

Dawn Stienecker

CHAPTER 1 - MY CONNECTION TO THE ART FORM

Earlier today when I headed to Houston from Denton, I saw a late model, compact car of some sort driving down the road. I can't really remember the color or the make. The reason it caught my attention was because it was covered with tourist plates - decorative souvenirs commemorating vacations. I get excited when I see her [the driver of this vehicle] on the outskirts of Dallas. I know where she is going and I wish that I could communicate with her some way to let her know, "Hey! Really, I'm one of you!" But I'm just driving a regular truck. Even if I slowed down and got her attention, she'd probably just wave and smile. If she even noticed, there would be nothing about me and my truck that would separate me from the normal gawkers. She's driving slower than me anyway, so as I feel the momentary "connection" pass, I head on down the road to home. I wonder where she was coming from and if I'll meet her during the events of this weekend. *personal journal entry*

In my first journal entry during this study, I was not necessarily surprised to see this decorated car driving on the city streets because it was covered with plates, rather, my excitement and connection was based on the fact that I was also traveling to participate in the same activities as this art car driver. I knew that it was not someone coming from the Dallas area, because I was not familiar with the car and there were out of state tags on the vehicle. I had spent months thinking about art cars and their relationship to art and art education and was on my way to conduct one component of my research, a field study at the annual art car parade in Houston. In the opening narrative, I retained the shift in tenses in the third sentence because I believe it is significant, demonstrating my excitement and associated feelings as I relived the excitement of seeing an art car on the way to the Houston Art Car Parade. Out of thousands of cars traveling on Interstate-45 this Wednesday afternoon, I felt a connection to this individual

because I knew we had something in common. I also considered seeing this car as a good sign for the investigation that was officially underway.

Houston is home to a growing grassroots art community of art car creators and art car events. Because the driver I saw on the way to Houston was driving an art car, I felt a connection to her and I had a pretty good idea where she was going. According to art car collector and Art Car Museum co-founder Jim Harithas (1997),

An art car is a motor-driven vehicle which a car artist alters in such a way as to suit his own aesthetic. In other words, the artist either adds or subtracts materials of his own choosing to or from the factory model to revive a beauty and style that once was. The result is a vehicle which conveys new meaning through design, mechanical, or structural changes, renovation, and/or the addition of new images, symbols, or collage elements. (p.11)

As with any other form of art, the definition of what constitutes an art car is constantly being challenged; for example, bikes and skaters make up categories for parade entries in Houston art car events in recognition and appreciation of these forms of entry and participation.

For the past 25 years, this unique form of expression has been highlighted annually at the Art Car Parade. The original parade of fifteen or so art cars was a caravan organized by artists that got together to drive through the streets of downtown in the mid 1980s. Harrod Blank (2007) has suggested that the 1983 exhibition, *Collision*¹ at the University of Houston, inspired the Houston Art Car Parade, which was formally organized in 1988 by the Orange Show Foundation under the direction of

¹ *Collision* was curated by Jim Harithas, then curator of the Contemporary Art Museum and artist Ann Harithas. Both Jim and Ann Harithas are art car collectors and founded the Art Car Museum in the mid-nineties.

Susanne Theis. In less than 20 years, the parade grew from numbers in the teens to featuring over 250 art cars from across the country. Over 200,000 spectators attend the parade, with even more viewing the television broadcast (Blank, 2007). According to Blank, "This event has inspired hundreds of people to make art cars and attracts an annual pilgrimage of artists, such as those who formed the art car caravan from the West Coast" (p.127). Furthermore, thousands attend additional events of Art Car Weekend. These gatherings include a party for the out-of-towners, welcoming people who come from all over the country to participate in the Houston parade; the Art Car Ball, a party presenting art cars as the guests of honor; the Main Street Drag, where small groups of art cars caravan to local hospitals, schools, and community centers, visiting people who would not otherwise be able to experience the parade; Art Car Sneak Peak, a Friday evening preview of art cars; the Annual Parade Saturday and illuminated cruise through the streets of downtown Saturday evening; and an awards ceremony and brunch on Sunday.

