Touching Minds and Hearts
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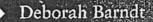
2008

Folk Art and Popular Art Forms

TOUCHING MINDS AND HEARTS

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◆ Deborah Barndt

◆ Roots and Strands of Community Arts

Community arts, as a term and recognized field of practice, only came into currency in the latter part of the 20th century. But the process it refers to—the engagement of people in representing their collective identities, histories, and aspirations in multiple forms of expression—is as old as cave paintings and ritualistic chanting. Gregory Cajete (1994) describes art in North American Aboriginal contexts as "an expression of life" practiced by all the people, usually an "anonymous activity expressing a unique cultural perspective of living" (p. 154). Thus, art was/is integral to life, totally democratized, and reflecting a community rather than an individual identity. Art was/is also a means of visioning, used within rituals and ceremonies, and integrating "myth, dream, art, ecological philosophy, communality, and spirit" (p. 146). Certainly for many Aboriginal peoples art is synonymous with community, whereas for the mainstream Western art world, "community" as a descriptor may connote something of lesser quality when judged against the work of individual geniuses of "high art."

The separation of "art" from "community" perhaps has its roots in both a body/mind and a nature/culture split in Western consciousness

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emerging from certain streams of the European scientific revolution of the 1700s (Griffin, 1995) and in the commodification of art and knowledge associated with industrial capitalism of the 1800s (Berger, 1972). This has intensified in recent decades with commercialized and individualistic practices of art and media in the context of corporate cultural globalization, often "reducing culture to commerce" (Adams & Goldbard, 2002, p. 20). This process is paralleled by and integral to the commodification of knowledge, which emphasizes knowledge transmission and accumulation rather than the knowledge production process and frames learning as a personal and primarily mental undertaking rather than a social relation and holistic experience (Barndt, 1990).

Besides the resistance of Aboriginal peoples to fragmented ways of knowing often implicitly promoted in Western schools, media, and institutions, there have been many forms of education, art, and activism that have also challenged these dominant paradigms (Freire, 1982). In the North American context, the *cultural workers* of the 1930s, for example, promoted collective production of the arts through the mural movement and film, theatre, and dance workers' leagues associated with socialist politics and supported by U.S. President Roosevelt's New Deal programs (Adams & Goldbard, 2001). *Community development* and *community animation* in the radical 1960s (and the related *animation socioculturelle* in Quebec) linked the organizing of marginalized communities with the expression of their issues through theatre (Teatro Campesino was linked to organizing Chicano farmworkers in California; see Rose-Avila, 2003), video (the Canadian National Film Board's Challenge for Change program documented and represented video portraits back to Maritimes communities; see Marchessault, 1995), and music (Black spirituals were transformed into hymns of the United States–based civil rights movement; see Sapp, 1995).

In the Latin American context, *popular education, popular communications,* and community arts were linked to the building of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge military dictatorships, United States intervention, and extreme disparities between the rich and the poor in the southern hemisphere (Kane, 2001; Nadeau, 1996; Nuñez, 1999). Art and media forms such as community radio, popular theatre, *nueva cancion* (new song), slide shows, and video were democratized and used to engage an exploited majority in naming and challenging current power relations while envisioning utopias of more just and equitable societies (Arnold & Burke, 1983). In this context, the critical and the creative were wed. As popular education promoted the collective production of knowledge, popular art offered both a mode of collective inquiry and a form of communicating that knowledge to the poor majority in ways that touched hearts as well as minds. It was understood that change would not happen unless the majority not only understood the root causes of their oppression and the necessity of struggle but also felt a deep commitment to working for change and a growing sense of their own power to make a difference. The arts were not only tools in education and organizing but engaged people more fully, moved their spirits, and inspired collective action. Participatory research was part and parcel of popular education, and so the processes of art-making and popular communications were also about people researching their own lives (Barndt, 2004).

