

# Stories of Community Practice, Artistic Ambivalence, and Emergent Pedagogies

*“The artworks were often created from stories that served as a departing point for discussion.”*

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## ABSTRACT

*The reflections and questions discussed in the paper emerged from a teaching artist experience in community-art that led to the examination of the contrasting values between the disciplinary paradigms of social practices, community-based and participatory arts and that of the contemporary artworld aesthetics. As goals of art for social justice often contradict the perception of artistic merit based on aesthetic quality, working at the intersection of artistic creation and community development demands a shift in perspectives. The position demands going beyond one’s artistic ambivalences, to include participants in a reciprocal relationship, attentive to the fact that any goals of empowerment inherently conceal a power structure. Models of interaction borrowed from prefigurative pedagogies, pedagogies of contingencies inspire the elaboration of a pedagogy of presence that allows for the unfolding of a process anchored in integrity, quiet activism, and the heuristic purpose of art.*

## KEYWORDS

*community-art, socially engaged practice, social action, pedagogy of presence, quiet activism, quiet politics*

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The reflections and questions raised in this article emerged during an English Literacy (ESOL)/Visual Arts community-based project intended to support immigrant adult women with emerging or no English literacy. The planned pedagogy included the cross-motivation of diverse creative pursuits that brought together speaking, writing, making and reflecting upon two-dimensional visual art production. Over time, these reflections and questions have led me to examine the contrasting values between the disciplinary paradigms of social practices, community-based and participatory arts, and that of the contemporary artworld aesthetics. As a visual artist trained in one tradition and working in the other, I observed and felt an inner debate with the perceived shortcomings on either side that forced the negotiation of ambivalences. Through the experience of a workshop, my perspective shifted.

### **Context and Place**

As a teaching artist and as an academic engaged in arts-based research, I was trained to aspire to those qualities of creative production that relate to criticality and artistic coherence. Alongside the conceptual art movement that informed my artistic education, theories of socially engaged practices that emphasize human interactions and participatory practices had been emerging since the 1960s, slowly carving a space for a new paradigm. Blending living and art, or “living as form” (Thompson, 2012. p. 16), these social sculptures define their purpose through shared dialogical and relational affects.

As the goals of art for social justice are often seen in contradiction to the values of artistic merit based on aesthetic quality and a validating artworld reception, working at the intersection of artistic creation and community development demands a shift in perspectives. At the onset it becomes process-focused, trans-disciplinary, with roots in critical pedagogy, psychology, anthropology, social theory, and cultural studies. Oppositions will claim that the political, or the social justice potential of art as social action is said to impoverish “versions of the artistic and the political by sterilizing them and reducing them to spheres that cannot exceed the realm of ethics” (Bilbao Yarto, 2017, p. 56).

Nevertheless, the transformative capacities developed through the process of making and “being-with” are important criteria in social practices as they maintain a blend of practical and symbolic significance. The appraisal of such projects is rooted in communal exchange, and often dispenses with the aesthetic function of art, altering its operation, and inserting other possibilities, such as its heuristic or epistemic purpose (Wright, 2014).

As for its importance in community engagement, Maxine Greene (1995) believed that, participatory involvement with the many forms of art does enable us at the very least, to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured. (p.378)

In order to contextualize what has become for me a long-term research into the numerous epistemological frameworks informing the activities referred to as social practices, I retrace the expansion of my philosophical inquiry through the specific situation of a community engagement project that triggered these reflections.

My early social practice effort took place in a New England urban shelter for homeless and low-income adult women. The shelter, which acts as a community center of sorts, is a locally prized organization operating with the mandate to support women experiencing financial, legal, emotional and physical emergencies, as well as demonstrating other linguistic and/or socio-cultural needs for assistance. Alongside numerous other services that range from food pantry, to employment support, and counselling, volunteer teachers offer training in computer basics and multiple levels of literacy for spoken and written English language. Visual arts and crafts workshops were recently added as an expressive and reflective pursuit. All of this work is done in the spirit of equity and social justice. Many guests, as the staff refers to them, are immigrants and refugees. Most if not all are low-income persons, and many have experienced recent traumas. In working with the women, volunteers and staff are reminded that being friendly does not mean to be friends. From the onset, I remarked that in making all efforts to protect everyone's privacy, we also have to reinvent what it means to communicate with authentic presence with each other.

