Community
Engaged
Theatre and
Performance

edited by
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Whose Community? Whose Art? The Politics of Reformulating Community Art

by Honor Ford-Smith

Memory-boxes: a letter, a rose, a photograph juxtaposed and framed by a wooden box provoke a meditation on the uprooted and transnational lives of Spanish-speaking women. A large mural called *Greetings to Taniperla* frames a handball court in Scarborough, Ontario. The mural is both a replica of and a response to the original, created in Ricardo Magon in Chiapas, Mexico, and later destroyed by the Mexican army. Artists, students and Catholic priests from Mexico and Canada contribute images to the piece.... Giant puppets dance like fantasies on the grass in a community play which synthesizes a traditional Chinese story with a commentary on the environment. In Regent Park, Toronto, a group of black youth talks about what creating a play might mean for the image of their community.... In advertising space on a Buffalo city bus, photo montages by Canadian artists Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge's "Theatre of Operations" juxtapose human health needs with the alienation and performative aspects of commodified medical care (Conde and Beveridge, "Theatre"). Drawing on theatre methods developed by Augusto Boal, the pair collaborate with union members and later rework images in discussion with workshop participants drawing on an artistic vocabulary influenced by the anti-nazi artist John Hartfied, the theories of German playwright Bertolt Brecht, Soviet and Chinese revolutionary art.... In Montreal, Teesri Duniya Theatre extends the notion of performance beyond the limits of the stage. Collaborating with Montreal Arts Interculturels (MAI), together they mount a professional production of Jason Sherman's *Reading Hebron*, a play about the 1994 massacre of Muslims at prayer in the Hebron. Alongside the play Teesri Duniya held community outreach meetings and exhibited community-produced drawings at the MAI to dramatize community responses to the issue (Little).

All these descriptions demonstrate that the practice of community art encompasses a lively range of peoples, activities, spaces and forms. Community art is becoming a discourse in its own right, gaining increased recognition within the categories of some public and private sector funders and cultural institutions and developing a particular language for its practice. It is bringing together folks from different social spaces in a mixture of symbolic activities and it is generating its own educational programs both within and outside of traditional training in the arts at colleges and universities. These developments have been a long time coming but nevertheless they raise a number of questions. First, there is the question of timing and

context. What does community cultural expression mean in the current context of the enormous expansion of global capitalism—an expansion which is commodifying almost everything, transforming both the potential of cultural production, as well as the way we think of communities, nations and the state? Second, since the arts and their cultural values do not exist independently from authorizing social institutions, (though their relationship to those institutions is never transparent), in whose interests does funded community art operate? Third, since the power and possibility of any practice is contingent on the responses it generates, and the way it is taken up, what critical practices will serve the development of community art? Is everyone an artist? If the legacy of high art is the notion of its autonomy from the babble and contamination of the tin pan values of the marketplace, and its critical evaluation in terms of this autonomy, how then do we evaluate art which claims to dissolve the division between artist and community, society and life, to open a space for the claims of the under-represented and the marginal?

In this very short discussion, I want to argue that the incorporation of community art into the categories of public and private funders and other institutions necessarily means that it becomes a space for struggle between a number of competing social, political and cultural interests. While I endorse its support by public and private institutions, its incorporation into these agencies as a cultural category has important consequences for notions of both "community," "artists" and "art". I propose that the process of incorporation and development needs to be led by the artists and the community members who struggle to make the means of all forms of artistic production accessible equitably to all and who are prepared to scrutinize the practices of Canadian cultural institutions. It needs to be led by those who advocate for varied and plural art forms and artistic identities through which the arts can speak to multiple audiences. Without this, community art is in danger of becoming a process which can be used both as a brightly packaged form of welfare and as a means for the manufacture of the myths which justify traditional narratives of Canadianness and the Canadian status quo. I also argue for an increasingly hybrid definition of community and community arts—one which allows for diversity of practice, rigorous critique of practice and which challenges the essentially conservative dichotomy between professional and amateur, between product and process by including more inter-sectoral dialogue between diversely positioned artists and communities. These strategies I hope will allow community art to preserve its function as a meaningful critical social intervention and will work against its domestication.

Throughout the article I use a critical frame that avoids discussions of the autonomy and formal qualities of particular art projects. Instead I examine community art in terms of its social context, the identities of those involved in doing it, the mode of production in which it is positioned, the practices and relations to which these give rise, the narratives and images it circulates and the uses to which the work is put. I write from the perspective of a teacher/artist who teaches in a community arts program and who brings to Canada twenty years of experience in community and professional theatre in the Caribbean and elsewhere. I therefore see community art through my location as a hyphenated teacher-artist and a hyphenated Canadian,

that is, a Jamaican-Canadian who like many others, inhabits more than one culture on this planet.

