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Art and the Politics of State Control

Finding Spaces that Nurture Voice among Homeless Women

Much of our experiences in the world can be mediated through art and artistic expression. Art is inherently political and, as such, is able to call up the interests, attitudes and experiences of particular groups in ways that illuminate these realities for all to see and experience. It can forge a relationship between the social, political and cultural domains of our world in ways that can greatly influence our way of seeing, knowing and experiencing. Art is acts and actions that are able to confront and act out particular realities in ways that illuminate certain messages, particular allusions and/or dole out real warnings (Krukowski, 1992).

When we dare to integrate art into the curriculum, we provide a means by which others can decode and re-code expression to forge connections between discursive social practices and language and the aesthetic symbolization of experience and knowledge. Ways of knowing the world through the practice and pleasure of the arts could make us more observant, wiser and more aware of the world around us. Since the content and creation of forms of art are specific to the location and social nexus of its affiliation, it helps us to draw the peculiarities between ideas, thoughts and experiences and express our knowledge in ways that help illuminate the nature of social life and build upon personal strength. It is also communal and depicts the evolution of self within the design of the group in which it resides. We can grow in our understanding of the relationship between feelings, knowledge and cognition through our engagement with art and its multiple forms (Grumet, 1995).

This regard for the power of art to connect, reveal and express formed the basis for the seed project we describe here. During the 2001-2002 academic year, we (a graduate student enrolled in Masters of Arts in Education program and a professor of education) developed an enrichment program in the arts for

12 poor young mothers. These women were residents of a communal homeless shelter in a small city in Central New Jersey, just south of New York City.

Once weekly, one or both of us would meet with these women for one and one-half hour sessions we named “Arts for Moms,” which were held on-site at the shelter for about ten months. The women identified themselves as African-American, Hispanic-Black, Hispanic and White and ranged in age from 18 years to 30 years. Ten of the women had one child. Two were mothers to two children. Several of the women were addicts in recovery. Others were victims of violent relationships or had neglected their children and were alerted to the local social services authorities. All were placed in this residential program by local social services agencies and were in need of consistent and adequate housing.

We are two White women, in our third and fourth decade respectively, with educational credentials and social status that will most likely protect us from homelessness in our lifetimes. Yet, both of us feel a kindred affiliation with these and other poor women who struggle to raise children as single entities. One of us was raised by a single mother, the other was raised by maternal grandparents because her mother was an alcoholic and her father was absent as a result of divorce. Our working-class and poor backgrounds as children taught us about the precarious nature of life among the working poor. Moreover, one of us raised her daughter as a single mother and remained so until that daughter reached the age of twelve. An intimate connect arose between and among some of the women over the course of this project. As women educators, activists and feminists, we seek and continue to make legitimate those voices that so frequently fall silent through our public work. We, also, strive to garner new meaning and new knowledge that might connect personal experiences and the experiences of others with the larger political and social nature of our world.

Life in a shelter

The basic need for shelter and food for themselves and their children as residents of this shelter was, of course, an obvious priority. The long-term shelter program that housed these women requires a minimum stay of nine months and a maximum stay of one year. All the residents were awaiting Section 8 housing, a form of government-funded federally supported low-income housing assistance in the United States. Often the wait period, especially in this geographical area of high need and low availability can be as long as five years. Frequently, affiliation with one of several county-sponsored shelters such as the one we describe here accelerates this wait time. Of course, this is dependent on the referral of supervising social workers and the “successful” completion of any programs sponsored by the shelter facility. The group we worked with during this time was somewhat transient and not all of the residents remained in the program for the duration of this project. Most of the residents “dropped out” before completing the nine-month requirement. At

times, only six or seven women were involved in the classes as the facility awaited replacement residents.

The facility itself is a large single-family dwelling that has been converted into separate bedroom facilities for nine families. Bathrooms are shared, and children and mothers sleep in separate beds in shared rooms. A small living room, a modestly equipped kitchen with attached laundry room and a moderately sized dining area are common spaces shared by all residents.

Schedules and routines are strictly enforced. Every resident was assigned duties and rotating chores daily. Signs are displayed on walls and bulletin boards to remind the women of their duties and the governing criterion. For example, a public telephone hangs on a hallway between the living room and the kitchen. A large sign forbids the women to talk for more than 15 minutes. No fathers are permitted on site (or men, for that matter, other than maintenance repairmen or members of the board). Visitors are only allowed to visit with the women in the common living areas described. Bedroom doors are required to be open when occupied during all times except after lights are turned out in the evening, and the women were not permitted to congregate in the bedrooms.