In the past 20 years, the term "community arts" has become more common in North America, but its meaning remains as diverse as the contexts in which it is practiced. At its most conservative, it refers to the dissemination of elite or classical arts to rural communities that have been marginalized by the large (and more heavily funded) urban cultural centers. Many municipal or provincial community arts councils, for

example, were responses to this disparity. Adams and Goldbard (2001), U.S. consultants in community arts for the past 30 years, eschew the term because of this connotation and prefer instead the concept of *community. cultural development,* which they define as "a range of initiatives undertaken by artists in collaboration with other community members to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change" (p. 107).

In the Canadian context, this new institutional space, however, has also been claimed by more political artists, who work collaboratively with diverse communities of interest and location. Honor Ford-Smith (2001), Jamaican Canadian community artist and cultural theorist, assesses both the potential and the dangers revealed in a new surge of public and private funding for community arts. Concerned that funders might hijack community agendas, she argues for

> an increasingly hybrid definition of community and community arts, one that allows for diversity of practice, rigorous critique of practice and that challenges the essentially conservative dichotomy between professional and amateur and between product and process. (p. 13)

Among activists of the new millennium, there has also been a resurgence of participatory production of the arts, often in response to commodified culture of global capitalism and the promotion of passive consumption rather than active citizenship (Starr, 2001). It is evident in the proliferation of puppets, masks, and performance artists in street protests (Hutcheson, 2006), as well as in the adoption of culture jamming practices (Liacas, 2005), theatre of the oppressed techniques (Boal, 2002), hip hop music, reclaim the streets movements (Jordan, 2002), and Web-based activisms (Kidd, 2005).

Community arts is often implicitly a critique of the domination of Western mass media and popular consumer culture. It is also a response to migration and diasporic populations claiming and creating diverse and multiple identities. In global cities such as Toronto, a cauldron of diverse cultural practices, new cultural fusions are drawing on traditions that challenge both the Eurocentric content and individualism of hegemonic White Western culture (Fung & Gagnon, 2002).

In choosing to use the term *community arts* here, then, I recognize its multiple connotations and the contestations about who does it, in what contexts, for what, and how. I like the juxtaposition of the two terms—art and community—in part because it challenges our commonsense notions of both complex concepts. It behooves us to constantly interrogate how we understand art (as most of us are socialized in a more colonial and capitalist notion of the term) as well as how we understand community—whether it be defined by place, tradition, intention, practice, or spirit.

Cleveland (2002) suggests that community arts can nurture four different kinds of purposes:

> To educate and inform us about ourselves and the world;
>
> To inspire and mobilize individuals and groups;
>
> To nurture and heal people and/or communities;
>
> To build and improve community capacity.

I would add that the process of engaging in community arts is in itself a research process, a collaborative process of producing knowledge. The social experience of art-making can open up aspects of peoples' beings, their stories, their memories and aspirations, in ways that other methods

might miss. When people are given the opportunity to tell their own stories—whether through oral traditions, theatre, visual arts, music, or other media—they bring their bodies, minds, and spirits into a process of communicating and sharing their experiences; they affirm their lives as sources of knowledge, and they stimulate each other in a synergistic process of collective knowledge production.

◆ *Key Elements of Community Arts*

In my own framing of community arts as a research process, I emphasize four key interacting elements: collaboration, creative artistic practices, critical social analysis, and commitment.

COLLABORATION

Community arts is infused with a spirit of collaboration at many different levels, whether it's collaboration between an artist or facilitator and a particular community, collaboration among participants in a community arts project, or collaboration with an audience. Animators of community arts, as research facilitators, must be able to draw out the issues, talents, and energies of people they are working with and help them spark each other's strengths. In contrast to most conventional art practices, this is basically a collaborative process; it may involve the artist ceding some control as it empowers the participants. This is a fluid dynamic, in that levels and forms of collaboration may shift from one moment to the next, depending on the context, the people, and the purposes of the project.

This intersubjective approach to research counters positivist thinking and objective knowing that until recently has dominated both science and art and, according to Suzi

Gablik (1995), is "attuned to the interrelational, ecological, and interactive character of reality." Gablik promotes this "connective aesthetics after individualism" that sees human nature as "deeply embedded in the world" (p. 86), similar to the reciprocity at play in an ecosystem.

