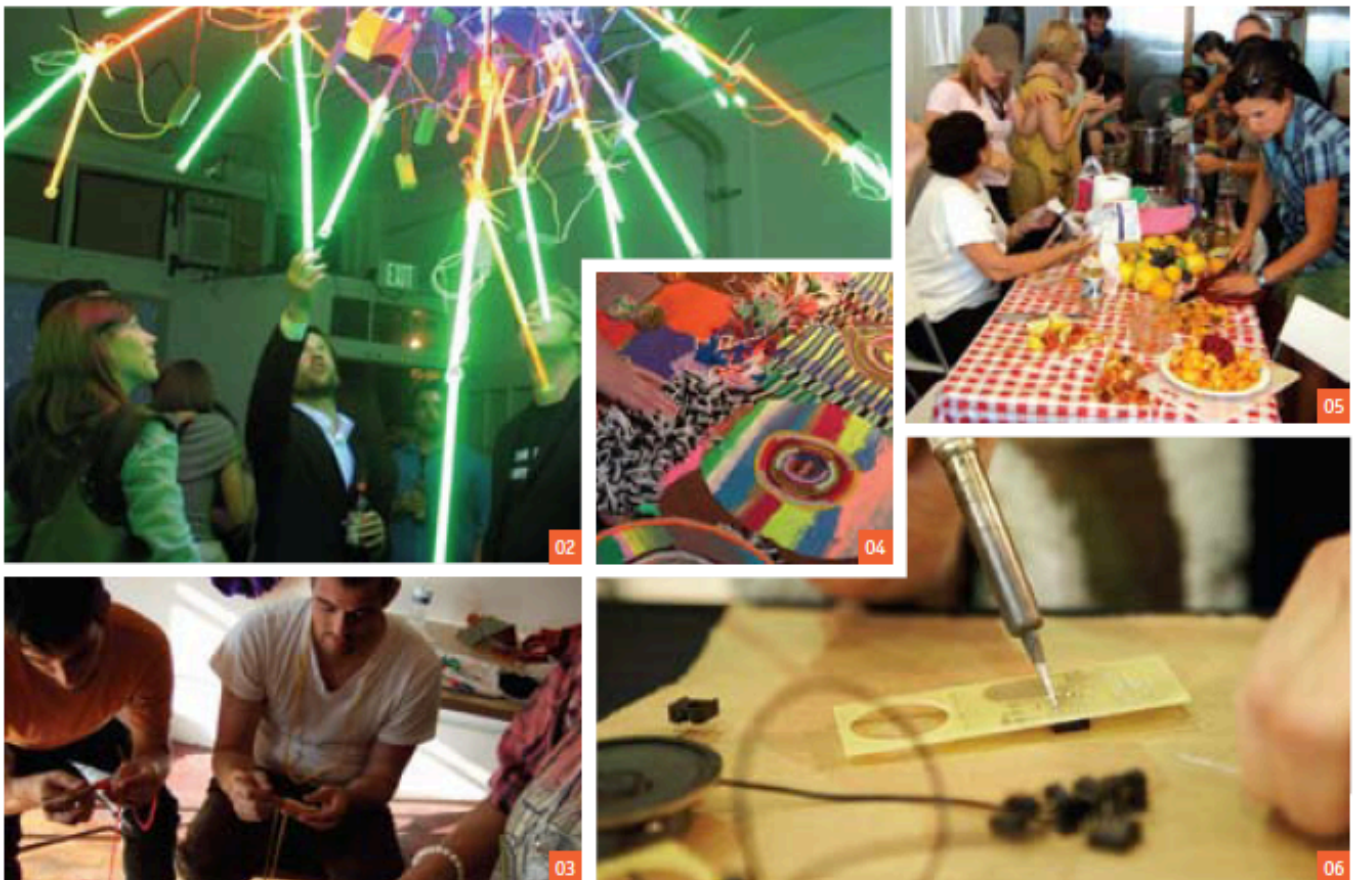


Often the space will be transformed by large-scale installations, which shape the themes of their event programming. In 2009 artists Christy McCaffrey and Sara Newey transformed their space

into an outdoor forest. In Los Angeles, outdoor forests are hard to come by, so this became a campground oasis for Los Angelenos to gather in a new and exciting environment. Unlike formal art spaces, it's perfectly acceptable to just hang out in Machine Project, with a guitar and even a picnic basket.

Machine Project is strongly connected to their neighborhood, thriving off of the diversity and quirkiness of places and residents from the "Time Travel Mart to the Saturday pupusa ladies" (machineproject.com/faq). Mark Allen describes the need for creating the organization as a rebuilding of an "infrastructure for spaces and communities that allow people to come together around a life of ideas." He goes on to say, "Machine Project has always been about encouraging people like you or me, or even drastically unlike you or me, to make culture for themselves and encourage them to want to experience it together." This idea of bringing people together to create their own culture lies at the heart of community arts practices. Machine Project is all about giving people the technical knowledge to create works using the most current technologies. They create a creative community where people can make, tell, and act ridiculous.

In the context of Los Angeles, a thriving metropolis where diversity, and art thrives, Machine Project stands out as an intimate art space that is inclusive while still presenting technically sophisticated work. Many of the community arts organizations we've examined in the Community Arts Praxis course focus on specific, often marginalized, communities. Machine Project does not. I see them as a model for how an art organization can create infrastructure to foster creative community in any type of neighborhood. Aside, from the setback of workshop fees, this type of organization could exist and flourish in almost any environment.



References

Allen, Mark (2008) Introduction, [A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), Machine Project

machineproject.com retrieved on 2/9/11

Machine Project Brochure, downloaded from machineproject.com 2/9/11