During the day, the women residents work, attend high school or GED classes, or participate in a job-training course. Those who work can only earn enough money to pay for transportation and some childcare. Any remaining wages must be relinquished as surplus to AFDC authorities according to regulation set by the state and federal government. Residents must secure childcare or babysitting for their children and must arrange for transportation of their children to/from these sites. Since most do not own cars and public transportation is limited, many of the residents resort to taking frequent and expensive cab rides to and from their designated daytime sites.

After school or work, they must pick up their children and return to the shelter in time for dinner or afternoon classes or before if they are responsible for cooking that evening's meal. Chores and responsibilities in the evening include preparation of the evening meal which is served family style to all residents, sweeping and mopping all common living areas, childcare for each others' children during evening chores, bathing the children, laundry *and* daily mandatory enrichment classes. Most of this is accomplished by 10:00 p.m. when the women, exhausted but eager for relaxation and "girl" talk, meet in the living room or dining room to visit with one another.

Monthly house meetings are also required and large clean up projects are also part of life in this setting. Saturday classes and curfews on weeknights and weekends are strictly enforced. Consistent non-compliance almost always results in dismissal from the program and subsequent removal from the housing authority list for Section 8 provisions. Minor infractions might result in "punishments" including written assignments, special large clean up projects and counseling by appropriate authorities.

The professional staff at the shelter at the time consisted of an Executive

Director, a social worker, a part-time educational director and a secretary, all of whom were White women. Support staff was characterized by an array of house staff members who remained on-site 24 hours a day for the purpose of supervising and (in some cases) spying on the women residents. These staff members were mostly African American women who worked at the shelter part-time. The residence, itself, was always locked and doors were often propped open to allow easier access. House staff members were usually present in the common areas, which made private conversations difficult if not impossible.

Enrichment classes

Enrichment classes were mandatory and held daily, except on Sundays. These sessions took place in one of two smaller outbuildings situated on the property. The Education Center consisted of the Executive Director's office and large conference room with about eight chairs for board meetings, and a small enclosed porch that served as a storage area for donated items. Social work interviews and some enrichment classes were held in the conference room. This room was a dark dismal area with orange carpeting, brown furniture and no windows. The second outbuilding was a bit more cheerful and was arranged as a playroom with a wide array of toys and activities for small children. Unfortunately, much of the equipment in this room was broken, badly used and worn out. A small outdoor play area with a swing set and a picnic table was placed between these two buildings. A parking lot sat adjacent to this area.

The "Art for Moms" class was only one of the half-dozen classes offered each semester to the women as enrichment classes in the evening or weekend hours. Other class topics included: child development, parenting, career choice and personal fitness. Volunteers from the community hosted all of the classes and in this particular academic year, nine of the twelve enrichment classes offered over this time period were orchestrated and accomplished by graduate students in teacher education from the university. "Art for Moms" earned its title when the educational director asked several weeks into the semester that each class be named and described and weekly lesson plans submitted for review by shelter personnel. This request came about after a particular session of our class was overheard by one of the house staff in which the young women were talking candidly about some of their sexual experiences.

The decision to create an art class for the women came from the authors and initially was not well received by the shelter administration. They did not see the usefulness of this endeavor and made some initial attempts to cancel it or, at the very least, restructure it to align with more specific skill areas mandated by county authorities. Eventually, we were able to convince the administration that this class fit under the skill needs for building "self-esteem," an area of concern with the curriculum guidelines. Eventually, the popularity of the course among the women residents made it impossible to abandon. The women residents frequently listed it as their favourite class and were very

insistent that it not be forfeited. This action on the part of the residents helped to sustain it over the year despite the staff's lack of support for it. It may also indicate the power of art to uncover and nurture voice among the women. Through the self-expression and self-exploration that the artwork fostered, the women engaged in discussion of experiences and emotions that are frequently not permitted or heard in the context of a government-sponsored program.

K: This is the one class we look forward to coming to.

M: It's someplace that we can come into, and we can be ourselves, and we don't have nobody looking at us like we are crazy.

V: Judging us.

A: Like we're homeless trash.

M: It's just the kind of class that you can come in and be yourself.

A: ... uneducated, unintelligent, never had anything... that's how a lot of people look at you when you are in a situation like this, like you ain't ever had anything. Like you don't know anything, and you're never gonna be anything.

K: And the stuff we express in our art shows that we are something. We are gonna be something.

A: We have always been something.

