

Walking Memories

A project by Nathaniel Katz and Patricia Fernandez

Seeking knowledge, together and about each other was a primary aspect of our relationship. “The first time I ever saw you I wondered where you came from,” Patricia said, and it set off the desire to execute the project *Walking Memories*. The intention of the project was that we would each create a series of drawings of sites of our childhood: Canada and the Dominican Republic respectively. We would draw them from our memory and give them to the other person to use as maps in order to travel and walk in the other’s memories. Through experiencing firsthand the places of our childhood, we could hope to know each other better. We wanted to use the idea of reliving the other’s memory as a way to create a new, shared memory. The drawings become an important element of the project in that art-making had been the mediator for us when we were in the classroom and now it became the conduit in our new relationship. The project suffered a setback, however, when we realized that Patricia’s paperwork was not in order for her to leave the country. Although it would presumably be a relatively simple task to renew the paper work, it would have pushed the execution of the project past the imposed deadline of the thesis exhibition for my MFA. The deadline was an unfortunate reason for the intentions of the project to be compromised; however, it was a real concern as this project was meant to function within the context of the thesis body of work. The project could have morphed in many different directions as a result of this obstacle; it took one direction which maybe was not the wisest one, or which perhaps was the easiest one: I went to the Dominican Republic to walk the memories of Patricia. The one-sided exchange clearly shifts the meaning of the piece and reveals that the piece was always more about me. The empowered action is focused on me, with Patricia remaining in a passive role. It no longer felt collaborative. When I expressed this concern to Patricia, she stated that her understanding of collaboration was different, and that she thought we were still working together. After that conversation we felt that the project was still worth executing in its compromised state, so long as it also included an analysis of my role as authority, and to draw attention to issues of the privilege of mobility as afforded me as middle class white male.

I went on the trip to the Dominican Republic with the intention of performing the action that I set out to do: to walk the memories of Patricia’s childhood based on the drawings that she made for me. While I was there I walked the path that Patricia drew from her memory. It was the walk from her parents’ house to her grandparents’ house. It was a wonderful experience of learning something more about a person with whom I have such a meaningful relationship. However, the walk itself was the most unremarkable part of the trip to the Dominican Republic and its real value was that it acted as a catalyst for other interactions.

In Patricia’s case, the decision to do this piece with me acted as an instigator to contact her family in the Dominican Republic, whom she had not seen or spoken with in twelve years. The renewed contact awakened a desire to return and visit with her family which, given legal issues, had not been an option to this point. The trip became a reason to begin the process of getting paperwork in order that would allow her to leave the country. At this moment I acted as a surrogate traveler for Patricia, using the privilege that is afforded me as white man and citizen of the United States to travel freely. This project highlighted the discrepancies in our freedom of movement and again reinforced the inherent power relationships at play between us.

Prior to my leaving, Patricia recorded a video greeting for her family, which I displayed to them on my camcorder in Santiago. They were tremendously moved to see her face and hear her voice, and it was a wonderful thing to be able to offer them that. Her family then recorded a video greeting for me to bring back and show Patricia. In this instance I was acting as a conduit. The actions were happening outside of my stated intentions and without any relation to me, aside from my role as the go-between, the person with mobility and the ability to relay communication between two distant parties. In a sense I felt like I was acting as an analog instant messaging service, using my mobility and communicative capacity to connect and erase distance. I also was very much conscious of the privilege that I was exercising in this instance and that this was not about me, but that my privilege allowed for the exchange. American artist Suzanne Lacy describes the value of the artist as experiencer: “when there is no quick fix for some of our most pressing social problems, there may be only our ability to feel and witness the reality taking place around us. This empathy is a service that artists offer to the world.”¹

A second consequence that the trip precipitated was the transformation of the relationship between Patricia and me. Again, the action was a catalyst, a provocation to the nature of our relationship and the results of the action are that in performing something about the relationship, the relationship has changed. We are now in more frequent contact, we call each other as friends and offer support to each other as friends.

While I was being authoritative in the construction of the projects, the freedom for the consequences to unfold was always present; I had no control in process and outcome to the point where what came out of it was what came out of it. While I went into the project with certain expectations, those expectations changed, were not met, were affected by interaction with the other person. To continue to act in an authoritative manner would have been to exert control over the outcome either in action or through representation. The project is ultimately translated through me and my perspective in that I am the artist. I think it important to represent the project without a misguided assumption that I can somehow represent the perspective of the other participant. This realization has led me to move away from representing the collaborative nature of the relationship in its translation to an exhibition context. Instead, the work represents the process of analysis and engagement with ideas that occurred to me as one participant in the project – namely, the participant who was exercising power in the construction of the experience.

¹ Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 174-175.