Most of the examples on which my argument is based are inspired by work which took place at the time of the Community Art Biennial in 2000. They are thus woefully Toronto-centric, but I hope that I will be provocative enough to stimulate some talk back from the west, east and north which are under-represented in the discussion. I begin with a summary of the struggles which have led up to reformulation of granting policies in some cultural agencies in the last decade and then move on to an analysis of what is at stake in the legitimizing of "community art."

Cultural Struggle and Cultural Crisis

One reason for the recent reformulation of categories like community arts in arts organizations and funding agencies in liberal democracies like Canada, Australia and Britain, is that artists and other cultural producers have fought for it. Their fight has both challenged narratives of what it means to be Canadian and what counts as having cultural value. Two examples of these protests are those of the Lubicon Cree in 1988 and those of the African Canadian community in Toronto in 1989 and 1993. The Cree, supported by other aboriginal groups across the country, mounted a widely publicized protest organized against the exhibition "The Spirit Sings," mounted by the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. They pointed to the hypocrisy of Shell having funded an exhibition purporting "to show the richness of the early contact culture" at the same time as they were bulldozing gravesites and interfering with hunting and trapping. The protest also critiqued the colonial discourses that controlled the representation of Native peoples in cultural institutions. The protest was broadened to include repatriation, the display of sacred objects, and the representation of Native peoples in museums and galleries (Inuit Art Foundation). Again in Toronto, Arts Organizations supported by communities successfully prevented the closing of the Harbourfront Centre, one of the city's most popular public cultural sites. These and many others events make it clear that cultural production is not seen as cordoned off from social and economic struggles, but rather that many see a link between how they are represented in cultural practices and how they are ruled.

The work of artists, writers and performers from many different social and geographic locations have challenged the boundaries between different categories of art (high/low, professional/amateur, collaborative/individual) and between producers and consumers of culture. Many cultural workers as well as unrecognized ordinary folks have argued that access to the means of cultural expression is a basic human need, one that conditions our ways of understanding the economic, social and political processes around us, and shapes our identities and our human relations. Long before the internet, many anonymous and unnamed folks as well as intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Augusto Boal and Rex Nettleford argued that the right to participate in meaning making through the languages of art goes beyond the consumption of the artistic products as privately owned commodities produced in controlled

institutionalized spaces. The "artist" is not simply a skilled person whose existence is dedicated to individual freedom of expression but someone who also speaks from within and about a collective or community and who is often deeply involved in creating that community's narratives of struggle, desire and possibility.

Art can be produced out of equitable collaborative relationships and in many ways can be about the terms and results of that collaboration. While artistic products should themselves be accessible, the means and languages of artistic production also need to be democratized in different ways. Scholars like Stuart Hall and Pierre Bourdieu have argued, in different contexts, that "art" is not a fixed category but rather one which is a constantly changing forum for the re-negotiation of cultural values and relationships. As Jameson and Miyoshi put it, "Whoever says the production of culture says the production of everyday life—without that your economic system can scarcely continue to expand and implant itself" (67).

Sharon Fernandez, formerly the Cultural Equity Coordinator at the Canada Council for the Arts, proposes that what we have witnessed is a social movement for cultural equity which emphasizes "*the importance of myriad practices of artists located within different community contexts*" and that this transforms the meaning and potential of art and culture. She contends that artists across the country are working in such myriad and multifaceted ways that the linearity of the concept high art/low art simply cannot apply. In regions where contexts are more grassroots and state or market-driven cultural infrastructure less immediate and ever present, artists have closer ties to the local social issues around them. In other settings artists operate more and more transnationally developing communities which they can nurture across national borders through the internet. Politically, provinces such as Saskatchewan or Newfoundland are very socially conscious and their art practices reflect this. Also artists are racially and culturally diverse and have very different approaches to cultural production. Throughout the 80s artists like Richard Fung, Lillian Allen, Dionne Brand, Afua Cooper, Clifton Joseph, Leonore Keeshing Tobias, Monique Mojica, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Paul Wong, Sylvia Hamilton, Jin me Yoon, Midi Onedera, Djanet Sears, and Zab Mabongou were among those responsive to community social, cultural and political concerns.