Art programs for the homeless

Within the past decade, art programs for the homeless have proliferated (Brown, 1994; Braun, 1997). Some have specifically named the need for these women to have space in which they can find and nurture their own voices by expressing themselves through art. Art programs have been implemented to help marginalized students develop voice, exercise power and construct identity. Teen mothers, homeless women and men, people in recovery, behaviorally disabled and learning disabled children, and poor children living in urban areas have engaged in art programs designed to foster self-expression and self-representation and encourage the creation of positive images of self. In some cases, art was created to deconstruct and combat negative stereotypes of the group, thus serving as social action. For the students involved in these art programs, art classes became an environment or space within which personal experiences and voices were validated.

The Artist and Homeless Collaborative, an art program established in New York City by artist Hope Sandrow at the Park Avenue Women's Shelter, provided a space within which homeless women could work with artists. The group transformed the interior of the shelter by painting murals, decorating common areas and displaying individual artwork. In this way, they recreated the physical space. The nature of the collaboration created a space for interaction and community that was often discouraged by the rules and regulations of the shelter. Perhaps most significantly, the homeless women formed a space within which they could use art as a vehicle to "reclaim positions as independ-

ent, functioning members of the community” (Wolper, 1995). In the Cap Street Project, artist Suzanne Lacy’s work with 36 teen mothers in 1997 produced *Expectations*, a multimedia art installation that explored the negative representation of teen mothers in the media and the juxtaposition of this image with the reality of their lives (Blumberg & Walkowiak, 1997; Fields, 1997). Other programs, such as *Wisdom Project*, founded in 1991 in a women’s shelter in Sacramento, California, serve women who are homeless, mentally ill or in drug and alcohol recovery programs. The mission of the *Wisdom Project* is to provide an environment in which “women can experience self-worth and dignity” and are “strengthened to shape their own lives...to break free from patterns of oppression” (Shiffer, 2000) by using art as a means of self-expression and self-reflection. The successes of these programs and others like them illustrate that art can provide a vehicle for gaining a sense of self in relation to personal experiences including interactions with others and interaction with society (Wolper, 1995; Davis, 1997; Shiffer, 2000).

The success of “art for moms”

Initially, we postulated that particular forms of art and the use of some contemporary artists and their works could help the women in this shelter learn to view themselves and their experiences as central to knowledge, rather than positioning their knowledge as on the margins and not valuable (Desai, 2000). We used the artist Frida Kahlo and her work as an example of non-mainstream art that depicted women’s experiences and placed women as central to the creation of knowledge and wisdom through experience.

Kahlo, a Mexican woman, suffered a tragic accident as a teenager that left her crippled and with chronic pain for most of her life. Her fame as an artist and popularity within the American art scene was relatively modest, with most of her notoriety stemming from her publicized marriage to famous artist, Diego Rivera. Rivera was able to establish a public identity in the arts through his flamboyant style and his work on commissioned murals in public spaces in America. Kahlo’s artwork, on the other hand, was more intimate, intrusive and revealing. Often categorized as a Surrealist painter, Kahlo’s work is heavy with symbolism that is personal, cultural and political. She dared to reveal the pain and humiliation she experienced as a woman, intensified even more by her inability to bear children as a result of her accident. She also identified strongly with her culture, adopting traditional Mexican costume as her usual mode of dress and including both native Mexican iconography and Catholic symbols in her work. Her paintings disclosed her vulnerabilities, particularly in reference to physical frailty and her knowledge and acceptance of her husband’s flagrant infidelities. When her work and life story was introduced to the women residents, they were immediately drawn to her dark looks and daring self-portraits. They were also fascinated with the details and tragic circumstances of her life and the manner in which she depicted these events through her art. They hungered for explanations of the

personal symbolism that she created, and the ways that these symbols described or reflected her experiences (Lindauer, 1999).

The parallels that exist between Kahlo's life and the lives of the women residents became more and more apparent as the project progressed. Her work was chosen as an introduction to narrative artwork and the use of visual symbolism as the women were encouraged to use art to tell stories about themselves. Because Kahlo's work is primarily self-portraiture, it lends itself to self-valuing and permits certain levels of self-absorption. Her image and ethnic identification gave certain authority to the women as members of marginalized groups to talk freely about these identities as they created depictions of their experiences based on the self. In contrast to the discourse sanctioned at the shelter, the language and practices in this instance valued self and viewed the self as a subject of worthy cause and scrutiny.

The connections made between the experiences of Kahlo and the lives of the women proliferated as time went on. The women residents begin to bridge commonalities of gender and oppression between themselves, us, Kahlo and the other women artists we introduced to them. The women viewed works by Georgia O'Keeffe, Meret Oppenheim, Judy Chicago, Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, Valerie Maynard and others. These women artists are/were marginalized in a discipline dominated by White males and supported by wealth. The personal became more political for the women residents as they learned to decipher meaning from the artwork of these women, hear the stories of their lives and connect events and symbols to their own experiences and understandings. Thus, the use of Frida Kahlo and others lead to some opportunities to understand societal constraints and the relationship between societal beliefs and image of poor women, racially and ethnically marginalized women and their children. Women artists and their work became significant in the introduction and execution of each project as the residents made connections between the life experiences of women artists, women's role in the arts, the social issues relative to women and their own experiences of oppression and misrepresentation.

Eventually, the class created several projects. Most were self-expressive and self-exploratory. In some classes, we used materials with a sense of immediacy, such as pastels, to encourage a spontaneous, abstract statement of emotion. Narrative work expressed happy or sad memories. Some of these were painful and others laced with celebration. One woman's narrative drawing of a happy memory was a self-portrait that depicted her, naked and serene, holding her infant son. About this drawing she said, "I don't know where I would be right now without my son." Other works included several collages that praised the beauty of particular personal physical attributes (such as one composed of photographs demonstrating Black hairstyles, or another that highlighted pregnant bodies as represented by women artists integrated with photographs of the pregnant women in the class). Other images that held particular meaning in the expression of anger, which was greatly suppressed in

this setting, were revealed in a collage of multiple sized and angled photos of the prominently posted rules and shelter regulations.

Each woman also created identity bowls. This project began after a discussion of woman as vessels whose perceived central role is one of caretaker and housewife. As such, the lives of housewives are affiliated with cooking utensils, such as bowls. These roles, however, diminish or belie the complexity of women's identities. Additionally, the symbol of a vessel can be associated with the way that the women were treated as vessels by their class instructors, having no active role in the acquisition or formation of knowledge (Freire, 1987). We discussed Meret Oppenheim's assemblage work "Fur-lined Teacup" as an example of the way anthropomorphic, vaginal characteristics can be used to symbolize womanhood. "The Dinner Party" was another piece introduced to the residents. In this work, Judy Chicago and a team of artisans created thirty-nine place settings, employing crafts techniques such as ceramics and stitchery that are traditionally practiced by women, to represent women who contributed to women's history (Tansey and Kleiner, 1996), thus centralizing and validating the achievements of women. The bowls made by the women at the shelter were made from papier-mâché and were painted, embellished with glitter, feathers and sequins. Each woman wrote about their bowl, explaining how the visual elements represented them.

M: My bowl represents my good and colorful personality. My bowl has bright insides and represents how I feel about being a mother and how much I love my son. The jagged edges represent the difficult times in my life, and the gleamy outside over the dark blue shows that I hide my feelings a lot.

S: My bowl is beautiful and sparkly, the way I want me and my daughter's life to be. Filled with different colors, gleaming, outstanding, and even at the dark end of that tunnel inside of you, there is a light coming through.

K: My bowl is very unique, colorful, and it stands out. It describes me as being very attractive, and how I never let anyone get too close. My inside is too precious like gold.

The meaning of mothering in the curriculum

In designing the weekly class sessions, motherhood was explicitly worked into the curriculum through lessons that addressed, reflected and responded to the motherhood matters faced daily by these young women. In initial discussions with the women, before the class began, it was clear that motherhood was of central significance to them. It was also apparent that the other required classes arranged by the state did not focus on their "motherhood" in any way except to bridge the content to the seriousness of their responsibilities as

mothers or to pinpoint their failures as mothers according to the state. Most of the classes seemed to ignore their status as mothers and focused on job training, interview skills and household budgeting. Yet, it seemed to us that being a mother mattered to these women in nearly every aspect of their lives. In contrast to the state's curriculum, we chose to focus on the celebration of their status as mothers rather than on their shortcomings as mothers. We did not wish to add to the endless list of do's, don'ts and should haves that seemed to pepper the daily events of their lives. This class, unlike the others in their program, was not skill-based since manipulation of the media was a secondary concern to us. Rather, the course was designed to be a forum for the exploration of self. The experiences of the women, as informed by many aspects of their identities including motherhood, became central to the lessons.

