

Theoretical Debates Concerning Community Engaged Art: An overview in selected quotes and critiques^{1 2}

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On Naming the Practice

- *“There is no definitive understanding or comprehensive theory. The practice is known by many names: community art, participatory arts, community-engaged arts, socially engaged arts, arts for social justice, artist and community collaboration, relational or dialogical art, applied aesthetics, and community cultural development. By extension, folk art, ethnic art, outsider art, collaborative art making, circus arts and grassroots arts are also at times included in this ‘too hard to define’ basket. This extensive ‘shopping list’ is presented here to underscore the fleeting language and jargon created by policy makers”*

Badham, 2010, 84

On Naming the Goals (“instrumentalizing of the arts”)

- *“I do not believe that efficacy and affect are opposites. In many contexts, the ‘unarticulated’ by-products of participation in theatrical events are actually the very things meeting a project’s interventionist goals.”*

Snyder-Young, 2013, 5

A Range of “Guiding Principles” (spiritual and/or political guides)

Examples of spiritual guides

- *“If I’m not for myself, who will be, if I’m only for myself, who am I?”* Hillel, Jewish scholar
- *“Do not do unto others as you would not have done unto you.”* Golden rule, Bible
- *“Be present to whatever happens”*. Buddhism

Critique/Counterargument: One of the main arguments against focusing on spiritual principles is that community engaged arts should not be used for proselytizing or indoctrination.

The main counterargument to this critique is that having guiding principles for conducting the work does not mean that the Judeo-Christian, Buddhist etc. content of the spiritual origin of the principle itself will be indoctrinated in the content of the community engaged art. Only in post-enlightenment Western traditions has there been a radical separation between the conceptual, the material, and the spiritual. The eschewing of spirituality thus not only runs counter to a movement towards look into what ‘matters’ through art, but further implies a Western bias.

¹ This list of issues and quotes was generated in discussion with the ASC researchers as well as participants attending **The Art of Changing the World Conference, Ottawa, November, 2017**, and in synthesizing recent scholarship from a diverse

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Examples of political guides

- *“Let us supposed that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have, in two ways, affirmed himself, and the other person. (i) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and, therefore, enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also, when looking at the object, I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses, and, hence, a power beyond all doubt. (ii) In your enjoyment, or use, of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man's essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man's essential nature . . . Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature.”*
- Marx, 1977
- *“Cultural democracy...(1) posits that **many cultural traditions co-exist** in human society, and that **none of these should be allowed to dominate** and become an "official culture."... (2) A second component of the idea of cultural democracy is **participation**. Cultural democracy proposes a cultural life in which everyone is free to participate.... (3) A third component of the idea of cultural democracy is that **cultural life itself should be subject to democratic control**. We need to participate in determining the directions that cultural development takes.”*

Adams and Goldbard, 1990/1995

Critique/Counterargument: The main critique of using political principles as guides to practice (e.g. Marxism or Liberal Democracy) is that art should not be used as political propaganda and/or a disciplinary technique to create a kind of political subjectivity.

A main counterargument, however, is that redistributing agency is “political” but does not dictate content or form of artistic production. **Ranciere (2004)** argues in the *Politics of Aesthetics* that all modes of distributing agency through art (thus all art forms) are ‘political’ – regardless of content, and thus that there is no ‘neutral’ art.

Kinds of social transformation

Kester (2017) has proposed these provisional categories of social transformation:

- 1) Transformations in individual consciousness;
- 2) Pre-figurative modeling (the creation, in various forms, of activist practice or new modes of social organization that challenge existing hierarchies of power, decision-making, creativity, etc.);
- 3) Transformations in cultural or symbolic discourse (the introduction of new value systems, re-framing of debates or the alteration of social relationships at a given site);
- 4) The re-shaping of spatial boundaries, the defensive partitioning of space or territory, or the temporary occupation of public space;
- 5) The re-shaping of temporal frames, via the blocking or delaying of repressive action;
- 6) Transformations in public policy (governing the police, social policies, property, housing, corporate conduct, etc.);
- 7) Transformations in political regimes, at the local, regional or national level.

Understanding Social Transformation through Socially Engaged Arts

The reshaping of individual and collective identity:

This cuts across many forms of identity – identity of individuals and groups, but also of places and spaces, as well as the identification and transformation of shared values.

