

## **Community Art Initiatives: theoretical principles and practices**

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In Canada, a wide range of community art practitioners operate in a variety of settings. Artistic encounters reflect the geographical, historical, and cultural diversity of the communities involved. From Native Indian artists to graffiti artists, Toronto is home to a vibrant mix of cultures and artistic practices. The City of Toronto Board of Education lists over 160 different languages spoken by its students. Half of the city's almost 3,000,000 residents were born outside Canada and observers predict that in the next 20 years, over 70% of Toronto's citizens will be non-white. According to government surveys, Toronto's west-end is the most culturally diverse district in Canada, and possibly in the world. Home to many new and established immigrant communities, it is also home to a dynamic and diverse arts community.

The objective of this paper is to examine four arts initiatives which, together with other arts projects, have propelled the area to the forefront of community arts development. Artistic projects in the neighbourhood reveal a number of common elements. They challenge the relationship between art, its production and the community at large. They redefine the role of community members, transforming them from passive consumers of art to active creators and interpreters of their own art and culture. They radically challenge the conventional figure of the artist, particularly in his/her role within the marketplace and bourgeois arts practices. These projects involve residents who are normally excluded from cultural activities and, at the same time, they contribute toward the creation of artistic alternatives to mainstream models.

A walk through our neighbourhood will take you past Italian grocery stores, Portuguese bakeries, and Jamaican roti shops. Modest houses on residential streets give way to apartment buildings and busy commercial strips. Centrally located and with affordable housing, the area has long been a magnet for newly arrived immigrants looking for work and a new place to call home. In the 1990s the neighbourhood faced a number of challenges. By the start of the decade, a significant portion of the old immigrant community had moved to the city suburbs, leaving behind a disconnected neighbourhood, a neighbourhood in transition as new immigrants and residents moved in and a multicultural community began to establish itself. By 1995, the community successfully battled a surge of alcohol and drug-related crime, which grew unchecked during the earlier transitional years. In the latter half of the 1990s, changes in the economy led to job layoffs, salary reductions, and economic uncertainty for many residents. New retail business strategies shifted shopping patterns from neighbourhood stores to American-style box stores, causing local businesses to close down, leaving boarded up and empty storefronts in their place. Furthermore, local government cutbacks resulted in reduced community services that affected, amongst other things, recreational programs for young people and garbage collection. Young kids started to hang out in front of empty stores on dirty streets. The neighbourhood became the victim of market-driven, bottom-line business and government practices that contributed to urban decay.<sup>1</sup>

The creation of a community art organization was going to set in motion a series of changes that would transform the community in many tangible ways. In 1992, Art Starts Neighbourhood Cultural Centre opened its doors on Eglinton Avenue, a typical commercial street in one of the boarded up storefronts. The founding members, local artists representing a range of disciplines, recognized the need for a place that would act as a catalyst for art projects in the community. A non-profit community arts centre, its mandate is “to build a healthy community through the arts”. It became a place where people could see themselves and each other through art. It built bridges between young and old, between old and new immigrants, between residents and artists. In practical terms, Art Starts functions as a small gallery and as a performance venue for poetry readings, music, film screenings, storytelling and other artistic and community events. It offers art workshops in a variety of disciplines for children, young people and adults, both in house and out in the community, in schools, neighbourhood centers and homeless shelters. Many activities bring artists together with community members to work on creative projects through a collaborative process. Artists and residents make things together, in their own community, with a goal to express their culture, outside the parameters of the marketplace.

Art Starts was the first arts facility to exist in the area, and the first of its kind. Like many neighbourhoods outside the downtown core, the area had no public spaces for the exploration of a community-based culture. Art was something you went somewhere else to experience. At the time, the dominant model for arts centers outside the downtown core involved the creation of expensive, large-scale venues, usually removed from the centre of neighbourhood activity. The idea was that these art centers would draw potential shoppers to an area, which in turn would lead to a revitalized neighbourhood. Art Starts defied this trend. An intimate space, 600 sq. ft., its goal was not to bring people into the neighbourhood, although this did happen as audiences attended events, but to work with people already in the neighbourhood. Its policy was to hire artists who reflect the cultural diversity of the area and to develop projects that draw from the cultures present in the neighbourhood. This meant offering conga drumming classes, weaving workshops, fashion design and spoken word events. As a storefront it was part of the streetscape, it blended in. It was accessible and visible; its programming was free. Yet, with its big windows full of art and bright colours, it was different. People regularly stopped in and asked, “What is this place? What do you sell?”, unaccustomed to seeing art and images of their own culture on display in their neighbourhood. People drop in on their way to the grocery store, coming home from school, or on the way to work. It is part of their everyday life. In this way, Art Starts provided a space that gave voice to a dynamic, urban and working class culture inevitably absent from mainstream cultural expressions. In time, Art Starts became a model for other communities.

