

art(ists), politics, and community: art making as community building and politics

**work in progress**

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This paper argues that artists comprise a social movement and focuses on their critical consciousness involving their own conceptions of community and politics.<sup>1</sup> Their work, the intent of their work, and their organizing within communities map onto civil society, as well as selected political institutions at the municipal, provincial, and federal level in ways that are richly political and provide examples of community building not always conspicuous in traditional terms associated with political action and social movements. This paper provides a scaffolding of recent research findings on artists in relation to community and politics.

A main part of this project is to interview artists. Artists are selected for where they live versus whether they exhibit or perform in national or provincial venues. The reasoning for this is that how artists think and carry out their process in their respective local spaces reveals aspects of community building and politics at an everyday level which is invisible. Specifically, Peterborough and Toronto artists are being interviewed. Peterborough is well known by word of mouth for its arts community and artists. During the 1970s artists living in the area were at the forefront in developing one of Canada's earlier artist run centers, Artspace.<sup>2</sup> Artspace is still in existence and presents juried exhibits of local, as well as nationally and internationally recognized Canadian visual artists. This organization was pivotal in helping local artists and important arts organizations such as Peterborough New Dance get started. The hive of artistic activity since the 1970s continues today. As well, Peterborough's close proximity to Toronto attracts artists who want and/or need access to Toronto, and it has historically offered more affordable studio space and housing. Artists living in Toronto are being interviewed because it is the art capitol of Canada. Peterborough is the first community where I am conducting interviews.

Artists, as independent cultural workers, are asked how they define or think of community and politics, and whether they perceive (or do not perceive) their creative work as community building or political. This approach is phenomenological in that the artists interviewed are invited to share their process and experience in a variety of ways: in relation to a project of interest, historical events they find relevant, performance experiences. While they also have affiliations with arts organizations, other social movement organizations, they were asked specifically for their perceptions on their own creative process and how it relates or does not relate to their conceptions of community and politics. Artists are not provided definitions of art, artist, community building, or politics at the outset. The aim is to allow or invite artists to reflect upon their own identity, process of making, and remembering their audiences from past performances or venues or imagining future ones. So far, a plurality of meanings are emerging, as well as some tensions among artists by discipline and organization, large urban locations versus smaller ones, gender, ethnicity, and intergenerational differences.

The role of art in politics has occupied a stronger place in history, and more recently in sociology than in political science. "Activists know that art is important for their movements, yet

social movement scholars have paid little attention to this topic” writes sociologist Jacqueline Adams (2002: 21). In her study, she traces how art produced by Shantytown women in Pinochet’s Chile had the effect of communicating the suffering of the people under the Pinochet regime internationally, signaling safety in speaking against the regime when hung in homes, and providing a modest income for the women and their families. “Art should be recognized as a major and integral part of the transaction that engenders political behavior” writes Murray Edelman (1995: 2). If art is important for movements, then artists are important too since they are the ones making the art. Social movement literature does not study artists’ themselves as a source of political agency. Instead, in sociology, for example, artists are subsumed under the rubric of culture where culture is assumed as a context or sets of conditions that influence social movement activity, or artists are subsumed into a broader category of the social movement as something that influences the art produced (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 14). History has a rich tradition of studying either the cultural activities of political movements or individual writers or artists in visual art and music in detailed biographies. Since “aesthetic considerations take precedence over social understanding,” there has been little influence on the sociology of social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 12, 14), or there has been little examination of artists themselves comprising a social movement that includes political resistance as a large part of its activity or identity.

What literature does exist in this area opens up the possibility of considering within political science whether artists represent a social movement themselves. Artists argue for rights to make art that does not conform to conditions of exchange labor or the kind of commercial exchange of retail goods found in usually larger, often corporate, retail outlets such as department stores or grocery stores. They contribute to the vitality and cohesiveness of communities at the local, provincial, and national level through their own culturally political goals. They argue for better conditions that support art making in their communities. The activities of artists are carried out in nuanced ways influenced by how they see themselves as artists and their respective goals. Because the ways artists live and make their work do not quite fit the predominant models of understanding social movement activity read from a collective level through representative organizations, they are not immediately thought of as a social movement. This paper zeroes in on artists’ own perceptions of their making in relation to community and politics.

