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## Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts

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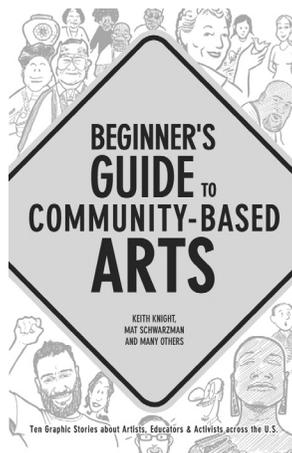
*Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts.*

By Keith Knight, Mat Schwarzman, and Many Others. Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2005. 171pp. ISBN-13: 978-0976605430. \$19.95.

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Structuring their book around themes of artistic process, community building, and life itself as a journey, Keith Knight and Mat Schwarzman present an impressive collection of tips, techniques, resources, and personal stories in an innovative comics-style manual designed to capture the attention of a younger audience. As the title suggests, *Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts* introduces readers to all of the considerations, processes, and steps central to the undertaking of a successful community-based arts project or program. Yet what truly sets the book apart are the ten inspiring stories, related in comics format, about individuals and groups who have used art to change their communities, “parables of practice” (xv) that readers can imitate, adapt, and adjust to fit their own creative and community needs.

Keith Knight is a graphic artist of “The K Chronicles” and “(th)ink,” and Mat Schwarzman is the director of the Crossroads Project for Art, Learning and Community in New Orleans. As they explain,

We anticipate this book will be most useful in middle and high schools, arts organizations, religious groups, youth development programs, social service agencies, universities, social action groups, community centers and street corners— wherever you find small groups (generally, fewer than 30) of teens and young people who are committed to a common project (xv).

Because of this intended audience, Knight and Schwarzman take great care in constructing the groundwork for the personal narratives in the first section of the book, “Packing for the Trip,” even providing a glossary that defines community-based art

as “any form or work of art that emerges from a community and consciously seeks to increase the social, economic and political power of that community” (xvi). They also emphasize the merging of art, learning, and social change in community-based arts, discussing the importance of creativity, the power of art to inform, and the cultural signifiers of communities.

In the second section of the book, “Tales from the Road,” the individual stories of community-based artists are shared, each accompanied by a tip from the featured artist’s story, group discussion topics, and a technique with set objectives for art, learning, and social change. For example, the story of Lily Yeh and James Maxton describes how the plan to create one outdoor garden blossomed into the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, where thousands of neighborhood residents work together on art, gardening, and theatre projects to rejuvenate their community. After the story, Knight and Schwarzman share Yeh’s tip: “When we come together, something bigger than all of us happens” (86). Then they offer topics for discussion about different ideas of beauty and about outsiders’ contributions to a community before presenting a technique in which people create an artwork, like a musical, quilt, or mural, sharing different people’s ideas about what factors create and divide a community. Lastly, the third section of the book, “Resources,” tells interested readers where they can learn more about the community-based arts movement and the artists featured in this work. While the book is clearly designed to be a “how to” guide, “the stories do not always translate into easy answers or step-by-step instructions. Rather, they demonstrate the promise and possible pitfalls you are likely to encounter in a community-based art project” (xxvi).

*Beginner’s Guide to Community-Based Arts* draws from a variety of influences and figures, including educator Paulo Freire, playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht, theater artist and activist John O’Neal, and anthropologist Paul Willis. Yet the methodology that it offers to practitioners of community-based arts projects consists of five steps: Contact, Research, Action, Feedback, and Teaching (CRAFT). Each illustrated tale describes an individual artist’s entire project, but each also focuses on a specific stage of the CRAFT process. Richardo Levins Morales, a poster artist for the labor and peace movements, emphasizes the Research that informs his art: the stories and perspectives of the many different people to whom he listens. The women of *Mujer Artes* describe their Action of producing pottery pieces that convey positive images and aspects of their shared Mexican heritage to the general public. And Sue Johnson and Alison Cornyn, digital artists at [www.360degrees.org](http://www.360degrees.org), a multimedia website that examines the United States’ criminal justice system from a variety of perspectives, stress the importance of seeking Feedback from as many people as possible in order to create the fullest, most accurate portrayal of a social problem, its consequences, and its possible solutions. In fact, Knight’s and Schwarzman’s inclusion of Feedback and Teaching, the two steps of CRAFT following the Action of a project, is especially noteworthy because these two essential stages are so often overlooked or minimized. Of course, “for some, the work of Feedback will never be as glamorous or exciting as Action, but it is perhaps the single most important territory of CRAFT—the point at which art connects with mobilizing community-wide resources and energy” (102).

Following their own advice, Knight and Schwarzman seek Feedback and Teaching suggestions, both for themselves and for others, at [www.xroadsproject.org](http://www.xroadsproject.org). Here, they provide additional information about *Beginner’s Guide to Community-Based Arts*

and its featured artists, as well as the CRAFT Circle, a discussion group that will be launched this year, offering more ideas, resources, and opportunities to dialogue with other individuals who are involved in community-based arts and who have used this book in their own undertakings. Needless to say, this book demonstrates a broad range of projects, including a documentary series, an “Equity and Justice” show, and the creation of handmade, painted furniture. While tackling a diversity of social issues such as the diabetes epidemic, the criminal justice system, and safe working conditions, the CRAFT process can be adapted to aid in nearly any artistic, communal endeavor. And, while it is aimed at young people and those who work with them, anyone who is ready to begin a new journey or to refresh an old trail in community-based arts could benefit from the stories and the methodology presented in this book.

