The Eye of the Imagination: Community engaged art as research

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Art For Social Change Research Project Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, B.C. Recently I have witnessed the increasing use of the term 'community engagement' within institutions and academies with growing interest. The University of British Columbia includes *community engagement* as a cornerstone of its strategic plan, describing its relationship with the community "as integral, where costs and benefits are shared, where learning is reciprocal, beginning with interest and outreach and growing to engagement and empowerment. ¹

Yet despite the best efforts of ethical researchers who partner with communities; the partnerships between the academy and community are often plagued by unequal power relations that do not represent reciprocal learning and where costs and benefits are not equally shared, particularly in the realm of community-engaged arts research. These unequal power relations are due in part by an incapacity on the part of institutions to appreciate, interrogate, and interpret the nuances of creative expression and art produced within a community engaged practice. As well as being unable to value the time and resources required to create community engaged art works and by an institutional bias that cannot recognize the work produced in community engaged art practice as legitimate research. In other words, the institution despite its claims to be an equal partner in community engagement cannot value the outcomes of community engaged art practice in the same ways it can assess and value the research produced within the academy largely because the institution has little experience of working with communities in environments that are dynamic and unpredictable and require interdisciplinary responses to facilitate and maintain. The outcomes, the actual creative expression produced within many of these projects remains largely unexamined or interrogated as legitimate forms of research. Meanwhile the lived experience of the community becomes the subject of the research and is measured or examined through conventional research lens and methodologies.

These concerns were expressed recently at a research retreat conducted by the Art for Social Change Research Project. This five-year research project funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada is designed to spark a network of exchange and collaboration between artists and scholars across Canada. In September

2014, the research project invited a number of artist working in case studies associated with the project as well as recognized practitioners in the community-engaged arts to inquire into what were the most pressing challenges in this field. One preoccupation raised at the retreat concerned itself with the work of the artists who have involved themselves in research projects and the need for their work to be recognized within the research and within the academy. When responding to the question of how do artists work within an academic system, the research group forwarded the need for governing institutions to value the different aesthetic modalities that can represent research outcomes and for these modalities to be valued as legitimate knowledge production.

Grant Kester (Variant Issue 9), views socially engaged art as having the capacity to form different knowledge depending on its location where the meaning of a given work is not centred in a physical local of the object nor in the imaginative capacity of a single viewer. Rather the art produced has to take on different meaning in different locations. (7/1) These kinds of production produce multiple levels of information and in Kester's words "unanticipated collaborative learnings". (7/1)

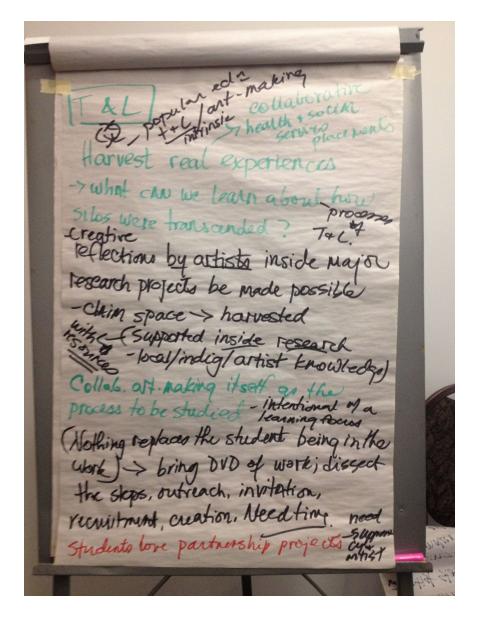


Fig. 1: Brainstorm by artists at 2014 Art for Social Change Research Project Retreat, Banff, Alberta. (Photography by Patricia Fraser. September, 2014.)

The problem in how to assess the value of this practice and thereby address some of the unequal power relations between research institutions and community engaged artists is not easy. However if the academy is claiming, as is the case of the University of British Columbia as well as many other academies in North America, an engagement with community and is seeking effective methods for this engagement, it is incumbent that artists involved in this field play a more central role in representing their work as legitimate research. With that in mind, I would like to unpack my own experience as a community engaged artist² who has worked within four research projects³ and within

innumerable educational settings with communities. I am doing so in order to further how we might start to frame the artwork produced within community engaged settings as research, and to interrogate the kinds of evaluations we might consider for understanding the efficacy of the work.