An early example of this kind of work is the play *Nomads*, produced by Art Starts. While the world was enthralled with television images of violence in Somalia, we saw in our neighbourhood refugees from the war torn state trying to make sense of their lives. We heard Somali spoken on the street. In Italian cafés and shops Somali refugees comfortably conversed, in perfect standard Italian, with Italian-Canadian immigrants who

responded in their dialect. All this in the midst of what was fast becoming the shopping district for Toronto's black communities. The irony was not lost on anyone, nor was the opportunity to explore world events from our local perspective. As debates raged in our federal government about how to handle the Somali predicament and its strain on the public purse, Art Starts produced a trilingual play in Somali, English and Italian, featuring three of Somalia's top performers. In the tradition of popular theatre and oral culture, it was a collective creation with no script. Incorporating music, song and poetry, *Nomads* told the story of Amina, a Somali woman who, with the help of an Italian-Canadian friend, tries to overcome obstacles as she starts her life over again. Art Starts was exploring culture, identity and politics -- a recurrent endeavor for many in the community -- from our multicultural neighbourhood perspective.

A more recent example is *The Community Totem Project*. In workshops with artists, over 500 residents created cast concrete tiles (depicting images of immigrant stories), that were placed in the ground and on surrounding columns in a design inspired by Native Indian symbolism. The installation transformed an ugly neglected parkette into a social meeting place, a marker for shared experience and creativity, a destination point for community members and artists to further explore their relationship with each other. Art Starts gradually became an organization through which the community could create art and project its culture within its own public space.

Art Starts also contributed to the creation of an infrastructure for the arts in the community. It served as a training ground for young and emerging artists and cultural animators. Its office facilities were regularly used by artists and community groups for their own independent projects. Art Starts created a network of connections by being engaged in city government activities and by participating in social service and neighbourhood committees whose task was to focus on economic development, art, and education, amongst other things. This work created exciting possibilities for arts in the community. A good example is the Oakwood Village Library and Art Centre that opened its doors in September 1997, in the heart of the community. After years of reports and feasibility studies, the local government was unable to fund a large-scale arts facility in the city's west-end. Art Starts' infrastructure allowed artists and residents to organize and lobby politicians and municipal bodies to support the new arts-focussed plans for the library. Original plans for the new Oakwood library did not include the arts. What was to be a meeting room in the basement of the library is now a fully operational studio theatre space with a sprung floor, change rooms that double as classrooms, a lobby and state of the art equipment for artistic events and community happenings. On the ground floor, room was made to exhibit art on the walls and in display cases.

Neighbourhood libraries in Toronto often connect to communities through their collections, children's programming, and literary events. What is different about this space is that it strives to function as a dynamic arts centre. From its opening day it is solidly booked, a revenue-maker for the library and an inviting social and cultural meeting place where books, art and performance compliment and strengthen each other, where the neighbourhood and its artists can develop and express their distinctive voices. This project received the Ontario Library Associations' 1999 Library Building Award for

“Libraries in an Urban Neighbourhood”.<sup>2</sup> Through a community-based and community-controlled process, artists and residents, developed the ideas and concepts behind the library’s arts centre. They dispelled the old idea that a large expensive cultural facility was better than a smaller, community oriented space. A survey confirmed that what was needed was a small, manageable space, that would be affordable to rent and affordable to maintain. This would ensure that independent artists, small arts companies, local residents, and community groups could actually afford to use the space. On a recent Saturday the library featured a children's modern dance class, two art exhibits, an art workshop, and a musical performance.

