Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues from University of Michigan faculty.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for joining me today on Michigan Minds. But before we start our conversation, could you please introduce yourself and share a little bit about your role at the University of Michigan?

Deb Mexicotte:

I'm Deb Mexicotte. I'm the managing Director of Arts Engine, which is an interdisciplinary initiative that is supported by the five north campus schools and colleges: Art and Design; Architecture and Urban Planning; School of Music, Theater and Dance; the School of Information and the College of Engineering. We sort of support all endeavors of faculty and students in the interdisciplinary realm, especially amongst art, design, architecture, information, music and technology, and of course engineering. I've been at the university about 27 years. I've been at Arts Engine for about seven. And it has been a fabulous experience in working with the kinds of interdisciplinary connections that our students and faculty make every single day in research, teaching, funding and community.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for sharing that insight into your background. And I want to hop right into our conversation. Your project Photocracy: Defining Democracy Through Stories and Art, worked with the UM community, asking them to submit artwork describing what democracy means to them. Could you please share a little bit of insight into how this work came about?

Deb Mexicotte:

You may remember that in the early part of 2020 and even previously, there was a lot of social unrest going on throughout the country. And there were a lot of questions about where we were heading as a democracy, how our leadership was responding to the needs of their communities. And Arts Engine, being an interdisciplinary initiative is always looking for ways to leverage the arts, engineering, technology in new ways, to bring new insights, new understanding, new expression and new knowledge to the kinds of things that are often referred to as wicked problems. Problems that need a multifaceted solution. And we were experiencing and continue to experience a great number of wicked problems in this country around a numerous set of topics from social justice to immigration to financial security, and on and on and on. The list is just large.

And so early in 2020 we were thinking about what can we do that might be a demonstration of how democracy in its many facets actually affect our students or affect our faculty. And our faculty director at that time, Gregory Wakefield, thought that we might want to do some kind of installation, some kind of large art project out on the Diag perhaps or out on The Grove. And so he was thinking about something where we would crowdsource the idea of democracy around flags or around other emblems that are often used to either demonstrate or subvert the idea of politics and democracy. And from that we decided we might crowdsource just general ideas from students and faculty and staff about how democracy affects them and what it makes them think about either visually or through poetry or just quotes that were helpful to them in thinking about how democracy affects them and what it means to them. And so we decided we would crowdsource a set of our community who were willing to put something forward about what democracy meant for them.

Unfortunately, we also ended up in a pandemic in March of 2020. And so we were all struggling with how to remain engaged, how to actually activate our communities when we were in lockdown, when we were just trying to figure out how to continue the educational mission, our work missions, our social missions. And so we asked for submissions and we got a few, but it certainly wasn't at the level that we were hoping. But, those submissions were then thought to be used instead of just as standalones as something that would then springboard to a couple of artist commissions. And that's where we pivoted.

So we solicited artist commissions both from a graduate student and a faculty member at the university. We got some great applications, and we selected two artists to move forward using the input from the community as a springboard to new works. So that's kind of the way it came about. We also got the opportunity to apply for an arts initiative pilot grant, which we got, as well as a democracy and debate theme semester grant that allowed us to commission these works. So while the crowdsourcing didn't have a lot of costs associated with it, we did use the funding that we received from the arts initiative and democracy and debate to commission these two works.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for that insight into this project. This project utilizes the arts and visual expression as a way to engage with the UM community around the multifaceted concepts of democracy. How do you think the arts can uniquely connect people to these current issues?

Deb Mexicotte:

Well, I think one of the things that the arts do for us is it gives us permission to express how we're feeling, what we're thinking, what we are experiencing in ways that can break through some of the text heavy or rhetoric heavy conversations that we tend to have around the ideas of politics or democracy. So it's different ways to connect creatively, emotionally, and actually even ethically around those parts of our democracy or those parts of our society where sometimes words get in the way or words aren't quite enough to speak to the multitudes of concern or worry or joy or expression that we're trying to sort of capture in our conversation.

