

ART-CRAFT PRACTICE EXEMPLARS: *Making Space for Art, Healing, and Community*

MEGAN J. DAVIES

IN 2018 I INTERVIEWED long-time Hornby Island resident Eleanora Laffin, a talented art quilt-maker and the instigator and coordinator of the Community Quilt Project, a forty-two-year local tradition. Laffin described how the yearly project takes shape. A vast and beautiful collaborative quilt is created, displayed outside the local co-operative store, and ticket sales are directed towards a specific island organization. This was a luminous oral history, storied, witty, deeply descriptive, but it was the moment when Laffin elucidated the health-giving aspects of the project that stopped me short. “Making a quilt is such a healing thing,” she said, “evident in the rhythm and feel of the handwork, in the progress and beauty of the piece, and in the caring relationships that are fostered by a shared and purposeful activity.” “Moreover,” Laffin went on to explain, “this public art project binds the larger island community together in multiple ways that connected to well-being: interest in the theme and design of the quilt, a shared volunteerism in the task of selling raffle tickets, and its monetary role in meeting specific community needs.”

Like the four projects that we showcase here in our theme issue of *BC Studies*, Hornby Island’s Community Quilt is a grounded local example of how humanistic public art-craft can foster social citizenship through personal and collective well-being. As four scholars editing a collection exploring art-craft and healing, we believed that it was important to include a series of meritorious BC case studies to demonstrate the processes that Laffin so eloquently describes. Two other academics engaged in discussions for the volume had been involved in such initiatives, one as a researcher studying an innovative dance program at a residential care facility in the Fraser Valley and another as facilitator/researcher on a biographical arts project for LGBTQ seniors in East Vancouver, and they agreed to come on board. I pulled in a woman I know who is artist in residence at two BC cemeteries. Then I read a fascinating book about a local group that did community building

through collaborative eco-art.¹ Why not see if they were interested? We coined the term “practice exemplars” to describe these projects.

A certain alchemy takes place in each of the four practice exemplars that is both commonplace and extraordinary. “The arts are made by and for people ... grounded in social endeavors and encounters,” write the editors of *Artistic Citizenship*, noting that public art-craft projects function as civic tools for stimulating awareness and guiding ethical transformation.² Our practice exemplars are led by artists who pay careful attention to process and emphasize nurturing human connectiveness through rituals that are often rooted in everyday customs: purposefully saying hello, sharing a cup of tea, gathering in a circle.³ The healing that takes place is both individual and collective, and while the cumulative health benefits do not map onto the medical model, they are clearly evident.

Researchers studying social citizenship projects have found that individual and collective empowerment fosters personal resiliency and strengthens community capacity in vulnerable populations.⁴ Community initiatives that have attracted academic attention in this regard include public art practice through film, dance, art making, storytelling, and art appreciation.⁵ But here our practice exemplars set aside scholarly

¹ S. Kallis, *Common Threads: Weaving Community through Collaborative Eco-Art* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2014).

² D. J. Elliott, M. Silverman, and W.D. Bowman, *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–24. A more mainstream view that nonetheless echoes that of Elliott et al. is J. Blackburn, M. Harris, A. Mowlah, and V. Niblett, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society* (Manchester: Arts Council England, 2014).

³ Elliott et al., *Artistic Citizenship*, acknowledge the important role of art makers as agents of social change – another intro section to this book considers community and grassroots connections.

⁴ Nina Wallerstein, “Empowerment to Reduce Health Disparities,” *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 30 (2002): 72–77; M. Whitehead, A. Pennington, L. Orton, S. Nayak, M. Petticrew, A. Sowden, and M. White, “How Could Differences in ‘Control over Destiny’ Lead to Socio-Economic Inequalities in Health? A Synthesis of Theories and Pathways in the Living Environment,” *Health and Place*, 39 (2016): 51–61; E. Skinner, and J. Masuda, “Right to a Health City? Examining the Relationship between Urban Space and Health Inequality by Aboriginal Youth Artist-Activists in Winnipeg,” *Social Science and Medicine* 91 (2013): 210–18; K. Anderson, T. Davis, A. Blair, “An Art Gallery Access Programme for People with Dementia: You Do It for the Moment,” *Aging and Mental Health* 13, 5 (2009): 744–52.