- *There is a relation between persons and role. But the relationship answers to the interactive system - to the frame - in which the role is performed and the self of the performer is glimpsed. Self, then, is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them. Just as the current situation prescribes the official guise behind which we will conceal ourselves, so it provides where and how we will show through, the culture itself prescribing what sort of entity we must believe ourselves to be in order to have something to show through in this manner.*

Erving Goffman, 1974

- *[Identity is “performative”, developed as] “a stylized repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous . . . [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.”*

Butler, 2011

The relationship between **discourse and power** is theorized throughout the works of **Michel Foucault**:

- *“Basically power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government. This word must be allowed the very broad meaning which it had in the sixteenth century. “Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others. The relationship proper to power would not therefore be sought on the side of violence or of struggle, nor on that of voluntary linking (all of which can, at best, only be the instruments of power), but rather in the area of the singular mode of action, neither warlike nor juridical, which is government.”*

Foucault, 1982

Homi Bhabha has explored how the performance of cultural identity can be an act of cultural submission, cultural resistance, or sometimes both simultaneously, particularly within the context of colonial practices and cultural hierarchies.

- *“The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double-vision that is a result of what I’ve described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object*

...

Those inappropriate signifiers of colonial discourse - the difference between being English and being Anglicized; the identity between stereotypes which, through repetition, also become

different; the discriminatory identities constructed across traditional cultural norms and classifications, the Simian Black, the Lying Asiatic--all these are metonymies of presence. They are strategies of desire in discourse that make the anomalous representation of the colonized something other than a process of "the return of the repressed," what Fanon unsatisfactorily characterized as collective catharsis."

Bhabha, 1984

Sarah Ahmed explores how affect shapes how race and gender are experienced *relationally* as an *encounter*

- *"We need to consider how the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living (dwelling and travel), as well as epistemic communities .I describe such processes in terms of encounters in order to show how they are determined, but not fully determined. The term encounter suggests a meeting, but a meeting which involves surprise and conflict."*

Ahmed, 2000

bell hooks explores how identity formation works at the intersection of gender and race, through performance, education and other cultural work, and offers a pedagogical vision for moving forward:

- *"Dominant culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community."*

hooks, 2003

Numerous anthropologists of performance/performance studies have contributed insights. See Marvin Carlson: *Performance: A Critical Introduction* for an orientation to major currents.

Theorizing Change³:

Change occurs through transformations in cognitive paradigms:

Jonathan Haidt: looks at the psychology behind adopting a particular worldview and the challenges to changing it:

- *"The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor."* &
- *"The social intuitionist model offers an explanation of why moral and political arguments are so frustrating: because moral reasons are the tail wagged by the intuitive dog. A dog's tail wags to communicate. You can't make a dog happy by forcibly wagging its tail. And you can't change people's minds by utterly refuting their arguments."*

Haidt, 2012

³ The various theories are, of course, not all mutually exclusive; some directly contradict others, but many go hand-in-hand, often merely reflecting different disciplinary framings.

Rick Kemp:

- *“Mirror neurons... are neurons in an observer’s brain that fire in a similar pattern when an action is observed as when an action is actually executed...it links mimesis, empathy and the imagination”*

Kemp, 2012

Change occurs through promoting the learning of transferable skills

Many studies and theorists posit transferable skills:

- *“[T]ransformation is grounded in principles of using embodied play to re-forge habits and fortify an identity within community and societal acceptance, through recognizing individual and collective creative contributions..”*

Spiegel and Parent, 2017

Bourdieu’s theories of “social” or “cultural” capital

- *“It is in fact impossible to account for the function and structure of the social world unless one reintroduces notions of capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory [...] capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital which is convertible under certain conditions into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital; made of social obligations (‘connections’) which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility”*

Bourdieu, 1986

Educational theorists like **Dorothy Heathcote** invite participants...

- [to wear the] “mantle of the expert” to become confident in their ability to co-construct a world; to all learn to improvise together.

Heathcote, 1995

Critical of “learning skills” theory of change:

- *“Often funders and grant writers justify these new arts programs with recourse to financialized neoliberal notions that art and culture essentially improve individuals’ human capital, offering skills and capacities that will improve their ability to sell their labour power and thus reduce their “dependency” on (increasingly scarce and punitive) social assistance”*

Haiven (2017); see also Bishop

Change occurs by inspiring social re-organization through the arts

- *“...[S]ocial arts programs contribute to community development by carving out a space in society that offers alternative ways of seeing and engaging. Those whose own individual and collective perspectives have been marginalized are able to creatively work together, affecting horizons of individual and collective futures. It is through such collective creative embodiment of alternative ways of engaging that such programs may contribute to ‘micro political revolutions’, providing tools for redressing the social inequities that dominate in contemporary urban centers.”*

Spiegel and Parent, 2017

Antonio Gramsci argued that

- “[Each individual] ‘participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it.’”