CREATIVE ARTISTIC PRACTICES

What distinguishes this kind of research from other collaborative forms is the centrality of the arts as tools of inquiry and collective expression. This involves a reclaiming of art forms considered the exclusive domain of professionally trained artists and nurturing the creative capacities of everyone in a community-based process. One of the first challenges is to counter our own internalized sense that "I can't draw." Chris Cavanagh (2006, p. 71) evokes Gramsci's notions of common sense to explain how in the Western world we have bought into this powerful notion of art that acts "to exclude the vast majority of people from the identity of 'artist.'"

In contrast with conventional research tools that have been primarily individual, verbal, and text based, community arts taps sense-based, intuitive, and relational ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) through nonverbal forms such as images, movement, and music. The arts are powerful catalysts for unearthing different kinds of knowledge and moving people to participate more fully in the knowledge production process. There are, however, ongoing debates about the extent of the participation of ordinary people in the art-making and how much professional control of the art-making is necessary.

CRITICAL SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Community arts is often identified with marginalized groups and communities,

offering them a space for articulating their own perspectives on the social conditions of their lives. The art-making process thus becomes a collaborative process of naming and challenging current power relations, of digging into the root causes of current injustices. By representing their lives in artistic forms, the social contradictions are made more visible and visceral. Part of the animator's role is to help groups engage those contradictions, to deepen their critical social analysis. There will, of course, be differences in the perspectives brought to such a discussion, and the differences within a group or community (based on gender, race, class, age, etc.) will likely come to the fore through this process. Rather than avoiding or flattening internal contradictions, these differences complicate and enrich the analysis, promoting a critical self-reflexivity.

Different understandings of power inform the social analysis that emerges from a group research/art-making process. For some, community arts should represent the major social schisms with a clear sense of the powerful social, economic, and political forces that perpetuate injustice. Others advocate a more subtle reading of power as "something that is circulated and dispersed throughout society rather than being held exclusively or primarily by certain groups" (Strega, 2005, p. 225). Whether framed by a Marxist, Gramscian, Foucauldian, or more liberal analysis of power, community art processes offer a critical edge over other approaches.

COMMITMENT

One goal of community arts is to help groups move from collective analysis to collective action, to become active participants in shaping a more democratic and just society. Community arts involves a questioning of the status quo and a commitment to social change. More than a purely ideological stance, this commitment must be deeply identified with the aspirations of the community, while recognizing the many contradictions within. On the part of the artist or research facilitator, then, it is not a rigid adherence to some predetermined vision or outcome but rather a deep commitment to accompany people in a process of exploring their own histories, identities, struggles, and hopes—not knowing where it will lead. Such a commitment is based on respect and humility, an openness to learn and to be transformed in the process. Again though, commitments will conflict, and visions will not always be shared; so this is something that is constantly renegotiated as well. There is sometimes a clash of utopias and differences over strategies; the art-making process can help both to illuminate these tensions and to work through them.

◆ *The Role of the Artist or Research Facilitator*

In considering community arts as a form of qualitative research, there are several possible entry points. One frames community arts practice in itself as a research process. In this case the artist or organizer of collaborative projects is also a research facilitator. Another approach sees researchers adapting community arts as a tool within the context of community-based research, in which case the research facilitator becomes an animator of the arts but not necessarily an artist whose vision shapes the project. It's important to acknowledge many different potential roles for the artist or research facilitator, which will be determined ultimately by the main purposes of the project, the nature of the issue, the community participants, and the orientation of the artist/facilitator herself.

The role of the artist/facilitator can also vary tremendously, along a continuum, from one who gathers stories (data) from the community and represents them through

her own artistic creations to one who engages community members in producing their own art as part of the process of gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing the data. Most projects fall somewhere between these two extremes: the artist/facilitator taking more control at one moment or another while ceding control through participatory processes at other moments.

◆ Some Community Arts Stories

The ideas underlying community arts practice and its potential as a research process come alive in all their complexity through five stories of projects/processes in different contexts and times. All projects have integrated some form of participatory research, an approach that honors the subjects of research as participants in naming the issues to be explored, developing the analysis, communicating results, and often acting upon them. Participatory research has a deep tradition of using art and media tools as ways to engage people directly, drawing them into the process and offering them multiple forms of expression.