Political science predominantly identifies social movements under the rubrics of labor, women, and the environment. Lesbian and gay and aboriginal movements are increasingly studied and recognized as social movements within political science.<sup>3</sup> Artists as political actors, however, have received scant attention in this field. Because political science ascribes agency, a conscious sense of political and social purpose to one’s action directed toward political institutions or a specific policy, a conception of artist agency becomes subsumed under social movements listed above already demarcated in the social sciences, or it is very minimally considered at all. Cultural work that has political content becomes effaced as the focus turns to more immediate political tasks such as political discussion, political ideology, and direct action (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 11). Within social movement literature itself, individual agency and collective agency of the social movement are often assumed equivalent, especially in the moment or discussion of a specific social movement intervention vis-à-vis the state. Here again, the action of a social movement becomes aggregated into a coherent and singular moment where a critical mass or group of people are a collective unit. While social movement literature acknowledges that social movement activity occurs prior to a collective moment, it continues to

privilege and importantly collective moments manifest in a public space where the naming of the collective movement is assumed or has already taken place (Smith 1999, Dobrowolsky 2000). What happens prior to and after these moments? Are movement members only planning for public events or direct action? There is much activity among individual members in between the public events more formally sponsored or initiated by a social movement (Cohen and Rai 2000, Hetherington 1990, Melucci 1989). “Although it is acceptable in a formal sense,” Cohen and Rai write, “probably the worst aspect of such a definition is the loss of sensitivity to the social and personal characteristics of many active participants” (2000: 3). In addition to the loss of social and personal characteristics of the participants, there is also a loss of political characteristics related to community building in terms of vision, social cohesion, and democratic participation. Social movement literature emphasizing resource mobilization, framing, organization, and repertoires of action (e.g., Zald & McCarthy 1979, Tarrow 1994) produce an abstraction of the social movement as an actor. Attempts to focus on identity and lifestyle (Melucci 1989, 1996, Pakulski 1991, Rucht 1990) inform this project since the self-identity of artists and their lifestyle(s) influence their work, how they perceive community and their contributions to it, and why they live the way they do.

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Civil society is a key concept for the study of artists as political actors. Civil society is the location of diverse interactions between individuals as community members. These interactions include economic, social, and cultural activity and exchange. In civil society there are a plethora of associations, the goal of which is to encourage and provide inroads to participation of community members in public life. This public sphere theoretically affords individuals the opportunity for what Young calls self-development, “being able actively to engage in the world and grow” (2002: 184). It is incumbent upon social institutions, in her view, to “provide conditions for all persons to learn and use satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, and enable them to play and communicate with others or express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where other can listen” (2002: 184). Young may be erring on the side of assuming more cooperation than conflict, tension, or agonism,<sup>4</sup> let alone coercion in the learning, using skills, playing and communicating in civil society organizations. For Young, civil society organizations are not devoid of politics, but neither does she give them a significant role for resisting state policy considered unhealthy for people’s well being. In contrast, Young argues that state intervention is necessary to regulate and direct economic activity to ensure that self-development can grow and flourish. The role of the state is to provide protective boundaries for human beings so that the worst economic processes do not have a claim on every aspect of an individual’s life. We need a beginning and end to the work day, we need days off, we need labor standards so employers do not have a claim on working people’s lives “24/7.” She writes that “only state institutions have the kind of power that can limit the power of large private enterprises and facilitate the use of that private power for the collective well-being” (2002: 186). In the Canadian context of a political shift to neoliberal values within the state that inform the idea of greater self-sufficiency through policies of reduced taxation, decreased public spending in health, education, and social services, reductions in welfare benefits, higher tuition rates in post-secondary education, and the list could continue, Young risks overlooking the need for robust and active organizations in civil society.

