Feminist Artist-Educators and Community Revitalisation: Case Studies from Toronto

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Abstract: This paper examines two community arts projects in Toronto. In particular, it discusses the dynamic role of the arts and the feminist artist-educators, whose guidance, knowledge and creativity enhance the cultural learning experience.

Introduction

Innovative pedagogies can help to facilitate the learning that must occur to meet the complex and multi-layered challenges women face on a daily basis (Bell and Williams, 1998; Von Kotze, 1996). As women attempt to make sense of and create meaning in today’s world, working with and through symbolic forms can stimulate critique, and collective power, knowledge and creativity by developing a common space of choice, control and imaginative learning. Community arts are symbolic forms of an imaginative, participatory approach to personal and social transformation. They “invite us to tell our story...to listen to the stories of those around us...to celebrate who we are together” (Overton, 1994, p.94).

Feminist artist-educators working collectively with communities provide new paradigms for comprehending and valuing art, promoting consciousness and imagination, raising the status of women’s art in society, and involving women directly in artistic processes that are life-enriching (Collins and Sandle, 1984; La Duke, 1985). Their involvement in community learning enhances the cultural, intellectual, educational experience. Among many other things, they are able to demonstrate the impact of artworks on the way women think, understand, learn and make changes in their own lives and communities. This paper explores two community arts initiatives in Toronto. “In the Hood” was sponsored by the Laidlaw Foundation. The Feminist artist-educators used women’s crafts as artistic expressions to overcome feelings of isolation, create a sense of community and transform ‘place’. “According to Us”, sponsored by Central Neighbourhood House, engages women in photographic explorations of violence, poverty, and mobilisation. The studies illuminate how learning is directly facilitated through the arts and the dynamic and multi-dimensional roles of the arts and feminist artist-educators.

Feminist Artist Educators, Crafts and Photography

Feminist adult educators have used the arts to make visible the ‘invisible’ of women’s experiences, knowledge and creativity, to celebrate, to question white privilege, to connect personal and political issues through the imagination, to enhance literacy learning, and as a weapons of protest (Bell and Williams, 1998; Clover, 2001; Roy 2000; Von Kotze, 1996).

Walker and Walker (1987, p.27) argue that “craftwork performed by women within a domestic setting has been done for love and for creative need, and also for domestic economy: it is an aesthetic survival.” For centuries, “women have communicated through craft activities, developed relationships” and have been transformed”(Larvin and Pooley, 1987, p.11).

But their
crafts have been relegated to the ranks of ‘low’ art since “the argument goes that if ‘it’ is seen in a museum, gallery or art magazine, then it is art” (Lippard, 1984, p.78) and women’s ‘arts’ seldom find a place in these bastions of esthetic truism. Women’s knitting circles are referred to as “women’s gossiping circles - in other words, triviality, domesticity, non-seriousness” and other forms of craftwork as occupations for ‘spare’ time (Russell and Barnett, 1987, p.66).

However, women’s crafts are more than ‘decoration that is superficial or inferior. “Pattern and decoration can be ‘read’ in many different ways; the signs, symbols and knits of patterns have as interesting and varied a history and iconography as any other art form. (Ibid.:66). Feminist artist-educators recognise women’s crafts as forms of artist expression and provide imaginative and fertile ground through which they can emerge and be represented publically.

Photography enjoys the ranks of ‘acceptable’ or ‘high’ art, adorning the walls of galleries and museums world-wide. It has also been recognised and accepted “by most regional arts associations and for grant-aid” (Adkins 1981:152). However, community photography by ‘non-professionals’ still does not fair well in the hierarchy of ‘art’. Nevertheless, this artistic form is an important tool of feminist artist-educators to document local history and socio-political concerns such as Martha Rolser’s photographic work in the late 1970s where she produced a series of prints on “the pollution of the Love Canal in the United States” (Bell and Williams 1998:131). Women’s photography often represents a ‘site specific art, unearthing forms of alienation, fragments of lives, putting them together into a cohesive visual experience” (Lippard 1984:272).

**In the Hood**

A fitting framework for this project is articulated through a quotation by Aroko and Farkas (2000:1): “While art cannot completely solve many social dilemmas, it can solve one problem: The loneliness of spirit.” “In the Hood” was located in the culturally diverse Oakwood and Vaughan neighbourhood of central Toronto. In her one report (1999:1) to the Foundation, artist-educator Elizabeth Cinello stated: “The boarded up storefront windows in the neighbourhood are an interesting metaphor for the community itself. What normally is wide open and designed to facilitate seeing, is instead covered, hidden and neglected. The richness, diversity and colour of the hood’s culture is unseen, ignored and invisible, except as a stereotype in the media.”