In the seventies and eighties, artists connected to popular social movements formed new cultural institutions which responded to the needs of under-represented groups like women, workers, gays, lesbians and bisexuals and others. Some of the strongest protests which Canada saw in the eighties and nineties were waged by communities of colour and First Nations groups around their exclusion from cultural institutions and around what counts as art. The debates raised at events like the *Writing Through Race Conference* of the Writer's Union of Canada in 1994, made it quite clear that many Canadian citizens and residents did not see themselves represented in national cultural narratives (Tator, Henry, and Mattis 86). Scholars of colour like Sherene Razack asserted that popular narratives of Canadianness expressed in Canadian art and literature depicted the country as empty land peopled by enterprising rugged white male settlers who tamed the wilderness and reaped material and

social rewards at the expense of first nations and people of colour. These colonial narratives make class, gender and race differences invisible or position aboriginal bodies and bodies of colour in subordinate, marginal ways while glorifying the values of pioneering self-made men who overcome the icy hardships of the north. Razack argues that it is important to be critical about the ways in which stories of the nation position Canadians in relation to each other since these affect how we think of our own power and identity in the everyday. Her argument forces us to ask: to what extent are residents and citizens prepared to consent to relations of ruling within a nation whose images of itself exclude, or make a hierarchy of, different racial, regional and ethnic histories and experiences and maintain the uneasy hegemony of a select group? For a country which depends on immigration for demographic stability, this has very serious implications for governance.

The transnational movement of peoples across borders results in the movement and mixing of multiple modes of representation from outside and inside the Western tradition. Additionally, the deep regional, class, and ethnic differences within Canada itself also result in a multiplicity of art practices and identifications. All these elements combine to revise ideas about what is valued as art, music, performance and literature. They have led to what Cornel West called in the 1990s, the new cultural politics of difference; that is, a cultural politic which compels cultural critics and artists to re-conceptualize their vocations and "to reveal as an integral component of their production, the very operations of power in their immediate work contexts (academy, museum, gallery, mass media)" (West 120). Power works in complex ways through cultural institutions to produce what can and can't be said and heard, to define categories and authorize genres, and it is important to be fully aware of the multiple levels on which this takes place.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the challenges that authorizing cultural institutions faced in Canada provoked a variety of reforms at both policy and programming levels. The Ontario Arts Council, for example, addressed challenges through establishing particular programs. The category "community art" which had previously referred to art in the regions, was expanded to include work with special interest groups, ethno-racial, linguistic and geographic groups—a shift which meant that the work went beyond funding to arts development in provincial regions. An Aboriginal Arts section was established in 1985 to serve status and non-status First Nations and Métis community organizations and schools. In 1991, the Canada Council established the First Advisory Committee on Racial Equality to look into creating greater cultural equity among diverse communities and to deal with the question of access to council programs. The work of the committee resulted in the establishment of a new policy around racial and cultural equity, greater inclusion of under-represented groups on staff and board and attention to ways of making the council's program more accessible. An equity office was created to monitor and work for the implementation of cultural equity policies.

These reforms came as a result of protest, resistance and struggle (see for example Philip; Nurse; Fung). The outcomes stressed that the practice of art that serves

these different communities is highly diverse and that policies need to take account of historic inequities such as systemic racism. The gains in the 1990s are to be celebrated. Having said so it needs to be recognized that access to the means of cultural production is only a first step toward full systemic transformation of cultural institutions. Once greater access is achieved, and assuming that this gain is not turned back, more complex contradictions begin to emerge. For changes to have full effect, questions of distribution and consumption also have to be addressed and assessed. Informed critical engagement with the work produced, as well as changes in the content of education about the arts and culture in schools, colleges and universities, all need to be addressed. The process of production, distribution, reception and critique are all part of a complete ecology of cultural production.

Three elements were stressed in writings about community art by agencies and practitioners: production across and with under-represented social groups—that is increased access to the artistic modes of production, collaboration among communities and artists, and storytelling as the preferred method of representation and performance. Often these stories were testimonials based on personal experience. A publication written in 1998 by Angela Lee for the Ontario Arts Council, then reviewing and changing its approach to community art, asserts that community arts are as much about process as product, that they involve a co-creative collaboration between artist and community, and that they are increasingly seen as an effective way to address social and cultural concerns and as a way to make the arts accessible, supported and appreciated by larger segments of society, to integrate non-western artistic activities and art forms into expanding concepts of what the arts are. Lee's discussion implicitly demonstrates the ways in which the idea of community art owes much to participatory and popular education practices which were formerly associated with social movements in Latin America and in particular with Freirean educational theories and strategies which emerged from literacy campaigns and stressed community education based on the life world around subordinated learners (Freire). This gave rise to the work of Boal in Theatre of the Oppressed, aspects of the work of Patricia Ariza (Colombia), Sistren Theatre Collective (Jamaica), Rosa Luisa Marquez (Puerto Rico) and Theatre Yuyachkani (Peru) among many others (Ford-Smith, Taylor and Constantino).

