

Taking Art Education to the Streets: "The Procession of the Species" as Community Arts

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Abstract

The Procession of the Species Celebration in Olympia, Washington, draws almost a quarter of Olympia's population in either participating in creating art, walking in a celebratory parade, or watching on the side. The Procession of the Species is a ritualistic celebration of the natural environment, while building solidarity, responsibility, and community. Observations of the event and interviews with the founder and director serve to illustrate the connections of the Procession to the field of art education, with community-based art education and environmental art education as the bridging components of the community arts event.

The Element of Earth: Walking under the element of Earth is a wizened-faced elephant, awesomely evocative, nearly life-sized. Long, ivory tusks extend to the human's waist, flanking a five-foot-long trunk that may have been, at one time, a flexible length of heating/cooling duct. The elephant strides purposefully, holding a scepter high. Not far behind, a woman's pleasant face appears like a blossom in the center of a clutch of seven-foot banana "leaves;" a small monkey, perhaps her real-life child, clutches her elbow. The crowd backs up from a barefoot, body-spotted cheetah springing and snarling down the street, on all fours. (Cerulean, personal notes, 2001)

In the context of community, art education assumes various pedagogies and responsibilities. It is within this context that the Procession of the Species Celebration is located, with community arts as the pedagogy and environment as the responsibility. The Procession is an artistic and environmental celebration of the natural world created by and for the community, using the mediums of art, music, and dance, to give the natural world a greater presence in the streets (Kim, 2002). Utilizing a model of community-based art education, the location of art education pedagogy moves from the classroom to the streets of the community (London & Briggs, 1996; Godfrey, 2001), where the Procession of the Species Celebration is found. As a reflection of postmodernism, environmental art education fits within this community-based framework (Ulbricht, 1998), raising environmental awareness (Reardon, 1995) and building solidarity and identity (Lowe, 2000) of the community arts participants.

A significant participatory role of community residents in artmaking



Figure 1. An elephant walking as part of the Element of Earth.¹

is often defined as community arts, local arts, participatory arts, or public art (Clinton & Glenn, 1994; Lippard, 1997; Durland, 1998). In this paper, community arts is utilized and defined as an arts project or event that elicits the participation of community residents where the arts activity, event, or project will take place. A community arts project often subsumes a specific theme, sometimes in the form of a public responsibility. In the case of the Procession of the Species, the responsibility being enforced is that of the people to their environment. Examining this activity in the context of community-based art education, the pedagogy becomes a ceremonial ritual of creating dance, visual, and musical artworks that respond to the theme of the environment, thus becoming a community parade of celebration. Whether the participants make, wear, or carry art, sing, dance, or watch the events on the sidelines, they are partaking in an educationally enriching community activity.

Although the notion of community arts adhering to postmodern ideals may seem a relatively new idea by current practices in art education, "the artist as an integral part of a larger community" is one of the oldest contexts (Durland, 1998, p. xxiii). Lippard (1997) characterizes this notion in describing how art of indigenous cultures is imbedded within the lives of the people, with the land as an integral and necessary source of inspiration, recognition, and celebration. Although, "a truly place-specific public art is still in its infancy. For all the art that is *about* place, very little is *of* place—made by artists *within* their own places or *with* the people who live in the scrutinized place, connecting with the history and environment" (Lippard, 1997, p. 263).

The Role of the Community

"This realm of cultural practice regards public participation and artistic creation as mutually interdependent—joined at the hip. It also asserts that there are significant and tangible community benefits, beyond aesthetic, that naturally accrue from certain kinds of community art endeavors"



Figure 2. The crowd watching the Procession.

Earthbound Productions created the Procession of the Species in Olympia, Washington, in response to a 1994 attack on the Endangered Species Act (Kim, 2002). Founder Eli Sterling calls the Procession of the Species a "parade of the human species sharing creations of individual expression of their awe and appreciation of the natural world" (personal communication, 2001). Designed as cultural exchange rather than entertainment, the event engages people from all walks of life -- regardless of age, experience, or background -- from local schools, social service organizations, tribal groups, churches, community groups, and individual area residents.

