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In Brooklyn, Stoops as Scenes of Change



Cassandra Giraldo for The Wall Street Journal

One of the discussions at “Between the Door and the Street,” a public arts project by artist Suzanne Lacy.

By Kirthana Ramiseti

On a crisp fall day in Brooklyn, a hundred conversations were emanating from tree-lined Park Place in Prospect Heights. Most of the stoops and entry courtyards were occupied by a handful of people — mostly women but also men — immersed in discussion, drawing passersby to stop and listen.

Saturday’s gathering was called “Between the Door and the Street,” initiated by the artist Suzanne Lacy in collaboration with the Brooklyn Museum and Creative Time, a non-profit organization that presents and commissions public art projects. Ms. Lacy, who is based in Los Angeles, is known for holding large-scale projects described as “socially engaged art.”

She said that Creative Time had invited her to stage the project to “explore the relationship between gender justice, feminism and other activist movements, particularly those led by activists in the [New York City] area.” For her, folks chatting on a stoop was the right artistic vehicle.

“For me, the project aspires towards an egalitarian society, one where diversity is respected and people are empathic toward the situations of others,” Ms. Lacy added.

More than 300 participants from 80 activist and social organizations were recruited for the event on Park Place (between Vanderbilt and Underhill Avenues), with the aim of reflecting diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, gender and gender identification. Ms. Lacy said that each group decided on which topic to address during the unscripted conversation, which ranged from poverty to gender equality to violence against women.

As for why she wanted to hold the conversations on stoops, Ms. Lacy noted that stoop-sitting has a “strong tradition” in the city, and that “it seemed a metaphor for redeveloping a sense of community and relationality to each other through conversation.”

While New Yorkers are used to accidentally overhearing conversations while going about their daily routines, “Between the Door and the Street” encouraged attendees not only to eavesdrop, but to stay and ruminate on what they were hearing.

“What’s kind of gorgeous is taking private issues and making them public,” said Michelle Fine, 59, a CUNY professor who served on the project’s advisory board. “That is, having the conversations that are often had alone, in one’s apartment or one’s head ... and taking it outside and having those ideas circulate.”

People were often spotted leaning in very closely to the stoops, as sometimes it was difficult to hear the conversations. But in doing so, that often created a greater intimacy and connection between those who spoke and those who listened.

Farah Tanis, 41, of Brooklyn, who served as a stoop leader for the group representing Black Women’s Blueprint, a non-profit group, said that she felt and fed off of the audience’s energy.

“It was amazing to see that the crowd was looking and nodding as we said words like ‘rape’ and ‘sexual assault’ and ‘rape culture’ and accountability and responsibility,” Ms. Tanis said.

While she said she enjoyed the experience, she said that the next step would be for the conversations to occur in communities that needed it.

“We need to go to communities where ... people are highly impacted by sexual violence and poverty and criminal justice abuse,” Ms. Tanis said. “So this as an idea is brilliant. But let’s take it to communities that are desperate for it.”

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