SNAPSHOT 1: PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH (TORONTO IN THE 1970s)

The Participatory Research Group of the International Council for Adult Education undertook local projects using art and media in participatory processes as well as linking with groups around the world creating alternatives to conventional research. I worked with a Chilean exile, Raúl Rojas, on a participatory research project to examine the causes of immigration among an emerging Latin American community in Toronto. We sometimes started interviews in living rooms with family albums, the images serving as catalysts for their own storytelling.

A slide show I produced on the emigration of Ecuadorians to Toronto was transferred to video and shown on personal television sets to generate conversations about the various forces that compelled immigrants to leave their homelands (political, economic, war, etc.). Video became the common medium that carried their stories outside the home; we edited the interviews and returned them to community events for further discussion. In this project then, we retained some control of the artistic process but brought in community members' images (from albums) and returned our visual representations of their histories to the community to generate further collective analysis.

A process that involved people more directly in art-making was the collective song-writing of the activist troubadour Arlene Mantle, who also joined the Participatory Research Group for a short time. In a community gathering called "Songs for People," Arlene offered a song-writing workshop, inviting the group to first brainstorm the issues that were most pressing to them, and then to choose one to focus on. The discussion about how this issue played out in their daily lives became the raw material for collective song-writing. Arlene offered a simple tune and worked with the group to generate lyrics that not only reflected their stories but also their own words or ways of speaking, developing their sense of ownership of both the ideas and the song. The process of creating the song collectively created the space for group members to share their analyses and to deepen their understanding of the issues they were singing about.

SNAPSHOT 2: COMMUNITY MURAL PRODUCTION (CALIFORNIA IN THE 1980s)

Building on the Mexican mural movement of the 1930s, a new mural movement instigated by Chicano and African American artists blossomed in the 1960s, in particular

in Chicago and Los Angeles. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chicana artist Judy Baca, a cofounder of the Social and Public Art Resource Centre, coordinated a major project that involved over 400 youth, 40 historians, 40 artists, and thousands of residents in the production of the longest mural in the world, the half-mile long Great Wall of Los Angeles (Baca, 2002). The youth were charged with researching the hidden histories of the many ethnic communities in California and making the results of their research visible in this monumental wall that followed a flood control channel. Thus, youth developed research and artistic skills, while learning about the rich multicultural history of the region and coming together across different ethnic and gang cultures.

In the late 1980s, Baca facilitated a participatory research process in Guadalupe, California, a primarily agricultural and Mexican American community. Again she hired teenagers from Chicano and Filipino farm families to collect historical information and develop a time line of the town's history. She took Polaroid photos of the farmworkers, which she returned to them, and then culled photos from local scrapbooks and school yearbooks that they lent to her. A town meeting involved discussing the key moments in the history and choosing imagery for the panels of a large public art piece, turning the art-making process into a forum for civic dialogue (Doss, 1995). The final product revealed Aboriginal roots of the area, the early Hispanic settlers, the arrival of Chinese and Japanese farmers, and the organizing of farmworkers in the 1970s—again contributing to a deeper social consciousness.

SNAPSHOT 3: COMMUNITY RADIO (NICARAGUA IN THE 1990s AND 2000s)

A community-based research management project initiated in the mid-1990s on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua chose to create a community radio program and a newsletter as tools in the participatory action research process undertaken with support from the International Development Research Centre in Canada and coordinated by York University (Barndt, 2004). The pluri-ethnic coast is comprised of Creole, Mestizo, Miskitu, Garifuna, Sumu, and Rama peoples, who make their living from fishing, mining, and forestry. Community radio is the most accessible medium in these communities, which may not have electricity and which are steeped in oral traditions. With the support of a then York University graduate student (see Christine McKenzie in Chapter 28 of this volume), a new radio program became a tool of participatory action research, as youth interviewed community folks about encroachment on their agricultural lands by Mestizos, shrimp farming that threatened the ecology of the area, and forestry companies that flagrantly ignored state regulations. The youth also gathered or created poems, songs, riddles, and other popular cultural forms to include in the radio program. As they became skilled in engaging people in critical discussion, they developed confidence and skills in both participatory research and radio production.