Fig. 2: Author preparing for the 19th Birthday Party—a media installation created in collaboration with former youth in care on issues relating to homelessness in Vancouver, British Columbia. In British Columbia there is no targeted support for youth who age out of government or foster care at age 19. (Photograph by David Henderson Hean, *The Housing Matters Media Project,* February 7, 2014.)

In order to engage in political acts, social acts, acts of resistance, and acts of resilency in the world and with each other we have to restore and reinvigorate the eyes of our imaginations. One of the ways to re-invigorate our imaginations is to engage through creative practice in fashioning of what we see into new realities. Working with people in a socially engaged arts practice is a role the artist can play in creating environments of innovation and inquiry. Creating art within a community engaged practice that attempts to inform, to disrupt, or to move others in ineffable ways, is an endeavour I have been striving to do for close to thirty years. It is a practice once described as the 'ever emerging never fully emerged

⁴ practice of community engaged art.

The practice is characterized by inquiry, offered often as an invitation to seek out what is of vital interest to the community.⁵ It is a practice that often finds itself with people gathering together in the margins of our cultures, often precipitated by varying degrees of crisis in a space that belongs to neither.



Fig. 3: At the *19th Birthday Party* videos produced in collaboration with youth who have experienced government care and who currently represent 65% of homeless youth in British Columbia are seen and heard at the birthday table, selected research on youth and homelessness appear on screen above the party table. (Photograph by David Henderson Hean, *The Housing Matters Media Project,* February 7, 2014.)

This practice strives to question and form creative responses that look past the language of measuring and broaden our capacities to create expressions and responses to our experience of being in a shared world. These responses often reach beyond what normally defines research outcomes and research methodologies. Thus, I would argue, developing the capacity that allows for the possibility to form responses that lie outside predominating conceptual frames.

When communities of people find avenues of expression that speak to an experience of being in a shared world or express a shared concern through making art there is the possibility of developing capacities within these communities to respond and create knowledge in unanticipated and unexpected ways. The degree of responsiveness developed through our creative capacities can form a response to the question curricular theorist William Pinar (2009) poses when he asks the question; "Does the human become human in the act of letting the world speak through her or him?" (p. 46).

Through the language of metaphor or through the disrupting of dominant narratives creative practice and art making seeks ways to expand our abilities in order to allow our experience of and concern for the world speak through us to others.



Fig. 4: *The Housing Matters Media Project* was created by Patti Fraser and Corin Browne as community engaged media art project with youth seeking to respond to the housing crises in Vancouver British Columbia. This poster was created in collaboration with community-engaged media project with young artists. (*The Housing Matters Media Project*, February 7, 2013. http://www.housingmattersmedia.com/screenings/)

Creating art within a socially engaged context in order create a response based on the lived experience of those with who are doing the making, whether it is things or events, stories or performances, also create opportunities for the participants and the spectators or audience to pay attention. When we pay attention we are in the space that is exemplified

by the best practices found in research. The way we attend, how we develop new responses to our shared world, and the questions that emerge within a creative inquiry with community is a central tenant of how art and its multiplicity of modalities can form lines of inquiry within research projects.



Fig. 5: Guests at the party experience intimate screenings of the digital narratives created by former youth in care that address issues of ging out of care at age nineteen in the *The Housing Matters Media Project*. (Photograph by David Henderson Hean, February 7, 2014. http://www.housingmattersmedia.com

Research is a practice that it is characterized by inquiry. Within action based research projects the inquiry is often offered as an invitation to seek out what is of vital interest a group of people or community. When the mediums and disciplines of art are employed to uncover the research question or inquiry, the framing of this inquiry changes and with it the multiplicity of possible responses are amplified. By shifting the focus onto the art produced by these individuals or by the community and by viewing this work as *authentic representations* of the lives of the participants themselves, we are aligning ourselves with the goals and values of community action research. Ibanez-Carrasco and

Riano-Alcala (2009) define community action research as research that engages communities and individuals as agents (not subjects) of activities, products, and knowledge production, (p.3). The goals of arts based research methodologies are to implement transparent, flexible, and trustworthy processes in communities and between individuals.