Many women in Toronto create crafts. They knit, sew or crochet but most often keep the products for themselves, their family or friends: the ‘private’ domain. In 1999 feminist artist-educators from the neighbourhood developed a community arts process to bring together women to combat isolation and disconnection, make visible their cultural crafts as ‘artistic practices’ and use these to transform the ‘public’ spaces of women’s ‘private’ work and “an ugly, drab and soulless streetscape.” Artist-educator Jo Anne Atherly describes the project as: “about bringing art to the community; about investment in the arts and each other; about being able to recognise each other on the street; about recognising our different talents; about us.”

The artistic expressions used were: A) a giant collectively knitted slipper; B) small individual fantasy slippers around which personal stories were woven; C) the transformation of one Laundromat’s unsightly interior into a work of art through poetry and paint; and D) the creation of Designer Laundry Bags adorned with words, symbols, found objects and imagination. These creations have been exhibited around the neighbourhood transforming women’s relationships to ‘place’ and their ideas of their crafts. One woman said she “liked the idea that this
is a community project where women of different ages, backgrounds and talents could work together to create a product. Like taking an everyday thing like a knit slipper and making it into ‘art.’ Another woman had been afraid in the Laundromat until the paint and poetry went up.

The women participated in “In The Hood” for four inter-connected reasons. The first was therapeutic. Many women saw it as opportunity to get “away from the hum drum of daily life...away from the day-to-day problems, even if just for awhile.” The second was to meet others and overcome feelings of isolation and disconnection: “I live alone, you see. And I get lonely. You can’t just watch TV all the time”. The third was the “opportunity to meet the people you may see often on the street and to be creative together, not just doing laundry and buying groceries.” The final reason was the arts themselves and the opportunity to work with artist-educators: “Now that I have learned [from the artists]...I would plan the theme for my slipper better. I would do two slippers - one to express the impromptu, untamed side of me and the other a more ‘cultivated slipper’ to express the calmer, aesthetic and intellectual side.”

Women involved in the project learned everything from how to make paper out of dryer lint to the amazing number of “like-minded people who want[ed] to come together and promote the arts”. Others acquired the “confidence to come out and teach people how to knit and crochet” and “not to be afraid to try something new, to experiment.” The project highlighted the cultural practices of the neighbourhood, improved the street-scape and raised a part of women’s everyday life to ‘art’.

According to Us

‘According to Us’ is a group of women who chose “the medium of photography to explore issues such as poverty and violence against women, tell their stories of their communities [and] as a tool for social change” (Central Neighbourhood House, 2000:1). It is a component of Central Neighbourhood House’s (CNH) Women’s programme. CNH is a community based multi-service agency in downtown Toronto. The Women's programme includes areas such as advocacy, community development, and anti-discriminatory adult education. The women involved are culturally diverse: Philippina, Metis, Caribbean, and white skinned. They have all faced poverty, homelessness, violence, mental illness and/or physical disability.

The women chose photography because, “We can’t draw!” but particularly because many had “always loved taking pictures”. Not far into the process, they discovered, as articulated by feminist artist-educator Jennifer LaFontaine, “that they didn’t know very much about photography [so] they advertised for a [professional] to work with them and that’s where I came onto the scene.” Their collective photographic exhibit titled “Portraits of Resistance: Celebrating Women’s Lives” was displayed at the March of Women showcase at the Canadian National Exhibition and other community centres and galleries around Toronto. They have also created a calendar using images of diverse women “who inspire us, who challenge us” and from the International Women’s Marches in Ottawa and New York.

The artist-educator came with the idea of teaching the women to use manual cameras but she noted that there was resistance and they seemed more comfortable “with the point and shoot as art.” While the artist learned that it was possible from the women to “tell their stories...and learn to see [things] differently without fancy cameras”, the women’s confidence grew and within a short period they “wanted to use manual cameras”. The women have also learned “how to
develop their own photos in the darkroom”, although many insist they hate that part until the moment “you begin to see the picture emerge, well, the finished product is worth it.” They have also learned more about violence and oppression from the women they documented, and have acquired an ‘artistic’ eye in terms of analysing photographs. A self-identified painter felt that being part of the group had not only been therapeutic but “taking photographic images and really looking at them in terms of social issues has impacted on my painting.”

The women have gained a great deal from interacting with each other and consider the work to be entirely collective which is why they do not assign their names to the photos. The photos in the calendar were all chosen collectively and this process was a powerful learning experience as told by one: “[she] chose a certain photograph and I thought that is the last one I would choose so I asked her ‘why did you choose that one?’ She said, ‘do you see all those women walking with their heads down? I’ve walked all my life with my head down.’ Without her I would have gone right by that picture and never understood what it was really about. You cannot understand community photography any other way.” In so many ways, the working together, “with its ups and downs has been very empowering”. There is a real collective power, a strength that comes from creating the art. The women continue to meet regularly and challenge themselves to move forward and create. Collectively, they have found a “path to creativity, healing, and resistance through art.”

The art itself provides the women with a larger audience. As the artist noted, “These women are not people who are powerful in the world. People do not listen to them do speeches. It’s not that they don’t know the issues, it’s just that people don’t listen. This is a way for them to speak and for people to hear them where they would not usually have a voice and people wouldn’t usually listen. Plus, they do beautiful work. This in itself is powerful....Isn’t that what feminism is about?”