So experiencing what we were experiencing through the pandemic, through the social justice and civil unrest, through years of political polarization. To be able to experience that in different ways and enter into a conversation with others in new and different ways can help sort of break that log jam. Break that polarization and speak to how something makes you feel, not just what it makes you think. Because if you're feeling something, it leads you to interrogate why you're feeling that about a work of art or a work of expression. Why do you feel angry? Why do you feel joy? And it kind of gets to those deeper meanings and places we can connect with others that, again, text and narratives sometimes don't get us quite too.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely. I think that is so great and thank you for sharing that. Do you see aspects of this kind of arts engagement as a form of research, and if so, how?

Deb Mexicotte:

So creative practice has long been recognized as a research venue and platform. It is a way that artists and designers engage with new inquiry and new expression. And so creative practices research has long been understood to be a meaningful and absolutely central way for research and new knowledge to be created. So when you think about inspiration, what is inspiration but a question? A research question. You see something and you either engage with it around its materials or you are struck by something that's happening in the world around you and you need to learn more and you need to learn more to express more. To peel away those layers we were talking about.

Art as a communication of ideas is the absolute underpinning of research and research publishing and research expression. We publish to communicate new ideas. We create, perform, and present to illustrate and underscore new ideas. So art is that expressive dialogue with the audience, is the artist doing the rigorous research and then presenting it through communication to an audience that then enters that dialogue around that new knowledge, gaining new knowledge themselves. So that evocative discourse is essential to all aspects of research the way that we think about it, including research as creative practice.

Speaker 2:

In what ways did the community experiences shape the way the phases or components of this project moved forward?

Deb Mexicotte:

We as a country and we as a university and we as a community had been experiencing years of uncertainty, of polarizing political discourse of concern about our families, our future, the big issues like climate change and immigration and social justice. And then we were struck with the pandemic. So it was in a lot of ways, it felt like that every way that we could be stressed and tested had been an ongoing process for several years. And so thinking about how the community was stressed and how they needed to both retrench because of the pandemic, but also continue to grow and explore was really the challenge that we were facing. And so those experiences of the community allowed us to say, we may not be able to crowdsource the large number of inputs that we were hoping under normal times, that we would sort be able to gather and collate. That's okay, we don't need as many inputs. What we need is a springboard, which we had, to the artist expressions, to those commissioned works.

And so I think that the community told us that what we had planned initially wasn't going to pan out quite the way that we expected, but using what we had to pivot to the two artist works that we commissioned, really kind of was brought about because of the way that the community responded during the initial part of the pandemic. The other part of it was that both of the commission works ended up also doing crowdsourcing around our artistic expression or commissioning of artistic work to sort of gather and curate a set of pieces to evoke that idea of what democracy was meaning to people during this very turbulent time.

Speaker 2:

Thank you for sharing that. And your project also had an online component. Could you describe the online installation, The Paradox of Democracy: Fault Lines and False Algorithms of Consent and Dissent and how does it incorporate the voices and experiences of American democracy?

Deb Mexicotte:

So the two works that weak commissioned, one was by a graduate student composer in the School of Music, Theater and Dance, Leonard Bopp. And he created, like I say, a curated set of installation rooms where you could actually engage around some of the prompts that our community had brought forward. The piece that you're talking about was undertaken by Amy Chavasse, a professor of dance here at the University of Michigan, and a collaborator Charli Brissey. And so their installation took on both that curation aspect but also an interactive aspect with the community that was looking at that web portal or that website.

And so it actually asks the visitor to think about the platform they're on, to think about the land that they're on, to think about the various pieces they stand on, including that idea of democracy as a foundational standing place. And they want you to interact with it in a very sort of deliberate, non-linear way. That you pass through a series of reflective pages or reflective interactions where you're asked to take notes, where you cannot proceed if you don't answer certain questions. Where you are given a series of randomly generated ideas and concepts to react to as one reacts to poetry or one reacts to discordant thought. Again, making us a little uncertain and the way that we've been feeling around the pandemic. And then that idea of being unlearning and unmoored in that process reveals that sort of loss of control that we all I think felt and have felt over the last four to six years and how do we get that back through artist expression or artist curation or artist voice.

