

Imagery and Meaning Making: Preparing for and Learning about a Large-Scale Object Performance Event in Community

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Abstract

This study examines the narratives of All Souls artists and performers in Tucson, Arizona asking how artists learn about, share information on, and make meaning through a large-scale event and in their art. This work focuses on, in particular, the idea that objects are more than material products, they are a center point in the meanings attached to as well as the learning processes involved in the performance itself. Methodologically, this paper builds on in-depth qualitative interviews with artists – both expert and novice – involved in the procession. This research is based on observational notes taken at differing temporal points leading up to the event, across two years of parades, preparation, and celebration. Interview transcripts are treated as narratives and examined in light of notes taken in the field to address the following research question: What does it mean for artists to teach about, learn about, and engage in object performance when representing their experiences of death and dying through the All Souls Procession?

Keywords: representation, object performance, information-sharing, art, community.

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1 Introduction

This research focuses on activities around Tucson, Arizona's All Souls Procession, also called the Day of the Dead parade or *Día de los Muertos*. This event began near the end of the millennium, when a handful of locals led by a female Tucson artist ("Lydia") gathered with objects in the forms of giant puppets, sculptures, and costumes to honor those now dead to whom they had been close—Lydia organized the first one to commemorate her deceased father. Today, the procession has thousands of participants—including school marching bands and out-of-state visitors—and many more spectators. The procession includes artists who share their stories through object performance, many of whom have only recently learned about object performance and the parade.

This study examines the narratives of All Souls artists and performers asking how artists learn about, share information on, and make meaning through this event and in their art. This work focuses on, in particular, the idea that objects are more than material products, they are a center point in the meanings attached to and the learning processes involved in the performance itself. Methodologically, this paper builds on in-depth qualitative interviews with artists – both expert and novice – involved in the procession. This research is based on observational notes taken at differing temporal points leading up to the event, across two years of parades, preparation, and celebration. Interview transcripts are treated as narratives and examined in light of notes taken in the field to address the following research question: What does it mean for artists to teach about, learn about, and engage in object performance when representing their experiences of death and dying through the All Souls Procession?

2 Data and Research Process

This study relies most primarily on narratives drawn from interviews with artists who perform with objects and/or assist others in doing so (participants have been given pseudonyms to protect identity). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) have referred to the narrative method of inquiry as having "a dual nature as both an empirical method and an ontological paradigm," thereby creating stories while helping members make meaning via telling their stories (p. 180). For this particular presentation, we focus on narratives drawn from interviews with Michael at his puppetry studio, Linda as she built an object at an 'all souls' workshop,

and Cody who was more practiced in object performance. These narratives were then analyzed thematically and interpretively.

Through their personal accounts of their own involvement in the procession, each of the interviewees offered a distinct perspective on representational processes, information sharing, and meaning-making. Michael at his puppet studio responded to an initial question about *collaboration* to ultimately highlight the importance of sharing and working together as a community of artists without compromising ownership and control of artistic output. First-time object-performer Linda maintained her own personalized meaning undergirding her participation in the procession – she was building a motorcycle in honor of her fiancé who was killed in a motorcycle accident. Cody who runs workshops for the events, was open to discussing meaning around objects and their construction process but, at the same time, exuded a strong sense of ‘big picture’ understanding, power, ownership, and confidence in his narrative – he was the ‘expert’ teaching and inspiring others to participate.

3 Findings Resulting from Qualitative Coding of Narratives and Observational Notes

Imagery and Meaning-making

Linda: ...It's a replica of the motorcycle that my fiancé and I were involved in the motorcycle accident which um yeah, he died ... So it's just, you know, a piece ...of a rider-less motorcycle...

Linda: Well this one, I'm going to lay a single rose on the seat um, just a signal – you know, make that statement...

