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Take a Painting

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TAKE A PAINTING

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Erika V. Stearly

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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There has been a general disconnect between the work of artists and the general public when it comes to the creation and interpretation of a work of art; however, a greater understanding could be achieved if the divide between artist and viewer were bridged. Therefore, by providing the audience with the materials, tools, and opportunity to make their own paintings on paper, *Take a Painting* seeks to blur the lines between artist and audience. By displaying hundreds of small paintings on paper on the wall along with instructions for the viewer to help themselves to a painting, I intend to make the ownership of a precious art object accessible to anyone who engages with the installation. Through *Take a Painting*, I seek to fuse my studio practice with the traditions of art history while breaking down barriers that discourage casual viewers from engaging with the discipline of painting.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION



Fig. 1. *Take a Painting*, installation view, image one. Kipp Gallery, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA.

Seeking to overcome the common disconnect between the work of artists and the general population regarding artistic creation and interpretation, the MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Take a Painting*, is an art event and installation designed to make

contemporary art more inclusive to the casual viewer by providing complimentary paintings as well as the opportunity for the viewer to participate in the creation of a precious art object.

The installation consists of several hundred small paintings on paper, accompanied by instructions directing viewers to help themselves to a painting. The complimentary paintings are created using fine art materials, including acrylic and watercolor paint, alongside non-traditional painting materials such as glitter and fabric paint. These materials allude to the vernacular of visual culture as a strategy to engage the casual viewer while also grounding the paintings in art historical traditions. The art event component of the exhibition, which is ongoing for the duration of the exhibition, provides viewers with materials that allow them to generate their own content, rather than simply responding to content presented via the installation. These audience-created paintings are then embedded into the larger installation and available for anyone to take.

The first portion of this manuscript contextualizes *Take a Painting* within the framework of a number of 20th century art movements that greatly impacted the discipline of painting, including Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Conceptual Art.

Next, a section investigates how the white-cube gallery space shapes an audience's interaction with art, and evaluates how other locations can be leveraged to create meaningful interactions with *Take a Painting*. This section will explore how *Take a Painting*, which emphasizes the audience's experience, has been shaped by ideas put

forth in Walter Benjamin's landmark essay, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and by the work of artist Felix-Gonzalez-Torres.

The final section of this manuscript focuses on the participatory nature of *Take a Painting*. Acknowledging that participatory practices are referred to through a variety of names, including "socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art" (*Right About Now* 60), Claire Bishop notes that this phenomenon is part of a "recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration and direct engagement with specific constituencies" (*Right About Now* 59). As *Take a Painting* applies philosophies from participatory art as a vehicle to familiarize an audience with painting, this section focuses on the intersection of painting and participatory art by examining selected works by Andy Warhol, Rob Pruitt, and Oliver Herring.

CHAPTER TWO

INFLUENCING ART MOVEMENTS

Abstract Expressionism

According to art historian Peter Selz, “Abstract expressionism became the dominant art mode during and after World War II, sometimes labeled action painting, tachism, lyrical abstraction, art informel, art autre, and a handful of other terms” (11). The term Abstract Expressionism was first used to describe innovative new paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, whose paintings sought to “appeal to all men and women through what he deeply believed were universal truths embedded in the emotive qualities of color and mark” (Fendrich 33). For Kandinsky, along with other revolutionary painters, abstract painting revealed “universal truths that could be understood by and would appeal to the sensitive viewer” (Fendrich 35-36).

Art historian Kirk Varnedoe notes,

The invention of these new kinds of abstract or ‘non-objective’ art coincided with the cataclysm of World War I, and the artists involved explained their innovations in terms of contemporary revolutions in both society and consciousness, proposing in numerous manifestos that their art laid bare the fundamental, absolute and universal truths appropriate to a new spirituality, to modern science, or to the emergence of a changed human order. (48)

In the midst of political upheaval in Europe, artists turned to abstraction as a method of communicating which transcended language and culture. Other revolutionary painters, such as Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, also believed that “abstract paintings that would make viewers seek and discover a profound understanding of the underlying structure of man and his universe than they could get at through looking at *pictures of things*” (Fendrich 32-33). Early modern painters rejected the notion that a painting functioned as a window through which one could gaze into another world. Rather than trying to represent a 3-dimensional reality in a 2-dimensional format, Abstract Expressionists approached painting as a flat surface covered by color, shapes, and lines, a strategy that “compel[led] the viewer to see it for what it is: a certain arrangement of colors and form on a canvas” (Wolfe 9). In doing so, abstraction invites the viewer to actively participate in completing the picture, by reassembling the deconstructed image in their mind, and in that way, the meaning of the work is driven by the viewer (Fendrich 31).

As a whole, Abstract Expressionism is complicated to describe through generalizations, with several distinct branches and multiple generations, but two distinct characteristics of the movement include an emphasis on mark making and flat fields of color. The work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Hans Hoffman does not include imagery, linear perspective, or a sense of scale. Instead, their emphasis on spontaneous gesture and the behavior of the paint resulted in highly decorative surfaces are encrusted with layers of paint. Other painters, such as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, were devoted to eliminating surface build-up on their paintings. They soaked washes of color directly into their paintings.