SNAPSHOT 4: MULTIMEDIA PROJECTS AND COMMUNITY THEATRE (TORONTO IN THE 2000s)

The Laidlaw Foundation initiated a series of pilot projects in community arts in 2000, among them The Garbage Collection, which brought together four sanitation workers, four environmentalists, and four community artists to produce murals on municipal garbage trucks with environmental messages. A two-day workshop created the space for these 12 participants to examine their own relationship to garbage, through an activity called "tracing the trash." Using storytelling as a tool, the artists revealed their complicity

in creating trash from the toxic materials they use, the garbage workers exposed the dangers they face as they pick up our garbage, and the environmentalists unearthed the impact current garbage disposal systems have on the planet. These distinct relationships to the trash were represented in drawings as well as stories. A second activity uncovered key environmental conflicts of recent decades through a popular theatre activity known as "sculpting." Finally, everyone contributed to a graphic brainstorming that fed collective processes of designing the murals for three garbage trucks. In this process, then, people who had not considered themselves artists nonetheless used the arts (storytelling, theatre, and drawing) to articulate their distinct knowledges and collectively designed and painted murals that integrated their diverse vantage points. This project was clearly a participatory action research process as well as a community arts production and culminated in the city whitewashing one of the murals depicting a controversial deal proposed for diverting Toronto garbage to a rural northern native community.

Also using multiple forms of art, Toronto-based Jumblies Theatre mounted a community play in 2004 that was built on 4 years of research in a west-end neighborhood of Toronto. Led by artistic director Ruth Howard, based at the Davenport-Perth Neighborhood Centre, the process started with the gathering of oral histories of residents from diverse cultural backgrounds. Stories of immigration were expressed in the construction of miniature boats that carried mementos reflecting pasts left behind. Groups in the centre claimed their own particular space in the process. A Latin American seniors group, for example, offered traditional dance to the dialogue.

Several smaller theatre productions were performed over the 3 years leading up to the final culminating community play,

Once a Shoreline. The story was a composite of the oral histories and reflected two generational perspectives on immigration—a way of synthesizing and feeding back a preliminary analysis to the community. The final production involved over 100 residents of all ages, three choirs, dancers, stilt-walkers, aerial acrobats, and puppeteers. Of particular interest was the integration of professional artists (e.g., two singers, a composer, and instrumentalists) into the participatory production.

The quality of the final production was critical to Jumblies' director Howard and did not diminish but rather enhanced the participation of community members. Seeing their stories represented in such magnificent and powerful form no doubt affirmed their identities while ingraining the ideas as powerful images in their minds. In this case, the results of early oral history research were transformed into a composite play that fed their stories back to local residents.

SNAPSHOT 5: THE VIVA! PROJECT AND EXCHANGE

Jumblies Theatre is one Canadian partner in a transnational research project, the VIVA! Project coordinated through York University, involving eight nongovernmental organization and university partners in exploring creative tensions of community arts and popular education in the Americas. Whereas participatory action research is a common methodology for North American collaborators, Central American partners have adapted a process they call *sistematización*, which involves project participants in a historical recovery and collective analysis of their shared experience with a selected focus.

Partners associated with CEASPA, the Panamanian Social Education and Action Centre, applied the systematization methodology in revisiting the Kuna Children's Art

project, assessing how involving Kuna youth in a wide range of creative art practices (theatre, painting, poetry) had contributed to their cultural and environmental awareness. In Nicaragua, the Intercultural Communications Institute of URACCAN, the Regional Autonomous University on the Carribean Coast of Nicaragua, has created a community cable television station to produce stories drawn from the daily lives and struggles of the pluri-ethnic coastal peoples. Run by eight young people, Bilwivision has as its slogan "Less Hollywood, More Local Stories" and operates in three languages: Creole, Miskitu, and Spanish.