Large, cultural institutions (such as the Royal Ontario Museum, the Ontario Art Gallery, the Canadian Opera Company) are also connecting to communities through art. These national and provincial institutions are seen as having a mandate beyond the local municipal area and are perceived by the government as important centres to support because they perform a significant role in cultural tourism. This year, our federal and provincial governments plan to give \$200,000,000.00 (CDN) in capital funding to these institutions that will allow them to expand and renovate -- this development will also result in a substantial increase of the surrounding downtown property values. However, it should be underscored that tourism arts dollars do little to contribute to the development of an indigenous culture. These organizations are in the business of culture, with huge budgets, business plans and marketing strategies, designed to attract paying customers. Sometimes the marketing strategies include community outreach with the goal of expanding their audience base to communities that normally do not attend their events. This can mean targeting audiences in a broader geographical area or expanding beyond their traditional middle class audience base to under-served communities through educational programs. In addition their strategy can be based on culture specific marketing. An example of this is the Royal Ontario Museum. It offers *Free Friday Evenings* that present traditional musical and artistic events such as Tibetan music and mandala making, a Friday night Chinese Lunar New Year Celebration and Nubian Friday. These events are very popular and well attended by their respective communities.

Other institutions, such as the Ontario Gallery of Art (AGO), actively integrate the techniques of community art making through their education programs. A recent exhibit *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, a show originated by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, featured 15 artists from 6 Latin American countries. In connection to the exhibit, the AGO organized artists' workshops in city schools. The AGO also sends art displays to communities. Recently, one reached the Oakwood Village library. Another institution, the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, sponsored local art workshops as part of its first community art exhibit. Undoubtedly, these programs bring artists in contact with a cross section of people who are given an opportunity to explore and to communicate ideas through art. Now, more than ever, as museums and other large art institutions develop partnerships with each other, receive the bulk of capital arts funding, compete with the broader arts community for project funds, and expand their audience base through community outreach, the creation of local infrastructure and alternative spaces for art making and art viewing become vitally important. These local

spaces represent one of the most effective ways for ensuring diversity and plurality in the world of art and culture.

In 1967, the Caribbean community organized what is perhaps the biggest and most successful cultural event in Toronto's history. A harbinger of things to come, it celebrated Canada's centennial birthday -- Caribana.<sup>3</sup> *Mas bands* (patois for masked bands), with their soca and calypso rhythms, fantastical costumes and community spirit paraded through Toronto's downtown streets. Today the annual summer carnival, the biggest in North America, includes house parties, family get-togethers, outdoor picnics, club nights, and of course the costume and song competition which draws a million spectators and over \$250,000,000.00 (CDN), in tourism dollars, to the city's economy. It is a unique assertion of popular culture and street arts where song, dance and costumes combine in an exhilarating public affirmation of culture and identity. The business community reaps a heady profit from all this community activity, most of which is centered downtown, away from the neighbourhoods where the originators and creators of this spectacle live.

Since 1994, TMMA (Toronto Mas Makers Association), a group of mas band leaders, has organized the *Jr. Carnival* parade for children aged 2 to 14, on Eglinton Avenue. It was encouraged by the community's desire to view its culture out on the street, in its own neighbourhood. It was also motivated by the desire to work with children and teach them the street art techniques of carnival, transferring the skills and knowledge necessary to create this community event, from one generation to another. Designers, wire and fiberglass benders, fabric stretchers, decorators, musicians, performers, organizers and months of work are needed to prepare the spectacle. The point of carnival costumes is to stand out and be noticed and to communicate ideas about history, current events and culture. In the popular tradition of carnival, mas bands mock dominant social and political structures and challenge the social order. They create a moving community spectacle that propels viewers into a fabulous world of imagination where art ignites ideas and the idea that other worlds are possible -- a poignant message for this community.

The group devotes its time, creative vision, money, community resources and organizational skills to the production of this summer parade. Today, eight mas bands and over 1000 children make costumes, dance and perform in the street on a carnival theme. Over 40,000 people line either side of the street to experience this outdoor spectacle. Celebrating its culture and passing it on to children, in an active and participatory fashion, is a must for the community. Residents see the arts as important for themselves and their children because they embody an expression of cultural identity. More and more, this identity is constantly threatened and strives to remain alive in a world where working class culture and ethnicity are lost to celluloid stereotypes and class prejudices. While events such as *Jr. Carnival* and collaborative art projects such as *The Community Totem*, are at the margins of mainstream cultural industry, they create a new framework for artists and for the role of art in present-day society. They challenge the artist to question the role of his/her own art in the context of the communal. Here, the artist is a co-creator with the community and an amateur who activates and helps bring

to life the imagination and desires of specific groups and communities with a goal to discovering the capacity of their shared creativity.

The boarded up storefront windows, covered with old faded newspapers, are an interesting metaphor for the community itself. What normally is wide open to facilitate seeing is instead covered, hidden and neglected. The richness, diversity, and vibrancy of the neighbourhood's culture is unseen, ignored and invisible, except as a stereotype. For residents, art projects become a way of demolishing perceived notions of a poor, crime-ridden neighbourhood without culture. Often, in the city, communities are defined by their commercial shopping areas which are centered around major arteries and ironically called "villages", like "Bloor West Village". Even our neighbourhood could not escape the designation of "Oakwood Village", as city officials tried to give it an identity as a viable commercial shopping area. The "village" designation comes hand in hand with the desired phenomenon called gentrification, where a commercial area of restaurants and high-end retail shops cater to middle class diners and consumers. This village model is seen as having a positive impact on the local economy and, as a result, it is supported by city capital improvement projects that focus on decorative lighting, advertising banners, road/sidewalk and building façade improvement programs. For city officials the objective is to create an 'identity' for a shopping district. Often, this process is not connected to the culture of the broader neighbourhood, except from a safe and distant historical perspective such as a mural on the side of a building highlighting the presence of early settlers in the area. Artists become protagonists and at the same time, victims in the transformation of neighbourhoods, creating highly desired 'in' neighbourhoods and arts districts with art galleries, cafés and studios, again attracting middle class consumers. Artists soon find themselves at the mercy of market-driven forces that price them out of the area, along with the initial inhabitants.

The challenge for *in the hood*, a series of four community art projects in 2000, was to begin to create a community-based model reflecting the culture of the neighbourhood as opposed to the culture of the commercial village. People in the community saw their economic conditions as an impediment for their interaction with art. However, unanimously, they saw the necessity of an artistic intervention in their local environment that would change the way they are perceived by others. *in the hood* aimed to make visible the neighbourhood's culture while exploring ways to improve the area's streetscape from a community arts perspective. The major challenge was to create an alternative to the bleakness of urban abandonment and to the equally alienating prospects of gentrification. *in the hood* involved a series of art workshops and installations in laundromats, schools, libraries, community centers, boarded up storefronts and, a homeless shelter. It incorporated art made by community members into the street life of the neighbourhood. It strengthened communication and networking while providing a springboard for the implementation of future projects.

Vaughan Road is believed to be a Native Indian portage route to Lake Ontario. At the foot of the street is Na-Me-Res, a native shelter for homeless men. Today, the history of this travelling route is buried in the past and the presence of Na-Me-Res in the neighbourhood is generally unknown. On storefront windows images created by

participants at Na-Me-Res highlight this travel route with themes of journeying and travelling. These *window-glyphs* and accompanying texts, record and make visible a forgotten journey through the neighbourhood -- a journey of the past and an unseen journey of the present, travelled by the men of Na-Me-Res.

How can a derelict laundromat -- the only space other than the library to be open to the public all day -- be transformed into a place where art and community life meet? As patrons waited for their laundry, they worked with an artist to make paper from dryer lint and other recyclables. With hand-made stencils and the lint paper, they filled the laundromat with colourful flowers of all shapes and sizes, a direct allusion to the name of the establishment -- Blossom Laundry. A poem about flowers, dreaming and creating, by the American poet Langston Hughes, was stenciled onto the wall. To the rumbling rhythm of the dryers and washing machines, the laundromat becomes a magical space for daydreaming and creative thinking. A space anyone can enjoy. When there's laundry to be done, art will be seen from inside the laundromat and, at night, from the street, where it looks like a giant three-dimensional painting.