Fig. 6: Lantern Houses inviting wishes for those youth aging out of care from audience at the installation/party. (Photograph by D. L. Williams, *The Housing Matters Media Project*, February, 7, 2014.)



Fig. 7: Well wishing card hung on lantern house. (Photograph by D. L. Williams, *The Housing Matters Media Project,* February, 7, 2014.)

Both community engaged art projects and research share the essential characteristic of inquiry. When invited into a project to work with a community the artist is, in essence, a researcher who initiates and facilitates an inquiry with a group of people. Because the inquiry is conducted as a creative endeavour, she or he is charged with a responsibility to maintain the inquiry's open quality for as long as possible. There is within this form of inquiry an invitation to think outside of the box or outside of predominating conceptual frames. Through facilitating the inquiry the artist and the participants are invited to research and to learn; to uncover, educate, and respond collectively. The basic tenants of

socially engaged art demands that the inquiry is facilitated in ways in which all of the participants can understand, participate, and respond. Within the inquiry the participants are not required nor encouraged to identify with any political or social agendas or need to feel the responsibility to represent any group apart from themselves. They are rather invited to explore the issue through the lens of their knowledge and their experiences with the participating artist who is acts as a possible medium. As the inquiry deepens often a shared sense of responsibility develops but the *intent* of the practice is to support an experience of freedom of creative inquiry.

Gathering to produce a creative response through the investigation of new metaphors or play at reconfiguring images of the past in order to create new meanings in the present, the *lack* of responsibility of obligation to anything else whether it involves the desires of the funding agencies, larger research goals, or other organizational agendas is the condition that produces the freedom needed in order to experience creative endeavor. By participating in freedom from obligation community engaged practices evoke spaces of potential creative action, the production and experimentation of innovative responses, and uncover new narratives. By facilitating environments where the participants can respond and inquire without attendant responsibilities to learning agendas or other agendas we reinvigorate the eyes of our imagination and make ourselves more ready to participate in social, creative and political acts that could, in the future, entail responsibilities to others.



Fig. 8: Patti Fraser and Corin Browne, Co-Artistic Directors of *Housing Matters Media Project*, with youth who created films on housing crises. (Photograph by Evan Crowe, *Housing Matters Media Project*, October 12, 2012.)

Sometimes the inquiry is conducted through introducing new mediums of expression to a community and then asking the community to work out the inquiry through creative engagement with this medium. The work requires that both the community and the artist engage in new forms and new relationships. These relationships may be characterized as informal, reciprocal, respectful, and co-collaborative.

In many community engaged art projects the experience of *hospitality* ⁶ is a key ingredient. The places and spaces needed to accommodate the practice of hospitality towards the community's needs not the institution's or research project's needs is a critical component to the artistic and research outcomes. Ivan Illich (1996) defines the practice of hospitality as 'recovering threshold, table, patience and listening, these activities generate seedbeds of virtue and friendship and radiate out for the possible rebirth of community. ⁷



Fig. 9: Youth at the *Housing Matters Media Project* at the Purple Thistle Centre, Vancouver, B.C. January 13, 2014. (Photograph by Corin Browne, *Housing Matters Media Project*, January 13, 2014.)

Thresholds are places we walk through to tables of food. Places we appear before each other with our human needs and offerings. Places that meet these human needs are necessary in order to begin to work together. These places of hospitality are especially needed in the margins of our culture. Places where the community is not adapting their needs to the needs of the host organization or research project but where the institution or research agenda is adapting to the needs of the community.

The Ecotone

Because the making of art with people is not seen as a central tenant in consumer culture we often find these projects gathering in the margins of our culture. In my role as a socially engaged artist I have come to view the space where this work happens best described in ecological terms as an environmental *ecotone*. An ecotone is where two or more entities meet and attempt to integrate. Deriving from the Greek meaning eco meaning *house* and *tonos* or tension. The ecotones are often places of great diversity, like

marshlands where the waters of the sea meet the fresh water of the land and salt water species become or engage with fresh water entities, where the incoming tide meets the outgoing tide or in the borderland between forest and field. *Ecotones* are ecologies where species interact in dynamic and evolving ways on the borders of intersecting worlds, they are places that cannot be defined as either this or that. The spaces located within ecotones of our shared culture working together are found outside institutional settings. The work itself unfolding in dynamic and unpredictable ways that requires interdisciplinary responses to facilitate and maintain.