Barry Schwabsky notes that our perception of Modernism, “the period from Impressionism through abstraction to Conceptual Art – was imbued with the idea of progress” (6.) With the influential art critic Clement Greenberg maintaining that abstraction was more evolved than representation, the Abstract Expressionists splintered into philosophical branches with deeply held, and mutually exclusive, ideologies regarding the surface of a painting. *Take a Painting* utilizes both thick layers and thin washes of paint, which showcases the capabilities of my chosen material and reflects the belief that multiple approaches to painting are valid.

The initial installation of *Take a Painting*, comprised of 1,003 small paintings on paper that demonstrate a variety of mark making techniques, including the use of squeegees, round and flat paintbrushes, etching needles and various writing instruments to scratch, brush, pour, smear and draw. *Take a Painting* does not put a premium on avoiding surface build-up, as evidenced through marks carved directly into the surface of the paint alongside the introduction of puffy craft paint, which sits above the surface of the painting. However, the use of rubbing alcohol as a medium disrupts the fluidity of watercolor and acrylic paint, allowing for complex designs to emerge and shifts in color when introduced to inks and dyes, creating patterns within a single layer. Through utilizing both philosophies within Abstract Expressionism, *Take a Painting* is tied to the movement’s overall exploration into paint application. *Take a Painting* leverages the limitless possibilities of paint application to circumvent the rigid boundaries of realism, which would discourage a great number of people from participating in the creation of paintings, based on the belief that they are unskilled.

According to Laurie Fendrich, Abstract Expressionism evolved from the desire for an expression of universal truths sought by Kandinsky and his contemporaries in the early 20th century, into an expression of personal truth by artists working in the postwar period. In the midst of this transition, Clement Greenberg remarks in his influential 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" that avant-garde had arrived at abstraction in its quest for "art for art's sake." Noting that by "specializ[ing in] itself," the avant-garde had "estranged many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets," Greenberg points out the failure of Abstract Expressionism to be an universal language. "Abstraction had turned into an esoteric activity for a small group of artists and viewers who could somehow 'get' it" (Fendrich 36).

Another sign of Abstract Expressionism's failure to connect with the common viewer can be found in abstraction's "[enthusiastic absorption] into corporate lobbies and CEO offices [which] functions powerfully as a sign, even to the uninitiated, that the company is successful, 'with it,' and modern" (Fendrich 15). Writing in 1939, Greenberg may have been correct when he argued that the avant-garde, abstraction, belonged to the elite ruling class, but since "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was published, the avant-garde has sought new ideologies, and like the once avant-garde Impressionist movement, Abstract Expressionism is slowly being relegated to the public domain. For this reason, *Take a Painting* borrows characteristics of Abstract Expressionism because they represent what art is to the casual viewer.

Through the utilization of the expression of personal truth, which was employed by post-war Abstract Expressionists and remains symbolic of what art represents to the

casual viewer, *Take a Painting* seeks to encourage and validate the endeavors of participants who may feel hesitant or self-conscious about engaging with the installation.

Pop Art

When pressed for a definition of Pop Art in an interview with G. R. Swenson, Roy Lichtenstein responded, “I don’t know – the use of commercial art as subject matter I suppose... Pop Art looks out into the world; it appears to accept its environment” (*What is Pop Art? Interviews with 8 Painters, Part 1* 26). A characteristic of Pop Art is its depiction of a familiar subject, such as Lichtenstein’s comic book imagery, or the inclusion of an actual object, as Robert Rauschenberg did in his combine paintings. According to Robert Indiana, while Abstract Expressionism was following its own aesthetic logic, young Pop painters were turning to “less exalted things” (Swenson, *What is Pop Art? Interviews with 8 Painters, Part 2* 27). Andy Warhol explains, “The Pop artists did images that anyone walking down Broadway could recognize in a split second – comics, picnic tables, men’s trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, Coke bottles – all the great modern things that the Abstract Expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all (Warhol 344). While Abstract Expressionism’s concerns lay with accessing the collective unconscious that transcended time, language and culture through spontaneous and improvised mark making, Pop Art defined itself by embracing newfangled consumerism as subject matter.

“The mass media imagery of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist did much to engage the public by using familiarity and humor, subverting the pretension and elitism in art” (Houston 84). In his essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg presents this “cultural phenomenon” of integrating mass media imagery with art as the opposite of the avant-garde, and includes “popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction [and] comics” in his definition of kitsch. *Take a Painting* applies the idea of familiarity to the object of painting, instead of the imagery of the painting, through its use of common materials. It is assumed that, in the course of their primary and secondary education, participants will have had experience using glue, paper, and markers, and likely with paint and glitter as well.

