

# MURAL ARTS / MOORE PICTURING A PLACE

by Jessica Garz

*In April 2019, Mural Arts Philadelphia and Moore College of Art & Design hosted a set of events called “Picturing a Place,” conversations that explored the idea of community-based asset mapping and asked important and critical questions about how artists can ethically incorporate this methodology into their practices.*

*On Tuesday, April 2 at Moore College, guests Rosten Woo and Courtney Adair Johnson discussed their work with moderator Dave Kyu and a public audience. On Wednesday, April 3 at Mural Arts’ Eakins House headquarters, Woo, Johnson and Kyu were joined by Aislinn Pentecost-Farren, Beth Uzwiak, and Keir Johnston and Ernel Martinez of Amber Art & Design for a more focused conversation for artists, arts and community development professionals, faculty, and students.*

*The events were part of muraLAB, a Mural Arts event series that explores practices of muralism and community-based art, and has the dual goals of fostering internal learning for Mural Arts staff, artists, and partner organizations; and expanding discourse about public art in Philadelphia and beyond. Below, Jessica Garz shares her thoughts about some key themes that were addressed over the two days.*

“If you want to see value on Fulton Street, you have to up look up to the second story and above to look at the beautiful cast-iron buildings.” At Tuesday’s public talk, Los Angeles-based artist and designer Rosten Woo shared this quote from a New York City urban planner and preservationist, whose casual dismissal of Brooklyn’s most vibrant shopping district reinforced a racist narrative of who and what has value in cities. In this case, the preservationist was focusing on the street’s upper-story historic facades rather than the living and breathing Black shoppers and businesses at street level.

As a challenge to this viewpoint, Woo created *Values & Variety*, a public exhibition that celebrated the shoppers, artisans, and storekeepers of Brooklyn’s Fulton Mall through meticulous and delightful documentation. Created under the guise of participatory art, this project, like many others Woo has instigated, operates in the vein of “asset mapping.” This methodology,

as defined in Kretzmann and McKnight's book *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing A Community's Assets* (1993), is connected to an urban planning and policy framework known as "asset-based community development." Recognizing that dominant top-down practices of the time commonly overstated deficits and focused on the state of the physical environment over the social context (particularly when surveying communities of color), this form of mapping started by identifying and representing existing and inherent community assets.

Wednesday's discussion, attended by more than 40 artists, arts administrators, and students posed a key question: *What do artists uniquely bring to the process of picturing a place through asset mapping?*

Though the group did not arrive at a firm answer, one did begin to emerge, and it comes in two parts. Artists uniquely bring both the *discipline of patience* and the *skill of representation* to the process of asset mapping.

As to the discipline of patience, artists are specifically trained, whether by self or school, to pause and be still in order to acutely see, listen, or feel. For example, a student in a figure drawing class might look at a model in one position for over an hour, a DJ might listen to a record 12 times to find the perfect half-second sample, or a filmmaker might wait all day to get a scene lit just right. Since most artists value observation as part of their creative processes, they dedicate time, effort, and labor to capturing detail and nuance before interpreting.

Planners and planning agencies, on the other hand, are incentivized to move quickly, to make "rational" decisions based on existing facts and figures, not to create anew. As such, the standard form of mapmaking taught to planning students (as I experienced as a graduate student) focuses on the technique of overlaying existing datasets using Geographic Information System (GIS) software, not creating new data or challenging the validity of those sets already in existence. Beyond the academy, many planning practitioners that find themselves in need of new information about a place utilize a method known as the "windshield tour," in which they make quick observations of a place, sometimes literally through the windshield of a moving car (something else I experienced firsthand, this time while working for a recovery planning firm in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina).

On the other hand, when artists utilize their skills of deep observation in a place, they often bear witness to that which is invisible to outsiders because of size, ephemerality, or the intentional obscuring by those in power. For example, in her 2015 article “Critical cartography 2.0: From ‘participatory mapping’ to authored visualizations of power and people,” Annette M. Kim, associate professor at the University of Southern California’s Sol Price School of Public Policy, writes about testimony maps that “challenge our understanding of what is the status quo through re-presenting situations, often injustices or overlooked phenomena.”

Kim’s statement alludes to the second part of the answer: artists’ unique skill of representation, “re-presenting situations” as she says. Visual artists, musicians, dancers, and media-makers all have the capacity to transform raw material like color, light, text, and movement into meaningful and legible representations of place. Instead of flat, declarative, and linear maps, artists embrace texture, complexity, and whimsy in their work, often collapsing time—past, present, and future—into one plane or mixing media in a single project. For instance, the Asian Arts Initiative’s *People:Power:Place* project mapped the memories of residents; Amber Art and Design’s *Hatfield Project* represented Strawberry Mansion’s notable past and present residents on a deck of playing cards; and Monument Lab’s *Report to the City* included a dataset of speculative future monuments.

The participants in Wednesday’s workshop also put another key topic on the table: What artists should not do while mapping community assets. The session began with many participants critiquing the term “asset-mapping” itself and sharing examples of how the methodology has been co-opted by power brokers and weaponized against communities. Artist Courtney Adair Johnson offered the word “artwashing” to describe the activity when developers employ artists as cover for psychologically violent processes of gentrification happening primarily in communities of color.

Instead of discrediting asset-mapping altogether, participants voiced, like a chorus, the imperative for artists to situate themselves within a well-considered ethical framework and power analysis to ensure that they understand who is truly benefiting from their work in both the short- and long-term. Kim agrees, arguing that critical cartography necessitates a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the mapper regarding “their own power positions in

society” in order to be truly critical or ultimately emancipatory (Kim, 2015). Over the course of the session at the Eakins House, the presenters shared practical tips from their own experiences about how artists can situate power, privilege and ethics:

- Know whose interest the mapping project is truly serving;
- Know who has ownership of the assets that you’re documenting;
- Know your real client (implying that it’s often different from the project’s sponsor);
- Know how much power and money you can share with your community partners and collaborators;
- Know how much time you need to complete the project with integrity;
- If the dynamics with the sponsor/funder feel funky, they probably are, so have the courage to say no or construct a phased contract in order to have a formal way out of the relationship if need be.

The sense of the group was that artists working in community and neighborhood contexts need to understand their power, privilege, and ethics now more than ever, given the increased philanthropic funding for this work (under numerous titles including “social practice,” “creative placemaking,” and “community engaged art”) and because of the prevalence of shrewd developers that hire artists and other community workers to lead participatory processes with residents (typically in low-income communities of color) as superficial gestures of respect while they transact big real estate deals, extract value from neighborhoods, and cause long-term displacement.

Since power, privilege, and ethics are not core subjects in most mainstream curricula for art students (Moore College of Art and Design’s MFA in Socially Engaged Studio Art is an exception), and are often ignored completely by well-funded arts and culture nonprofits in this country, artists must build their own analyses and accountability structure, whether through lived experience or elective training. Artists interested in strengthening their own analysis can learn more about the artists that presented in the “Picturing a Place”

event, dig deeper into Annette M. Kim's writing, introduce themselves to the book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, and keep their ears open for *Powermapping*, Daniel Tucker's upcoming project with Mural Arts Philadelphia. When properly situated, the artist's hand can be a powerful tool in picturing *and* creating places that are socially and racially just.

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