The women artists discussed, each for a specific reason, were used to help these young mothers delve into aspects of their own identities. As such, it seemed that each project and each story of an artist's life somehow found its way back to the defining theme of motherhood. For example, in one project that grew from our analysis of photo collages, we explored the lives and work of African-American artist Lorna Simpson. Simpson's collages address issues of beauty, femininity and African culture. Based on the photo collages of Ms. Simpson (which were used to introduce the women to another woman artist of color, and to introduce the technique of collage), the women created collages using photographs and subject choices of their own. In these collages, the women included mostly pictures of their children and their pregnant bellies. Clearly, their primary role as mothers was centrally located in the delivery and experiences of this class.

In using the art materials and activities provided to them during the class, some discussion of mothering, their responsibilities, frustrations or lack thereof often resulted. The women would lament about the ways they were misunderstood or ill perceived as mothers by the shelter workers or administration, for example. Or, they would talk about the details of their day with the other women, comparing the development and antics of their children with one another. Thus, the creative work of using art in the class provided some space for the women to speak and listen to one another in a much less restricted manner.

In other ways, motherhood was discussed in relationship to the women artists introduced to them in the class. For example, Frida Kahlo's non-mothering life was of acute interest to these women. Kahlo could not have children due to an accident in her teens that resulted in a punctured uterus. Her art, in particular, delved into her unfulfilled desire to be a mother, a theme that was explored countless times in her work. This personal tragedy regarding mothering and motherhood was the basis for many discussions in the class, one of which led to a lesson on using art to convey emotion. The women recalled a happy or sad event in their lives, which they communicated in a narrative artwork. Their powerful artworks gave their memories a tangible, visual quality.

Two of the women took this opportunity to celebrate motherhood in their work; one drew herself giving birth, not to a baby but to words that expressed joy, sorrow, pride and pain. In another narrative work, mentioned earlier in this essay, a woman created a nude self-portrait in which she sat serenely, holding her infant son. These discussions of the life and work of Frida Kahlo gave the women some means to discuss motherhood as a central defining notion of women's lives, an event that allowed them to legitimize their own histories and see their roles as mothers as valid, valuable and worth exploring through art.

The exploration of multiple identities (woman, wife, lover, mother, etc) through art and the use of art for the self exploration of one's own mothering could be used in many state-run programs for young homeless mothers. Our example provides some support for the importance of and value of such celebration and exploration on the road toward self-fulfillment and the development of a strong sense of self-worth.

Discussion

Homeless women and their children occupy a restricted space that relegates them to the lowest of all statuses in our society. In shelters and other sites of public benevolence, they are often denied a space of their own in which they can contest, assert and celebrate. It is within these restrictions that they are most often forced to conform and comply, to relinquish those very traits and skills that might ultimately lead them out of these dismal locales. Yet, little is known or sought after in the understanding of how women negotiate these binding spaces and little attention is paid to the complicated identities they traverse in these in-between places.

The art class we described here provided an important free space in which young homeless mothers could engage in self-exploration, reflection and shared experiences of joy, pain and community with one another. As histories and experiences were validated, voice was developed and nurtured. An emerging awareness of political realities may eventually help some of these women move from positions of self-blame to a more complex understanding of identities and image in society. This class provided an acceptable method of resistance to the prevalent discourse of self-blame, self-loathing and self-denial that pervaded this setting. For a brief moment, these women were permitted to be self-reflective and self-centered, without worry that these sentiments might betray the best interest of their children, the shelter and the society to which they must learn conformity and humility. Conversely, in this instance, their experiences and perceptions became central to the development of the class artifacts. Class meetings became one of the only "free" spaces in which they were able to acknowledge experiences and create understanding without censorship.

This study of art and art work helped the women to link personal and social identities with experiences, often highlighting the intensity and complexities of their multiple identities as mothers, poor women and women of colour. It

seemed that the experience of being “mothers” was validated for many of these women in contrast to the social roles and related discourse that was encouraged and accepted within the shelter. These roles and identities associated with motherhood emerged as a central theme of importance in the lives of these women but, importantly, was also the one area in which they felt least acknowledged and supported by the shelter staff and the larger public.

In summary, it is evident that particular ways of seeing and experiencing the world as mothers and women through the practices and pleasures made visible through the arts makes us mindful and appreciative of our own knowledge and the experiences we embody as women and mothers. When we learn to verbally express and visually depict the peculiarities between our ideas, thoughts and experiences, we learn to interpret the meanings of experiences and ideas that can lead to stronger notions of personal strengths and reveal the connections that invariably exist between the personal and political.

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