

## BLM – THE ART OF MATTERING

In the early weeks of the initial COVID shutdown, the Black Lives Matter protests that had filled streets in Oakland were entirely replaced by a vast empty cityscape.

But still standing in that space was the loud and remaining echo of those voices of protest – the massive installation of street art that, in eerie silence and spectacular sunlight, transformed downtown Oakland into a gigantic outdoor public gallery dedicated to the social and moral injustice of abuse of power.

Art itself is known most broadly for having two key characteristics. The first is that it can communicate universal themes across time, place and cultures. The second is that individual artists will likely either express their common affinity with each other by using similar forms or themes, or they will differentiate themselves by tending away from commonality towards being unique.

Artists, whether individually or in collaboration, had come together emotionally, psychically, and finally physically, to create the enormous collection of BLM statements that would be paneling the doors, windows and alleys of the business district.

Then, installed as protests, individual works directly appropriated the very sites that too much symbolized the barrier to black lives mattering.

Collectively, the huge variety of works occupied territory in a way that literally created their own new, but temporary, environment.

The uniformity of the theme in no way suppressed the variety of styles and imagery on display, ranging from writing to glyphs, icons, symbols, drawings, portraits and scenes -- and encompassing all kinds of animate and inanimate items while referencing people, places, ideas and events.

## BLM – THE ART OF MATTERING (continued)

That variety, aggregated within the business district, also expressed the pervasiveness of the problem that BLM protests: disregard, disrespect, or abuse encountered in so many ways.

For decades, the most familiar form of protesting in that public outdoor space has been graffiti. We have long ago become accustomed to recognizing graffitists (aka “writers” and “taggers”) as artists, and to call what they do “work”. Yet for many people, graffiti seems over-familiar now, if not blighting, and calling it “work” is felt simply as some kind of politically correct compliment competing with its invasiveness. This time, the products of this new BLM emphasis stood firmly on, but far exceeded, the tradition of graffiti as protest.

A fundamental question about *all* art production is this: what kind of work is being done?

The truth is, that **all** art is fundamentally work, *before it is anything else*, before there is “final” output. This is not a question about genre. Rather, the work that is called “art” is always an effort being made to discover and display how meaning can be created. That is precisely why we can say “the art OF this, or the art OF that”... Motorcycle maintenance, war, cooking, pitching, writing, farming, design, conversation, composing, seduction, and so on. These varieties each contain distinctive experiences of meaningfulness.

Political expression is work, and there is an art OF political expression.

The BLM movement is, by definition, a demonstration of the presence of victims, who now insist on social justice through respect from holders of power and who announce their intent to improve social equity through maintaining solidarity of allies.

**BLM – THE ART OF MATTERING** (continued)

Whether installed or applied, *the works of art literally made their mark directly on the very devices and surfaces that were constructed to shield established power holders — business interests — from harm.*

Once there, those marks were, and are, rallying points for the like-minded in any community regardless of location, occupation or status.

The messages were consistent, and clearly fashioned to be a record of testimony and witness... history made live by being told in the first-person.

However, over a year later, most of those works are no longer in their initial targeted places. They have been actively removed, repurposed, or replaced; they have passively deteriorated, or been damaged in place. Many were anonymous to the public; while other were signed but not necessarily reclaimed by their originators or returned to them.

Surviving aside from those issues is the documentation of their presence and their condition when made public as part of the singular, high-pitched moment of the BLM marches. The curated documentation, which is a work in itself, is the ongoing evidence of the *class action*, and is the closest thing to an encore performance of the exhibit.

—*Malcolm Ryder*