Gramsci, 2009

Hannah Arendt’s (1958) concept of “natality” characterizes the moment one is “born” into the political sphere as a moment they become an initiator of freedom, acting collectively to bring about the new and unexpected.

John Dewey on creating situations:

- “[that inspire] not Conscious trust in the efficacy of one’s powers but unconscious faith in the possibilities in the situation. It signifies rising to the needs of the situation.”

Dewey, 1938/1997

Paolo Freire on empowering the learner:

- *No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.*

Freire, 1972

Maxine Greene:

- “I view aesthetic education as a mode of countering the anaesthetic, awakening people to ellipses they never knew existed or to plunging leaps they never could have conjured up themselves.”

Greene, 1978

Nicholas Bourriaud on relational aesthetics:

- “Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue”.

Bourriaud, 2002, 17

Augusto Boal:

- “The theatre itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution”

- Boal 1985/2008

Community Arts as part of Broader Social Movements

- “There is always something happening out there that we cannot see. In theatre, that is where the radical plays/”

Filewood,2011.314.

- “Rebel clowns refuse all dichotomies: they are often neither male nor female, neither artist nor activist, neither clever nor stupid, neither mad nor sane, entertainment nor threat. They know that these clear oppositions are oppressive and, more importantly, that if we really are to win this fight for the survival of humanity and the earth’s eco-systems, then one day we will have to convince the cops and soldiers to change sides.”

Klepto and Major Up Evil, 2005,243

- *“Socially engaged art, as my peers and I have experienced it, is created in an expansive place that awakens peoples’ voices minds and spirits in various ways. As for clubs beating people over the heads, I am more concerned about the real ones that might hit my campañaros when they demonstrate for peace or equal rights, than the ones that might emerge from a sincere heart.”*

Naidus, 2009

Critique/Counterargument: A critique of participatory art in social movements is the Aristotelian notion of “catharsis” (Aristotle, *Poetics*): art simply allows people to let out steam to avoid the need for social change.

Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin, 1984) explores both the revolutionary potential as well as neutralizing effects of community play.

Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* explores this tension in neoliberal times.

Decolonizing Theory, Decolonizing Community Art

There are many approaches to the decolonization of theory and practice. Many current prominent writings on the subject involve a deeper listening and engagement with the land and ecosystems to which we belong, and are emerging both from settler allies across disciplines, as well as most importantly by indigenous artists and writers.

“The science in the Arctic is the camp, is the storms, is the stories, is the everyday adventures, is the human interaction. There’s no way you can parse those multiple things apart. It’s one and the same”

John England, climate change scientist

“To me, this is what coming into wisdom within a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabe epistemology looks like – it takes place in the context of family, community and relations. It lacks overt coercion and authority, values so normalized within mainstream western pedagogy that they are rarely ever critiqued. The land, aki, is both context and process. The process of coming to know is learner-led and profoundly spiritual in nature. Coming to know is the pursuit of whole body intelligence practiced in the context of freedom, and when realized collectively it generates generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, inter-dependent and self-regulating community minded individuals. It creates communities of individuals with the capacity to uphold and move forward our political traditions and systems of governance. “

Leanne Simpson

Navigating (Institutional) Power and (Logocentric) Theory: Art and Community Based Research/Theory

- *“stop moments” in our work.. “the stop “lives at the interstices of action”*

Applebaum, 1995

- *“the moment of the stop, perceived failings, hesitations, stumbling, transgressions, and started recognitions - are sign posts to new ways of engaging in our world(s) or embodied experience”*

Lynn Fels, 2004

- “If we want to be creative in our outputs we will need to be creative in our outputs, we will need to engage in a paradigm shift from talking to doing: moving beyond text and words and employing the power of sounds, movements and pictures, all moving toward the development of an alternative means of communication of social science data”

Kip Jones

Above all, the refrain that emerges is a need to listen and be guided by parents, elders, community members and all those who ‘participate’ in projects – and taking their words, art and bodies, taking their power and strength as a theoretical guide for future practice.

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(also see *Handbook of Arts Based Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy and