STREET-LIFE'S CREATIVE TURN: AN EXPLORATION OF ARTS-BASED ADULT EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION WITH HOMELESS/STREET-INVOLVED WOMEN IN VICTORIA

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Abstract

Using interviews, focus groups, learning journals, and observations, we explored the impact of an arts-based adult education project on 20 homeless/street-involved women in Victoria and members of the public who attended exhibitions of the artworks they produced. Although not without challenges, the project created a strong sense of belonging by building trust and new connection. It also encouraged artistic skill development and metaphoric and creative responses to difficult social issues. Meaning, artistic identity, and empowerment came from creating artworks collectively, and from the recognition the women received from sharing their art publicly.

Résumé

Les entretiens d'utilisation, les groupes de foyer, apprenant des journaux et des observations, nous avons exploré l'impact d'un projet d'enseignement pour adultes arts-basé sur 20 sans abri/femmes impliquées par la rue dans Victoria et les membres du public qui a assisté des expositions des travaux d'art qu'ils ont produits. Bien que pas sans les défis, le projet a créé un fort sens d'appartenir en construiant la confiance et la nouvelle connexion. Il a encouragé aussi le développement artistique de compétence et les réponses métaphoriques et créatives aux problèmes sociaux difficiles. Signifiant, l'identité et l'autonomisation artistiques sont venues de créer de travaux d'art collectivement mais aussi, la reconnaissance les femmes reçues de partager leur art publiquement.

Introduction

Across Canada, the number of women living in substandard housing or on the streets is growing (Lenon, 2000). A key aim of feminist adult education and research is to work with marginalized and oppressed women to maximize their potential to develop new understandings and relationships, a sense of agency, and possible strategies for future change (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Lather, 1991; Thompson, 1997; Walters & Manicom, 1996). Over the past decade more and more women educators and researchers have begun to use the arts (i.e. Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Clover & Stalker, 2007; Knowles & Cole, 2008). However, arts' potential with marginalized populations of women has yet to be fully explored and understood. One reason is that, traditionally, the arts have been regarded simply as trivial add-ons to learning, which begs the question: "Are the arts merely ornamental aspects of human production and experience or do they have a more significant role to play in enlarging human understanding?" (Eisnor, 2008, p. 3). This article responds to this question by exploring the potential and challenge of using the visual arts as a tool of adult education and research with homeless/street-involved women.

Over a period of 18 months, 20 homeless/street-involved women associated with a social service agency that works with the homeless in Victoria took part in a series of arts-based workshops to explore issues of violence, health, stereotyping, patriarchy, and exclusion, and to develop a more collective voice for change. Woven directly into the adult education workshops was a feminist arts-informed study aimed at developing a deeper understanding of how women were making meaning through the arts and the impact this aesthetic learning activity was having on their lives as well as on the public through three art exhibitions of their work.

This article begins with a discussion of some aesthetic epistemological frameworks that guide arts-based adult education and research. This is followed by a description of the arts-based adult education workshops and the collective and individual aesthetic practices used. We then describe the feminist arts-informed approach of the study—how it was interwoven into the workshops and exhibitions—followed by a presentation of the major themes that emerged from the multiple data collection strategies. The article concludes with a broad discussion of the themes and the implications of using the arts as a tool of adult education with marginalized women.

Background: The Arts-Based Adult Education Project

The arts-based adult education project was developed as a result of a needs assessment undertaken by a local social service agency interested in exploring new programming for the people it served. The homeless/street-involved women who took part in the assessment noted, among other things, that they wanted three specific things. The first was their own program as women. The second was an opportunity to explore their own creativity or artistic talent. The third was a non-threatening way to engage the general public in discussions around homelessness and poverty. The last is very important, because although there are many people in Victoria who actively support homeless shelters, transition houses, safe injection sites, and low-income housing, there is an equally large and vocal group that

rages against the homeless, portraying them as too lazy to get a real job or as people who choose to be addicts or alcoholics and live off the backs of taxpayers.

