

Engrenage Noir Montreal, QC

Community Art or Finding the Way Home?

By Louise Lachapelle

ETHICS? STANDARDS?

A FEW APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY ART PRACTICES

Saturday, March 13, 2004, La Caserne, Montreal, Quebec

A day of discussion organized by Engrenage Noir on the ethical issues fundamental to community art practices.

Joanne Gormely (yoga instructor)

Kim Anderson and Pam Hall (speakers)

Louise Lachapelle and Devora Neumark (facilitators)

NB: This is a brief extract of a longer text.

On the community arts scene, ethical issues and related lines of questioning often arise only in circumstances that challenge the established, usual, traditional, conventional or familiar ways of going about things (like art?). This incursion of ethics into the field of community art practices certainly draws attention to issues that also raise questions about the conditions that make many of our contemporary artistic and cultural practices possible. A situation, project or action suddenly makes a way of being or thinking, that up to that time seemed self-evident, lose its "obviousness." A vision of what art is (or could be) suddenly becomes opaque when confronted with another definition of art. The artist's self-proclaimed social function differs from the role that the community may envisage. A value considered "eternal and universal" becomes a mere historical category based on compromise when it turns out that not "everyone" supports it.

[...] We may wonder the extent to which these relational practices and, more specifically, the community art practices discussed here, also constitute a last attempt to consolidate a theory of art (i.e., to preserve a cultural practice as well as some sort of refuge at a time when the place of art has become uncertain).¹ Like the place of human beings, we might add. Could the uncertainty of this place be creating ethics?

[...] Ethics has not always been part of what has come to be included in the concept of art, and it is by no means clear that the conditions and forms of artistic practice today are bothered by ethical tensions. Is art exempt from these questionings because they are an intrinsic part of it (art as ethics), though the history of art would deny it, or do its concerns simply lie elsewhere? After a trend toward autonomy that led art to the point of breaking with some of its basic traditions and cultural markers (particularly in relation to its cultural underpinnings), if not the loss of its necessity, is artistic practice in the community trying, with a little nostalgia thrown in the mix, to find its way home? Or do these practices run the risk of being carried by their era beyond the realm of art?²

[...]

From the ethical funds of the large banks to the fashionable ethics bouquets, the hot trend has been to seek rescue by turning to "ethics" or touting it like some value added label. This ethical lunge, however,

¹ T. W. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1982[1970], p. 9.

² This idea is part of a study in progress on evidence of ethics in contemporary artistic and cultural practice: *This should be housing / Le temps de la maison est passé* which will explore this critical perspective more fully, mentioned here by way of an introduction.

smacks of a need for rules, a somewhat subterranean desire to be told what to do, to have our choices confirmed (who or what do we obey?), to “effectively” resolve a conflict or obtain some kind of legal protection. Sometimes, the process stops there. It was a useful means of locating an authority that could address the problem, of replacing old rules with new rules (in the broad sense of codes, standards, laws and others), and of avoiding the sometimes painful or otherwise paralysing requirement of ethics.

The Ethics phenomenon? Standards? A few approaches in community art practice were defined from the outset to avoid a simplified view of ethics as a code of conduct or ethical rules intended to regularize or legitimize a practice. The organizers (Devora Neumark and Myriam Berthelet of Engrenage Noir, with the cooperation of Louise Lachapelle) hoped to foster critical thinking on the values and motives that influence and guide artists when they work with and in community settings. We therefore favoured an approach where ethics differed from morality just as an open system differs from a closed, and turned our attention to the question, “What do we do?” a question constantly renewed in relationship to the living being.

How do we respond to the living being? How can we relate to ourselves, others, materials, a culture, values and a world? And how can we answer these questions once and for all (i.e., every time a situation raises the question) or once for everyone (as if anything could ever suffice for everyone). Therefore, ethics is not only an attitude of questioning, a disposition and intention, but a fallible and perishable undertaking that exists in tension with (and therefore bound to) a setting, history, tradition and language.¹ [...]

During this day of discussion, the speakers and facilitators encouraged and supported participants in their efforts to consider how their personal values affect their intentions, behaviours, decisions and choices at each stage of their creative process. Participants were also asked to consider other ways of approaching ethical questions (either from a theoretical or practical angle) in terms of their artistic practice and in relation to the community art scene.

The educational objectives of this entire process, as well as many of the lines of questioning that defined it, arise from the community art practices themselves. For one thing, participants largely described the various means of expressing ethical issues based on concrete experiences. At the invitation of Engrenage Noir, some of them proposed questions, problems, and situations that all became case studies during the preparatory phase and variously enriched the day's activities. Among the themes identified by this means, we would mention the challenges created by pluralism and diversity (cultural, ethical, economic, religious and so on), the management and distribution of power and decision-making authority, the various choices that enter into play when developing a project or activity, the division of responsibility, and the varying definitions of a project's success or failure. In short, the issues raised pertain to one basic concern: how can we personally and collectively create the conditions that make collaboration and co-creative relationships possible in a community art context?

The theme of this brainstorming day also focused on the history of community art, in other words, a time when artists begin to turn on themselves the mirror that they originally tried to hold up to certain communities. The context and conditions in which community art occur have cost some artists a kind of nativity, or subjected them to the shock of reality. It sometimes provided an opportunity to gain awareness of their own power (and the power of art) or responsibilities, given the fact that certain problems exceed our ability or that certain consequences of our actions can be difficult to bear. In this way, thinking focused on ethical issues also nurtures a critical relationship to art (community). The ethical motive is also a critical motive.