The debate over whether civil society versus the state is the *proper* location of politics helps to situate artists as political actors. Young believes that only the state can coordinate the kind of large scale activity across a diverse collection of organizations to produce a coherent

program for self-development. She implies that citizens need to focus their attention on state institutions and see it as a site for democratic struggle to lobby them for the kinds of social changes citizens believe they need. On the other hand, Marla Brettschneider emphasizes that civil society organizations have a history of fulfilling the goal of self-development. In the case of the United States civil society organizations were often started by marginalized groups such as Jews, Latina/os, Chicana/os, Blacks, gays and lesbians, and Native Americans for the purpose of community building and political resistance (2002: Chapter 6, 136-172). The development of community fostered networks for political organizing as specific issues arose (2002: 148). She suggests that in the case of early Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, social and cultural needs in communities were addressed first that “facilitated rapid means of communication and were ready-made units for political organizing” (2002: 148). These kinds of organizations included loan agencies, credit unions, workmen’s circles. Within a specific community, organizations will be started by individuals who see a need that has as yet been unfulfilled. The organizations that provide for social and cultural needs of a community, thus, also provide an existing infrastructure for organizing at a community level for political ends where direct action emerges. Nonetheless, the infrastructure is made possible by the individual affiliated organizations. Within these organizations, there are interactions and activity that involve negotiation, discussion, and debate, in other words politics, where the participants themselves, their members, and their intended audiences, and not the state, may be the object of action. Politics, then, has multiple meanings and the richness of the concept cannot be reducible to direct action against the state. Melucci states:

“Still today we usually judge collective action in terms of its impact on the political system. This short-circuiting of the relationship between social movements and political power and conflict is best avoided. It weakens our understanding of the independent processes at work within social movements as well as their impact upon the political system” (1989: 219).

The predominant community building activities of artists occurs through their art-making that brings them or their into connection with fellow artists in the community and their audiences. Within this larger pool of artists, there are those who take on a leadership and advocacy role by working in funded arts organizations either part-time or full-time. The activities of these conceptually distinct groups, whose boundaries blur according to project or discipline, combine together to weave a rich and complex web of projects and relationships within their realm of endeavor. They act according to their conviction that they are creative beings and in their labor they work with other artists as well as those in the community interested in learning about an artistic discipline. They see themselves making and creating their own spaces and temporalities of freedom, and sharing and communicating that sense and space of freedom with their audiences.<sup>5</sup> Second, in speaking with artists there is often a strong identification with political resistance and social change. Third, in the making of their art, artists see themselves in a process of self-making, transformation that resonates with the process of Foucauldian critique that starts from the question, “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them” (Foucault 2002: 193).

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Even though I quote Foucault above, the work of Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt’s School preoccupation with commodification currently guides my understanding of artist

perceptions of their own work.<sup>6</sup> Foucault does not explicitly address the need for aesthetic supplement against a capitalist backdrop. The care of the self resonates with an aesthetically aware critical consciousness available in Frankfurt School critical theory, however, it distances itself from the context of capitalism and its inherent commodification. Commodification is important to consider when examining artists' views and their work because they are marginalized economically in society and they see their work in resistance to consumerism and environmental devastation linked to capitalist organized resource extraction and production. According to Statistics Canada there are 131,000 artists in the country, but this number does not include the many more who carry out artistic endeavor and who earn either negligible or no earnings from their endeavor. Oftentimes such artists support their creative endeavor from their own pocket and the pockets of their families and friends. The Canada Council reported in 1999 that as many as 50% of cultural workers hold multiple jobs and may not self-identify in a census artistic occupation because their earnings come from a non-artistic occupation. Artists and craft artists according to Statistics Canada earn very low incomes, on average \$23,500 per year (Hill Strategies 2004: 6). Artists are in the lowest quarter of average earnings of all occupation groups.<sup>7</sup> Artists very often voluntarily give their time to their art as well as their time to arts organizations that fund or present art.