As an art car artist, I am one of the individuals inspired by this culture; I saw features on the news about the annual event and watched the parade from home several times before joining the community. Art cars were more than something odd featured on television; I encountered the cars on the streets, in the parking lots of stores, and at music venues. As an art teacher in the Houston area, I introduced art cars to my students. But while I was excited by the concept of this "vehicle of expression," I was not one to defile my own car with a hand-made paint job or affix something to it, much less remove the body and build one from the chassis up. Perhaps someday I will have the courage to create a "daily driver," an art car that is the owner's

main mode of transportation. In the meantime, my art car is an additional vehicle, used solely for art car related activities. My journey from outsider to insider took place in less than a year. In 2004, I attended the Art Car Ball, an opening event for Art Car Weekend. A year later, in 2005, I helped plan the ball and created a collaborative art car. Being a member of this community has been one of the highlights of my life.

Spectacle and the Display of Art Cars

Art cars are an art form that disrupts the norm of daily driving and ordinary activities. Harold Blank, a member of the national art car community, has written several books and made several films about art cars found throughout the United States. His work has touched a broad audience with the airing of *Wild Wheels* (1992) and *Driving the Dream* (1998) on public broadcasting stations. Through his work, we know that art cars are a recognizable cultural phenomenon, an outgrowth distinct from gypsy wagons, hippie-vans, and low-riders. He states, "As a result, when people see an art car now, it conjures a more positive image, something that they understand, accept, and even embrace. In fact, nowadays people frequently say, 'Look, there's an art car!'" (Blank, 2007, p.7). Connotations and cultural values are associated with art cars, and automobiles in general, that are hard to bypass. Harithas (1997) states, "All art cars are subversive and have in common the transformation of the vehicle from a factory-made commodity into a personal statement or expression" (p.11), and Blank (2007) concurs, "An art car is often a fantasy made into a reality, a symbol of freedom, and a rebellious creation" (p.10).

Art cars are closely akin to contemporary art forms. Jackie Harris sees her art car, covered with painted fruit, as a moving still life. Others see art cars as moving

sculptures. With the inclusion of costumes and soundtracks, many of these cars now function as vehicles of performance. For example, the coffee scooter driver's occasional caffeine-crazed dance that accompanies the display and the enactment by an eleven-year-old girl in a shower cap, using a back-scrubber as she drives her creation, *Touring Tub*, down Allen Parkway have led to the category of a performance prize. Art cars are an exciting new form of public art in several ways. Not limited to the walls of an institution or even a city plaza, these cars go into public spaces and invite public interaction in much the same way as contemporary artists with an interest in community. Desai (2002) states,

Artists no longer work in isolation but move into parks, hospitals, prisons, community organizations, streets, and neighborhoods to produce artworks in collaboration with people in these various communities. Art [becomes] a forum that open[s] public dialogue on issues of concern to people. (p. 309)

Contemporary art forms are no longer exclusively contained in museums, and in fact, the role of the art object has undergone a significant shift in postmodern cultural performances. With an emerging body of literature on institutional critique, authors like Svetlana Alpers (1991) have pointed out inherent flaws in art and cultural exhibitions in traditional museum displays. Alpers identified the "museum effect," noting a "tendency to isolate something from its world" (p. 27) and that "what the museum registers is visual distinction, not necessarily cultural significance" (p. 30). The museum effect is independent of the object and can either "aid or impede our appreciation and understanding of the visual, cultural, social, and political interest of the objects and stories exhibited in museums" (Karp, 1991, p. 13-14). Karp (1991) has also pointed out

that museums are not neutral spaces, but that curators organizing exhibitions function in a role of power, sending subtle messages “either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication” (p. 15). Art cars are made for the road and are an art form that is not separate from life. “Daily drivers of art cars move about the town with the knowledge that they are on the one hand being disruptive and on the other insisting upon simply doing ordinary errands such as commuting to work or stopping at the bank” (Dregni & Godollei, 2009, p. 44).