Art outcomes remain invisible as research

I have noted, in my experience as an artist in partnership in numerous research projects⁸ and within other educational projects, that the creative outcomes that are produced in this form of inquiry within community engaged contexts often remain invisible as research. Although some of these research and educational projects were framed as action research the actions or the outcomes of the art making did not become an expression of the research. In other words the work produced in these settings was not interpreted, interrogated, or used as research outcomes but viewed more as a part of the research project's community outreach and community development strategies. The artwork produced in these settings was seen by the researchers as recreational or creative but not as outcomes of research. The 'research' methodologies retreated to the methodological comfort zones of qualitative interviews and standard questions derived from other disciplines in order to capture the lived experiences of the participants.

For example, in the *Arts Health and Seniors Project* ⁹ where I was a resident artist for four years, the research project used an evaluation and qualitative research methodology taken from the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Nursing standard mental health testing in order to ascertain the effects on the health and wellbeing of seniors working with artists in a community engaged practice. The research based their findings on individual health outcomes, changes in social behaviours, and learning outcomes. While all of this data is important to forward the argument for the benefits of creative

practice with seniors, the research project was unable to evaluate *the work* produced in this extensive community engaged art project.



. Fig. 10: Digital Shrine created by Patti Fraser and Corin Browne with seniors from Silver Harbour Seniors Centre in North Vancouver, B.C. Exhibited at Mountainview Cemetery's *Night for All Souls* as part of *The Arts, Health, and Seniors Project*. (Photograph by Andrew O'Connell, October 31, 2005, http://www.cacv.ca/marina-szjiarto)

Evaluation

These same research projects privileged the community engagement and community development outcomes in the projects over the art making and its outcomes. What was not recorded was the *degree* to which the producing of art formed the experience of engagement within the group of participants. Not investigated was the ways in which the making or creative practice determined or enhanced the resiliency within the community. The unexpected forms of knowledge produced within these collaborative environments

and the ways in which the production of art aided in the re-narravitizing of the participants' lived experience including those of the facilitating artist were not queried. The creative work produced in the form of the predominant images, metaphors, narratives that emerged in the course of group's facilitated creative process was neither interrogated nor interpreted.

Although these same community engaged art projects that I have worked on have influenced public policy, ¹⁰ helped to inform public opinion, and change the lives of those who have participated, the art making and its ensuing productions created out of these projects was viewed as recreational and educative rather than legitimate expressions of research.



Fig. 11: Lawrence Lam and Kim Villigante introduce films and website at opening screening of their work. (Photograph by David Henderson Hean, February, 7, 2013)

Community engaged or community starved?

In the research projects I been involved in as an artist, I have witnessed the current interest within these same research projects and the interest of institutions in community engagement propelled by the need for these academies and institutions to relieve their condition of "community starved." The condition of being 'community starved' may be a possible factor in the lack of commitment to the creative outcomes of the work in the

community and the intense focus on those who create the work. This need to produce as evidence 'members' of communities within institutuonal settings propels the research projects to make a demand on the participants to appear in place of the *the work produced* by community engaged art as the outcomes of the research and inquiry. In my experience these same research projects chose to view the vehicle of artmaking as a recreational or educational tool to gather community and provide action research participants rather than recognize the artmaking and production of artwork as research outcomes.

The "appearance" of these same participants at conferences or dialogues hosted at the institutions as proof of their community engagement garners a currency that leverages funding. The members of the community engaged projects were expected to 'appear' before others not as producers of the art or as purveyors of the creative expression but rather as evidence that the project had community involved in it. While appreciating the care and respect many of the individual researchers displayed in their relationships with the participants and the community, there remained nevertheless a demand for the participants to appear in institutional settings as evidence of community engagement.