The visual art and English learning project in which I took part – marking the beginning of a long-term, continuing relationship with the organization – consisted in a weekly workshop with participants who were enrolled in a daily English language course. The visual art workshop was offered at the end of the week, as a culminating activity that offered the opportunity of a casual English conversation practice. As a team-taught workshop led by one visual artist and one English language coach, the class included artmaking and conversation practice. The artworks were often created from stories that served as a departing point for discussion. As they struggled to explain a thought or a choice of motif, the participants were supported by the group who suggested vocabulary. The art supplies were simple, limited to two-dimensional materials, for drawing, painting and collage. Every few weeks the participants explored a theme of interest, introduced with reproductions of artwork selected for their cultural inclusivity and relevance. While this preparation served as thematic guidance, the participants usually carried on as they saw fit.

### **Pedagogy**

In his elaboration of transpedagogy, Pablo Helguera (2011) suggested that in the context of community-informed artistic practices, dialogical modes of exchange bear more creative meaning than the art object. Due to language barriers, our limited spoken conversations tended to emphasize the silence of the art making activity. Often, our non-verbal, intuitive and sensorial ways of knowing predominated. Autoethnographic storytelling took place in images. One woman's drawing showed a rendition of a major volcano eruption that took place in Cabo Verde, where the participant and her family came from after losing their farm to the catastrophe. She drew feverishly, not looking up, focused and seemingly driven by an inner

desire to recall, to show and to tell. As a Portuguese speaker, she could only narrate the story by pointing to her drawing and with hand gestures. On other occasions, a person in the group would help translate, teaching everyone new words at the same time.

One learned to practice teaching artistic skills without the usual community building approach that arises from verbal connection and dialogical exchange. The usual explanations of skills, techniques and discussion about conceptual approaches to one's artwork were replaced with what I can only call an embodied practice. It responded to the silent relational attunements between participants, their creative processes made visible, and a fleeting sense of presence. The irony for me and a cause for questioning was that the project included an English-for-speakers-of-other-languages (ESOL) learning mandate, and conversation about the artwork and the process was to be at the core of our workshop. However, we never spoke only English. Rather, inspired by the urge to communicate, we invented ways by use of the body, and through a creative mixed-language idiom of our own spontaneous invention.

Askins (2014) describes the possibilities of relationships as emerging from a "quiet politics", "an unassuming praxis of engaging with others...performing a citizenry embedded in emotional belongings, previous experiences and [one's] own sense of agency" (p. 354). My observations confirm that in the environment of the shelter and the studio, participants tended to be guarded, cautious, keeping a relational distance until they felt safe with each other and with the volunteers. Most were not eager to tell their stories. As with any relationship, familiarity and trust develop with time, patience and repeated encounters.

In defining a pedagogy that would be best adapted to the circumstances, I borrowed from my knowledge of adult education, and the need to recognize the richness of the participants' life experiences, aware that their hesitation and/or appreciation of art making and art forms might be connected back to their school years, or circumscribed and defined by contemporary expressions of commercially disseminated visual culture. However, art making at the shelter did not pretend to be presented as a school subject. The visual language skills that were developed alongside the spoken and written English were the work of self-taught artists, some of whom had learned to enjoy the process of making and of "being-with" while others remained more goal-oriented.

In his work as an educator, Miner (2013) defined an activist teaching practice using "prefigurative pedagogies". The term is borrowed from prefigurative politics, "an anti-institutional tactic designed to dismantle oppression and social stratification... with the goal to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that 'prefigured' and embodied the desired society" (p. 3). Therefore, "prefigurative pedagogies are anti-hierarchical and predicated on participatory learning" (p. 3). At the shelter, this activism is quiet and embodied. "As such, it is characterized by qualities of gentleness, slowness, subtlety and subversion. Quiet activism extends the realm of the political beyond the cognitive and verbalized, into practices of doing, making and flow" (Pottinger, 2017, p. 216).

If for Miner (2013), the subject matter of the work his students complete addresses directly the issues of politics and infringement on civil liberties to name a few, I noted that at the shelter, the subject matter, unless it is to tell a story of personal importance, was not as salient as was the simple experience of making something that, in small ways perhaps, gave its maker a sense of achievement, of having created something beyond one's initial sense of artistic inadequacy. Sometimes, the success was simply to slow down, to be quiet and to feel safe. Subject matter and techniques for selecting it ranged from being copied, borrowed, traced, collaged, remembered or invented. In such a simple creative project, everyone has their private imaginary precipice to straddle, and to reconcile.

