

*** Public Dreams ***

Community-Based Art as a Means of Social Change

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Art encourages heightened consciousness and reflectiveness meaningful with respect to human purpose and human undertakings. Art has a way of awakening people to their personal modes of existence and their responsibility as individuals in a changing and problematic world (Connors 1998).

This essay is an exploration of art as a tool of activism and a strategy for social change within a community context. The word “community” will be loosely applied throughout the paper due to its elusive and inclusive nature. “Community” will generally be used to define a group of people who share resources within a geographically bounded space. However, this may be extended beyond the boundaries of geographical space to include those who are strongly connected by a common identity, ethnicity, culture, or otherwise. For clarity I have divided the essay into three parts. The first section, based on a sweeping literature review, will begin by looking at different ways community-based public art has been used globally to initiate positive social and environmental change. The second part will look at different ways the benefits of public art can be made accessible to communities through the forging of community-university ties via science shops thus making concrete connections to the course material and lectures. In the final section I will then ground these ideas in a proposed mock art project for the community of Tofino thereby imagining the positive, controversial and possibly negative effects of community-based public art within that specific community.

Art, I have discovered, is a very abstract and difficult concept to encapsulate within the finite boundaries of words. Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary did not seem to have an easy time at this task either. It describes “art” as follows: *“the conscious use of skill and creative imagination esp. in the production of aesthetic objects; also: works so produced”*. I would like to expand this definition to include the channeling of the power of creativity into sensibly tangible, emotionally engaging and/or thought provoking works that can provide an imaginative space for experiencing profound insight and truth into the realities of existence. Creating an imaginative space can also be the foundation for envisioning and dreaming of new ways of being and thinking.

Art is a form of celebration, education and of resistance as well as an agent of activism and social change. Art is a form of healing and therapy. Art provides historical documentation and is a means for collaboration and conflict resolution within diverse groups of people. Art can be used as an idealistic space where dreams, hopes and desires can be shared. Part of the power and magic of art lies in its ability to transcend verbal language in order to create emotionally engaging messages. In this way art is a universal language. As such it deserves a more credible and valued role in society.

1 Examples and Benefits of Community-Based Public Art

Community-based art places greater emphasis on the *process* of involvement of the community with the project rather than on the finished work itself (Cohen-Cruz, 2003). This is parallel to the motives of community-based research that strive for community participation and shared control over the research agenda. Apparently, the trend of community involvement in the public art process emerged in the mid nineties with the realization by public art professionals that public art has a direct impact on the lives of those living in the community in which the art is situated (Cohen-Cruz, 2003). In the case of outside artists pursuing their own creative ideas within that community it is important to involve the community for many reasons. When creating public artwork, especially if it has an activist agenda with potentially controversial subject matter, it is essential that it is also appropriate within the context of the community. This way the chance of the end product being dismantled due to the public's disapproval is decreased as are the chances of vandalism and defacement (Cohen-Cruz, 2003).

Aesthetics / beautification

The most obvious benefit of art in public space is the beautification of the place through the development and enhancement of its own unique character. My own personal experience is that art in public spaces (for example: a mural, sculpture, or fountain) enhances the sense of place that area beholds, something that is especially important in larger cities where anonymity abounds. When people have a strong sense of place within their community there is greater manifest respect for the environment and the community. Although some people vandalize public art and monuments and others do not really pay much attention to them, many more

people do notice and appreciate the effort taken to beautify or decorate a public place such as a park, town center or courtyard.

Community empowerment / increased cultural awareness

Some advocate the role of contemporary artists as being that of catalysts for positive social change (Morin, 2000). When artwork is specifically about and/or involves a group of oppressed people or a minority it can be empowering (parallel to one of the goals of community-based research) (Cohen-Cruz, 2003). This is supported through the work of Frances Morin, an artist who brought a culturally diverse team of artists to Salvador, the capital of Bahia, Brazil to work with the educators and children of Project Axe over the course of six months. Project Axe is part of the Center for the Defense and Protection of Children and Adolescents that works towards positive transformation of the lives of street children. The goal of the nineteen artists who came from all over the world was to empower the youth by helping them to recognize the beauty, dignity and sacredness of their daily, mundane activities. They attempted to accomplish this through helping the participants to realize that art is not limited to the privileged but rather is a free tool that can lead to self-knowledge, pride and empowerment. Their founding philosophy was based on self-reliance as opposed to charity and their work tactic was the cultivation of ethics through aesthetics¹.