Warm, cozy hand-knitted slippers, the ultimate symbol of 'being at home' become a fun and whimsical work of art. Many women in the neighbourhood know how to knit, sew or crochet. Their work goes to friends and relatives -- a little hat for a newborn, a scarf for a friend, a doily for a neighbour. Now the ordinary becomes extraordinary as a parade of slippers made with wool and feathers, pasta and paper, beads, wire and computer parts, toured the neighbourhood. Working with storytellers, people wrote stories, poems and songs about the fantastical slippers.<sup>4</sup>

*in the hood* involved fashion designers, storytellers, visual artists, carnival street artists, photographers and performers, making art with the community. For six months the neighbourhood became a centre of creative activity making and displaying its art and culture in alternative venues to the traditional spaces in which art is made and consumed. Connections were made between residents, arts groups and artists, schools, businesses, commercial property owners and social service organizations, many of whom have continued to work together. Other projects are in the planning stage, like an art studio for homeless men and a studio/storefront development. As the community experiments, exploring and merging different cultural practices and strategies, it begins to develop its own aesthetics. It builds a village identity from the perspective of the local culture, creating a stimulating alternative to the commercial village previously described. This is not a process through which the individual artist's and resident's inventiveness are lost or have disappeared, but it is a way to recover a possible dimension of art outside the commodification of the marketplace. The objective is the creation of a village model with a sense of place for a community in transition.

The exploration of culture, identity and community involves a complex set of issues in Oakwood Village. Many immigrants in this neighbourhood come from a rural background of small farming communities and villages, already at the margins of mainstream culture. They bring with them a range of popular arts practices that accompany them as they go through a class transition from peasant to worker. As

workers they are further marginalized and rendered powerless by dominant economic forces and regressive government spending practices. As immigrants they must deal with the cultural duality of their identity, further complicated by stereotypical interpretations of ethnicity and race. As they strive to come to terms with these complex issues both in their personal and social life, community arts projects offer an effective space for discussion and dialogue. Art becomes the language of encounter, a vehicle of expression for the single and for the community. As neighbourhood residents live on the edge -- on the edge of unemployment, on the edge of homelessness, on the edge of racial discrimination -- in a world that is becoming more insensitive to the needs of the marginalized, they are reshaping their identities and developing a sense of self-esteem within their new reality. These and other artistic endeavours represent constructive, community-building projects that spark a new way of seeing each other and a new way of being seen.<sup>5</sup>

Carnival costumes from the Caribbean make use of the African technique of assemblage - putting different things together, mixing things up, to make something new. This idea resonates in the neighbourhood. As people make art together and the faded newsprint is stripped away from the storefront windows, we see a shared experience emerging. We see artists engaging with people who would otherwise be excluded from cultural activities. We see that popular culture does not need to be fossilized in traditional expressions of arts and crafts, nor does it need to be limited to an issue-orientated, pedagogical role. We see residents participating in the social development of their neighbourhood. We see connections forged and opportunities for creativity, as art enters into the fabric of community life. We see the ways artistic expressions can be an integral part of social interactions. We see that art is not a separate realm outside of the everydayness of life, but it is reintegrated in the social imagination, where it has the power to transform, and therefore subvert centuries of separation between artists and community, art and society. In this lies art's true social engagement.

## Notes

- 1 In 1997 the Conservative provincial government forced the amalgamation of Toronto with five other municipalities creating the new city of Toronto with a population of over 3 million people. Amalgamation resulted in a 40% (approx.) reduction in the number of elected representatives. With amalgamation, the Oakwood/Vaughan neighbourhood was divided up between three different city wards, resulting in a fractured municipal identity.
- 2 The Oakwood Village Library and Arts Centre is designed by the Canadian architectural firm, A. J. Diamond, Donald Schmidt and Company.
- 3 In 2002 Carabana underwent restructuring. The carnival parade based on Caribbean carnival celebrations is now called Toronto International Carnival Festival.
- 4 *in the hood* also included the design and creation of a giant, 14 ft. long, hand-knit, red slipper, and two more laundromat projects. The first, at Asmara Coin Laundry where patrons designed and created their own laundry bags with a fashion designer and artist; the second, an installation at Toronto Coin Laundry.
- 5 With these projects artists operate outside the mainstream cultural industry where they would be required to play the role of "artist/genius" who produces works to satisfy the demand for new commodities.