The concept of community art currently in use connotes something beyond a gathering of people who come together to make art in a particular social or geographic location, with or without formal training in the arts. Implicit in the origins of the term is the idea that art production in community contexts is linked to social movements that give voice to the systemically excluded from access to cultural resources, skills, knowledges and institutions. Julie Salverson, for example, quotes a working definition put together by Ontario artists and cultural workers in July 1992, which describes popular theatre as a "theatre for, with and by specific communities—who have not been given access to resources in our society—our interaction with these communities implies a participatory process that may include—development and collection of stories from individuals affected by an issue—[and] accountability to the participating individuals and their communities" (Salverson 120). This defini-

tion points to the fact that the origin of the term community art involved the idea of a social and political intervention in the interests of social justice for the marginalized. Salverson goes on to critique the ways in which this definition sometimes homogenizes communities, thus erasing vast differences between those who make up any given group. She points out that the practice of popular/community theatre can subtly discourage popular theatre artists from reflecting on their own artistic and pedagogical needs and disciplines and their own cultural biases and discourages reflection on the way these (suppressed) needs enter their practice in contexts where there are enormous differences, particularly around difficult or traumatic experiences. This insight suggests that disciplines and institutional systems through which artists or facilitators get scripted into community art practice need careful examining.

Hegemony, Institutional Power and the Idea of Community

The institutionalizing of any discourse as a result of struggles confers a gain in power. But such gains are not absolute. They come full of contradictions. The terrain on which gains and reforms are won is ever-shifting. There are many issues at stake in the institutionalizing of a practice which has roots in struggles for social change. The work of Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci helps us analyse the meaning of changes in cultural discourse when he proposed long ago that it is at the level of culture that consent for governance is negotiated. Gramsci viewed culture as a force field of relations shaped by conflicted tensions and interests. Cultural hegemony, he argued, is secured not via the obliteration of subordinate cultures, but via their articulation to dominant culture and ideology. Giroux and Simon summarize the concept of hegemony when they write:

> For Gramsci, the exercise of control by the ruling classes is less characterized by the excessive use of officially sanctioned force than it is through what he calls "the struggle for hegemonic leadership"—the struggle to win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing social order.... In Gramsci's view such a pedagogical process must work and rework the cultural and ideological terrain of subordinate groups in order to legitimate the interests and authority of the ruling bloc. (Giroux and Simon 8)

In other words, dominant groups who incorporate the demands of their subordinates have to decide what they will change about themselves or give up in order to keep power and control. Similarly, subordinates have to decide what they will give up in exchange for having some of their demands met. This is the process which is currently taking place in Canadian cultural institutions in the context of the shrinking of the nation state under the expansion of capital. It is the outcome of the process of hegemony which will determine who ultimately benefits from the reforms of arts council policy and programming in the late eighties and early nineties.

There is much to be gained from speaking within an institutionalized discourse, as cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak has pointed out (Spivak). The acquisition of a place

from which to speak and be heard and a particular language through which to interpret practices are not things to be scoffed at. But Gramsci helps us see that there is nothing essentially or finally democratic, subversive or even equitable about such an acquisition. We have only to think of the way in which medical discourses on gynaecology, race or mental health have been used, to see that any discourse can be appropriated, misrepresented or used in contradictory ways by diversely positioned groups—even as its regulatory procedures give rise to particular ways of seeing and naming the world, even as lives are simultaneously enhanced or denigrated. Nevertheless, the acquisition of a language for seeing and naming the world confers a gain in power. It is pedagogical and so produces subjects. It makes more visible the space for reflection, action and negotiation. In the case of community art, greater support from cultural institutions allows more people to participate in the work. It affects educational programs and offers opportunities for deepening critical approaches.

In the Canadian context, the crucial question is who will provide the leadership of multiple historically marginalized communities as they work to gain from increased public representations of their realities. This is what at present hangs in the balance and is part of the current terms of the struggle. Politicians and professional managers of national, provincial, and urban cultural infrastructures are certainly conscious of what is at stake in the reworking of national narratives of Canadian citizenship. But it is equally important for artists, cultural producers and consumers to be able to name, independently, the ways in which the process of hegemony is proceeding under the new programs and policies. One way of doing this is to examine the social positioning of those leading the reworking of national narratives and narratives of community, the relationships generated by the process, the context for the work, the modes of production in which the work is located, the spaces and places where it is generated and the ways in which those narratives and images are taken up and used socially.