Since the 1960's, groups like Fluxus have been pushing art world boundaries, blurring distinctions between art and life. The art car movement is a grassroots movement that also blurs this boundary between art and daily life. Both contemporary artists and art car artists are creating interactions that involve artists and audiences in new ways and these can be examined as cultural spectacles because they create representational forms to which people respond. Both of these art forms interrupt daily life creating a spectacle. MacAloon (1984) made one of the early efforts to define the distinctive features of the spectacle. Based on the etymology of the word, “Spectacles give primacy to visual sensory and symbolic codes; they are things to be seen” (p. 243).

Anyone who has driven an art car knows that they do not go unnoticed. People wave, give thumbs up, and even take pictures and video. Not all sights are spectacles as MacAloon explains, they must be of a certain size or grandeur, “appealing to the eye by mass, proportions, color, or other dramatic qualities” (p. 243). Some art cars are subtle and may not cause as vivid an interruption of daily life as another. A caravan of 20 or so art cars or a parade featuring over 250 art cars makes a distinct impression. “Spectacle is a dynamic form, demanding movement, action, change, and exchange on

the part of the human actors who are center stage, and the spectators must be excited in turn” (p. 244). Contemporary art and art car events set up events that have the necessary components of a spectacle, an exchange between participants and audiences.

Participation in spectacles is voluntary and spectators are caught up with different levels of intensity. With spectacle, elitism or authoritarian ideology of other forms of exhibition tends to diminish. For some, spectacles raise concern with their seductive, transcendental potential. Knight (2008) explains that for cultural critic Guy Debord, “spectacle’s evolution in the twentieth century threatened culture. In his view, lived experience was in danger of being edged out by simulation, with commercialized fantasy usurping intellectual and socio-political engagement” (p. 101). Spectacles such as the Houston Art Car Parade have the capacity to cultivate what Knight identifies as a proactive public. Art cars are celebrated because they challenge the status quo through spectacle. At a minimum, they “stir emotion and spark debate, as does the best of public art” (p. 106).

Aligning a Cultural Investigation of Art Cars with Art Education

Little literature is available on the art car movement, although knowledge about the event continues to grow throughout the country and the world. This study of Houston’s art car community is a step towards sharing insight regarding the growing body of literature in the field of art education on community-based art. I believe it yields important information on the way art can empower communities and enable individuals to reconnect with its value in daily life. Learning taking place within the community is not a top-down body of knowledge, but a collective, ongoing experience. I also hope this

study will shed light on the possibilities of democratic education as it reflects the ways individuals have empowered themselves to challenge mainstream assumptions.

bell hooks (2003) points out “teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom” (p. 41). Art cars have presented challenges and individuals involved have overcome problems as they alter these vehicles. This type of problem solving should drive our educational programs. As Freire (2007) states:

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality; but reality in process, in transformation. (p. 83)

The phenomenon of art cars presents opportunities to look more closely at hidden expectations of society, including the social norms of vehicle operation. I encountered this notion when I started working on my first art car. As soon as I started striping the old, faded, red paint on my 1988 Jeep Wrangler, I felt the pressure of social norms of proper vehicle maintenance. Without permanently altering the frame by drilling holes or cutting away from it, this temporary alteration seemed inappropriate by the standards of dominant culture even though I bought the car exclusively for the purpose of joining in the art car parade. The creative endeavor of making an art car serves as one example of a myriad of ways individuals and community groups challenge top-down concepts of knowledge. Furthermore, the art car community provides a way in which to understand community artists described by Goldbard (2006) as a group “whose self-definition sometimes makes a virtue of necessity, prizing an ad hoc, unfettered, guerilla style” (p.

161) as they take their work out of galleries and museums, using non-traditional forms. These approaches can be explored for empowering communities and the practices of art educators as well.