In April 2002, Olympia hosted its eighth annual Procession with more than 125 workshops, 2500 participants and 30,000 spectators, totaling a quarter of Olympia's population. On Procession Day, Olympia virtually shuts down for the event, which winds its way along 16 blocks and ends at a big stage by a lake. There is a closing ceremony that includes salutes to the four directions and drumming that adjusts to the pace of the human heartbeat. Similar Procession events are popping up everywhere -- in Portland; in Bend; in Spokane; and in Wichita, Kansas; Winona, Minnesota; Durham, North Carolina; White Springs, Florida; and Boulder, Colorado. In Boulder's place-specific Procession, a school group might come as a grassland ecosystem, a book club may come as an alpine meadow a-bloom in July and individuals may parade as bald eagles, bighorn sheep, and/or a sabre-tooth tiger, a species that once roamed the Front Range of Colorado.

Through the participatory process of community art making, solidarity and identity are significant outcomes of such a process of social interaction by sharing a common goal and setting a positive mood (Lowe, 2000). Specifically, through observation of two community arts programs, Lowe (2000) has identified elements of community building to include: solidarity, building relationships, providing support, communicating common concerns, individual identity, and collective identity.

(Cleveland, 2001, p. 21).

Every year, on the Saturday in April preceding Earth Day, a celebration of thousands of creatures prancing, slithering and flying winds its way through the streets of Olympia, Washington, creating a moving river of banners, windsocks and giant puppets. The community-based nonprofit

In addition to being a forum for building neighborhood solidarity, the community-art projects fostered individual and collective identity. Identity development is the emergence or growth of feelings and ideas about oneself or one's group... Collective identity is an expression of the nature of group cohesiveness and the commonality shared among individuals within the group. Given that the individual and the collective are influenced by and influence each other, it is relevant to examine both individual and collective identities as they relate to community development. (Lowe, 2000, p. 374)

Sterling believes that the most important creative and personal exchanges of the Olympia Procession event happen not on the day itself, but in the months and weeks preceding (personal communication, 2001). Before the event, a series of workshops as well as the creation of a community art studio open to all, assist people in making their costumes and instruments. The workshops, all taught by volunteer artists, are entitled for example: Frog Headdresses for Kids; Magic Batik Wings; Advanced Stilts for Four Leggeds; and the Elephant Rhythm Stomp. In the workshop entitled Geese in Flight, over the course of six Friday nights, participants learn to make beautiful goose wings and masks and rehearse the flowing movements of migrating geese, which involves shifting and interchanging leaders. On Procession eve, moving in the Element of Air, this avian gaggle flocks to the tunes of the Mailhotia Jazz Procession Band. About 1,000 parade walkers either attend workshops or use the art studio to make their costumes.

In the simplest terms, the goal of Procession founders is to engage people in a personal yet public experience of where they are, where they came from and where they may be headed to help people see their particular places with new eyes by "making the familiar strange" (Bastos, 2002), or by "luring the local" (Lippard, 1997). Sterling and his co-workers believe that societal efforts to protect the environment will be preserved only as we recognize and honor our local connection to the world around us. Inspiring protection of wildlife is not the singular outcome however. "The intent of the Procession is to elevate the dignity of the human spirit by enhancing the cultural exchange that we have with each other and, the natural world...and to do that through imagination, creation, and sharing." (Sterling, personal communication, 2001) As we



Figure 3. A child/bird as part of the Element of Air.

recognize these connections around us, to our environment and to each other, this "feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn -- to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world" (hooks, 1994, p. 40).

The Element of Air: Air features the snowiest of snowy owls, feathers emerging all about a child's serious bespectacled face, the human and bird as close to merging as imaginable. A contingent of young, batik-winged fairies, which might also pass for butterflies, circle and dance behind. An enormous brown bat puppet with accurately-veined wings spreads the width of a full street lane (Cerulean, personal notes, 2001).

The Responsibility to the Environment

"Anthropologists used to call 'quaint' and 'superstitious' such beliefs that, without prayers and certain ritual practices, the sun might not come up. Now we see that we have for so long treated the earth as an inert thing to use and exploit, that she may in fact be dying and the sun might not come up for us" (Smith, 1998, p. 49).