One of the most persistent challenges of seeing and valuing the work of community engaged art as research is viewing the work itself as having value to the research *in place* of the lived experience the participating community. The production of creative work based in a community engaged inquiry has the capacity to interrupt the scrutiny of the qualitative and quantitative research gaze and thwart its desire for stories of lived experience that originate within vulnerable communities by a constant narrative loop of vulnerability and marginalization.



Fig. 12: Still from *Dreamhouses* by Jamillah Touré. (http://www.housingmattersmedia.com/young-artists-explore-the-housing-crisis/)

In the research projects I have been involved in there is a great deal of pressure exerted on the artists, those of us who facilitate the community engaged inquiry and are making art with the participants, to provide these research 'bodies' within institutional settings. Over the course of three decades of work I have had to negotiate a relentless hunger on behalf of social service agencies and associated institutions and organizations to provide participants, mostly youth, from communities who I am working with. Understandably these same projects view the appearance of the participants as inclusive but rarely are the settings for these encounters supportive of the needs of the community. These requests invariably come in the form of invitations to conferences and dialogues and events that are designed and created by institutions that have little or no experience of working within the ecotones of our culture. What is not recognized in the culture and sets of relationships that are developed within community engaged arts projects is that these relationships do not concern themselves entirely with the goals of the research projects. These relationships developed within a creative collaborative art making process depend on reciprocity, informal exchanges, and informal experiences of hospitality. They take place in spaces that are not institutional and cannot be replicated within the academy.

Many of these invited participants come from stressed or vulnerable communities. The need for others to hear their stories is an endemic problem. It has led one youth and homelessness advocate to characterize this need of institutions of have 'community' participants available and seen at conferences, and dialogues as 'poverty porn'. What has been consistently missing in these projects that stem from the compassionate desire for change on the part of the research groups is the willingness to interrogate *the work* created collaboratively between artist and participant as the most considered response to the conditions of their lived experience and the richest expression of their lives. The attending to creative work produced within community can shift the gaze from subject to producer.



Fig. 13: Guests listen to individual stories in intimate setting with others. Roundhouse Community Performance Centre, Vancouver. (Photograph by David Henderson Hean, *Housing Matters Media Project*, February 7, 2014, http://www.housingmattersmedia.com/the-19th-birthday-party/)

Community engaged creative practice is the practice of seeking of new metaphors, new mediums, and therefore new forms of contextualizing and understanding the lived

experiences of the community. It requires building enormous levels of trust that can support creative work and the challenges inherent in experimenting with new mediums and new modes of expression. This kind of work can be challenging to maintain in vulnerable communities. However the production of authentic creative expression also has the capacity to energize these communities in laying the groundwork for future action.

By focusing the lens of research on the inquiry that emerges through expressive arts the research can replace the stories of lived experience that are often narratives of persistent traumatization and relieve the partnership research institutions of the need to have people tell these stories. It also calls us to investigate why art matters, particularly in community action research projects.

By shifting the focus onto the art produced by these individuals or by the community and by viewing this work as *authentic representations* of the lives of the participants themselves, we are aligning ourselves more fully with the goals and values of community action research.

The questions I use as a participating artist to evaluate in part a project, lie within the participants' experience of creative freedom, and the effects of the artistic outcomes of the project. For example, we might ask the participants to what degree did they enjoy themselves? We may observe together the ways and the degrees to which we collaborated and cooperated with each other. We would interrogate the ways we did engage with each other while experimenting in creative responses to the difficulties and tensions of creative work. And we would ask what emerged as the vital question or vital interest of this particular community through their creative work? To what degree did we respond in innovative or disruptive ways? Did a network of support form that will exist after the project ends? And perhaps, what were the outcomes of this work in larger community? Are there predominate metaphors or narratives that emerged in the produced pieces? How doe these inform our understanding, and impact possible future response?



Video still from Ruby Smith Diaz's "Untitled", part of the Housing Matters Media Project



Still from the Production Residency of Housing Matters Media Project

Fig. 14: Stills from *Housing Matters Media Project* (www.housingmattersmedia.com)

Conclusion

By participating in freedom from obligation to any agenda, whether it is a research agenda, or a social justice agenda we evoke spaces of potential creative action, the production and experimentation of innovative responses, and the uncovering of new narratives and new actions.