Questions and Study Overview

My interest in the art car community has been its community dynamic. I have witnessed the parade as an egalitarian venue, a space where artists, non-artists, and youth groups exhibit an art form side by side in a public space. Additional art car related activities take activities throughout the year, contributing to making Houston the art car capital of the world. Even more intriguing to me is the emergence of this art form through a community of practice, with contributions coming from a wide-range of individual experiences and backgrounds. Through auto-ethnographic research, I investigated my relationship to this community of practice through the following questions:

How can studying the art car event give me insight into art and its value for people in a community?

- A) What are the purposes for participating within the art car community?
- B) How do art car artists view their work in relation to other forms of artistic practices?
- C) How does the art car redefine artistic practices?
- D) How do audiences value art cars?
- E) How is art education taking place within this community?

As I investigated my primary question, “How can studying the art car event give me insight into art and its value for people in a community?” as well as the subsequent questions that arose, I conducted a qualitative investigation incorporating auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry research methodologies. These mixed-methods are complementary as both processes and products, allowing unfolding events to guide the study through emerging questions and theories. In this auto-ethnography, I also considered my multiple roles as an art car artist, as a researcher studying the activities of the art car events, as well as myself as an art educator interested in the social learning that takes place in informal settings. I considered the ways these roles inform and influence one another personally and culturally.

In this study, I am the primary voice, one of the participants, an insider who has already been influenced by participation and interactions within the community as an audience member and art car artist. Like the many of the community members, I have had several roles in the community including parade attendee, an art car creator and parade participant, as well as an event organizer. I have also brought art cars into activities with adults and children of all ages as an art educator.

I am also interested in the multiple voices that bring together and contribute to the art car event. Additional participants included art car artists, organizers, and community leaders, as well as parade attendees. To get a perspective of participants with a variety of backgrounds, I used criteria-based sampling to choose nine participants with which to conduct semi-structured interviews. I was interested in the perspectives of other art car artists and recruited three other individuals that had created art cars. I sought one academically schooled artist, one self-taught artist, and a

professional artist collaborative (artists who make art for a living). To gain insight into the development of Houston as the art car capital of the world, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with people I identified as leaders of the community. Participants included a representative of the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art (the host of the annual parade), the former director of the Orange Show and organizer of the first parade, and the co-founder and former president of the Houston Art Car Klub (HACK). Furthermore, I interviewed three parade attendees with a variety of background experience with art, including an Orange Show volunteer, a local artist, and my dentist's assistant.

This study took place primarily in Houston during Art Car Weekend, 2009, with a focus on the parade. As indicated in the opening, I was living in Denton attending graduate school at The University of North Texas (UNT). Denton, Texas is approximately 275 miles from Houston. During my enrollment at UNT, social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook enabled me to stay connected with art car community members and became helpful in conducting research before, after, and during art car weekend in spite of physical distance.

For data collection in this study, I primarily used semi-structured interviews, personal journaling, field observation, and art making. I recognize that my prior experience with the community and my prior experiences studying art while pursuing undergraduate and master's degrees have shaped my perceptions of the community that influenced the information I addressed when creating the art car, conducting field observations, journaling, analyzing the data and writing this narrative. Furthermore, I traced many of my perceptions to my own life experiences, particularly considering

cultural experiences related to my understanding of the automobile and driving. Reflecting on these experiences as they related to my understanding of art helped me come to know my perspectives on contemporary cultural life. Conversations during semi-structured interviews also prompted me to re-examine these perceptions.

Autobiographical notes are the personal journaling that situate you, the researcher, within the research process. They became a means for thinking about how the research is cocreated among you and the research participants; how each of your actions and interactions shape what follows. (Glesne, 2006, p. 60)

Some methods were more successful in practice than others. For example, I intended to use snowball sampling to find the attendees in advance and arrange an opportunity to visit with them during the parade line-up, a time when attendees can walk among the cars and visit with the artists. I got contact information from a couple of people I interacted with during the parade and at the award ceremony, but was not able to reach them after the parade. On the other hand, my art-informed approach to field observation on parade day provided significant insight, in much the way that I anticipated it would. I “gathered information, utilizing observations made over extended periods of time, from multiple sources of data, employing multiple techniques” (Wolcott, 1997, p. 334).