“[Pop Art] promoted a democratic attitude in art and encouraged a broader, middle class market for artists. Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein helped revive the printmaking medium and museum shops and department stores nationwide were able to offer affordable multiples in addition to clothing, furniture and appliances” (Houston 78). *Take a Painting* acknowledges these strategies for democratizing art in a variety of ways. While printmaking is a discipline distinct from painting, *Take a Painting* utilizes printmaking’s strategy of producing multiples in order to distribute them to large group of people. Furthermore, *Take a Painting* borrows printmaking’s conventions of a numbering individual works as a part of an edition by numbering each painting included in the installation.

Considering each painting as an individual, which commodifies the components of the installation, links *Take a Painting* to the intersection of commodification and art,

which was vital to the democratization of Pop art. Even today, inserting Pop art into commonplace retail venues remains a powerful strategy for bringing art to a mass audience. In 2004, the Campbell's Soup Company released a limited edition 4-pack of tomato soup cans, which retailed for \$2 and replaced its iconic red and white label with a combination of green and red, pink and orange, aqua and indigo and gold and yellow, for sale at the Giant Eagle supermarket chain, which operates in and around Andy Warhol's native Pittsburgh; a nearly identical limited edition, made available for a substantially higher price, accounted for over \$360,000 of Barneys New York's 2006 holiday sales (Kinsella 87). Consumers, whether at a rural supermarket chain or a luxury department store, can insert Pop art objects into their understanding of other goods for sale. *Take a Painting* has been most successful at reaching an audience when displayed in a situation that people feel comfortable navigating. Through presenting individual paintings as painted pieces of paper that can be held in one's palm, *Take a Painting* connects painting with handheld electronic devices and slips of paper such as currency, checks, coupons, receipts, ticket stubs, business cards, and mail, which are encountered through daily routines as a strategy for introducing painting into everyday life.

In *American Pop Art*, Lawrence Alloway suggests that Pop Art could possess at least one, but not necessarily all, of several characteristics. The list includes artists working outside of, or expanding the limits of traditional media, which includes Ed Ruscha's paintings made with "egg yolk, silk moire, blood, fruit juice, Mexican bean soup, gunpowder, and Pepto-Bismol" (Hunter 363), as well as Lichtenstein's use of Ben Day dots or Rosenquist's merger of billboards with easel painting. *Take a Painting* uses

non-traditional materials as paint, including food dye or fabric paint, but also to interfere with the characteristic properties of traditional material, as glue and rubbing alcohol do when introduced to acrylic and watercolor paints. While this combination of materials underscores Abstract Expressionism's interest in the spontaneous gesture by allowing for more variety in the handling of paint, the commonality of these materials in everyday life ties *Take a Painting* to Pop Art's emphasis on familiar consumer products.

Conceptual Art

It was not until Sol LeWitt published "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967) and "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1969) that Conceptual Art began to be considered a stylistic movement (Stiles 805). It emphasized the notion of art being an "idea" rather than a physical object, such as painting or sculpture, a phenomenon Lucy Lippard referred to as the "dematerialization" of art in her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.

In the first paragraph of his essay "Paragraphs," LeWitt explains,

In conceptual art the idea or the concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made before hand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to be emotionally dry.

There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer.

The emphasis on the audience's experience in selecting and creating paintings ties *Take a Painting* to Conceptual Art. The paintings that participants create are vital to sustaining the installation. Although they exist physically, the paintings are the manifestation of the audience's experience, which cannot be collected by the ruling class, as was the case with Abstract Expressionism, or commodified for mass market consumerism, as was the case with Pop Art. Furthermore, the audience's experience cannot be stolen, damaged or auctioned to the highest bidder as an object can, which has the potential to overpower the perception of a work of art. Through removing commodification and consumerism, *Take a Painting* removes barriers that prevent works of art from reaching a broad audience.

In his essay, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," LeWitt provides a list of 35 sentences that seek to describe conceptual art, two of which are particularly relevant to the intentions of *Take a Painting*, and tie the project to the Conceptual Art movement.

The first of these sentences is, "No. 20. Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions" (LeWitt 75). *Take a Painting* challenges the role of the gallery by utilizing it as a venue for the creation, as well as the viewing and the acquisition of art. Next, it questions the role of the artist. Kipp Gallery at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the venue which displayed *Take a Painting*, indicates that it is displaying the work of Erika Stearly, who has simply created the conditions for others to produce the works of art that will be displayed. *Take a Painting* applies a Renaissance-era apprenticeship model of producing works of art,

which relies on assistants to realize and work through the ideas that are central to the installation. Lastly, *Take a Painting* makes ownership of a painting, a status symbol traditionally inaccessible to common people, possible for anyone. Although audience members may choose a painting to commemorate their experience with *Take a Painting*, the uniqueness of each painting combined with painting's vital role in 400 years of Western culture (Fendrich 21), transcends a fate of being a mass produced souvenir.