A Mexican partner in the VIVA! Project exchange has developed through UAM, the Autonomous Metropolitan University, a training program in community-based mural production, titled Painting by Listening. It involves potential animators of mural projects in a community research process to ensure that the murals represent the issues of the community and contribute to an ongoing process of community development. Another Canadian project, the Personal Legacy Project based in Montreal, involves individuals exploring through a collective process their ancestral histories. Using both archival research and body work, they recover and recreate characters based on specific ancestors. The resulting performances are based on embodied knowing as well as creative group processes.

◆ Blurring the Boundaries Between Research and Art

In the examples offered above, it is clear that the purposes of each project were distinct. Not all were framed as research, yet research was very integral to their processes. The selection of the art forms or tools to be used in any of these contexts depended on a variety of factors: what was culturally appropriate to the participants, the overall goals and objectives of the project, the talents and interests of the artists and facilitators, and so on.

Stanley and Wise (1990) make the important distinction between method, methodology, and epistemology: "Methods" include specific techniques or research practices (surveys, interviews, or artistic practices such as storytelling, popular theatre, photo-story production, songwriting, etc.), "methodology" refers to a broader theoretically informed framework (e.g., participatory research), and an "epistemology" is a theory of knowledge, an understanding of how we know and what counts as knowledge. There is always a danger of art-making processes being reduced to tools or techniques when using them as integral to qualitative research, making them devoid of meaning in relationship to the deeper purposes of the research. .

The kind of community arts-informed research process I've been describing here is built on an epistemology that challenges the relationship between knowledge and power, that aims to democratize and collectivize knowledge production, and to engage people fully, as individuals and as groups, in expressing their identities, recovering their histories, articulating their visions, deepening their analyses, and developing their capacities to create history. The arts, when applied appropriately and facilitated sensitively, can involve participants as full human beings, touching minds AND hearts, healing the body/mind split inherent in Western scientific research methods.

◆ What Makes a Good Researcher/Community Artist?

Engaging people in research and representing their lives in artistic forms involves a

very special set of skills. Singer/educator Jane Sapp (1995) includes in her list of key practices: listening, listening, listening. She is referring to what is called deep listening or active listening, meaning that a facilitator of research using community arts must go beyond the kind of self-expression often associated with art to expressions that are collective and community-driven. Community artist Suzi Gablik (1995) calls this listener-centered rather than vision-oriented art, which "can only come into its own through dialogue, as open conversation, in which one listens to and includes other voices" (p. 83).

When artists/researchers listen, they not only hear others' stories but they also discover other forms of storytelling that emerge from the group/community with whom they work. Ruth Howard, Toronto-based community play animator, described how she discovered sewing as a medium important to a group of women in a new community art project and basketball as a key entry point for the young men. Careful listening can unearth other forms of expression, but it is yet another skill to tap the creative powers lying within people of all ages. Animating the creativity in everyone requires patience, daring, and belief in peoples' capacities, even when they may not have that belief in themselves.

One of the ways that people become more confident in their own abilities to express themselves is when their ideas or symbols are fed back to them in forms that affirm and inspire. Community-based researchers/artists bring their own skills of synthesis and artistic expression to feed back or re-present to community members the ideas and images that have come from them. This may involve identifying tensions or contradictions uncovered in collective discussions and creations, but that ring true with participants. It also helps move from the level of individual concerns to issues of common import.

Finally, this kind of research and art requires a willingness to share power and to embrace processes that may be beyond one's control. Community artists talk about this tension between holding on and letting go. The researcher/artist may structure processes to engage participants in creative inquiry, but if the process is to draw on the knowledge, skills, and visions of community members, there must be space for that to happen. It can be unsettling for people who like to be in control of all aspects of the process. One must learn to live with uncertainty, become comfortable with discomfort, and be excited by the insights and creativity that can emerge from both silent and sticky moments.

Community artist Leah Burns (2006) summarizes this spirit when she suggests that coordinating community art and participatory research requires healthy doses of honesty, humility, and a good sense of humor.

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