Cultural Hierarchies, and the Defence of Community Art as Political Intervention

One project which graphically illustrates some of the questions which have to be negotiated by cultural organizations, community artists and others took place in Toronto in the summer of 2000. Minsook Lee, a cultural animator, was employed by the Laidlaw Foundation to develop a project for Take Part!, an initiative in cultural democracy begun by the foundation. Minsook Lee designed a program which built on a previous collaboration between the Toronto Environmental Alliance and CUPE Local 416, which includes sanitation workers. The project brought together four visual artists with union members and environmentalists and facilitated dialogue about the environment. The work developed in the context of a political debate about what Toronto should do with its garbage. As workers, activists, and teacher-artists worked together discussing environmental issues, the project resulted in the painting of collectively designed murals on the side of publicly owned garbage trucks. The planned paintings were submitted to the city for approval and the murals were painted on the garbage trucks. The project was launched at the same time that the controversy over

moving the city's garbage to the Adams Mine, an abandoned iron mine in Kirkland Lake, Northern Ontario was growing. One drawing—that of a truck leaving Toronto full of garbage, with men with pig-like faces in suits counting money—was interpreted by the media as a graphic critique of the project proposing the dumping of garbage in Kirkland Lake. The city government became alarmed and one city councilor, Bill Saundercook, then head of a City works committee, interpreted the mural as accusing city politicians of corruption and ordered the critical mural painted over, something project members learned after the fact (Barndt, Lee, and Pacific).

The media reported the incident and the groups involved held a press conference. On a CBC discussion of the matter one art critic pronounced on the work of the artists, declaring the murals inferior art objects. The groups held a press conference censuring the city's action and determined to repaint the mural elsewhere. They were to receive further support from the Laidlaw Foundation for this, but when the repainting of the mural coincided with the municipal election, an election in which Saundercook was running, Laidlaw made further funding conditional on an appropriate "communications strategy" and suggested a post-election repainting. No such public relations strategy materialized and so the foundation did not renew the contract of the officer, Robin Pacific, who researched, initiated and developed its venture into community arts. Her assistant, a student intern, was also suspended. The mural has not yet been re-painted and the group has not taken any more funding from Laidlaw.

Throughout the fall, the mainstream media in the city gave widespread coverage to the question of whether the Adams Mine should serve as site for Toronto's garbage, but little attention was paid to the censoring actions of the politicians or the response of the private funding organization by any arts or civil organizations. So far no group of artists, politicians or citizens has come forward to investigate the matter and comment on the garbage truck fiasco publicly in spite of the fact that the silencing of the work took place in public space. Metro garbage trucks are after all, not owned by the works committee or the councillors who chair it, they are owned by the residents of Toronto.

I am quite sure that if something like this had occurred in Havana or Caracas, it would not be long before we would have heard loud protestations about the censorship of artists in Third World dictatorships from many North American media houses. In due course, we might even have had a major Hollywood film about the heroism of those involved and the terrible effects of repression on the artist's lives. Canada is a liberal democracy which never misses an opportunity to perform what it sees as its superiority to countries like Cuba on the world stage by claiming to support the practice of basic human rights worldwide and by claiming to support freedom of expression. Yet in its own yard the disciplining of cultural workers commenting on political issues in publicly owned space has gone without full public discussion or censure from arts groups, unions or city politicians of any persuasion.

There are many questions to be asked about community arts on the basis of this story. The first question is why has there been so little investigation and discussion of

the matter from the perspective of cultural workers? Apart from the obvious question of censorship and political manipulation around the question of the environment, there are questions to be raised about the role of arts managers and funders in such a controversy. Why have arts agencies, and in particular Laidlaw itself, failed to publicly defend the right of the community arts projects which they fund to produce politically critical material? The images generated by the garbage trucks were taken up as a strong political critique. The work of artists as different as Brecht, Boal, Lacy, Neruda, Darwish, Wodiczko, Soyinka and countless others across time and place, demonstrate that political critique has always been one of the longstanding purposes of art. If the right of communities and artists to make political statements is not defended by artists or those who support them, then what we have is a situation in which so-called "community" art becomes a way of massaging and managing social consent by offering welfare to the most marginalized, in a bright new decorative package with all the attendant hype of public relations.

Several community artists I interviewed for this article described previous experiences of censorship, though not always by the state and not always by blatant destruction. Deborah Barndt recounts an incident in which the gallery of the Etobicoke Civic Centre removed a photo of a demonstration from a series of photos she was displaying and refused to put it back. Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge describe violently hostile reactions to their exhibition at the AGO in the seventies because it critiqued the politics of the art world as elitist.

Another question worth asking is: would such blatant acts of silencing be possible where an unpopular critique was undertaken by a prominent popular singer, actor or ballet dancer? That is, would it be possible if the artists in question were positioned in a more heavily capitalized and commodified area of the arts or in one of the high arts? Is community art something that lends itself to manipulation because it is somehow "low" art, less and positioned on the borders of the cultural marketplace?