The second of these sentences is, "No. 22, The artist cannot imagine his art, and cannot perceive it until it is complete" (LeWitt 75). According to the influential 20th century artist, Marcel Duchamp, "The creative act is not performed by the artist alone, the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications, and thus adds his contribute to the creative work" (819). As *Take a Painting* is a dialog between the audience and myself, it can only be fully realized when the audience interacts with it. If the audience accepts the invitation to select a painting and remove it from the installation, part of their experience will occur outside of the gallery at a later time and place, where it is not possible for me to know the extent of how the audience engages with their chosen collection of paintings. However, I am aware of audience members who have who have framed their collections, used them as bookmarks, refrigerator magnets, and incorporated them in other works of art. These interactions between the viewer and *Take a Painting* provide insights that I reflect upon as I continue to refine the strategies used to create a meaningful experience for the viewer. In fact, the invitation for the participant to make

their own works on paper grew out of an unexpected trend in which viewers chose a painting, embellished it, and added it back into the installation.

By emphasizing the overarching ideas behind *Take a Painting*, rather than the individual works of art themselves, *Take a Painting* connects with Sol LeWitt's ideas of Conceptual Art. As no one is able to anticipate how others may interpret or interact with *Take a Painting*, observing these variations provides another point of entry to consider. Possessing a variety of avenues in which to engage with the installation enriches the work of art because it draws a wider audience to *Take a Painting*, and encourages further, open-ended investigation once engaged. Artist Joseph Grigely explains,

The thing is, no matter how much information you put in or alongside an artwork – no matter how much of a biography there is, no matter how long the wall labels are – the work has to survive the circumstances of its making. This is partly what Roland Barthes meant about the death of the author – we can't always be around to chaperone work through the ages. All I can do as an artist is allow for the fact that the work will have multiple points of entry: biographical points, formal points, theoretical points, and that is precisely this multiplicity that gives many different lives to a work, so it can survive the inevitably tangled readings and misreadings that constitute critical practice. (Barry 11)

CHAPTER THREE

REIMAGINING THE GALLERY SPACE

Museums have a reputation of being “quintessential, unapproachable ivory towers” (Knight 49). “Today’s museum is most closely descended from personal collections...embodied in the Renaissance “Kunstammer,” literally an ‘art cabinet’ filled with aesthetic treasures collected by those with power and privilege in order to demonstrate their mastery over and reach around the world” (Knight 48). The Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia exhibits Dr. Albert C. Barnes personal collection of fine art objects, meticulously arranged according to his vision; similarly, the Gardner Museum in Boston boasts a collection of work chosen and displayed according the tastes of Isabella Gardner. Although both institutions strive to maintain a balance between their public missions and the personal visions of their founders; Lewis Mumford observed in 1938 that museums seem quite elitist; “half safety-deposit vault, half show-room” (Knight 49). “Nearly 80 years later, the initial exclusion of museums from the government’s stimulus package underscored the perception that [the] field is isolated and elitist, existing for and catering to a small segment of society” (Cembalest 76).

However, Lyndel King and Janet Marstine put forth the observation that university art museums are in the unique positions to challenge this notion as they “operate in an academic climate where the questioning of authority is encouraged” (268). The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College defines its mission as being “to foster interdisciplinary thinking and studying, to

invite active and collaborative learning, and to awaken the community to the richness and diversity of the human experience through the medium of art” (King and Marstine 282). Ian Berry, director of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College describes the institution by explaining, “We wanted to engage traditional users of museums – artists, art historians, cultural historians, anthropologists – but also scientists, dancers, economists, geologists, environmental studies majors, business majors, physics students, and invite them into the museum to use their own vocabularies” (Sheets 38). Through its display in Kipp Gallery, part of a public university, *Take a Painting* is able to amplify its challenge that galleries and the public reconsider how they interact with each other, by turning the gallery space into a community space where the audience has an active role in the production of works of art that will be displayed, as well as the acquisition of works for personal gain.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres belongs to a generation of artists active in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s who produced works of art that relied on viewer participate in order to be fully realized. In Gonzalez-Torres’ case, he challenged the traditional museum / viewer paradigm using a variety of strategies.

First, Gonzalez-Torres intentionally designed his sculptures to be interactive. Speaking of his *Untitled (Passport #1)* of 1990, which is a white stack 24-by-24-by-6-inches high with just white paper you can take, Gonzalez-Torres says,

I need a viewer; I need a public for that work to exist. Without a viewer, without a public, this work has no meaning; it’s just another fucking boring sculpture sitting on the floor, and that is not what this work is all about.

This work is about an interaction with the public, or a large collaboration.
(Obrist 308)

Gonzalez-Torres' work upends the museum's traditional role of safe-keeping completed works of art; according to the acquisition agreement, museums and art collectors who purchase Gonzalez-Torres' stacks of paper or candy are obliged to sustain the work's free distribution of these objects indefinitely by replenishing the piles each time they are reduced (Weintraub 114). This forces collectors away from the role of accumulating art and into the role of giving art away.

Gonzalez-Torres' work also challenges the museum's function by divorcing itself from the "objectness" of traditional sculpture. By allowing a pile of individually wrapped candies or a stack of pieces of paper to be taken away by the viewer, Gonzalez-Torres responds to the ideas expressed in Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" through destroying the aura of his sculptures. According to Gonzalez-Torres, this was a deliberate maneuver on his part to, "deal with the fact that having this stack on the floor that was not an original – you could never have an original – that you could show this pieces in three places at the same time and that it would be still be the same piece" (Obrist 311).