Since the second half of the 20th century, it has become difficult to deny not only the mighty, destructive potential of culture, but its limits as a force for integration, a principle of cohesion and a tool for relating

¹ The following text by Paul Ricœur is a solid introduction to this approach to ethics “Avant la loi morale : l'éthique », in *Encyclopédie Universalis*, under « Enjeux », Paris, Encyclopædia universalis, 1985, p. 42-45.

to the other: the bonds of humanity are not a given, are not reciprocal, and can never be taken for granted. In the context of community art, where creative activity emerges as a catalyst for individual and social transformation, why should we assume that art is not an ethical practice in itself, or that existence is not necessarily made more human by the forms its culture takes?

And indeed, if [meaning-makers] have such power... to enable, to enliven, to re-enchant, to awaken, to inspire, to provoke... then clearly we have enough power to do GOOD or to do HARM. Perhaps it is never our intention to mis-represent, to exploit, to open old wounds, or inflict new ones... to promote hate, to provoke suicide or depression, to incite violence... and yet all of these things are possible in the terrain of art-making... and all of them are present within its history.

Pam Hall

[...] Over the course of its history, the fact that art has claimed to have an effect on the world is the reason that we must now ask whether ethics plays a role in art. The conditions for the artistic expression of this desire to change the world, shared by many modernist cultural movements, were created by the autonomization of art before it translated into a reaction to this autonomization, and soon became identified as "engaged.". The practices involved in community art are an offshoot of this artistic culture. [...] In relation to autonomy, which becomes the legitimizing (social, of course) principle upheld by artistic modernity, the engagement becomes a principle of exclusion, or at least, of hierarchization, which still creates a dual shared space: engaged art is less legitimate artistically, than autonomous art, which is less "moral."

[...]

[...]

[...]

Abandoning the generally comforting model of morality (good/bad) in order to work on the complex offerings of reality is difficult, despite the loss of certain limited or inadequate benchmarks or guidelines. Whether we are referring to the moralizing aspect of art or a community ideal, "come share our art of living. It's good because it's made of all that's best!"¹ To question our own ethical conditioning and the system of values underlying it can sometimes create the troubling impression that our very foundations will suffer.

[...] Defiance is a familiar tactic among artists, and common in the history of community groups, who sometimes base their legitimacy on the fact that they oppose something.

Opposition is similar to substitution: against the law, for a different law. How can there be relationship instead of separation?

It is all about relationships and responsibilities.

What kind of relationships are you coming from, and what kind are you developing in the work you are doing?

What are your responsibilities? This assumes that we are never operating as individuals, but rather within a community or multiple communities. We carry responsibilities in all our relationships, human and other. How does our work as artists play into all of this?

¹ Peter Brook, *L'Espace vide : écrits sur le théâtre*, Paris, Seuil, « Pierres vives », 1977, p. 174.

[...]

Community art: art in community settings? Collective creative practice? Art as a community practice? From a theoretical point of view, community art practices oblige us to explore the interpretative categories we use to conceptualize art. They also explore in a very tangible way the categories we use to communicate, the words we use to think about who we are and who the other is. Would not the first collaborative project be simply that, to create the conditions for some form of communication, to acquire a language, to mutually (establish) ourselves as independent subjects? In other words, to accept or to refuse to collaborate, free to assess, criticize, decide and create together the conditions for developing a joint project (is whether or not the undertaking involves art truly important here?)

[...]

And why turn to creative practice to do this together? Is a community there for the artist? Is it an auditorium for art with no audience, for practice without purpose? Are communities just one more kind of "material"? A place to work outside the studio? A space for influencing, like a new extension of the territory of art where artists are again able to exercise their prophetic power (contribute "art with good values"), their heroic power (to save these "poor misguided creatures")? Is community art sometimes synonymous with a kind of artistic proselytizing? From the point of view of members of community groups, is art, or the creative project, a new kind of entertainment? Just another way of passing the time? An opportunity for some kind of self-enhancement by mimicking the attitudes of the artist or taking up an activity that society has invested with value and moral prestige? The discovery of one's own creative potential? [...]

What brings artists to community settings, what are they looking for personally (not only professionally), and what brings community groups and their participants to art or creative activity? Are their motives necessarily the same? When the goals of the artists clash with those of the group's members, how can the conflict be approached as a creative opportunity? Amid their highly divergent motives and intentions, will the collaborators try to find a point of intersection, a meeting place, where sometimes the tension can create zones of discomfort, a place where uncertainty lingers?

[...]

[...]

To mount a collaborative project therefore requires creating the conditions that make such a project possible. Once again, this is a creative project in itself [...] to create the conditions where community art becomes possible demands that the need for such art be clear both for the artists and the community groups, although each may view it differently.

[...]

If we consider that a community art project is co-directed by the artist (or artists) and the community group, we realize the importance of paying special attention to the way things are done and how decisions are made, in other words, to think about our own decision making processes and the values that guide our choices from an ethical outlook. In a process based on developing collaborative relationships, and values that aim to be inclusive, the need to cut through to a solution --the etymology of the phrase reminding us that deciding means cutting through--can be uncomfortable. At this point, it can be tempting to give up thinking for ourselves and making our own decisions, and to refuse to expose ourselves to the risks involved in certain conflicts, sacrifices or compromises. In other words, to avoid the ethical imperative on the basis of a situation (hopeless), rule (unavoidable) or value (unassailable).

[...]

During this day of study, we decided to explore the space of tension that arises between ethical thought and the immediate need to take action. The Ethical phenomenon? Standards? What approaches in community art practices tried to show that ethics can be incorporated into the decision making process, choices and actions involved in community art practices. This framing of ethical issues and practices may help support the demanding nature of the fundamental issues rooted in reality, and alleviate the dizzying or paralysing effects that they sometimes entail. Changing situations demand that we take action and make choices that can complicate the ethical issues even more.