

Chapter 1

Socially Engaged Art Education: Defining and Defending the Practice

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ABSTRACT

Community Arts have a long history within art and education, yet its practices continue to evolve. The issue of nomenclature when discussing such socially engaged practices raises the deeper questions of whether work in this area suggests the formalization of yet another new genre of art, or does it entail a more profound re-ordering of the discursive system that underlies most existing modes of artistic production? This chapter attends to individual differences and similarities in perception and practice through a careful consideration for how the field of art education might nurture new and diverse articulations of community-based practices that emphasize relational aesthetics, participatory pedagogy, and socially engaged artistic practices. This chapter will (re)frame the discourse as Socially Engaged Art Education (SEAE) to emphasize a new terrain of consciousness that is socially responsible and ethically sound, and goes beyond mere promotion of aesthetic quality to contribute to improved quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

Community Arts have a long and distinguished history within the field of art education. At various times and places, such community-based practices have been referred to as: Community-Based Art Education, Service-Learning, Place-Making or Placed-Based Artmaking, Civic Engagement, Art for Social Change, Socially-Engaged Art, Art as Social Practice, Activist Art, Participatory Art, Community Cultural Development, Arts-Based Community Development—and the list goes on. These discourses continue to shape the kinds of practices artists and art educators engage in with their students and members of the community, yet at the same time, the implementation of practices continues to evolve. The issue of nomenclature when discussing such socially engaged practices, art historian Grant Kester (2014) suggested, raises the deeper questions of whether work in this area suggests the formalization of yet another new ‘genre’ of art, or whether it entails a more profound (re)framing of the discursive systems

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that underlie most existing modes of artistic production. This, amongst others, is one of the questions this chapter will attempt to address.

This chapter begins with a brief exploration of the history of civic engagement in the arts, and then moves to a more in-depth discussion regarding the evolution of its terms and characterization of its practices. It will attempt to clarify and distinguish between different community-based practices, particularly as they continue to evolve and diverge. This chapter will then provide examples of socially engaged artistic practices and considers their pedagogical implications. Through an analysis of practices associated with 'Community Art' and 'Community-Based Art Education,' this chapter will distinguish and (re)frame the role of the arts in engaging the public through civic engagement, and then provide a framework for Socially Engaged Art Education (SEAE) as a means to discriminate and synthesize elements of these discourses.

SEAE does not refer to a 'new' genre of community-based art practices; rather, it is being used here to distinguish between different types of 'community practices' (i.e. art skills and media taught in a community setting vs. art as a transformative action). It further leverages distinct community arts practices that consider art's function as social action. Such a (re)framing of community-based practices has connections to participatory pedagogy and socially engaged artistic practices that focus on our emerging understanding of the intertwining aesthetic, social and political implications of community arts practices.

The pedagogical implications of such socially engaged practices involve creating greater critical awareness of the artist's role that is not the result of an autonomous, self-contained individual focus on self-expression, but rather upon a dialogical structure that results from collaborative and interdependent processes. This more socially oriented framework seeks to connect art and pedagogy through practices that create a critical consciousness that provides ideas, solutions, and structures for change that establish political, social, as well as artistic validity. Yet, the more one engages in community-based practices, the more one comes "up against an unacknowledged split between our ethical and our aesthetic standpoints" (Gablik, 2004, pp. 90-91). Subsequently, these socially engaged practices demand a profound alteration of "aesthetic canons" to include pedagogical, political, and other values through a stylization of social forms that extend and redefine interpersonal relationships (Bourriaud, 2002). This chapter will then offer a 'defense' of such practices through an articulated sense of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) and the consideration of community civic engagement as a postmodern artistic practice (Taylor, 2002). Finally, the purpose of this chapter is to (re)consider the role of the arts within the community setting.

BACKGROUND

Recently, the Community Arts Caucus was recognized as a special issues group within the National Art Education Association (NAEA). Yet there was some confusion as the NAEA still maintained a Community Arts Division. Initially, members were unsure as to which category to submit conference proposals, but significantly, distinct differences in philosophies and practices began to emerge. The subsequent conversations between the caucus' executive committee and the NAEA underscored the differences and similarities amongst community-based practices within the field. In its broadest context, Community Art includes all 'outside of school' or 'outside of museum' art education. It serves as a category to include all who work in settings defined as 'the community' (i.e.: a class teaching watercolor painting at a community center). Community Arts, as represented by the caucus, emphasize a deeper understanding of the purposes of art within the community, and how it can be utilized as an effective tool to catalyze social

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