Although a significant distinction lies in Gonzalez-Torres' reliance on mass produced, commonplace items and *Take a Painting's* emphasis on one-of-a-kind art objects, *Take a Painting* and Gonzalez-Torres use many of the same strategies in challenging the conventional role of artist, museum and viewer. As artists, we both use the gallery as a location in which the audience acts, not simply views. The participation

on behalf of the audience fully realizes the installation and rewards the participant with ownership of the object, although the types of objects are distinctly different. Gonzalez-Torres relies on a never-ending supply of mass produced, commonplace items, where *Take a Painting* relies on a never-ending supply of one-of-a-kind paintings, generated through cutting large, participant created works into small pieces. Although we both rely on viewer participation for our work to be fully realized, *Take a Painting* takes this one step further by inviting the viewer to produce, as well as to act. Finally, we both force the gallery, traditionally a venue for safeguarding works of art, into a vehicle for giving art away, free of charge, to the viewer.

While the audience can view *Take a Painting* in a variety of ways, two distinct ways stand out. First, they encounter the installation in a public setting, where there are a large number of paintings alongside evidence that previous viewers have encountered the installation and taken a painting for themselves. If they choose to take a painting, they will then have the opportunity to view an individual work in the location where they have chosen to display it. The viewers' opportunity to engage with *Take a Painting* in these distinct contexts both directly supports and challenges Walter Benjamin's ideas of exhibition value and cult value in a work of art.

According to Benjamin, works of art are valued on two separate and opposing planes: the exhibition value and cult value. Objects possessing cult value are often instrumental in religious contexts, where their existence is often more important than their visibility. Exhibition value is bestowed upon objects that are displayed, especially objects that can easily travel between destinations, allowing for many people to view them.

The *Take a Painting* installation is not site specific in that it can be installed in a variety of places without greatly compromising the integrity of its idea, which is to present an opportunity and means for a general audience to feel comfortable engaging with painting. Previous installations of *Take a Painting*, which were intended to develop the overarching concept of accessibility, such as the display on the stairwell bulletin board in Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Stapleton Library, classifies the installation as having exhibition value. The installation was deliberately placed in a location that increased its availability to the public, rather than asking the public to deliberately seek it out. While Benjamin argues that films viewed in a movie theatre or a live performance in a theatre has more exhibition value than a painting because they are experienced simultaneously by a collective audience, I would argue that within the pre-Digital Age in which Benjamin formulated this idea, *Take a Painting* has more exhibition value than a static painting. Not only can multiple viewers interact with the installation simultaneously, they can respond to the evidence of previous participants while providing a legacy for future viewers to respond to. However, in the Digital Age, images of static painting can be quickly and easily viewed and reproduced digitally, which intensifies their exhibition value. *Take a Painting* does not translate well into a digital format, because of its emphasis on interacting directly with the installation. Still images of the installations, which can be viewed and reproduced digitally, serve as documentation of *Take a Painting*, but do not offer the viewer the experience of engaging directly with the display or present the opportunity to create their own works.

At the same time, the installation also exhibits characteristics of cult value. After the viewer has chosen a painting to take, it is removed from public view. Assuming the

painting is displayed in the viewer's living space, it can only be viewed by a select group of people. Viewers who are aware of the larger installation reflect on that display, and feel a connection to the installation, mimicking Benjamin's assertion that what matters about objects with cult value isn't their display as much as their existence.

Museum

Making a comparison to film, Benjamin states, "Painting is simply in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience as it was possible for architecture." *Take a Painting* challenges that statement by tying the content of the painting to three distinct locations that create an opportunity for simultaneous collective experience.

First, let us explore "simultaneous collective experience." Benjamin discusses this by using the example of a theatre full of people watching the same film at the same time and notes, "although paintings began to be publically exhibited in galleries and salons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception." While Benjamin's argument remains a valid point, it could not anticipate a contemporary audience's fluency in navigating between a physical and virtual reality, in which individuals may be physically alone and yet participating in the same experience with many other people in a virtual realm. Expanding upon the example of watching a film, contemporary audiences have the ability to watch videos via YouTube, which records how many times each video has been viewed, and provides links to circulate these videos through social media channels – hence the term "viral" – and viewers are

aware that even if they watch a video alone, other people are also viewing the same video. This hybrid platform of the virtual and physical provides a new way in which to have a simultaneous collective experience.

Take a Painting acknowledges the sophistication of a contemporary audience. Benjamin speaks of a single, static painting in his analogy, in which the painting cannot reflect to the viewer evidence that it has been viewed before. However, when viewers experience *Take a Painting* and remove an individual work, the resulting hole in the installation acts as a visual record of how many other people have experienced the installation, just as YouTube counts how many people have viewed a video. Viewers who repeatedly view the installation over a period of time are able to identify fluctuations that occur as works disappear and new works refresh the display.