Marcuse adopted the position that critical theory's aim is to cultivate a consciousness oriented toward ideology critique and social transformation, specifically emancipation from an increasingly administered capitalist society. Karl Marx influences Marcuse and members of the Frankfurt School via his theory of commodification. Commodification is inherent in a capitalist mode of production. Because exchange value becomes the measure for all things, the fungibility of things gives rise to a consciousness that human beings have control over objects through the potential ownership made possible through the working wage. What remains unspoken is that human beings have also become commodified through the very wage labor in which they must engage in order to minimally or comfortably survive. They can be bought and discarded much like an object with a price tag. The circulation of human beings as an exchange value is a source of unfreedom. Emancipation from this commodification process is key for Marx and Marcuse.

The idea of emancipation implicit in Marcuse's writing can be supplemented by drawing upon the early political writings of Marx. In his piece "Alienated Labor," Marx lays out an ontology of species being where human beings have an essence of freedom and capacity for labor that has and continues to be spoiled, estranged, and distorted by the ideology and material processes of liberal capitalism. The underlying quality of this essence and capacity is a spiritual realm. "The life of the species in man (sic) as in animals is physical in that man (like the animal) lives by inorganic nature" (1988: 47). "As plants, animals, minerals, air, light, etc., in theory form a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art--his spiritual inorganic nature or spiritual means of life which he first must prepare for enjoyment and assimilation--so they also form in practice a part of human life and human activity" (1988: 47). Freedom and thinking associated with this inorganic nature transmute into exchange values according to the exigencies of capitalist production. The commodification process of capitalism transforms species being into a commodity form where freedom and thinking itself become an object of exchange value equivalents and are turned into their opposites: coercion and conformity. In this process, exploitation occurs since the commodification process channels the very inherent and species being freedom into wage labor and remains unrecognized in the wage. Marx's early writings suggest that the nature of human beings needs to be imagined in a space and time where capitalism does not exist, a counterfactual location. What occurs in this space

and time is a sense of being where human beings can be themselves without coercion. They can simply and freely *be* themselves. This being involves activity, many kinds of activities, all aimed at the “real interests” of individuals,<sup>8</sup> the enrichment of a person’s happiness and sense of completion and connectedness in the world. This would be a world without commodification.

Even though alienation is inherent in capitalism, capitalism does not eviscerate species being. According to Marcuse, art, and the creative labor that produces art, retains some immunity to this commodification process even while it is subject to commodification. How is this possible? Marcuse assumes human beings have the capacity for a new sensibility, an aesthetic dimension of thought and representation that is itself a form of critique against the oppressions of capitalism. This new sensibility or aesthetic dimension is ontological. It is a capacity for which Marcuse holds enormous hope and expectation in its development as resistance. Marcuse discusses the new sensibility as fully capable of effecting or producing the new society “of human relationships no longer mediated by the market, no longer based on competitive exploitation or terror” (1969: 27). The qualities of this new sensibility involve temporal considerations, the development of aesthetic capacities sensitive enough to read against and disrupt commodification. This roughly translates into incremental, step by step change, that at a collective level becomes transformative. It takes a vigilant attitude to persist in maintaining and cultivating self-transformation in the step by step effort. Every thought, every interaction, in every location one travels or circulates requires self-reflection or self-examination. While a human ontology, Marcuse implies that the new sensibility has not yet been exercised to its full radical potential and because commodification contains resistance, the new sensibility has to be practiced over and over again.

If art is simply understood as the making of something because one wants to make something with the purpose of representing what is wrong with society, then critical theory becomes an art form since it is a practice of rigorous self-reflection and study of values that inhere in society; it comes from a desire for a world without exploitation; it is a practice that is repeated daily; and in creating or making things, there is self-transformation in the process. In addition, art is always temporal and elusive in its goal to give representation or expression of the desired object that emanates from the entwinement of a feeling and idea. Plus, it captures a feeling after the fact so art never exhausts thought processes. Art always fails or invites, depending upon how you look at the temporality of art or art’s existence in time, new making, new creative labor. Leonard Cohen’s poem “Came so far for Beauty” (1993) evocatively captures the illusive quality of what art can promise.