The Procession is a deeply creative response to a key issue of our time -- the general disconnect between peoples of the developed nations and their specific places on the planet (Snyder, 1995). Snyder (1995) claims what is called for is a commitment to this continent place by place, in terms of biogeographical regions and watersheds, in terms of landforms, plant life, weather patterns and seasonal changes. Snyder (1995) urges North Americans in particular to become "reinhabitory" -- that is, learn to live and think as if they were totally engaged with their place for the long future. Lippard (1997) refers to the notion of thinking globally, acting locally, as an underlying theme of a community arts project such as the Procession of the Species. She poses the question, "What will make it possible for artists to give places back to people who can no longer see them?" (Lippard, 1997, p. 292) The Procession of the Species responds with three basic tenets:

- finding the balance between making information accessible and making it visually provocative as well
- creating a project that is fulfilling to all involved
- bringing a new degree of coherence and beauty to the local.

A project such as the Procession makes it possible for artists to give back by creating community arts projects that remind us of our environmental responsibilities. Sterling (personal communication, 2001) describes the Procession as "a festival in design, and a ceremony in its creation of a spiritual place that brings the community together to say, 'We are a people of

nature.' It places people in the context of creation, thus responsibility."

Sterling and his group of organizers at Earthbound Productions have not stopped at the Procession of the Species. To reclaim the night, they lead Midnight Moonlight Nature Walks in local watershed parks, which is especially popular with teenagers. For winter solstice, they celebrate in the three-story Washington State Capitol Rotunda, filling it with 1,600 people who call forth the four directions, each represented by community organization being honored. Collectively creating their community's personal sense of place, they light the shortest night of the year with their singing. Through production of the Procession and other events, Sterling and Earthbound Productions have won numerous awards, including the 2002 Founder of a New Northwest Award from The Pacific Northwest Regional Council of the President's Council on Sustainable Development and a 1998-99 award for the Best in the Community Catalyst Category from the Environmental Education Association of Washington.

The Element of Fire: All manner of Fire beings in crimson and orange move next past the crowds lining Olympia's streets. A gray-costumed thunderstorm in a double stroller sits next to scary streaks of lightning; above them, a rainbow arch frames the face of the young storm's mother (Cerulean, personal notes, 2001).

Implications for Art Education

"The criteria for art and for public interaction diverge so drastically that the education of public artists and their publics (including their critics) - - together -- is crucial" (Lippard, 1997, p. 286).

The movement of art education outside of the classroom and to the streets has great ramifications for the field. Community-based art education and environmental art education provide the field with pedagogical approaches to incorporating community and environment in a k-12 curriculum. By looking at the Procession of the Species as an educational endeavor for adults and children alike, the role of art education in communities is realized and enhanced. Bappa and Bello (Clover, 2000) suggest that adult educators view the use of community arts "as an opportunity to break out of the orthodox form of teaching adults and recognize its ability to liberate the imagination and develop creative ability" (p. 19).

Exemplifying community-based art education, the Procession of the Species provides local arts teachers with the opportunity to enhance their curriculum with community arts involvement. Marché (1998) has identified three components of community-based art education: taking from, learning about, and acting upon. In the context of community arts, these components become steps in the process of community involvement, moving toward the



Figure 4. Parade walkers representing the Element of Water.

trayed in the Procession, and acting upon, in the form of participation in the environmental celebration through arts and ritual.

By taking art education outside the classroom, educational endeavors become more meaningful, strengthen community solidarity, and enforce a sense of environmental responsibility to the community involved. Recognizing the various locations where art education is already taking place will serve to expand and broaden the field as well as strengthen k-12 community-based and environmental art education approaches.

The Element of Water: An aqua river of folks with trout and salmon cutouts leaping from their heads lead the element of Water. Dancers trained in pre-Procession Sunday workshops by Samba Olywa celebrate liquid motion in a range of steps from stately and simple to simply energetic (Cerulean, personal notes, 2001).

Notes

1: The authors would like to thank Eli Sterling and Earthbound Productions for permission to use images from their website, <http://www.procession.org>.

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