Although viewers may apply their understanding of the virtual realm to their experience of *Take a Painting*, they are experiencing it in person in a physical location. While *Take a Painting* has a virtual presence, it exists as photographic and written documentation of a temporary display and an ephemeral experience, and serves to draw attention to the real world installation. *Take a Painting* does not provide a virtual entry point for viewers; although on behalf of those who have contributed venues, financial support and miscellaneous assistance, interested parties have blogged, uploaded photos, and shared links in an effort to share their enthusiasm for *Take a Painting*. However, I am unaware of any instances of participants who have engaged with the installation and used the internet to complement their experience. This underscores the importance of touch to *Take a Painting*, during the production of the paintings and the choosing to collect an actual object directly from the installation, which

can only occur in a physical location. Observations based on installations that contributed to the development of this project indicate that there are three types of spaces where the installation can be exhibited, including what I shall refer to as destination spaces, transitory spaces, and private spaces, and each location has a distinct connotation.

Benjamin states that architecture has the ability to present a simultaneous collective experience, and *Take a Painting* has been installed in two types of architectural spaces. The first is a destination space, which is a room inside of a building, while a transitory space, such as a hallway or stairwell, allows people to move between destination spaces within a building. Destination spaces include galleries and museums, which are dedicated to viewing art, but the public is often alienated by the gallery space. This uneasiness extends even to those who want to embrace the visual arts. Cher Krause Knight, Assistant Professor in the Department of Visual and Media Arts at Emerson College notes, “In over 15 years of teaching, there has never been a single semester in which most of my students said they conceived the museum as a place for them, one they seek out because they felt genuinely welcomed and appreciated there, and fully confident in their abilities to negotiate personal relationships with the art” (49). It is not simply students who are skeptical of museums; artist Robert Smithson, whose work exists outside of museums and galleries states,

Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called galleries. A work of art when placed in the gallery loses its charge and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a

submission of the neutral. Works of art seen in such places seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. (Barrett 206)

Exhibiting their work outdoors as a way to fuse art and the natural world around us, Smithson and other Earth artists rejected the sterile environment of the gallery. Likewise, *Take a Painting* rejects the formality of the gallery setting for a transitional space, where the removal of the “warden-curator” enables *Take a Painting* to reach an audience that may otherwise be self-conscious about engaging with the installation. Artist and critic Brian O’Doherty observes of the formal gallery space, “Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space occupying bodies are not – or tolerated only as kinesthetic mannequins for further study” (15). Ironically, because the gallery is perceived as so inhospitable to the viewer, displaying a work of art in a gallery for a fine arts exhibition many not fully emphasize an object’s exhibition value.

By displaying *Take a Painting* in a transitory space, on a stairwell bulletin board, I have removed the installation from a charged viewing space and inserted it into a location that the viewer will encounter through normal daily activity. This inserts art into everyday life and serves to reassure viewers who would not feel comfortable visiting an

art gallery to view *Take a Painting*. Through my own experiences as the artist installing and maintaining the installation and observing viewers' interaction with the installation, viewers feel confident in their understanding of the artwork, are aware of others' interactions with the with installation and are capable of identifying trends amongst the selection of individual pieces. Furthermore, it was the viewers that suggested ways of adapting the destination space to further their engagement with *Take a Painting*, by requesting a location in which to create their own small works on paper.

Utilizing the gallery as a place for viewers to create work upends its status as having what O'Doherty refers to as having "the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom [and] the mystique of the experimental laboratory" (14). As an interactive art piece, viewers have the authority to engage with the installation and the supplies as they see fit, which allows them to customize both the installation and their experience within the space. Simultaneous collective engagement is available through the knowledge that viewers are collectively working to sustain the installation.

The final location in which the viewer engages *Take a Painting* is in her or his personal space. This is distinctly different from the viewer's experience in engaging the project previously because in removing an individual painting from the installation and displaying it in a private location, the individual work loses its exhibition value and gains cult value. However, the viewer maintains a memory of the larger installation and its evidence of previous interactions by other viewers. While reflecting on this, the viewer can assume that other people are also displaying their own individual paintings in their own personal spaces and remembering their encounter with the installation as a whole.

CHAPTER FOUR

PARTICIPATION



Fig. 2. *Take a Painting*, installation view, image two. Kipp Gallery, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA.

In order to combat what she refers to as “Painting Illiteracy Syndrome,” Mira Schor suggests education that incorporates “a kind of Braille in which paintings are actually touched... marks of paint should not only fill the viewer’s field of vision but also that optical process must be bolstered by the sense of touch” (97). In this spirit, *Take a*

Painting is designed to enhance a wide audience's understanding of painting through hands on, active participation in their production and selection.

Claire Bishop writes in the introduction of an anthology of a collection of essays on the intersection of participation and art, "The gesture of ceding some or all authorial control is conventionally regarded as more egalitarian and democratic than the creation of a work by a single artist, while shared production is also seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability" (*Participation* 12). While there is a history of artists relying on community driven participation in order to fully realize their works of art, *Take a Painting*, which is designed to facilitate personalized and meaningful interactions with each member of the audience, falls in the middle of a continuum of the amount of control granted to the participant. By embracing the contributions of the community, which interferes with the sanctity of the precious object and the gallery space, which can be alienating to a general audience, *Take a Painting* makes both painting and the venue more inclusive to the audience.