For a period of 18 months, 20 homeless/street-involved women from diverse cultural and social backgrounds came together with four artist-educators (hired by the community organization) to explore issues, concerns, and experiences and develop collective and individual artworks based on these for display at three public exhibitions. Although the 20 women were quite different in many respects, what they shared were experiences of violence, poverty, and mental illness.

The project was divided into two phases (due to funding cycles). The first was titled *Warrior Women Garden of Art* and the second *Phoenix Rising* by the women themselves. The feminist arts-informed study began alongside the workshops, weaving in and out of the learning process as we explain below.

The workshops ran for four hours per day, three to four days per week. One feature of the workshop was its drop-in format. This responded to the unpredictable and complex lives—for a variety of economic, social, or psychological reasons—of women living on the streets. In other words, their constant attendance could never be guaranteed so the process needed to be as flexible as possible. Linked to this, a second feature was to provide healthy food. Women are often unable to participate in activities because they have to find food, so this problem had to be eliminated. In essence, we were responding to the metaphor of bread and roses by coupling the physical need for sustenance with the human need to be creative (Thompson, 2002).

Each workshop was facilitated by one of four artist-educators; collectively, these four women had skills in quilt-making, plaster-cast, collage, mask-making, and mosaic. Individual artworks included poetry, collages, paintings, beadwork, miniature mosaics, and a dress designed from old plastic bags. Collective works were a quilt, a mural, a life-size marionette, masks, a decoupage on wood, and a tile mosaic featuring a phoenix taking flight. The role of the artist-educators was to encourage capacity in individual art-making but, perhaps more importantly, collaboratively develop collective pieces.

Both phases of the project culminated in public exhibitions of the artworks. Over 300 people attended the galas and many more viewed the art over the weeks the exhibits remained at the gallery sites. The audience included politicians, artists, university students and professors, school teachers, business owners, homeless men and women, social and community development workers, and a variety of others who were simply intrigued by the idea of the show. The media came out in droves. Four articles appeared in daily and weekly newspapers.

Aesthetic Epistemological Standpoints

Within the past decade, the arts as tools of adult education and qualitative research have grown in popularity (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Clover & Stalker, 2007; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Advocates for the arts as emancipatory and critical forces for learning and knowledge mobilization construct arguments from several standpoints. One is the need to move away from the passive reception of the arts

toward more active creation and engagement in the arts. This direct experience provides an important means "to personal or social development" (Thompson, 2002, p. 30). Another standpoint is that access to the arts is a fundamental human right and something needed in our lives. This is the "bread and roses" argument whereby people need both "to enhance the quality of their lives in ways that are relevant to their urgent problems and real concerns and which lift their spirits in difficult and troubled times" (Thompson, 2002, p. 26). A further standpoint is the value of the imagination and creativity. Thompson (2002) believes that to liberate the imagination is to create opportunities to "explore experiences other than our own, in ways that can expand our moral comprehension" (p. 31). Collins (2006) goes even further, arguing that it is extremely important "to keep in mind the significance of the aesthetic dimension within a politically oriented emancipatory pedagogy [as it can be] an [expression] of support for a more just society" (p. 125). There is indeed a limit to day-to-day reality and cognitive knowing, and incorporating "other ways of knowing . . . as expressed through metaphor, dance, poetry, visual arts or dramatic expressions draw on the affective, somatic, and spiritual domains" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 4), key aspects of more holistic, transformative learning.

An interesting tension in arts-based learning and engagement exists between the arts as tools of socio-political learning and the arts as therapy or personal development. Thrown into this mix is also what is referred to as arts for arts' sake—akin to learning for the sake of learning, rather than any instrumental purpose (Cunningham, 2001; Hayes, 2007). This is particularly relevant to this project, because homeless/street-involved women have specific rights as well as needs that often require specific forms of professional or therapeutic intervention (Buckner, Bassuk, & Zima, 1993). Yet the neutral therapist role and self-centredness of arts therapy become problematic when one's aim is advocacy and socio-structural change (Ball, 2002). Perhaps this is why feminist adult educators suggest a combined personal-politicized practice, the aim of which is emancipatory in terms of building community, individual capacity, and addressing issues that marginalize and oppress (Ball, 2002; Krieg, 2006; Wiessner, 2005). Extending this notion to include working with and through the arts, it is fundamental to "maintain the aesthetic quality of art [without abandoning] the aesthetics of activism" (Kelley, 1995, p. 223).

A final important standpoint vis-à-vis the arts is knowledge mobilization and dissemination. These terms are commonly understood as pulling together information and transferring it within and across settings with the expectation it will be used conceptually or instrumentally (Hutchinson & Huberman, 1994). The aim is to provide new perspectives on issues that can help people make better or more informed decisions. Cole and McIntyre (2003) argue that our contemporary society requires more holistic, dynamic, and creative approaches to mobilizing and disseminating knowledge. The more stimulating or engaging this process the more likely it is to have a holistic and deeply felt personal or social impact (Chwe, 1998). For Cole and McIntyre, the arts are powerful tools of knowledge mobilization because of their innate ability "to evoke relational, emotional, cultural, social and political complexities" (p. 18). This alternative form not only is "more accessible" but has a unique and creative way of engaging "the audience/reader in meaning making and knowledge construction" (pp. 60–61). This has strategic value because communications with the public around complex social issues "must involve more than just transferring information" (Chwe, p. 48). Feminist art researchers suggest we need experimental

texts that go beyond traditional discursive practices and allow "us to hear silences and see absences and invisibilities" where we were unable to before (Ball, 2002, p. 2). Taken all together these epistemological standpoints provide a useful framework from which to consider the arts-based project and more fully appreciate both its impacts and challenges.

Methodology and Design of the Study

Woven into the tapestry of the arts-based education project was the research. The purpose of the study was to explore the potentialities and challenges of the arts-based adult education work and exhibitions with homeless/street-involved women. Our methodology was a combination of feminist and art-informed methods. A feminist approach aims to empower those involved, uses multiple data-gathering practices to place women at the centre of the inquiry, and honours their experiences and ways of knowing as starting points for change. It is also based on developing collaborative knowledge by decentring researcher-researched power relations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Arts-informed research is a form of qualitative research influenced broadly by the arts (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Central is the enhancement of understandings of the "human condition through alternative process and representational forms of inquiry" (p. 59). Key objectives of this approach include reaching out to multiple audiences through the artworks and redefining research form and representation to create new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, and subjectivities (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008).

There were four researchers in total. Darlene Clover was one. She is a professor at the University of Victoria (UVic) and was invited by Corrina Craig, the person at the social service agency who developed the arts-based project, who also acted as a researcher. The third was a student from UVic hired for during the *Phoenix Rising* phase, and the fourth was one of the artist-educators. The researchers agreed the study would run parallel to the workshops and be as participatory as possible. We met three times before the workshops began to flesh out the objectives—including some guiding interview questions that could get the study started—and legitimize the artworks themselves as data-gathering instruments and authentic forms to capture knowledge and understandings (Knowles & Cole, 2008).

We used a mixed methods approach to collect data. The first method was focus groups. In one instance, Clover and Craig began to ask the women questions using the guideline questions. We told the women we would begin, but then they were expected to jump in with their own questions. As the women became more comfortable with the process they did begin to ask each other and the researchers questions. One interesting aspect was the adamant decision by the women that we—the researchers and artist-educators—would participate fully in the art-making and not see ourselves as apart. We truly became participants—as adult education and feminist researchers argue to be vital—engaging in all levels of artistry, debate, and dialogue (Walters & Manicom, 1996).

A second strategy was learning journals. Each woman, including the artist-educators, received a journal to record reflections on the adult education process, the artworks, the exhibition, and/or the issues discussed during the workshops. In the spirit of the aesthetic nature of the project, drawings and other forms of cultural expression were included in the journals to illustrate and interpret learning and experiences. Although some

women handed in their journals for analysis, others did not and there was no pressure to do so. The women may have felt their reflections were too personal, but it is more likely they were worried the journals may not be returned (although they all were) and they would lose yet something else precious in lifetimes of losses.

A third research strategy was the artworks themselves. Over the period of the project, we collectively discussed violence, health, the place and role of the arts in our lives, poverty, Aboriginal self-governance, death, motherhood, drugs, men and what they meant to us, what we were learning collectively, and how we were changing. Symbols, metaphors, words, and images from the discussions were woven into the artworks as physical/visual manifestations and messages.

We used three other strategies to gather information. The first was individual interviews of the project participants, which gave them a space to speak privately about what they were learning or discuss their challenges or concerns (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). The second was guestbooks placed at each exhibition, where we actively encouraged audience members to write thoughts and impressions. Thirdly, we interviewed, individually or in pairs, 20 members of the public as they milled around the artworks. The data generated from these sources was categorized manually and placed into a matrix. The matrix presented a visual way for us to see similar, recurring, or conflicting patterns and to create clusters of patterns that appeared conceptually related. We also coded the data for challenges and placed those within the various linked themes.

The Art of Belonging and Connecting

For many women who live on the streets or in substandard housing, feelings of belonging or connectedness are fleeting (Miller & Du Mont, 2000). Fundamental to any sense of social connection is the need for trust. Through the project, trust slowly and painstakingly began to grow. "I am finally really learning to work well with others, to trust . . . because I have to and it has been hard for me to trust anyone" (Lisa). For Doreen, as noted in her journal, the project meant learning to trust in a way she never had before:

> For the first time I sleep in checked sheets and I let someone [the artist-educator] cover my face [to make the mask]. I couldn't do either because it was part of my abuse as a child. But it happened here because it was safe and I can trust.

Building on this, street-life is often referred to as "flight-life"—away from a violent or potentially violent situation, the police, or even an angry member of the public. Jane articulated how she had changed as a result of the project: "So much in this year and a half has changed. I used to sit on the edge of a chair and was ready to run at every moment. But now I can sit on a chair and feel secure." Further detectable signs of belonging and trust came in the form of one participant inviting another to sleep on her couch, while others walked each other home or rode the bus together.

The art of connecting is not only the present, but also the future—the right to imagine and hope things could be better when, as Higgs (2008) notes, "the reality of the world is difficult" (p. 545). The word most often used by the women when they spoke of

the future was "hope." One expression of hope was that the project could broaden its read: "This kind of project might hopefully inspire other women to come forth with their stories by letting them know they're not alone and there is hope" (Linda).

The strengthening of bonds and connections was visible not only in the women's comments, but also through the comments of those who attended the public exhibitions of the artworks, as this written comment in the guestbook suggested: "I noticed the women have gone beyond just survival. It is good to see these women so [together]. Competition is our culture, but I see a cooperative spirit here. This is more commendable."

A testament to how the arts create empathy, affect people, and provide a sense of connection came from a young man who attended the first gala opening:

> Powerful project! I've been through much abuse and been down so far. You would have thought there wasn't any light or way out but hope. Thank you and all these beautiful women whose art and poems portray their lives—these are truly gifts.

The Aesthetic of Meaning

Wenger (1998) suggests that "human engagement in the world is first and foremost a process of negotiating meaning" (p. 52). One aspect of meaning in this project was the simple feeling of having "something to look forward to which has been missing for a long time" (Edna). Building on this, Doreen reminds us what the arts mean in the lives of people who are on the margins: "Because it [art] is something denied to us when we live in a violent world. When you are a victim it is the one thing you are unable to do—always hiding and running and no space to do art."