My answer to this would be yes and no. Silencing and disrespect for cultural workers is not limited to community arts, though community artists probably experience it more often. Censorship can be imposed or it can result from selective oversight wherever cultural work threatens to have social uses that threaten powerful groups. So-called "high" art has often been censored in covert and overt ways. But ironically it has been able to mount a defense through claims of artistic autonomy and by recourse to the liberal freedoms—the right to freedom of expression. The theatre of Athol Fugard in South Africa was able to survive and circulate stories about the everyday abuses of apartheid in the 1970s precisely because of its use of elitist artistic forms and transnational appeals beyond the local communities to which it referred. A membership club and initial recourse to arguments about artistic excellence and universal appeal all were used to keep it alive, even though it was simultaneously openly critiquing both those things by producing highly political theatre of testimony (Kruger 154–55.) This kind of rhetoric was never used to defend the garbage project perhaps because the project challenged the concept of the autonomous art by taking art into public space, by drawing on the stories of union members and by

juxtaposing art and garbage. What language then can art which is political and participatory invoke in its defense?

Many artists opt to work outside of the cultural marketplace because of disillusionment with the self-referential limitations of the art world. They see their work in collaboration with non-artists as a way of redefining the kinds of discussion which produce the arts and the role of the artist. The arts, for many of these producers, are a way of intervening in power relations through representational practices. For many, community art gives artists and practitioners who do not feel connected to the mainstream arts a place to express their ideas about the world and their desires for what might make it better. Folks who feel excluded by the racialized and class marked institutions and tastes of middle class art lovers find in spaces outside of this field of culture a chance to perform the stories they live by for each other. Collaborative art making that connects formally trained artists with folks who don't consider themselves artists at all creates a hybrid space from which ever-changing stories emerge to shape the human relationships. The commodified, highly individualistic, metropolitan based obsession with formal behaviours, disciplines and genres, and inter-textuality associated with arts institutions are elements which provoke other artists to create spaces which position art as related to social life in the everyday. It is the ambience of formality and the rigidly regulatory procedures that accompany these that lead many artists and audiences to the view that cultural institutions producing high art are elitist and exclusionary.

But the idea that "community" is somehow a pure space, which is more inherently democratic and utopian and which exists in a space uncontaminated by the ideologies of the marketplace, does not necessarily follow. The painting out and silencing of the garbage truck project graphically demonstrates that there is no pure space anywhere and that cultural production is always both a covert and overt site of struggle. The idea that the work of the artist comes from and is connected to pure or transcendent space is an old one which has haunted the work of artists since the romantics and before. It depends on the opposing notion of contamination, because pure space can only be so if contamination exists elsewhere. The binaries pure/impure, authentic/inauthentic, rarely apportion value equally. They are accompanied by the apportioning of greater power to one side of the binary—in this case to that of the richer arts institutions which are defined by discourses of universal transcendence and not by intervention in contemporary social or political issues. This line of reasoning taken to its conclusion implies that community art depends on its opposite—art produced in autonomous and self-referential spaces and/or art produced in the market place. So much for social change!

Artists who make art with subordinate, impoverished, marginal or racialized communities feel the effects of this binary line of thought in the way that they are seen and treated by so-called professionals and by cultural institutions. Their work is often openly patronized as second class artistic practice by the professional arts community. Like the artists who worked on the garbage truck project, they find themselves treated as unskilled, producers of "serious" and perhaps "worthy" but somehow "bad"

or "crudely didactic" art within the hierarchies of formal artistic institutions. Their work is justified as social work or adult education—rather than as a serious mode of cultural representation that renders complex thinking and carefully developed skills. These attitudes have material consequences. If one examines the budgetary figures on grants to the arts, it is vividly clear that, even though allocations to community arts and racialized groups have increased, allocations made to institutions like the Ballet or the Opera, for example, are far greater than any to aboriginal arts programs, works by artists of colour or community productions. The practice of community art, up to 1996 when the internet took off, has traditionally relied on a mode of production that was semi-autonomous from the market and undercapitalized. It was a mode of production comparable in some ways to the informal sector or to peasant production. When it moves beyond this marginal position through the uses made of it, it tends to be censored or to be redefined within another disciplinary category.

On the other hand, social, political and labour organizations concerned with social equity or fighting for better conditions have a history in which the arts are seen either as functionalist tools for education or as a frill on the serious work of making social change on more fundamental "hard core" issues—such as jobs, housing or health. In spite of the sterling work of some artists and union workers around this matter, artists still have trouble being taken seriously as workers within the hierarchies of the labour movement. For some, artistic work is connected to the need for pleasure—a luxury to be dealt with after basic needs are met. For others the arts are contaminated by centuries of patronage by the rich and powerful and are not comprehensible by the average philistine. The idea that the artist is a worker is a difficult one to grasp, especially where the artist is not producing for exchange on the market. Artists collaborating with communities find themselves between a rock and hard place—between at least two competing discourses, one on arts and one on the politics and marketing of labour.