I came so far for beauty  
I left so much behind  
My patience and my family  
My masterpiece unsigned.

One reading of this refrain offers the journey an artist undertakes in the pursuit of art making and the beauty potentially manifest in art. The vision of the work is in the mind’s eye, and the realization of the effort remains there. This pushes the maker to the next piece, and the next, and the next, perhaps at the expense of her/himself and those with whom s/he is in relationship.<sup>9</sup> While Cohen’s poem provides an account of the individual journey of art-making, Marcuse points to the social.

Marcuse has his eye on contestation and transformation on a much larger and collective scale: he writes “the new sensibility emerges in the struggle against violence and exploitation where this struggle is waged for essentially new ways and forms of life: negation of the entire Establishment, its morality, culture: affirmation of the right to build a society in which the abolition of poverty and toil terminates in a universe where the sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful become forms of existence and there the *Form* of society itself” (1969: ).<sup>10</sup> Marcuse offers significant hope in the possibility of human beings to awaken and develop the new sensibility that lies within themselves once they are informed of how commodification creates false needs and desires that, in turn, anesthetizes, impoverishes, and kills humans, flora, fauna, and ploughs over the natural landscape to make spaces and places ever more conducive for commodity production.

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When speaking to artists, they offer significant hope in the work that they create even if they are less optimistic about the bigger picture. Artists experience their creative work as something “they must do.” Art-making is spoken of something akin to a vocation distinct from one’s wage-making labor since the majority of artists interviewed do not survive from their art making alone. There is a calling manifest within oneself and the call itself is unique for each artist. A passion develops and the activity increasingly occupies a central place within one’s life. At some point, there is often a conscious decision to take on the identity of “practicing artist” especially as one realizes that their art is a primary preoccupation. It is not discussed as a noble decision that places the artist above the more lowly human being. Instead, it invokes a chosen way of life that involves practice, discipline, commitment, and devotion without any clear path. This resonates with Canclini’s description of art-making as a laboratory: “a place to play and try things out” (1995: 77). “Faced with productivist efficiency,” Canclini writes, “[art] reclaims the playful; against the obsession with money, the freedom to rework, without interest, the inheritances that remain in memory, the uncapitalizable experiences that can free us from monotony and inertia” (1995: 77).

There is a “high” associated with art-making that can create a spiritual feeling, a completeness, a mind-body sensation that has not been accessed by another activity in the same way as through art. Russell Smith says about his experience of writing that captures the sensuousness moment that draws one to creative endeavor:

“It’s about the extraordinary lightheaded feeling that follows writing the one good page, walking around seeing everything glowing, outlined in sharp lines, as if you have just been crying or on E or something. In that fleeting mood—a mood that may suddenly give way to a lot of drinking, and subsequent fragility and self-loathing—one looks at the physical world with the strangely religious sense that there is a hidden imaginary world behind every object, behind every poignant garbage can and billboard and rusting Toyota. You don’t tell people about that mood. But once you’ve had it, you hardly want to do anything else.” (2005: R3)

The sense of addiction is acute in ballet in the documentary “Etoiles: Dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet,” which asks a recurrent question why dancers enter a profession with so many physical and economic liabilities and uncertainties. “The answers aren’t surprising,” writes Stephen Holden, “it’s an obsession, it’s stronger than love, it’s like a drug” (2002: B18).

The motivation for making art comes from a personal inner and emotional place. This personal place is difficult to describe in physical terms or dimensions, but importantly, it is felt in the body and the emotional dimension is influential. In response to the question where does your

art come from, one artist replied “from right here” as he lightly pounded his chest with a clenched fist. Some artists will be more aware of where in the body the emotion is felt and to what intensity. This will depend upon an artist’s self-awareness of their emotional life and how this is connected to their body, and their own mind-body practice that may include meditation, yoga, and/or alternative healing practices such as reiki, cranial sacral therapy, acupuncture, and other diverse modalities of bodywork.<sup>11</sup>

Artists vary in how they perceive their work as either political or community building. Artists who are not involved in representative community arts organizations do not always immediately see their work as overtly community building or political. Initially, artists sometimes associate community building as social service in terms of helping or charitable organizations and politics with government or direct action in the form of public protest, public advocacy, or running for office. But then these conceptions give way to how they see themselves resisting conventional societal norms, offering alternative visions of society or thinking as well as building appreciation for art and/or community. Artists express resistance in overt political performance, in their creative endeavor, and in terms of their chosen occupation that often resists middle class norms associated with profession, career, and material need or success.