Secondly, metaphors are pervasive in life and enable us to create graphic and figurative illusions that convey meaning. *Busted but not Broken,* the life-size marionette, was a triumph in metaphor, bringing together a number of abstract ideas and real-life experiences. She was made of a plaster-cast body part from each of the participating women and from the artist-educators and researchers. She was strung together with a piece of rope to symbolize the ties that bind women, barbed wire to symbolize violence and pain, and a heavy chain to symbolize the weight of violence, and a feather boa was draped over one shoulder to symbolize frivolity, lightness, and freedom to be whom one chooses. The phoenix rising was chosen as the metaphor of the second phase of the project because, to the women, it symbolized growth and change: "The [second phase of the project] had to go beyond the last one. It had to make us stronger, together, and not just go back to the same things. That is why we chose the phoenix [for the mosaic]. It's rising above *Busted but not Broken*" (Linda).

There was also debate around the concept of meaning, particularly around art and its place in the process. For example, Carol, one of the artist-educators, shared this view during one of our sessions:

> Maybe the word "art" shouldn't even be in the title of our program. It's a misnomer in a way because it's not about art—it's about empowerment and community development. In some ways, it stops that good stuff because

> of the fuzziness of the creation of art—in a way it puts a different value
> on the process; it makes it results-oriented and not process-oriented.

Her comment touches upon a very important debate around the division between the process and the product (Butterwick & Dawson, 2006; Clover & Stalker, 2007; Knowles & Cole, 2008), and we will return to this in the final section of this article.

Identity With/Through Art

Although perhaps once understood as static, identity is in fact fluid, ever-changing and culturally or contextually defined. The main identity to coalesce, not surprisingly, was that of the artist. At the beginning of the project, a question to any one of the women such as "so you are an artist?" was met with a fairly firm "no," although many would admit to painting or writing poetry. But as the workshop progressed and we persistently revisited the question, we would hear comments like these: "Now I want to let everyone know about my art, that I am an artist in my own right" (Doreen) and "I think I'm ready for a one-woman show now. People really liked my work!" (Gillian).

Identity as an artist came from learning to make different types of art and make them better. The more skill acquired the more confidence the women had as artists. We would often record comments such as:

> I actually painted on fabric for the first time. Now I know I can do it. I
> inspired [my own sense of] self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of
> fulfillment. This morning I finish the last touches and hand it in. I feel so
> proud of my creations.

One role of the artist-educators was to help develop this individual skill, not only to empower the women but also to augment their income. But as the above quotations from the women suggest, the change really came from the public recognition received from the audience at the exhibitions. Comments from those who attended such as "I am inspired and I think I will go home and write a poem" and "Beautiful, awe-inspiring women and their creations! An absolutely fabulously talented group of women" provided much of the fuel required for the women to really take on the persona of artist and, even if only for a short time, leave the label of homeless behind. "We are artists now, not just [people] living without money and without hope. . . . Okay, yes, artists are poor but it's a very different poor . . . it's a legitimate poor" (Helen).

Another aspect of identity came from a conversation around the masks. Doreen, again using metaphor as it was pervasive throughout the project due to the arts, shared her reasons for wanting to create the mask and what it symbolized for her. She argued that "for a long time I had different faces for different situations." The masks provided a physical manifestation of discussions about the often unconscious process of multiple identification or being whoever was necessary in order to get what was needed.

And there were other means in which identity as both personal and individual, but also collective and public, emerged. Returning once again to the notion of metaphoric thinking, the collective quilt was perhaps the best example of individual/collective identities. Each of us worked on an individual square of cloth. Some contained poems

about exclusion and marginalization, others were messages of hope, others were images of despair, and others spoke to the value of the arts and creativity. This collection of individual squares was then sewn together within one framework to make the quilt. When analyzing the quit, we were struck by the powerful juxtaposition of individuality and anonymity, collectiveness and visibility.