The social philosopher Albert Borgmann (1992) views the making of art and craft as examples of focal practices that aid us in creating coherence with the world (121). Coherence with the world is experienced as a desire to reconnect, to be in each other's company, to create networks of support. When we combine these kinds of focal practices within research projects we seek to create a kinship whose bonds are those shared in play, in freedom, and in uncovering what is of vital interest to the community. This kind of community engagement can lift research out of a sense of confinement and offer possibilities and opening into more inclusive circumstances.¹¹



Fig. 15: Still from *We have to figure this out* by Chak Estable. (http://www.housingmattersmedia.com/young-artists-explore-the-housing-crisis/)

This kind of inquiry is framed by Augusto Boal's (2002) theory that by making explicit images of our world and our consciousness of this world and by changing these images we change reality.¹²

In conclusion we might begin to assess the value of community engaged artmaking as research by seeking to understand arts based practice on its own terms. By assessing the degree of re-invigoration of the imagination that took place in community, in the ways in which the community was able to represent its culture, the degrees of hospitality it enjoyed, the measure of freedom it experienced, the quality of its expression, and by the depth of its ongoing network of support that arose out of this engagement. In what ways are we letting the world speak through us? And in the doing change our realities.

Endnotes

¹ The University of British Columbia Strategic Plan

² Honouree of 2013 Vancouver Mayor's Art Award for Community Engagement

³ In other words, the community-engaged arts research projects were conducted within larger major research projects.

⁴ In conversation with Arlene Goldberg at Banff, Alberta, 2014

⁵ Garion, Charles R. (1999). *Performing pedagogy; toward an art of politics*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

⁶ Illich (1996) Hospitality requires a table around which you can sit and if people get tired they can sleep. If I had to choose one word to which hope can be tied it is *hospitality*. A practice of *hospitality*— recovering threshold, table, patience, listening, and from there generating seedbeds for virtue and friendship on the one hand —radiating out for possible community, for rebirth of community. (1)

⁷ Ivan Illich with Jerry Browne, We the People, KPFA, March 22, 1996

⁸ Community engaged arts research projects: The University of British Columbia Housing Justice Research Canada Project; principal investigators: Dr. Penny Gurstein and Professor Margot Young) www.housingmattersmedia.com, Applied Theatre Research Consultant with Dr. J. Salverson: with Queen's University: Gender based violence and coercion and HIV infection within Zulu speaking communities of Sisonke, Kwa Zulu Natal in South Africa; principal investigators: Dr. R. Jolly, Dr. S. Fergus, and Dr. Alan Jeeves, 2006, Resident Artist/Curator – with University of British Columbia Faculty of Nursing in the Arts, Health, and Seniors Project; media artist with *Chako* in partnership with Chee Ma Muk Aboriginal Education British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, and Pacific Cinematheque, *What is TB? (not TV)* in media artist collaboration with the communities of Gitanmaax, Kispiox, and K'san Village, coproduced B.C. Centre for Disease Control and Pacific Cinematheque awarded *Canadian Council on Health Services Accreditation citation for Leading Practices in Tuberculosis Control.

¹⁰ For example in 2014 this 19th Birthday party art was exhibited at the University of British Columbia at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies. Members of a senate committee viewed the exhibit while deliberating over whether the university would offer scholarships to youth who had beein in government care. A week after this exhibition it was announced there would be free tuition for all youth who have experienced government care at the University of British Columbia. The exhibition of this work according to one Senate member critical in helping the committee come to their decision.

¹¹ Borgmann, Albert (1984) Crossing the Post Modern Divide; University of Chicago Press, Chicago

¹² Boal, Augusto. Boal applied Friere's pedagogical theory to the theatre working dramatically to find ways to perceive our shared reality differently. (2002) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. (Trans. Charles A. & Mariea –Odilla Leal McBride) London: Pluto.

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The University of British Columbia Strategic Plan – Community Engagement

http://strategicplan.ubc.ca/the-plan/community-engagement/