Two observations emerge from this: first, it is not so much the process of making cultural representations which incurs feelings of alienation from the mainstream among many artists working with under-represented and impoverished groups, but rather the way in which the workings of power through cultural institutions legitimize regulatory practices that limit how art communicates, to whom and how it can be used by audiences; second, cultural institutions—especially public ones—require constant scrutiny and continued criticism from communities affected by their policies if they are to serve taxpayers and all communities equitably. But such scrutiny must also be accompanied by scrutiny of the cultures of the market and the aesthetics of commodification or else the picture will become one sided. Analyses of community must be accompanied by a relational analysis of the public sphere and the corporate sphere.

In Ontario, broadly speaking, increased interest in community based projects from organizations like the Trillium Foundation has come alongside cuts in funding to individual artists at the Ontario Arts Council. Under the conservative provincial government, in the context of free market expansion, this has been accompanied by

decreased support for social programs and increased privatization. Richard Fung argues that in this context, the term "community" can be invoked as an attempt to extend and re-legitimize the neo-conservative agenda and the power of politicians and policy makers. Commenting on recent developments in cultural institutions, Fung contends that many bureaucrats who claim to speak on behalf of "grassroots communities" experience a considerable gain in their power as a result of speaking for communities of which they are not members. Populism can work to legitimize neo-conservative power while marginalizing critics from non-dominant groups who have led the struggle for access to cultural institutions over the last decade. Fung argues that dominant groups can re-work and maintain their power in the guise of including others while in reality limiting the potential of the critical voice from within those communities and the transforming of power relations. This analysis makes visible the process of hegemony at work. One important conclusion to be drawn is that critical artists and audiences need to be involved in leading the process of change if it is to benefit those it claims to serve. Secondly, a more complex understanding of the concept of community as one which spans difference is also key.

Community is usually understood in two ways: first, as a geographically located group and second, as a group which defines itself as a community on the basis of having a particular shared interest or bond of association. Communities, but especially naturalized communities (i.e. communities which you don't get to pick membership in, those which you inherit or are born with—those of sex, nationality, race, age, physical ability), carry with them stories about their bodies or histories which define who they are and how they are seen by others. Through these representations, we make sense of our relationships with each other, decide who's in, who's out, who's important and who's not. Most of us make use of these stories about who we are to determine what we can become, when and how we might enter the scenarios thrown up by life. We invest in them and use them to define or limit our possibilities.

Stories and images of community, unlike our biologies, are not naturally constituted. They are made and unmade over time in cultural production and are often replete with stereotypical myths. The Jamaican community, for instance, has had to fight the Canadian press over consistent representations of Black Jamaican men as criminals. It is not that there are no Jamaican criminals, but that the majority of Black Jamaicans who are not criminals are rarely represented if at all. Over time, portrayals of Black Jamaicans as "bad immigrants" has gained currency and it serves to define its opposite "good Canadians." Definitions of identity usually depend on the denigration of another opposing group. Group identity is made by differentiating one group from other, relationally. Problems arise where groups apportion value to each side of the comparison, giving one side more importance than the other. Material and social rewards are invested in this process accordingly.

When the term "community" is invoked in discussions about community art, it usually refers to groups which are different from the dominant (white and middle class) norm. The moral authority of these groups derives from notions of essential authenticity. The "grassroots," "the working class," "the south-Asian community," and

so on, all signal homogenous entities which are just as often contested from within. Material and social resources and rewards are invested in these definitions accordingly, when the trouble is that no community is entirely homogenous or entirely fixed. Any given community is full of internal differences which must be muzzled to preserve apparent unity. The ideal of unity can and does serve a strategic function in struggles for change, but often, it also contributes to the dominance of certain groups within those groups.

When we think of any given "community" we tend to define group identity according to dominant images in circulation and not to the groups which challenge these stereotypes from within the community. For example, popular images of the "black community" are unlikely to bring to mind black lesbian mothers. Poet and activist Audre Lorde spent much of her life challenging ideas of black and feminist community homogeneity and the ways in which it worked to penalize and exclude those who differed from the dominant heterosexual, able-bodied male norm. Acknowledging and working with the notion of diversity between communities and affirming the right of critical voices to speak from within communities may be one way to deal with those who seek to manipulate particular marginalized groups in their own interests. A notion of hybrid communities may work against the trend to fix particular groups in ahistorical ways.

Obstinate Memory, an exhibition of memory boxes made by Latin American women, produced for Community Arts Biennial in 2001, illustrates the power of complicating the concept of community. Women from the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples in Toronto worked with visual artist Amelia Jimenez to make, assemble and juxtapose objects in small boxes. These objects were images of memories drawn from their past, their lives in their many countries of origin and their present lives here in Canada. They were auto-ethnographic symbols which gained symbolic meaning from the way the objects were displayed against each other. The ruptures and discontinuities of the women's lives were expressed in objects like stones from Lake Ontario, fragments of letters from relatives in South America, keepsakes from childhood. All these were expressed in work which demonstrated the shifting boundaries between individual/group, world/nation, and dramatized investments in more than one nation, north and south, third and first worlds. The ambivalence of the objects themselves offered ways for spectators to actively respond to the arrangements of objects through projecting their own narratives onto the objects, even as the process offered the women a place for mourning and remaking of self in the context of the group. The boxes served as a momentary framing for snapshots of the process of identity as a work in progress, not an ongoing or fixed position. The process was collaborative in that each individual discussed her work in the group and with Jimenez, but each woman created her own box.