On one end of the spectrum are *Do-It-Yourself (Landscape)* and *Do-It-Yourself (Flowers)* paintings by Andy Warhol from 1962. As the title suggests, these acrylic on canvas paintings are based on popular kits which provide an image that can be finished by following the instructions. Warhol's paintings are partially completed, just enough for the viewer to determine what the image will depict upon completion. While I present the opportunity, the supplies, and the venue for the participant to have the authentic experience of making one-of-a-kind painted art objects that will be displayed in a gallery, Warhol merely invites the viewer to complete something he has abandoned –

“The only reason I didn’t finish them is that they bored me; I knew how they were going to come out. Whoever buys them can fill the rest in themselves” (Bourdon 8).

The level of authorial control ceded by *Take a Painting* is similar to that of Rob Pruitt’s *101 Art Ideas that You Can Do Yourself*, in that they both provide a prompt that can be interpreted by the viewer. Pruitt’s list of instructions, which levels the boundaries between artist and participant, includes suggestions such as “30. *Make a drawing by pressing pause and tracing the image off the TV screen... 50. Make mud. Two parts dirt, one part water. Use as paint or clay... [or] 72. Put googly eyes on things*” (Pruitt 47, 50, 52).

While interviewing Rob Pruitt, James Franco remarked about the DIY, “Martha Stewart-type approach” of *101 Art Ideas that You Can Do Yourself*, to which Pruitt agreed,

Yeah, that’s exactly it. When I sat down to make the *101 Art Ideas* project, I was really thinking about how my parents didn’t have the advantages that I had of going off to college and studying something that is really very impractical or nonessential in many aspects; an art school education. So I was thinking, my parents provided me with the gift of being able to do exactly what I want to do, which is be an artist, so *101 Art Ideas* was my gift to them. It was my attempt to explain to them what it is that I do. Your average person probably will never go into a New York gallery and see what’s being made today. It’s still a closed off world. So I wanted to make the statement that art is really a lot more accessible than most people would imagine- that it’s not completely inscrutable and

esoteric and just for the rich and educated. In the end art is really just about developing a sensitivity about the world you're living in in a beautiful way. (Franco)

By Andy Stillpass's account, Pruitt was successful in achieving this goal.

Reflecting on an evening in which Pruitt introduced himself and invited Stillpass to view the exhibition, "I also noticed how his work was as welcoming as he had been when he personally included me earlier in the evening. The work was accessible and understated, and it continuously made me laugh. I felt like we stood on common ground." (Pruitt 43)

Although *Take a Painting* and *101 Art Ideas that You Can Do Yourself* both incorporate familiar material as a means to dissolve the gap between artist and audience, the key distinctions between the two works are found in the differing philosophies behind utilizing familiar materials and the different audiences the works aim to reach.

"I've really enjoyed letting the art world know that not everything is so mystified or so regulated to expertise – that you can make something really beautiful with a little ingenuity and some supplies from Michaels [craft shop]," says Pruitt in his interview with Franco. While Pruitt's comment reminds the art world not to shy away from utilizing craft supplies, *Take a Painting* encourages participants to use their familiarity with common materials as a springboard to experience and experiment with quality artist grade materials.

Noting that Pruitt “dissolves the boundaries separating the artist from spectator and professional from amateur,” Stillpass is especially struck by how “[Pruitt] allows words/images/fashion/design/commerce and art to interpenetrate and interact” (Pruitt 43). Speaking of his career as a whole, Amy Kellner remarks that her “favorite thing #2” about Pruitt’s work is that he “gives you drugs and great ideas for decorating your apartment, a flea market full of bargains and giant pandas made of glitter. I don’t know about you, but these are all things I want” (Pruitt 36). While Pruitt imbues his work with consumerism and kitsch, seeking to fuse art with the everyday, *Take a Painting* seeks to increase the agency of participants in demystifying the traditions associated with the discipline of painting.

Describing his community-driven, participatory work of art, Oliver Herring says,

TASK takes place in a designated space usually stocked w materials and props and is activated by people who get together and write tasks – anything that comes to mind – and deposit them into a designated ‘task pool’. Each person then randomly draws a task from the pool and interprets in any way he or she wants with whatever and whomever is around. When someone deems his or her task completed, that person writes a new task, deposits it back into the common task pool, picks a new task, and so on. The task pool is thus always stocked with new and up-to-date instructions, reflecting and further perpetuating the ever-changing momentum in the room... In theory almost anything is possible within this framework. (14)

Although *TASK* and *Take a Painting* share similar ideas, *TASK* operates on a much grander scale in several respects. First, Herring gives his participants more authorial control; *Take a Painting* grants creative freedom within the parameters of creating a painting, but participants of *TASK* generate their own instructions. Tasks including, “386. *Conduct by the stereos for several minutes,...* 490. *Be a lion tamer. Get six other people to be your lions,...* [and] 522. *Make a large flag, and wave it to the beat of a song of your choice. Find a place to put it,*” were generated at the Hirshhorn Museum in April 2006 (Herring 31, 39, 41, 170).