And so it's really such an interesting installation because it takes the viewer on an interactive journey, but it also doesn't give them any answers. It unsettles them as it causes them to think of... And this is the thing that I love about it, what it makes me think about is where am I standing? What land am I standing on? What platform am I interacting on? What ideas do I think are foundational and are they really? And in the end, where do I stand in creating something myself around this uncertainty? So I think it really captures that experience of wanting to be grounded, not having control and thinking about ways to take back control through your voice and your expression. And whether that's voting or whether that's art, I think really is a reflective piece for the audience that's encountering this website.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for sharing that insight and your feelings on what this piece promotes. And this project was conceived at a time when the 2020 presidential election was upcoming. How do you think the meaning of this project has changed since then as it's unfolded and what might audiences take away from it as the midterm elections are on year?

Deb Mexicotte:

So I think that one of the things that struck me about the project when I was thinking about this question is how we need to reengage with our peers, with our community, with our friends and family, with our students and colleagues and just with the conversations. The last few years have been so exhausting, so sort of grinding in both their sameness and uncertainty that I think the meaning of the project hasn't changed very much. I think it still requires us to think about reengagement, rethinking, reexamining the things that we knew to be true pre pandemic or pre 2020. And then realize that our new normal should incorporate those things that we miss, that we think are important, that we want to maintain as far as our democracy, but that there have to be new ways to engage. We are not the same people that we were two and three years ago. But we can be better people in that difference if we reengage, reassess and recommit.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much. And what parts of this project are evergreen and can be open to interpretation regardless of specific political circumstances?

Deb Mexicotte:

I don't think the project is evergreen. I think in some ways it captures a very unique set of circumstances where that feeling of being unmoored or that feeling of being uncertain or that feeling of being isolated. I mean, it was such a unique set of circumstances over the last couple of years that have brought us together that I'm not, that I think about this project as being evergreen. I think of it more as a snapshot of this moment in time. It's still full of hope. And even in the face of the uncertainty, there are some historical questions it asks about in terms of the land that you are on or the place that you are in this internet interaction. But I would say that its evergreen aspect is it makes you feel like you need to reach for something else. But it is very particular, I think to this moment in time. But that's okay with art because there's plenty of art that speaks to a moment in time but then has lessons for us later.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely. I love that statement. Thank you so much for sharing that. And what's one takeaway you hope everyone listening will have from the information that you shared about this project?

Deb Mexicotte:

I think that the takeaway that I have is that in turbulent and uncertain times, we sometimes have to tunnel in, into ourselves, into our communities, into our institutions in order to reemerge stronger, different, better. We need to take the time to reflect in order to express. It's kind of we need to stop in order to go. And I also think about how we need this circle sometimes around an idea or an event or a process in order to then move back out into the public square. So I think that the takeaway I have from this project is that that reflective aspect, that curation of thinking, that pulling in order to reemerge is the underlying takeaway that I have. That it's about digging back down to your foundations and sprouting anew from them.

Speaker 2:

Thank you for sharing that. And before we wrap up today, is there anything else that you would like to share about your work or your Arts Initiative pilot project?

Deb Mexicotte:

So as I said at the beginning, Arts Engine is sort of committed to this interdisciplinary collaborative space. And we kind of are always working between that experience and knowledge from the domain areas and how they can join, change, transform, move back into domain areas with new insight or new energy or new tools. So there's always this sort of between space in that collaborative world of Arts Engine. And the Arts Initiative, by giving us the grant gave us the opportunity to not only try something new, but try something old for Arts Engine.

When Art Engine was first conceived and it was called Arts on Earth then, it really wanted to look at spaces like arts and war or arts and health, the sort of arts plus integrative space. And we actually commissioned work at the beginning in 2006, 2007, 2008, that actually spoke to these themes. But we hadn't really commissioned any new work in a long time that we had moved into sort of different areas of developing collaboration, community, experiential learning, et cetera. So this actually gave us the opportunity to revisit that commission space and sort of create some new knowledge ourselves instead of just supporting knowledge that our faculty and students create. So this really helped us reconnect and expand on something we didn't have the capacity to do for a long time. And I think it has rekindled our ability to see us ourselves as an arts and integration catalyst rather than just as a supporter.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing that insight and thank you for all the information that you've provided us today. Thank you for your time. And thank you for joining us on Michigan Minds.

Deb Mexicotte:

Thank you so much and I encourage people to go and view the two works that were created from this effort.

Speaker 4:

Thank you for listening to the Michigan Minds podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with #UMichImpact.