The youth of Project Axe, aged 5-18, mostly black, and desperately poor have been socially and psychologically affected by centuries of racism, poverty and violence. In order to participate in Project Axe, with its benefits of three meals per day, access to health care, family counseling and participation in cultural activities, the youth first had to agree to return home and attend school. The artists worked with the children by engaging them to creatively explore their rich cultural history ripe with tradition and religion. The artists hoped that by the youth celebrating their culture they would learn more about themselves and feel greater pride for their culture and thus themselves. Using the imagination to envision the future was also a vital component in the process of discovery and empowerment. At the culmination of the artists' stay

¹ This mandate of working under the philosophy of justice rather than charity is echoed in the article "From Charity to Justice" by Sam Marullo and Bob Edwards (2000) which argues that effective positive change comes from changing the underlying causes of subjugation which occur at both the structural and institutional level. That is to say that charity and "Band-Aid solutions" do not really solve the problem but only provide temporary relief while helpful energy is detracted from negotiating the root causes of the problem. Community-based research attempts to work within this paradigm, which recognizes the structural causes of oppression affecting communities.

in Salvador the participants voiced their opinions on the collaboration. The artists experienced first hand the racism, poverty, and social injustice that is the result of the legacy of colonialism, post-colonialism and globalization. For some of the artists this experience had a life-changing effect as they found the need to alter the ways in which they lived and worked back in their home countries. More importantly, many of the youth commented that art was a valuable agent in the transformation of consciousness. Others, such as artist, activist and scholar Alan West, support the arts as a worthy tool in community development and cultural exchange. West argues that community art fosters the building of cultural capital that includes knowledge, skills and cultural traditions and acquisitions. This is especially important in immigrant or minority communities where art can stimulate a vibrant dialog regarding identity issues while forging solidarity amongst the population (West, 1994).

Education

Learning through the arts can increase tolerance of cultural diversity through the use of art media, visual metaphors and story telling (Connors, 1998). Artists and art activists can use art as a means to reveal truths and expand perception around typically accepted forms of reality due to the pervasiveness and omnipotence of mass media. For example, Anne Bray, renowned public art activist, uses the very same technology as does the media (cameras, billboards, advertisements, sound systems, etc) to expose the illusions and fabricated desires that the media falsely creates in society. By infiltrating the typical means of media she is able to effectively reach the masses with a message that turns on itself by exposing the control characteristic of the ubiquitous mediums of pop culture. While her artworks do not typically involve the community in the making of them she is able to symbolically portray strong subversive messages that are meant to challenge and educate the public (Bray, 2002). Art has also been used to inform the public about AIDS, women's issues, ecology and culture (Ott, 1994). Other art activists have summed up public art as a form of teaching that transcends exclusionary classrooms and lands into the realm of public society, thereby targeting a larger audience.

Furthermore, it is my own feeling that an important facet of learning is based on not only intellectual challenge but also the questioning of deeply held beliefs and customs (transformative learning). Because community-based art transcends socioeconomic barriers by being publicly accessible and inclusive to the entire community it has great potential to be used more frequently

in communities to raise awareness around issues of concern and to educate the public about alternatives.

Collaboration

One of the benefits of communities and outside artists working together is the often-inherent realization of difference and similarity between the two. Collaboration via the art experience can be seen as an “activation” of the space of possibility in between groups and individuals (Morin, 2002). Contemporary art can be the forum where differing groups can learn about and from each other. This has special value in a world increasingly alienated by the processes of globalization and its hegemonic effect on the global population. As large cities, especially in the developed world, become increasingly plagued by a sense of anonymity pervasive throughout its populations any type of project facilitated by a competent and caring individual that invokes participation across a broad spectrum of a community is valuable in creating more unified and cohesive communities. That is, collaboration is vital to any community building strategy because it also builds social capital.

Conflict resolution

Art can be a medium used to explore problem solving through the imagining of different and new solutions to particular conflicts through situation analysis and creative modes of thinking (Connors, 1998). Kathleen Connors, a professor of art education at both the undergraduate and the graduate level(s), found that learning through the arts can increase tolerance of cultural diversity while enhancing conflict resolution. One of her self-described teaching methods is to create a hypothetical conflict in an imaginary situation and then have her students work in small groups imagining innovative and creative ways to solve or ameliorate the problem through the use of visual metaphors, story telling and art media. Some of the biggest challenges her students encountered were imagining creative solutions that were collaborative and flexible enough to incorporate everyone’s vision, which differed largely on account of personal and cultural experiences (Connors, 1994). I feel that this exercise in imaginative and collaborative solution finding has enormous potential to be transferred outside of the classroom with its hypothetical conflicts and into communities divided over contentious issues where multiple stakeholders represent very different if not contradictory interest groups.