I was particularly interested in methods that supported the idea of “co-creating” this experiential tale, and believe creating an entry for the art car parade that solicited responses on the open thought clouds opened up this avenue. This arts-informed approach to research exemplifies what Graeme Sullivan (2005) claims as “ a set of practices that helps broaden the way we understand things and thus can be used to

expand how information is gathered and represented” (p. xiii). I used the black thought clouds for interaction during the parade line up and also included pictures of the thoughts contributed to the final text.

As I prepared the collaborative art car, *DialoJeep*, for entry into the parade, I reflected on the ways I have become a community member and the ways I continue to interact with other members as I contribute to the development of new ideas and processes for operating an art form that must be road worthy. I considered the ways other art car artists from this community have influenced me and the creation of my vehicle. For example, when I first met Visker, an art car artist, at an event at the Art Car Museum, he was talking about wanting no part of the car he used as a frame to be recognizable. I recognized how he did this to his own art car by removing doors and windshields and altering the form by extending features beyond the frame. Other artists, like Tom Kennedy and David Best combine two or more cars to distort recognizable automobile models into an altered vehicle. While I have not yet had the ambition to make such a sculpturally phenomenal car, I do recognize the influence of these artists on me and my understanding of visually intriguing art cars. Other community members have also pointed out that often relatively simple techniques such as engineer/art artist, David Haim’s patterned configuration of reflectors on his Buick *Reflectra* can be equally impressive.

This auto-ethnography also utilized narrative inquiry as a methodology and for analysis. I believe the process of making an art car, reflecting, and journaling, coupled with my interaction with other art car artists allowed me to ask

more pertinent questions during the semi-structured interviews and also gave me insight into the challenges artists encounter as they create and operate their own art cars. The art car itself became a field-observation vehicle, inviting audiences to share their thoughts and to collaborate in the art-making process by writing or drawing on magnetic thought clouds that I created for my parade entry.

Furthermore, I tracked the emerging questions and speculative issues throughout the preparatory activities for the parade, through the stages of analysis, and finalization of this document.

In addition to my own journal entries based on my art-making and field-notes generated at the events of Art Car Weekend, the informal interviews I conducted with artists, supporters, and community members gave me insight from specific groups of people that I could not necessarily gain through participant observation. Wolcott (1997) states, an “ethnographer never intends to base a study on the findings of only one technique, one instrument, or one brief encounter” (p. 340). The semi-structured interviews of local leaders and community supporters of the art car community offered further understanding and additional contextual information, while providing opportunities for me to reflect on my own assumptions and biases. I refer to ethnography, even though I am conducting an auto-ethnography as a reminder that the larger picture is one of culture as it is reflected through my eyes and experience, rather than an autobiography.

My excitement about the Houston’s art car community was not only in studying a topic that I am personally invested in, but also to engage with research using a range of research methods that merge art and social science. Using multiple methods allowed

me to examine multiple facets for understanding the art car community. Leavy (2009) warns,

Corresponding research methods need to click. “By *clicking together*, I mean to suggest that the research methods should be selected and adapted to meet particular research questions that are embedded within a framework of epistemological assumptions and theoretical commitments.

(p. 258)

The methods I am using do “click together” and encourage an examination of the multiple roles of participants, including myself. Using arts-informed, mixed-methods enabled “self study, being in community, relational and ethical inquiry” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xix) as I explored the creation of my vehicle through art and text. Moreover, inviting the audiences of the art car parade to participate by sharing their thoughts as part of the creation of the art car invited a collaborative dynamic to the field participation portion of the study. During the semi-structured interviews, I tried to encourage other community members to guide the interview process, allowing my own biases and assumptions to be challenged and other participants’ beliefs to contrast with and/or complement my own. These biases and assumptions were further tested as I interacted with audiences, organizers, and leaders in the community. This auto-ethnography created through exploring the different levels of participation, based on my own experience and enhanced by the thoughts and insights of others regarding Houston’s art car community, shaped an exciting study that I believe is a significant contribution to the field of art education.