

The Rapunzel Art Project: Thoughts on Art as Social Practice and Community

Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair, so that I may climb the golden stair.

The Rapunzel Art Project was a group fiber art project that took place over two days during Open Studios at the Novato Arts Center (Marin Museum of Contemporary Art) in Novato, California, in March of 2016.

Visitors of all ages were invited to create a “strand” of any length using the materials any way they wished. The goal was to make enough strands to hang a braid out my studio window to the ground. Over 25 people participated, and we had more than enough to hang out the second-floor window—we ended up with five long plys and the final braid was over 15 feet.

The Rapunzel Backstory, Talking, Community Practice

It makes a difference when a piece of art has a backstory. So, while the participants were creating their strands, I read the story of Rapunzel in its entirety—all three versions. I always loved being read to as a child; many of us have that memory. I note that Rapunzel has a fascinating authorship and backstory: Before the famous Brothers Grimm version, a female author named Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force wrote *Purcinette*. (Charlotte-Rose was a strong-willed and fiercely independent woman who was banished to a convent after displeasing the Sun King, Louis XIV at Versailles. Locked away in a cloister, much like Rapunzel is in her tower, she was among the first writers to pen a collection of literary fairy tales and also one of the world’s first historical novelists. Her stories were among the first literary fairy tales to be published, and she has been attributed as starting the historical fiction genre.)

We also talked together while we were creating. There is something special about coming together working with fiber on a common goal; it brings us back to a sense of community and to our ancestors sitting around legrolling fiber for nets or spinning yarn for clothing.

For me personally, it was a pleasure to conceive of and facilitate an artistic project like this that came together so spontaneously and with so much participation. It’s pretty wonderful when different ages and personalities come together harmoniously.

Participants of All Ages

Men, women and children of all ages participated—from three to 73. (I asked people their ages.) We worked in groups of five or so. The three year-old was just learning how to tie, so this was great practice. Another child was learning how to make a knot: at first, she wanted me to do them for her. By the end, she was doing them herself.

Decisionmaking and Not Stepping In

While we were creating our strands, I also talked about fiber techniques. Fiber art is not something that everyone understands necessarily, so I took the opportunity to throw in a little teaching.

I also think a project like this helps teach basic decisionmaking skills. It was fascinating to watch how different ages handle deciding on color, fabric, rope. I kept very few rules, except for safety (handling of scissors, for example). I rarely had to step in.

The Unique Braid

Each strand was completely and utterly different. It was surprising how unique they were, given many people used the same materials.

It was pretty loosely spliced together! Several of us stayed after the workshop to put all the strands together, and then braid the five long plies together. That was a workshop all in itself. We had to google how to do a five-ply braid. It also rained, so we could only hang it out the window for a short time.

Learning Outside the Classroom

I think that art outside the classroom is very important—not to diminish the excellent work that art teachers do—but I think it is good to reinforce the idea that art can be everywhere, on the street, outside your window, and not just in a school or gallery. This project does not require formal art “skill” or technique, so I think that made it more accessible.

It was a success, I think, from an artistic point of view, but also from the viewpoint of community coming together. Next time, I think we should build a ladder of silk: just like in the story.