Resistance

While there are many inspiring examples of the ways art has been used as an effective and organized form of mobilization and resistance Haiti's political murals stand out as being extremely significant due to their scale and historical context. Haitian public art, in its most political and symbolic form, was seen in the 1990s following long-term, violent political upheaval. In 1994 public art was the primary response to liberation when the popular political leader Bertrand Aristide returned after a coup d'état had kicked him out of government, replacing him with an extremely violent and unpopular leader for three years. When Aristide returned after the United States ended a three-year trade embargo with the arrival of 20,000 troops, artistic fury ensued. Thousands of murals immediately appeared all over the country. Since three quarters of the population is illiterate visual imagery is the most celebrated form of public communication. Furthermore, art was seen to restore normalcy and helped in the rebuilding of people's lives since the prior thirty years of oppressive dictatorship had outlawed freedom of expression (Brown, 1996). The murals were of an extremely political and symbolic nature and served many functions to the population. For many, the murals serve as a historical record of the injustices suffered as they portray the horrific crimes that claimed so many lives. In this way many artists perceive themselves as photojournalists providing documentation that makes it impossible for the population to forget about those sacrificed during the turbulent times. Yet the majority of the murals is of a highly political nature and employs the use of the rooster, Aristide's political emblem, in various symbolic positions (Brown, 1996). In Haiti murals were a very effective, obvious and emancipatory form of expression as well as an overwhelming display of resistance and solidarity. Similarly, art can be a catalyst for social change through its illumination of a political or contentious issue which can lead to mass mobilization and action (Cohen-Cruz, 2003).

2 Science Shops, Art Shops

Science shops, originally developed by Dutch universities but now with varying models worldwide, can serve as invaluable conduits between universities and communities. Science shops employ academic researchers and students with their access to university resources and

equipment to connect with communities that request aid or information on issues of community concern. Usually, science shops operate free of charge when the community demonstrates its inability to fund the type of research it requires and that it is not commercially driven by profit. Science shops grew out of the model that universities ought to have public spaces where community members with specific problems could connect with particular academic fields related to their problem by visiting “chemistry shops”, “physics shops” and so on. To my knowledge there are no science shops that incorporate “art shops” into this information-sharing network.

Based on the literature review in Part 1 which validates the social benefits of public art, I see enormous potential for the role of art as a problem-solving tool for certain situations as a notion worthy of exploration. Universities do not strictly turn out scientists and social scientists but also artists and art educators. The roles of trained artists in society need not be overshadowed by the more mainstream and concrete roles that are dictated by the fields of science. The fine arts provide a form of “knowing” equally important to but very different from the traditionally valued fields of science.

What would an art shop look like? An art shop could operate as its own unique entity where demand for art and art services was high enough, or it could operate as a sub-branch under the wider umbrella of science shops at large. Communities wishing to build social and cultural capital as well as attempting to resolve conflict or celebrate an aspect of the community’s shared history or cultural may be interested in connecting with a professional artist trained in the area of community-based art and adept at facilitating large-scale art projects. The community would be able to seek out such a person by visiting an art shop and negotiating an agreement with an artist capable of taking on the scope of the imagined project. Unfortunately, seeing as science shops have barely taken off in Canada, art shops will likely have a difficult time being resurrected. Valorizing art as a meaningful and beneficial tool for positive social change is vital in an academic world that is increasingly realizing that importance of interdisciplinary studies and education.

3 Community Solidarity via the Public Art Process

In this section I will apply the knowledge gleaned from research as well as the class lectures and my experience during the field component in the Clayoquot Sound region to an example I have specifically imagined for the locale of Tofino. Tofino, better known for its rugged wilderness, surfing and tourist attractions, is in the midst of major and ongoing environmental and development conflicts. Below standard forest practices are still defacing the remaining intact watersheds in the Clayoquot Sound region, while fish farms are becoming increasingly concentrated despite environmental concerns. Meanwhile, around the city of Tofino urban development continues to invade the wilderness surrounding the town-site as more sub-developments and resorts are contracted out. What I really learnt during the field component in Clayoquot Sound was how divisive and controversial these issues are within the communities of the region. While my personal concerns are largely of environmental caliber I became more sensitized to the realities of the local economy and the struggle of locals to make a living in a region whose local economy has historically been based on resource extraction. For many people involved in the forestry, aquaculture and tourism industries radical environmental reform is directly linked to a fear of a loss of employment. I sensed deep ideological crevices in the community that cause conflicts within the different stakeholders who live and work in the area. The central region Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations who number in almost equal numbers to non-Aboriginals in the area also have deeply invested interests and emotional ties to the environment.

Despite the fact that the communities of Clayoquot Sound are deeply divided around environmental issues, in many people there remains a sense of fierce solidarity and activism around environmental concerns as exemplified by the famous anti-logging protests in 1993². Therefore, I perceive Tofino to be a perfect site to employ the strategies of community-based public art.