(also)

Cody: Well the thing that totally stuck me about the Día de los Muertos in Mexico was that it was fun. It wasn't heavy and it was more like um, you know, they put out a meal and a glass of tequila and a cigarette for Grandpa, you know? It was like “Come party with us,” and it was like very lighthearted. And you know ...those little diorama things they make with the little skeletons and there's the businessman skeleton, and the seamstress and the doctor. You know, it's like everybody's equal in death. There's no [chuckles] ...there's no one-upping anybody, you know? So there's kind of like this beautiful irreverence in the Mexican culture for death and you just don't see that in European culture. In European culture they've had too much plague or something you know, where it's like “Oh, death is a scary monster coming!” And Americans are so like in denial about death, like you know, “We're going to put makeup on Grandpa!” [chuckles] You know? Like he was yellow last time I saw him; he looks really pretty with that shade of lipstick. So you know, I really like that humor and irreverence; but it was also like they acknowledged people came before us, we're here now and there are people coming after us.

Collaboration, Information-Sharing, and Learning in Community

MC: ...when people talk about collabora↑ting with me↑ usually↑ it- it's like in one e-ear and w- out the other=

DD: =huh huh huh wh- why's [tha...

MC: ...I can't(!) seriously think about collaborating with anyone except .hhh like a really good musicic↑an (.) right now.

DD: Hm.:

MC: Uhm (2.8) >I guess< I just don't have the the skills, I don't have the organiza↑tional (.) .h temperament tah >tah be able< to (.) be patient with people and (.) (COUGH) allow other people's visions. ...

MC: ...(.) it's kind of um-an obstacle (.) It'd be kind of good. to have (.) kind of that(!)—In THAT way I would like to collaborate.

(also)

DD: What was, what was the purpose of doing the workshops for you?

Cody: Community.

DD: Community.

Cody: Community building, yeah.

DD: *Mm-hmm. Like... Is it, I mean you can community build with a party. Why an object workshop?*

Cody: *...Okay, if I have parties it's always my friends who show up and do these things with me which is fine, I love my friends. But I want to be more inclusive. Like they've never made anything in their life – those girls who are making that motorcycle in there, they've never made anything in their lives, you know? And so like that to me is where it's really cool cause you're like "Check this out," you know? That's where the magic happens.*

Information on Object Performance: Going Viral, Catching On

Jim showed up a few years ago ... you saw his lantern? that he had on an agave stalk? ...And then like so I figured out something similar made out of cardboard –we did these cardboard lanterns. And I still do them in the workshop, like she's got one there that she's making. ...And it's Jim's idea but I took it and made it a little easier to make for people. And then like, then um John, ...he picked it up and he did a thing here in Tucson called Luminights. So I showed him how to make it and then he took it to this other group that does Krampus Fest where they all dress up like Krampus and run through the streets of...

Female: *Scaring children.*

Cody: *...is it Portland?*

Female: *Yeah.*

Cody: *Yeah, so they do that up in Portland. And so like the guy had learned how to make those and then he published it online, and then all of these other areas of the country it's sprouted up. It's like a virus.*

Cathy: *Yeah, everybody's making lanterns now, it's awesome.*

Paul: *A lantern virus.*

(also)

Cody: *...I want to see people put their energy into making nice things and I want to see like them experience the joy of creativity, and that playfulness that comes with it. And I think remarkable things come out of it. And you know, like once they're done here and they understand a little bit more what art is they're going to go out to the community with a new appreciation of art, and that only helps me because I need to sell those damn paintings!*

4 Concluding Remarks

Our findings suggest these participants' narratives embody processes that move from the object performance as text, to the personal in the representations of those texts, to the social and community – artistry and related information going socially viral. For participants, the representations and process of participating in the procession are personal, and the meanings they make of related activities are individually distinct. For workshop facilitators, processes tied to sharing historical information about the parade, inspiring artist participation, and teaching about object performance situate them as 'experts' in charge of imparting artistic advice and managing historic information about the event itself. The procession is thus a personal and 'local' affair, while being simultaneously social and potentially 'global' in nature – shot through with information-sharing processes and tensions, ideas that we will elaborate on and discuss with this poster presentation.

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Table of Figures

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Table of Tables

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