But, of course, there were challenges vis-à-vis identity. As noted above, a tension arose between the individual artist and the collective artist personae. In terms of the very personal, the individual works mattered. For example, Doreen was often adamant she really wanted to work on her own pieces only. Her argument was that she "wanted to be different . . . my designs, my style of colour, and my beads are different so I stand out." Being unique as an artist, as we discuss later, was fundamental to her sense of self-identity and recognition. Individualism, while critical to identity formation on the one hand, is also a pervasive "narrative of freedom" (Calhoun, 1995, p. 194) and the arts are by no means immune (Cunningham, 2001; Felshin, 1995). The solitary artist working on the individual masterpiece is the most stereotypical and, of course, most nurtured persona in the art world (Cunningham). The generative spirit of being given free reign to create enabled them to separate themselves from the crowd and develop greater personal understanding of their own individual experiences (Higgs, 2008). Yet there is no doubt that the collective artworks were truly the most compelling in terms of inspiring activism and provoking the public to think differently about this group of women.

An interesting written comment made by one exhibition attendee is worth noting: "I think the women demonstrated their growth in confidence by attending. Those who spoke publicly really showed that they were not very different from everyone else attending this event." It was the "not very different from everyone else" that we found interesting in terms of identity coupled with 22 other entries in the guestbook that noted how "surprised" they were to find these women had talent. Surprise that homeless women are like others or artists comes as no surprise, since this is seldom the light cast upon them, particularly by the media. The public discourse of homelessness is too often one of victims, addicts, and ne'er-do-wells who are decidedly different from the "us." They have a unique identity that is separate from normative ideas of community.

The Art of Empowerment

Like identity, empowerment is personal and political-public, individual and collective. Barndt (2008) writes that, for some, using the arts is a way to "represent the major social schisms with a clear sense of the powerful social, economic and political forces that perpetuate injustice" and feelings of powerlessness (p. 355). Yet others advocate for how they represent more subtle readings of power as "something that is circulated and dispersed throughout society rather than being held exclusively or primarily by certain groups" (Strega in Barndt, 2008, p. 355).

Personal empowerment came predominantly through developing new skills and capacities. As noted above, women were very proud of learning to paint on fabric and other skills. Secondly, personal empowerment came from communication. Culture in so many ways depends upon communication, and communication patterns provide opportunities for

members of a culture to enrich each other's lives. Many women commented on their new ability to openly share ideas, and it was common for them to attribute this to the art as the medium through which this was most manifest:

> The art gave us a way to communicate with each other casually, offhandedly even. As you work to create something together or separately, it begins to go deeper. These are by far the most powerful conversations I have had. Hearing the "why's" behind the "what's." (Lisa)

What is being expressed here is perhaps what Butterwick and Selman (2003) refer to as "deep listening, a yearning for a practice more personal, more self-revelatory, more willing to expose and acknowledge . . . and more willing to express emotion" (p. 13).

As the women became more empowered over the course of the year, the shift from knowledge as external and held by the artist-educators gave way to mutual acts of teaching and learning, which, in turn, furthered the emancipatory goals of the project. The artists in effect had to cede control over the artistic process as Shannon articulates so well: "In the beginning, it was clear I was the focal point. But I noticed over time that the other women began to recognize their own skill as artists and to show each other how to do certain things like fine beadwork." This begins to challenge ongoing debates in community arts-based discourse around "the extent of the participation of ordinary people in the art-making and how much professional control over the art-making is necessary" (Barndt, 2008, p. 354).

The metaphor of "rising" in the mosaic very much symbolized collective action and a new willingness to address issues and concerns as a community. When the project began, there were strong feelings of self-blame in terms of the women's situations. But as the artist-facilitators pushed to stimulate creative thinking, we began to see a shift from self-victimization to empowerment, from the more personal to the decidedly political: "When the collective piece comes together it tells a whole bunch of different stories— several people's different thoughts. Government won't listen to one person. [But] they don't like people with a gang behind them!" (Gretchen). Another example of this richness of understanding and the complementary nature between the personal-political comes from Sheila:

> [The artworks] show in so many ways the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. As long as we stick together and do our art it will say we are human. They don't listen to us but visual arts tell a thousand words and they can see the damage they have done. "Warrior women can survive anything," it says on my quilt square.