Obstinate Memory challenged ideas of nationality and community as fixed concepts and offered a way of crossing the borders of difference in the imagination of the women and the audiences they addressed. The women recreated their transnational worlds in the maps they made of their lives. They were simultaneously positioned in

many sites, speaking not as one but as many voices located in many locations—South and North American, women of different classes, ages and locations in the Canadian immigration hierarchy. The work troubled ideas about cultural purity and community as fixed entities. *Obstinate Memory* defies classifications of community arts as celebratory, oppositional or transformative (Pacific). It is an example of art which offers participants a chance to act as "the mediators in a process of publicly defining the community to be celebrated and perhaps, changed" (Little and Knowles 111).

I have argued that while the category of community art has developed in response to struggles for greater cultural equity, its incipient institutionalization raises a number of new challenges. There are many more struggles ahead if an equitable cultural landscape is to be brought into being. Setting up a separate category of community arts within arts funding is one way of addressing the matter of cultural accessibility, but it does not necessarily address the problem created by the binary community/mainstream. It does not necessarily challenge the authority and traditional legitimacy of these institutions as signifiers of normative cultural power and "western civilization."

In the long run if community artists are to effectively advocate for themselves as cultural workers and defend their right to be as critical as they wish, they will have to come up with two things: allies and a language for defending their work. Such a language will have to confound the old binaries of high/popular art, professional/community artist and so on. One way to do this is to generate critical languages appropriate for assessing art as a mode of cultural intervention and not as a naturally constituted practice based on autonomous, self-referential languages. This does not mean that the work produced should emphasize the literal, the naturalistic and sloganeering. Art which crosses boundaries and makes social and political intervention needs simultaneously to generate support across different groups of artists and community in order to survive and defend itself even as it retains the right to a complex language of signs.

Critical artists and informed community members have an important role to play in the leadership of this process and need to continue to work for the development of the discourse, if it is not to be taken over by those who claim to speak for groups they do not represent. I have argued that if the critical edge of community art is to remain, a more complex understanding of community is needed, one which acknowledges differences within, rather than one which stresses inner homogeneity. I have suggested that the practice of community art itself needs to build on varied approaches, supported by critical work which theorizes problems arising from current practices. While the establishment of the category of community art is a significant step, the binary which undergirds the relations between community artists and traditional artistic disciplines needs to be undermined by critical engagement with the power relations which inhere in those institutions and by developing opportunities for more cross sectoral collaboration and dialogue. The divide between community artist/professional artist and between artist/worker and the binaries which underlie them may not be one which serves either group well in the long run. Artists of all kinds need

forms of organization which defend them as workers and which at the same time allow points of divergence and points of contact in their work. As community art becomes incorporated into the categories of public and private funders, communities of all kinds need to work to defend its socially critical nature, so that it does not become a means for greater social control of the most marginalized or a second class practice inferior to professionalized practices.

Communities and artists working with them may need to take a lesson from the trickster hero. They may need to shape shift and strategically retain the lesson of the slippery sign while allowing for multiple interpretations of it. They may need to cut and mix the language of critical education for social action with the rhetoric of artistic autonomy in ways which do not set up an inflexible dichotomy between professional and community, high art and popular art. The use of a hybrid critical language for community art may be important for community art discourse, if it is to survive manipulation and command support.

At the start of the new millennium, the market is more pervasive than ever. Production and consumption regulate our lives in unprecedented ways, creating identities, proposing what to do and how to act. While the marketplace is oppressively present, it is impossible to retreat to a pure space its relations have not transformed. Social theorists Michel de Certeau and Dick Hebdige suggest that consumption isn't just making idiots of us (hard to believe if you watch TV for five hours) but that there is creativity and resistance written into the way we respond, cut, mix and make a bricolage from the paraphenalia of stuff around us. Ways of reusing symbols help to constitute new positions from which to think about and demand new possibilities. Indeed, commodified popular cultural forms such as reggae and rap have provided a space for insurgent Black diasporic identity formation, springing up as post industrial cottage industries within the multinational reaches of the cultural industries. There may be many lessons here for the artists seeking to work in hybrid ways in the present period of expansion and regulatory developments in the field of subsidized community arts.

(2001)

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