Artists sometimes get involved in political theatre connected to organized protest by a political party, for example, or organize one themselves related to a current public issue. Artists see community building resulting from these kinds of events. Political art provides a time and space to voice emotion that can be collectively expressed among those who share the same political views. The cathartic effect produced by performances that zero in on a political issue helps people feel better amidst a political agenda that they individually cannot control. There is also a goal of informing audiences of political issues in order to help them make informed decisions and opinions. Some artists organize their performances to draw, not only the community at large, but also the social justice community through benefits for a social justice or a relief cause. They view the benefit venue as easily accessible for an audience. From one artist’s perspective, the audience can receive the pleasure of listening to good music, meeting friends, making new friends, networking while at the same time making a financial contribution at the venue itself.<sup>12</sup>

Artists are aware of their own labor distinct from wage labor. A conscious choice is made whether an artist will opt out of wage labor. Many artists have had careers and then decided to pursue their art full time. They are aware of the low wages and salaries of an artistic life and they know full well what such a life promises, or rather does not promise them relative to a middle class lifestyle.

My art is not something I pursue for economic gain. The contribution to my community is more important. This is in itself resistance. I’m giving myself voluntarily to my music and my community. I see my approach to music and performance linked to sustainability. I want a sustainable community and my music making and performances contribute to sustainability. My partner and I have chosen to live with less because what we do gives us more. (Kirsten, 13 April 2005)

The choice for a creative life at one’s own economic expense suggests that within the endeavor of art-making there is something considered more valuable. This something includes the freedom to express themselves emotionally and intellectually through their art as well as the material benefits associated with the community that they experience. These can be better informed members, happier people at the event that may last beyond the venue, good memories, extended networks, new friends, new ideas, future projects.

Some artists are intent on becoming conscious of the kind of concept or message that s/he explores in her or his work, the transformation of consciousness through the creative process, and the political communication that may be intended in the making, display, or consumption of the art object.

As soon as you are in a discussion with someone, you have politics because you are negotiating meaning. (David, 13 April 2005)

Transformation has a temporal component which is potentially rich in possibility for consciousness and action, reiterative and ideally unending. Transformation in the sense of a shift or doubt concerning a prevailing way of thinking can occur immediately or over time either emotionally or intellectually. The distinction between emotional and intellectual impact is very fine indeed; almost too fine a distinction to make. Nonetheless, the experience of a shift in consciousness may be felt at a visceral level where there may be felt the power of horror, beauty, the comic in terms of enchantment, alienation, or another emotion. Regardless of the emotion, there is a heightened sense of awareness for the receiver. How the emotion becomes channeled by the receiver into his or her world may or will influence action at some point in time. Artists will theorize their audience knowing that transformation is only a possibility. Artists generally hope that a receiver will be inspired to think of their own meaning in relation to the consumption of art. An underlying assumption is that a diversity of interpretations and meanings will emerge. This anticipated and encouraged plurality points to an “aesthetics of reception that questions the existence of unique or correct interpretations-as well as incorrect ones” (Canclini 1995: 100).