⁵ A. Carson, N. Chappell, and C. Knight, “Promoting Health and Innovative Health Promotion Practice through a Community Arts Centre,” *Health Promotion Practice* 8, 4 (2007): 366–74; Hester Parr, “Collaborative Film-Making as Process, Method, and Text in Mental Health Research,” *Cultural Geographies* 14 (2007): 114–38; N. Smith, D. Waller, A. Colvin, M. Naylor, and J. Hayes, *Dance and Dementia Project: Findings from the Pilot Study* (Brighton: University of Brighton, 2012); S. MacPherson, M. Bird, K. Anderson, T. Davis, A. Blair, “An Art Gallery Access Programme for People with Dementia: You Do It for the Moment,” *Aging and Mental Health* 13, 5 (2009): 744–52.

scaffolding for plain language, personal voices, and visual storytelling. We aim to situate the viewer close to the process, the labour, and the power of collaborative creation.

Each of the projects featured in this section of the journal rejected orthodoxies and preconceived notions, and embraced innovation and even risk. Wheelchair-bound dementia patients become ballet dancers. A cemetery is transformed into a theatre space for the enactment of shared sorrow. Reconciliation is enacted through the shared work of making fishing nets by hand. A shoebox art display proves transformative for an elder working through childhood abuse.

Like Eleanor Laffin and Hornby Island's Community Quilt, the four practice exemplars we present feature artists who are connected to their projects by their own practice, by emotion, and by intent. In this sense, what is happening here is the "ground truthing" that Derrick Stacey Denholm employs in his study of British Columbia's northern coastal rainforests, a careful series of steps en route to a deeper and wider understanding of how to be in the world.⁶ "What do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else?" Robert Macfarlane queries in the introduction to his memoir of walking Britain's ancient pathways, inviting his reader to carefully observe both external location and internal response in order to arrive at larger insights.⁷ We want you to ask yourself the same question as you explore the following practice exemplars of art-craft and healing in British Columbia.

Rebecca Graham introduces *BC Studies* readers to the *Land & Sea Project*, a Vancouver artist/community collaboration that uses everyday materials and art-craft methods that were once foundational to northern coastal cultures – linen, fish leather, and net-making. The broad goal of this practice work, initiated by the non-profit EarthHand Gleaners Society,⁸ is a shared understanding of how First Peoples, settlers, and newcomers can live in the region's Salish Territories with respect and integrity. In *Land & Sea* events, sharing memories, learning, and creation emerges within extended community conversations. "When my hands are busy, I'm more open," reported one participant, evoking Laffin's insight into the healing and meditative potential of collaborative art-craft.

Paula Jardine is a public artist who also sees art-craft as collaborative conversation. As October ends each year she and her colleague Marina Szijarto direct the *Night of All Souls* at Vancouver's Mountain View

⁶ Derrick Stacey Denholm, *Ground Truthing: Reimagining the Indigenous Rainforests of BC's North Coast*. Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2015.

⁷ Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Penguin, 2012), 27, 48.

⁸ <https://earthand.com/>.

Cemetery, honouring the dead and opening up this public space for expressions of grief and remembrance. The project is led by theatre artists who, Jardine explains, understand the power of symbols, ritual, and the use of music, beauty, colour, and light to affect experience. The result is a week-long public event with processional bands, public art, cups of tea, and personal memorial-making. Jardine describes the community that is created at Mountain View during *Night of All Souls* as a “sanctuary for tender feelings,” a shared space that is not sombre but is caring and supportive.

Darren Blakeborough and Shelley Canning report research findings on an intergenerational dance project that took place in a long-term residential care facility in the Lower Mainland. Here, collaborative art is an exchange with multiple beneficiaries and clear health benefits. Partnered with elderly residents in a series of innovative dance techniques, school children undergo rigorous ballet training, yet the shared pleasure is what is most evident in the filmed sequences. Blakeborough and Canning emphasize the importance of a multifaceted program in which music, movement, and physical touch draw both older adults and children into a meaningful connection.

Claire Robson focuses on the evocative work of one participant in a collaborative critical arts project that she conducted with LGBTQ seniors in Vancouver as part of her post-doctoral program. Robson and the object’s creator reveal the memory that the art piece “hiDdEn” makes public and detail the story of its creation. Framed by concepts pulled from second-wave feminism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory, this exemplar perfectly demonstrates the importance of the collective and the political in artistically rendering a difficult personal history. Notions of what comprises healing, Robson argues, can be expanded when the emphasis is shifted from the individual to the collective.