I take comfort in Thomas Hirschhorn's slogan Energy, yes, quality, no! (Art21, 2014), and I know that the value of the work at the women's shelter cannot be assessed by its conventionally understood artistic quality. I also attend to Claire Bishop's (2012) insights as she declares that this type of art tends to value the invisible, and that these projects, "thread a fine line of a dual horizon – faced towards the social field but also towards itself" (p. 274), toward artistic integrity.

As I was slowly discovering the pedagogy that would best suit the context of the art workshop, I reconceptualized what it meant to teach. Rather than struggle between the necessity of producing artistic value, or to focus on sociality and empowerment as pedagogical goals, to a certain measure, I had to learn to let go of what I knew, of what I thought I knew (Kight-Witham, 2020). "Our impulse is to fix and to rescue and to control, but to truly know what will serve in that moment, we must let go of all that and be present with what's there" (p. 7).

### **Aesthetic Attributes**

Suggestions of applicable criteria for socially engaged practices were indeed what I longed for when I found a collection of Aesthetic Attributes, a document published in 2017 by Americans for the Arts. Led by Laramee-Kidd, the goal of the Lab Group that created the document was to "promote evaluation that embodies values and practices congruent with arts and social justice work" (p.2). In the document, the use of the concept aesthetic is reclaimed to indicate that, "aesthetics is about how creative expression stimulates our senses, moves us and makes meaning in the world" (p.5). The criteria enunciated in the publication include "commitment; communal meaning; disruption; cultural integrity; emotional experience; sensory experience; risk-taking; openness; resourcefulness; coherence, and stickiness" (p. 4). Their reference to artistic and cultural processes, products and practices puts in place fundamental values for community, social, and civic work as it is achieved through artistic engagement.

However, these attributes function as measures of success and parameters of evaluation for entire programs. When referring to these aesthetic attributes, what about if we asked: Who is the observer? Is this observer looking at the project from the outside? How long do we have for social change to be made so tangible that "communal meaning" can be measured? How does one bear witness to what happens within? What about the change that

happens incrementally, unmeasurably in the mind and lives of participants? We cannot truly measure, “how the art experience translates into a new way of relating to others, to objects, to the context in which the participants act and live, wanting to transform it...? How does the aesthetic experience relate to everyday reality” (Wildermeersch & von Kotze, 2014, p. 323)?

When I drop the project of finding the aesthetic attributes in my project with the women at the shelter, I am left with the barebones of experience. The methodology is unmethodological and the practice is unpredictable, responsive, contingent, and ever changing. While the aesthetic attributes offer an inventory of outcomes for socially engaged projects that appear better aligned with that mode of address than are the traditional artworld expectations of expertise, I remain suspicious of indicators. The aesthetic attributes can easily frame the way we perceive and expect an experience to be, suggesting a common understanding of development. “Benchmarks intend to shape a consensus about the goals of progress, about what ‘indicates’ the positive development of our society” (Badham, 2010, p. 7).

In analyzing the meaning of a public project that they had designed, Wildemeersch and von Kotze (2014) realized that “the precariousness of everyday life often colors the way people relate to or interact with art” (p. 324). They also recognize the need for a pedagogy attuned to specific contingencies, a pedagogy that maintains “a strong conviction that [participants] can be creative actors if only they believe in themselves” (p. 322).

The resilience and capacities that are necessary in insecure times are highly specific to a particular place and moment. The really useful learning that helps people to survive –not just physically, but also emotionally, creatively, spiritually, and convivially– demands a pedagogy that responds to the particular conditions of location and time. (p. 324)

### **Empowerment and agency**

When I began working at the shelter, I also felt the need to acknowledge my struggle with the feeling that my presence as an academic and artist teacher amidst the community group where I operated, highlighted my condition of privilege, a stance that unavoidably situated the participants in a homogenous and distant otherness within an assumed polarized subject/object relationship. In the class-conscious community and cultures where we orbit, the differences in social contexts brought by economic inequalities cannot be ignored. Seeking to establish a relationship of authentic reciprocal exchange, I was cautious not to default in the denials of class, racial, experiential, or other relational blindness. It is also in our reciprocal effort for authenticity that, as Jared Seide mused in an interview about his social justice work, I was trying to “carry my privilege honestly, maybe use it to build some bridges and create compassion, as someone who was able to walk between those two worlds” (Kight-Witham, 2020, p. 8).