My vision for Tofino is to transform the Ike St. Tree into a work of collaborative art with the intent of educating the public, particularly tourists, about the environmental conflicts in the Clayoquot/Barkley Sound region. The work would also commemorate the solidarity expressed during the 1993 protests as we approach its 10-year anniversary³. Equally important would be the historic documentation of the developments in environmental issues (that is, continued

³ The protest In the summer of 1993 was an unprecedented event in Canadian history as over 800 people of various ages and backgrounds were arrested for civil disobedience during the sustained blockade. The blockade, which protested clear-cut logging in the area was seen as being successful and empowering in many ways.

logging mostly by Interfor but also by Iisaak Forest Resources) and their ecological and social consequences. I see the process of creating this artwork as an opportunity for a cross-section of the community to come together to celebrate their solidarity as well as their differences and to envision an idealistic if not utopian future where all factions of the community could be satisfied and cared for. In this way the involved community could work on conflict resolution through the use of visual metaphors and art media as aforementioned.

The reason for the Ike St. Tree being the location selected for this artwork is because of the tree's potent symbolic value. From what I understood from talking to a few Tofino locals the story of the Ike St. Tree is as follows; At some point soon after the calamitous 1993 protests there was a bid to develop a waterfront area underneath a bank upon which a massive old tree resided. This particular tree was one of the only old-growth trees left standing within the town-site of Tofino and was adjacent to (and clearly visible from) the highway. Unfortunately, due to the tree's deteriorating condition it was deemed to be a dangerous threat to the development and was therefore slated to be cut down. This notion was found to be unacceptable to the people of Tofino who felt that taking down the tree was symbolic of the destruction of the rainforests of Clayoquot Sound in the name of profit. The community therefore banded together and miraculously raised an exorbitant amount of money to have the tree saved. This entailed building an enormous brace around the tree with large metal supports radiating outwards from mid-trunk to the ground surrounding the tree. It is not a very beautiful sight. In fact it seems rather ironic to see the tree forcefully preserved upright in an unnatural contraption that prevents it from completing its natural lifecycle. However, it is the symbolic value of solidarity within the community and the powerful environmental message that makes the Ike St. Tree so extraordinary. Moreover, it is highly doubtful that the average tourist driving along the highway into Tofino has any idea what the strange-looking tree represents.

I feel that the way to develop this project would be in accordance with the principles and ethics of community-based research. Therefore, respect for the community would be the top priority as would be community participation. Also, *everything* would be done in accordance with the "Standard of Research Protocol". The project coordinator/facilitator would be responsible for describing the project proposal to the community and gaging whether or not the

project would actually be met with enthusiasm and support. Assuming that it was, an advisory committee would then be set up. The committee would attempt to be a cross-section of the community with interested representatives from each interest group or stakeholder (Nuu-chah-nulth representative, forestry worker, fish farmer, environmentalist/conservationist, activist, scientist, artist, etc.). The advisory committee would then meet to discuss the goals of the project and the means in which they would be accomplished. Either the committee would design the project with the artist executing the plan or the artist would work in conjunction with local community artists and interested individuals. One possible idea for the project would be a type of cyclical mural made of panels that ran between the supports where the cables merged with the ground. The panels would be designed to rest against and between the cables.

The potential benefits of this type of a project echo the potential benefits discussed in Part 1. Education, collaboration, conflict resolution, resistance, beautification and social change all have the potential to be the by-products of this community-based public artwork. I feel that Tofino would be receptive to such a project because of its general environmental enthusiasm as well as the fact that this project would offer an ideological and commemorative space where passionate community members could publicly expose their views. Due to the fervent and controversial content of the subject matter there would certainly be many hurdles and conflicts to overcome. Many of these challenges would presumably mirror the difficulties of doing community-based research. These include time issues and constraints amongst participants and funders, funding itself, effective communication and conflict resolution. However, in both community-based research and community-based public art the obstacles and challenges are a necessary part of a process that valorizes equality, justice and respect between community participants and the researcher or project coordinator. Once again, the *process* of the collaboration is more important than the end-product itself.

The art shop concept would be the perfect framework for the realization of this project and other projects like it. Here, the community of Tofino (with some funding?) would have the opportunity to approach working artists through an art shop to discuss project ideas. The artists at the art shop would then be able to offer a *service* to the community through their specifically tailored skills, ideas and experience.

Conclusion

Based on the overwhelming amount of literature (not all of which I was able to include in this essay) hailing the wide-ranging benefits of community-based public art I strongly believe that art shops ought to be modeled after or included within the science shop concept. This would allow the benefits of community-based public art to be accessible to communities regardless of socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic composition. Art is crucial to the creation of socially equitable societies because it creates free, imaginative space where new ideologies can be explored in emotionally and spiritually transfixing ways. Art is powerful and diverse in its usage. Whether it is used as a tool, a weapon, a lesson or a vision art has always had and continues to have an integral role in community development. As such, the benefits of its public practice ought to be valorized to the same extent that the physical and social sciences are heralded as able to provide viable solutions and frameworks for change.

What better place than art, with its fertile questioning, its nomadic beauty and utopian anticipations, to forward (the) dialog of equals?(West 1994)

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