We can never underestimate the potential of making the art public in terms of empowerment. When asked how this felt, Doreen literally squealed: "Oh yeah, I feel powerful because my voice is out there . . . having the power to ask and to say it." While silencing those who are marginalized in today's society is totally disempowering, creating artworks together, at times paradoxically in total silence, was a means to voice: "We choose to scream in anger not suffer in silence" (written on the mural).

Relations of power also emerged from the complexities around the personal versus social and the political versus therapeutic. For example, Carol suggested "the purpose of

the project got a bit lost, blurry. Anyone working with the women must be clear that it is a process to heal." She placed a strong emphasis on the arts as ways to process internal problems and the development of individual artworks as the way to do this. However, this was actively countered by Shannon, another artist-educator who was adamant that if this project were to do anything, it would "need to be a way to empower the women to be better than they were yesterday and to teach other women how to be advocates and mentors." She went further by actually suggesting, "I don't do therapy because we are not going to change the world with therapy!" Lying somewhere in the middle were comments by the women themselves that seemed to reflect much more a mutual constitution between social empowerment and private healing:

> Like the mural says, together we choose to scream in protest—not suffer in silence! It [the art] empowers us! It is easier to retaliate against one of us—harder to retaliate against a group of us! The more we have a chance to speak out—the greater the chance of being heard and the greater the possibility of helping other women to heal. (Lisa)

Gaining power and control over and in one's life is what enables people to be what Freire (1970) calls more fully human. But there is an important distinction between power over and power to/with. Instances of domination, particularly in the beginning of the workshops, prompted Carol to exclaim:

> Can these women not be given an advocacy role? They need a role where they work for each other, especially those with that sense of "peacock-ness." A grassroots leadership/advocate role might teach them to guide instead of pushing other women out the door. They'd learn that they need to be wise and kind.

Power was not only manifest internally in the workshop but was used like a blunt instrument from the outside. An alcove outside the workshop space was used by drug users even though Shannon "prayed almost every day that the addicts wouldn't show up and bother us." One afternoon as one woman left the workshop, she was grabbed by the police and accused of dealing drugs. She protested and insisted they speak with the artist-educators but they refused. To deal with the situation, Corrina Craig rang the police station and explained the project. We also had name tags made for the women. Although these tactics worked and a similar situation never happened again, that one experience triggered a trauma throughout the project and it humbled us to realize that in spite of all the empowering potential of the work, relations of power and abuse are a persistent reality in the lives of these women.

Discussion and Conclusions

Wildemeersch and Vandenabeele (2007) believe identifications necessary for the constitutions of society are constructed through practices of 'belonging' rather than through practices of 'autonomy building'. A human being does not exist solely in his or her own consciousness—each has an effect on those around them. While it can easily be argued that belonging, building community, and trust are important to all forms of community-based adult education, it is particularly true with this population. For many of these women, poverty, violence, and other forms of abuse coupled with mental illness or addiction create

deeply ingrained feelings of isolationism, fear, and distrust. On the other side, we have, at best, an apathetic community that holds quite negative stereotypical views of the homeless/street-involved. Newspaper headlines often talk of "cleaning up the streets" as if the women living there were bits of trash to be collected once a week. Being creative in public was perhaps the most risky and yet the most important thing these women could have done in terms of their own sense of belonging and self-image, but also in the images they presented to the community. Like the phoenix itself, these women rose from the individual broken shards of pottery to soar collectively in their own and the public's eyes.

If arts-based adult education and research are to be truly emancipatory and empowering, then participating in the collective creation of artworks is perhaps the most powerful act of civic engagement. Our study clearly shows the collective public voice produced the strongest sense of agency as political activist artists. But we must always keep in mind what Young refers to as "social collectiveness—one which allows us to see [women] as a collective without identifying common attributes . . . or implying that all women have a common identity" (in Butterwick & Selman, 2003, p. 43). Confidence and pride come from being a unique, individual artist alongside the persona of collective, aesthetic, social actor.