The venues that Herring is able to bring *TASK* have helped him reach a larger audience than *Take a Painting* has. Having refined and unveiled *TASK* in many locations over a period of time, Herring is able to distinguish trends that have unfolded over a variety of locales. According to a review written by Jen Graves, “Paris was poetic, he said; the D.C. version was full of war, religion and destruction (it had such an edge that Herring and an organizing curator both reported relief that no one died); Lake Worth, FL... was political and, for whatever reason, obsessed with clothing” (Graves).

Kendra Paitz, who helped to coordinate *TASK* at Illinois State University and the subsequent publication devoted to *TASK*, notes,

Working collaboratively to find creative solutions, whether to build/destroy a cardboard wall or to spread/cure a deadly disease, both encourages fresh perspectives and provides us with new ways of looking at our interactions with others, liberating us from the sometimes stifling routines of everyday life. Through my involvement with *TASK*, I have witnessed

how a participatory approach to art can change people's behavior and outlook, whether for one afternoon or more longterm. (114)

As a participatory approach has the capacity to integrate art into the world around us, *Take a Painting* encourages participation as a vehicle for the general audience to enjoy meaningful encounters with painting.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION



Fig. 3. *Take a Painting*, detail of participant's work space. Kipp Gallery, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA.

Take a Painting was on display in Kipp Gallery at Indiana University of Pennsylvania from Feb 4-28, 2014. There were several notable observations gleaned from studying how viewers and participants engaged with the exhibition, which sought to bridge the divide between artist and audience in order to promote a greater understanding of artist's creation and interpretation.

First, the exhibition in Kipp Gallery distributed a significantly fewer number of paintings than the investigatory display in Stapleton Library, despite a scheduled reception and several class field trips to the site, which caused spikes in the number of viewers exposed to *Take a Painting*. While uneven public access (the gallery is open less hours than the library stairwell) may have contributed to this phenomenon, *Take a Painting* may have reached fewer viewers because of its location in the loaded space of the gallery. However, the explicit permission to engage with the installation was empowering, and many viewers gained outward confidence in their ability to engage with the installation. Viewers demonstrated a sense of responsibility towards the display, rehanging works that had fallen to the floor or straightening works that were askew on the wall. While a small minority of people who passed through the stairwell and stopped to gaze at the installation actually selected a work, the overwhelming majority of people who entered the gallery chose a painting or two. If asked, they were happy to show the paintings they chose, and explain their criteria for selection. Frequently, this included color or composition; highly embellished paintings were popular choices as well. In many cases, viewers chose works that had been part of the same larger work, often unconsciously choosing individual works that aligned along a common edge, despite the fact that works from a larger painting were randomly scattered throughout the display.

Spontaneous conversations outside of the gallery space with individuals who had seen the exhibition provided valuable insight into how *Take a Painting* connected with them. They revealed where and how the paintings they had chosen were displayed; some people use them as bookmarks while others have framed their collection. They

were eager to tell me how they had thoughtfully and deliberately curated their collection, and to inquire about the different ways paint was applied. Several viewers offered thoughtful comments on the gesture of giving paintings away.

Not all viewers who selected a painting elected to participate in the creation of them. There appeared to be a social component that significantly impacted the likelihood that people would make paintings. While small, tightly knit groups of people who came to the exhibition together would occasionally sit and interact with the materials, I never once observed individuals engaging with the paintings supplies alone. However, during the exhibition reception, the workspace designated for creating paintings was consistently occupied with participants interacting with the supplies. Many participants utilized the available materials and created their own large works, while some chose to embellish works removed from the installation.

During the course of my research, available data concluded that participants were more likely to respond to existing marks on a page than to generate their marks on a clean sheet of paper. Simon Willis describes this phenomenon, “I have an almost paralytic inhibition when it comes to drawing. I like to think of myself as creative and yet my facility with a pencil abandons me the moment I switch from words to pictures” (Herring 16). For that reason, I provided participants with a stack of paintings on paper that I considered partially complete – observational data indicated that the more intricate drawings were the most sought after – with the idea that participants would add onto existing marks. Surprisingly, many participants simply flipped over the paper and painted on the clean backside. Interfering with my ability to sign, date, and number each painting, these participant-created paintings cannot be utilized in this installation.

Future exhibitions of *Take a Painting* must address this by also providing blank sheets of paper to participants as well.

Barry Schwabsky writes, “Contemporary painting retains from its Modernist and Conceptual background the belief that every artist should stake out a position – that painting is not only a painting but a representation of an idea about painting” (8). *Take a Painting* reflects my belief that through inviting an audience to construct their own experience by producing and selecting them, painting can be accessible to everyone, not just an elite, educated population. As *Take a Painting* functions as a conversation between the artist and the audience, these observations are not a sign of shortcomings, but rather a sign that *Take a Painting* has successfully connected with its audience.

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