Sometimes an artist becomes a flashpoint for political organizing within the community. Linda Duvall, an artist who divides her time between Saskatoon and Toronto, is an organizer for Families Against Meth in Saskatchewan. The instigating event behind this organization occurred when her home was the target of a police stakedown associated with her son’s addiction to crystalline meth (meth). The media captured the stakedown in graphic detail. She converted this experience into art by interspersing CTV footage of the stakedown with laments collected from asking people at large and from the CBC archives. The work, “Lament,” was a way of expressing her own grief as well as finding affinity with those who were grieving or had grieved. She received calls from all over the province from parents whose children who are addicted to meth. This led to a public meeting addressing the problem of meth addiction and the creation of Families Against Meth. In this public meeting, a police officer came forward and announced publicly that one of his children was addicted. Since the attitude toward the police was hostile, in light of the shocking and sensationalist television coverage of the police stakedown on Linda Duvall’s home, the police officer’s announcement positively changed the tenor of the meeting. Families Against Meth has had meetings with judges, police, and government officials to address meth addiction in the community.<sup>13</sup>

Some artists provide affordable performing venues for young artists who want to “try on” the identity of being an artist and discover what it means to be one. ‘Cultural production attracts more cultural production’ says an owner of a café who does not charge musicians to perform in the space. When there are places where cultural production is “alive and kicking,” more cultural production will grow. Young artists need affordable performing venues. A venue that offers performance time for free allows young artists to try performing in front of an audience, find out how people respond to their music, and find out how they themselves respond to their reception whether enthusiastic or not, whether there is an audience or not.

It is important for artists to be able to produce their work in their local community as a way of grounding of themselves and cultivating a nurturing artistic environment. Bringing

money into the community for an arts project is one way of keeping artists doing their work and staying in their locale. It also provides a source of recognition as an artist when grants are peer reviewed. This raises the esteem of artists even when the grant is a modest amount. This esteem is important to artists because there is a perception that local artists are “not very good” or are not “real” compared to urban artists living in Toronto, Vancouver, or Montreal. One of the reasons why artist-run centers were started was to communicate to the community that there are local artists living among the residents and that the work they made was worthwhile of their attention.<sup>14</sup>

Artists involved in community arts organizations that represent artists to provincial or national arts organizations or government are very aware of their work as community building and political. The very concept of community art is a current issue within the province of Ontario through Community Arts Ontario. Community Arts Ontario (CAO) began about 25 years ago and was initially a coalition of Ontario city arts councils. These art councils focused on supporting crafts, small theatre, dance, and more European tradition art forms. In time, new organizations started and about ten to 12 years ago, individual artists joined CAO. During the same timeframe, the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) started the Artists in the Workplace Program and the Mayworks Festival began. The OAC thought that city and community arts councils needed to be more receptive and accountable to their communities and the emerging diversity of artists within their communities. There was tension and conflict between arts councils and community organizations in terms of funding. From about 1995-2000 artist within CAO started becoming politically active and undertaking advocacy work around the inclusion of community arts organizations and representation of visible minority artists. CAO now has policies that fifty percent of its Board members be non-white and in 2005 the CAO Board decided for the first time that the Executive Director hired this year would be non-white.<sup>15</sup>

Artists have pushed to raise the visibility of artists and art in their respective work organizations. For example, in the mid-1990s artists who are members of the Ontario Federation of Labor (OFL) pushed for the adoption of the inclusion of a cultural programming during meetings. There has been singing, theatre, opera as part of the OFL meetings. As well, the OFL has worked to raise the status of artists in Ontario by lobbying the Ontario Arts Council to keep the Artist in the Workplace Program when there were significant funding cuts from the Ontario government and it drafted during 2004-05 a document entitled legislation on the Status of the Living Artist. The Ontario Minister of Culture has struck a committee to work on this issue, but so far the process has been slow. By drafting the legislation, the OFL hopes that its model will inform the eventual legislation.

The aim of artists’ endeavor, not always explicit to the audience, is to present personal expression important to the artist(s) themselves, to share this as a communication with their audiences, to either lay the ground for its audience for a shift in thinking and action or to jolt it to challenge existing perceptions of some phenomenon or issue, to provide self-dialogue and/or dialogue with others over meaning as it pertains to individuals personally or more broadly at a social level, and to provide temporary relief from the burden of the everyday. Artists recognize that the degree of engagement with art will vary from person to person, nonetheless the communication with their potential audiences has the goal to inspire and produce any or all of the following: personal reflection, social cohesion, and political thinking and action.