However, “community and individuality need not be understood as antinomies” (Daniel, 2011, p.80), and “relations between particulars are the key to constructing and reconstructing community” (p. 80). Like Daniel, “my goal is to avoid representation –not to speak for others but to provide them with the means to speak for themselves” (p.81). Further, I tried to position

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25889/qhn8-1898>

my association with the participants to clarify our shared relationship to power and “subject”. In defining the use of the word subject, Cruikshank (1999) suggests the following interpretation based on Foucault’s use of the terms. In this context, it serves to illuminate our shared condition as “expressions of the struggle to define ourselves” (p. 21).

Modern forms of power tie the subjectivity (conscience, identity, self-knowledge) of the individual to that individual’s subjection (control by another). The subject is one who is both under the authority of another and the author of her or his own actions. Foucault means to undermine the perspective from which power can be perceived only as the antithesis of freedom. (p. 21)

With time, and as tangible exchanges developed with participants through a pedagogy of presence beyond the Art/ESOL workshop (Bourgault, 2019), it became clear that the distancing role defining our positions was also a social construction that did not take into consideration the multiple and unpredictable changing conditions of our beings. Beneath our unstable state of poverty or wealth, experience of racial inequity and traumatic histories, we can meet in the depths of our interconnected subjectivities. This positionality does not erase or deny differences. It does not embrace a position of doing good, or seeking to empower the other. I am aware that despite its apparent benefit, “the object of empowerment is to act upon another’s interests and desires in order to conduct their actions toward an appropriate end” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 68-69); thus, empowerment is itself a power relationship.

Much more adequate is the philosophical position that points to a shared method of discovery that facilitates a sense of solidarity and does not assume reciprocity with an “Other”. This perspective points to the recognition that we continually define ourselves relationally, from our own centeredness, through knowledge, and experiences (Bourgault, 2019). It does not mean that we do not recognize social inequity. We acknowledge that, in discussion about poverty and homelessness “what is typically or normatively seen and represented as individualistic and pathological, is instead understood as historically constituted, culturally produced, politically oriented, and socially maintained” (Rimke, 2016, p. 12).

### **Ground, Path, and Fruition**

In Shambhala philosophy, ground, path, and fruition represent a three-folds logic widely applicable to understanding the principle of how we individually and communally change. “Ground is where we find ourselves today, fruition is where we want to go, maybe also where we end up, unaware, and path is what we have to do to get from here to there” (Berkeley Shambhala Center, 2006-07, para 4). I use Ground, Path and Fruition as a theoretical framework for thinking back to my project, where fruition defined its own attributes. The paradigm demands a mind that does not look for things to fix, but that is attentive to qualities that manifest.

I was interested in this philosophy because, in its simplicity, it allowed for individual change and discoveries while also acknowledging a shared community purpose. Contrary to a set of indicators or attributes, the focus was neither on artworld judgement of what counts as good contemporary art—or self-taught art for that matter—nor was the focus on establishing a series of relational outcomes that could be used to evaluate the project and determine its success and validity.

If we agree that at the core of values associated with social justice we find the human attributes of dignity and worthiness, some form of wisdom and human resilience, then we can ask: How much of these qualities were able to manifest through the art/ESOL workshop? How much presence was allowed to come through? Through one's longing for this presence to be visible in the art making, we also feel that one could get there with many other forms of creativity, of inventive living.

The qualities witnessed form the beginning of a quiet activism, “small acts, such as the creation of interpersonal connections that construct social networks” (Pottinger, 2017, p.216) that could also represent the nascent stages of political awareness, leading to further action. In its quietness and lack of obvious deliverables, the workshop (transformed today in an open studio) supplied a kind of resistance to the external pressures of contemporary life that expects optimized productivity with everything we do (Odell, 2019).

At the onset of the art/ESOL workshop, and as this article was first conceptualized, I struggled to find a bridge between the values of social practices and that of the contemporary world aesthetics. Living through the workshop initiated a flow of reflections that continue to evolve to this day, as I enter my third year as a teaching artist at the women's shelter. I have learned that critical artistic reception or the building of community are not within my control. The deepening of a practice of presence transformed the workshop into an open studio, a socially engaged art practice that has no need to be formally recognized as art. Indeed, socially engaged practices seem to value the invisible aspects of their practices. Having set the stage for something to manifest, one needs to get out of the way of its unfolding.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25889/qhn8-1898>



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