Meaning-making is "recognising the coexistence of multiple perspectives" (Wiessner, 2005, p. 103). We can say with certainty that the highly visual and creative images and messages not only inspired but challenged the audience to see the women in their multi-dimensionality. Although there is much apathy in Victoria about the issue of homelessness, the exhibitions attracted not only artists but also politicians, teachers, community workers, students, academics, service organization board members, and so on. As tools of knowledge mobilization, dissemination, and critical social reflection, the exhibitions more than exceeded our expectations. The exhibitions, in fact, proved to be what Kazemak (1992) calls "a potential revolutionary force since [they] create for us and challenge us to pursue more human and complex selves and society" (p. 150). There is perhaps no greater testament to the power and potential of the exhibitions than an article that appeared in the *Times Colonist* by a young woman who attended the final gala:

> The women say they are rising from the ashes . . . while browsing the silent auction table . . . I was approached by a researcher. She asks if street woman is a term I usually associate with artists and I shamefully have to admit the truth, which is no. There is so little opportunity for women in poverty to have their voices heard and their journey openly offered for the public. I normally pride myself on being a particularly sociologically aware teen, but I now see that awareness and up close and personal are vastly different. Judgement is an act that is grotesque and all-consuming, hovering like a festering cloud of smog . . . I find myself glad that at least for tonight, there are no barriers. (Hall, 2007, p.C6)

We came to realize that the struggle between art as therapy and art as a means to social empowerment is very complex, with no easy answers. These women have been abused or have mental illnesses that need to be addressed at a personal/internal level. Art therapy and individual artwork creation is important because they provide opportunities to explore one's inner self and manifest identities in creative, aesthetic forms that in themselves

become concrete and empowering. Yet one must stay mindful of Fraser's (1989) caution that art therapy can often position "its subjects as passive client consumer recipients and not as active co-participants involved in shaping their own life conditions" (p. 155). Eccelstone (2004) adds that the emphasis on damage and vulnerability can compound feelings of disempowerment. We have come to believe that arts-based adult education must take into account these vulnerabilities and be what Lisa called "a journey towards healing." The combination of the workshops and the exhibitions proved to be a way to realize capacities of autonomy and self-control while aiming toward a sense of collective power and recognition.

Many group conversations focused on violence and these became manifest through the collective works. While poverty and unaffordable housing are primary causes of homelessness, many women live on the streets "as a strategy for escaping violence" in their lives (Lenon, 2000, p. 125). Paradoxically, living on the streets "is a much more dangerous condition to be in for women" (Lenon, p. 125) as they are more likely to be abused or taken advantage of than men (and by men). Yet interesting paradoxes around this emerged. For example, when we discussed men in the workshops, a typical comment was: "Even though a lot of men are abusive I still can relate to men [better] than women" (Helen). Others felt men should be included in future workshops: "I would like to see people, other women who deal with abuse with not only male but female partners—good to have a few men in for some balance." Comments such as these are disconcerting because men are without a doubt the main perpetrators of violence against women, yet many participants seemed to excuse them or just accept that this was so. Moreover, some women would insist orally that other women were equally as abusive as men. What became interesting for us was that as feminist researchers we felt silenced, yet as feminist adult educators we were not. As researchers, we struggled with our commitment to be true to women's voices and accept at face value what they presented as their realities, although the comments about women's violence never seemed to make it into the artworks we noticed. But as adult educators, we could follow our feminist commitment to criticize and challenge unexamined assumptions, pressing them to explore more deeply and through their artwork the role of patriarchy in their lives and deconstruct this systemic force, rather than focusing on individual men.

To conclude, this project offered a space to be creative, to learn, and to have fun, because "we must never forget that essence of absolute joy, unjustified by any reason other than its existence" (Wyman, 2004, p. 14). It also offered a space for debate and individual and collective risk-taking. But perhaps most importantly, through paint, tile mosaic, and fabric, these stereotyped and marginal women made their own way toward being what Freire (1970) calls more fully human in both their own eyes and those of others.

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