Artists are also involved in organizing for the status and conditions of their own creativity through funding fellow artists and providing spaces for creative exhibits and/or performance. The significance of these findings are that artists are recognizably political actors in that they

start from a place of critical consciousness, want to express their perceptions in their art making, and in the making and presentation of their work they see themselves building community in a variety of ways. Artists believe that their presence in the community as cultural workers is itself a contribution to the place where they live and that what they offer to their audiences provides both a sense of relief from everyday burdens and connection to place and to each other. Artists see themselves integrally a part of their community and involved in politics through their art-making, and intermittently involved in an institutional political process. It would appear that artist communities are a complexity of assemblages and intensities whose activity is largely disaggregated and in motion, meaning that artists come together in concert most visibly in the display or performance of the creative work.

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<sup>1</sup> What artists make has been studied as knowledge production and truth bearing for social movements, but artists themselves comprising a social movement has received less attention. For example, Eyerman and Jamison examine music as cognitive praxis that contributes to a social movement (1998: 24). This suggests that a circumscribed social movement frames the music produced or that artists produce music for a specific social movement.

<sup>2</sup> David Bierk, Ian McLaughlin, Joe Stable, and Dennis Turbin were among the artists who helped put Artspace (founded in 1974) on the map.

<sup>3</sup> The recent work of Miriam Smith (1999), Kiera Ladner are examples of scholarly contributions of lesbian and gay, and aboriginal movements respectively.

<sup>4</sup> **Need explanatory footnote on agonism as well as some authors.**

<sup>5</sup> A PERFORMER'S PRAYER

By Holly Near

Why am I up here

In front of all these people?

It is a wild notion

To perform in front of people

Ah yes, I remember

I am not here for me

I am not here to promote my ego

I am here to serve the Great Spirit

To be a voice for those afraid to speak

---

To be movement for those who are stuck

I am here to reveal a mystery

To learn something new about myself

I give my talent to the wind

I give my weakness to the rocks

I give my fear to the stars

I give my confidence to the moon

I give it all away

So if I am great, it is not my greatness

It is the wind that will celebrate

And if I am not great, it is not my failure

It is up to the rock to carry the pain and disappointment

I am a channel here to do the work

To make the discoveries

To shout the joy

To call my mistakes "teacher"

I am here to give it away

To the people who come to watch and listen and feel

So that we will remember more than the time of day

Why am I up here

---

In front of all these people?

So that the Great Spirit may paint a picture on my face

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<http://www.hollynear.com/artand.html> (accessed March 23, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Hetherington offers a Schmittean perspective on expression arising from a Romantic consciousness that come into conflict with existing societal conventions and direction. (Hetherington 1998: 76-79)

<sup>7</sup> Three-quarters of the 500-plus Census Canada occupations have average earnings higher than artists. Occupations that have similar earnings to artists include medical secretaries (\$23,500), customer service, information and related clerks (\$23,400), delivery drivers (\$23,500), and roofers and shinglers (\$23,800). Hill Strategies 2004, p. 6

<sup>8</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Free Time," in *The Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge) 2003, p. 196.

<sup>9</sup> Duke Ellington in response to the question "what's your favorite song?" replied, "the next one." Ken Burns, *Jazz*.

<sup>10</sup> For Marcuse, "Form," is the sign for a complete structure of society. If our current western society were a circumscribed Form, it would be replaced with another one under a new sensibility.

<sup>11</sup> Meditation and yoga practices involve attention and observation of one's breath and awareness of bodily sensations in the stillness and movement. Yoga involves cultivating awareness of energy centers in the body that are houses for specific emotions and characteristics of human experience both alone and with others. For further information see, **list sources**.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Kirsten Addis, April 13, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Duvall, public talk, Artspace, May 13, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Joe Stable, May 16, 2005.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Renée Wetselaar, May 7, 2005.