**The Roles of the Arts and the Feminist Artist-Educators**

This short space cannot do justice to the many roles played by both the art and the Feminist artist-educators so only a few are outlined and are explained primarily through the words of the artists and participants.

Making art, making things, and perceiving those made, makes connections to experiences we have in life. Creativity is sparked by boundaries and finds satisfaction in new connections across boundaries. The creation of artistic products allowed the participants to find their own but also a collective expression. The artistic process allowed for the creation of a personal and social knowledge to emerge upon which understandings and could be built: “It felt good for me to do the portraits because these are women like us. They weren’t anybody on the TV that most people would know just by name-dropping. They are like us. They are hardworking women trying to make a change in society” (According to Us).

Creating a visible, tangible and beautiful icon is important. These projects are about both ‘works of art’ and the ‘work of art’ - maintaining an important balance between the two. The production of artistic products leaves active images. The fantasy slippers and the photographs are reinterpreted each time they are seen on display. This seemingly magical quality of art, of life after the project is completed, commends the arts as unique tools for community transformation: “The art was the cultural practices of the neighbourhood, it improved the street-scape and made
art a part of people’s everyday life. The art made our heritage visible” (In the Hood).

Without stories we cannot grab things and hold them. Through the photographs and the slippers women were able to tell their stories and hear those of others. The artwork illustrated the stories of the lives of those involved and those who make up the larger community. Like illustrations in a book, the narratives of everyday life, the good and the bad, were conveyed through the art itself: “Some people expressed themselves, their problems through their art. If it was spiky, it was a rough day” (In the Hood).

Poems and pictures on the walls of the Laundromat, a gigantic knitted slipper and a photographic display draw people’s attention making the art itself an important outreach tool: “At the women’s march I was at the exhibit and so many women came to look at our display. Some stayed for a really long time. Some talked to me and others went through and actually read all the stories. That made me feel good. Our photos really had an impact.” (According to Us).

Creating collective art is difficult and challenging and yet they are a vibrant way to bring together people across race, age, gender, ability and other traditional socio-economic barriers to work creatively towards common goals. The arts can have a ‘neutralising’ effect in terms of power and make ‘visible’ the invisible in society, giving voice and legitimising lives and dreams through a tangible, collective object of beauty: “sometimes through art you can better create trust. You are more vulnerable perhaps since it comes from the heart. Everyone is in the same vulnerable position”(In the Hood).

The feminist arts can emphasise how creativity belongs to the artist in every person and how all people are creators of art. They do not control the artistic process but rather put the verb of art into women’s hands for intentional and effective use in everyday life, drawing out innate capacities, curiosities and artistic potential and steering that towards personal and social transformation: “The artists were there to guide us, but we were the artists. We made the things. We transformed the place.” (In the Hood).

Participants speak of the power of the feminist artist-educator to demystify art and the artistic process. When art is seen as something that only is done by naturally born talents or those highly trained, the experience of seeing the artistic process as accessible and possible is empowering. The artist-educators also nurture the ‘spirit’ and thereby help women to acknowledge and honour the art they create, enriching their lives and building their confidence: “This one woman came up to me [at the women’s march] and said “that is not a very good photograph. I am a professional so I know.” But you know, we are good and that did not bother me. “So what?”’, I said”(According to Us).

The down-to-earth actions that result in art objects, the perceiving that brings such objects to life in us, and the impact artworks have on the way we think, understand, learn and make changes in our lives is highlighted by the artist-educator. They discuss art in new ways, pass along skills and ideas, conceptualise and bring together the ideas that come from a group. Bringing in a professional quality too has a major impact on the end result: “Working together [with the artist] meant it became a discussion about the artistic process, about artistic learning and about developing arts projects. I think about art differently now” (In the Hood).

The Feminist artist-educator makes the links between the arts and the community: “The artists were very talented and they knew the community - it is essential that they know the community” (In the Hood). They also use the art itself to deal with challenging situations: “When
people made mistakes, and this woman... made mistakes on her pieces for the big slipper... the artist decided to make a ‘story blanket’. She just improvised and used those pieces and others that were not correct. There was no ‘wrong’ that way.” (In the Hood).

**Conclusion**

This article provides a brief look into the exciting an innovative feminist community arts work in Toronto. The projects emphasise that we can transform the quality of our daily living through the artistic learning process. To understand why women come together and use the arts as a vehicle for social and personal transformation, we need to understand what they care about and how they see their place in the world. It is this central activity of ‘naming’ that the feminist artist-educator so creativity nurtures. Feminist artist-educators engage women through but also inside works of art. They engage imaginations, are catalysts for social action, and facilitators of the ‘artistic’ experience, minimising feelings of fear and inadequacy. They teach that to engage fully in the work of art, all you really require are the skills you already have.

**Bibliography**