

SYMBOL AS CATALYST

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CONTEXT COLORS THE MEANINGS of an image or symbol. The Buddha image is widely recognized across cultures for evoking tranquility and spiritual attainment. It suggests the longing of individuals and societies for peace. For more than a decade, my art has used the image of an emerging Buddha to stimulate reflection on the human search for self-understanding and peace. Growing out of the earth, the Buddha image reflects our own growth and change—and the ability to create well-being and community that can come with maturity.

The context the Ten Thousand Ripples project (TTR) created for this image is interwoven with the vibrant life of the Chicago area’s diverse communities. Collaboration and early public engagement were essential elements of TTR. The first year of this two-year project was spent actively connecting with community organizations in the participating neighborhoods. Through these connections, we learned about the many ways people were viewing and responding to the Buddha image. Block clubs, neighborhood meetings, and community gatherings became sites for conversations and sustained dialogue that were the foundation for building trust.

From the onset, TTR invited community members to develop the project in ways that suited the local context and to be involved in creating meanings for the sculpture and the project as a whole. TTR served as a catalyst to bring together community members to discuss local issues and generate ideas for artistic and community programming. Through collaborative decision-making and creative activities, TTR gave individuals and organizations an opportunity to coalesce—some of whom were previously unknown to one another.

The resonance of a symbol depends in large part on the scope of the viewer’s past experience. Respecting and working with differences was integral to TTR. Neighborhood meetings in Pilsen, a largely Mexican Catholic community, brought up issues of culture, ethnicity, and faith, as the image of the Buddha was alien to many residents. However, in the ensuing discussion, some residents agreed that Pilsen was part of a larger world and would benefit from exposure to symbols and images from other cultures. The importance of dialogue as a way to exchange ideas and deepen one’s understanding of different points of view also became apparent. This was also the case with the panel discussion at a Buddhist Temple in Uptown, where Buddhist, Muslim, and Native American leaders, artists and the audience shared viewpoints about cultural appropriation.



A key element of TTR for me was learning about the social and political contexts of public space in communities where definitions of public and safe access to public space constantly change. Community members chose where to place their sculptures, which themselves were transformed by the physical and social contexts of each site—whether an abandoned lot or community garden, a school entrance or gang boundary. By their very presence, the sculptures invited viewers to reconsider the meanings of both the sculptures and the sites, and encouraged new perspectives and experiences.

A catalytic symbol can direct thought, prompt associations, and alter perception. Its meaning can evolve over time and be transformative. Throughout the city the emerging Buddha sculptures were welcomed, hugged, interacted with, ignored, debated, occasionally graffitied, offered gifts, and protected. They provoked questions, introspection, and conversation at the individual and community level.

The Buddha image invited people to reflect on the possibility of an end to violence and the emergence of peace, and to draw on individual and communal resources for moving from reflection to action. Jequeline Salinas, an art teacher who worked on TTR projects with students at Hedges School spoke of her thoughts and feelings about the sculpture: “For me, the Buddha image symbolizes *la esperanza*—meaning the *hope*. The hope I feel deep inside my soul. It is the desire that my students and school community can find peace, live peace.”