

EDITORIAL

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Creative arts and resilient communities

Abstract

This editorial serves to outline key themes emerging through the articles presented in this volume. As we all navigate conflicts and challenges of various proportions, the question of resilience-building is of particular interest to socially engaged creative practitioners. Working in diverse geographical and virtual locations across the fields of theatre, textile craft, curatorial practices and cultural leadership, authors here explore these themes through their work with communities: art as a practice of cultural leadership points us towards social cohesion; engagement with art strengthens attachment to place uprooted by ecological disaster; imaginative and creative practices, whether material or performative, force us to consider marginalised forms of knowledge and expertise.

Keywords

Social cohesion, place, repair, connection, knowledge, sensory, creative ingenuity, activism

Introduction

As we, the new editorial team at the Journal of Arts and Communities, settle into our roles and present this, our third volume, we observe emerging areas of particular interest to the community of socially engaged creative practitioners amongst the unpredictable waves of economic, social, environmental and political change. It is a privilege to be able to provide a platform for these artists and researchers, who, in far-flung regions of the world, work to repair and stabilise communities affected by these changes.

This volume advances some of the thematic directions of the past two issues around social cohesion and connecting and reconnecting communities. It spotlights particular contexts for creative engagement with the arts and their related concerns: attachment to place in the wake of ecological disaster, creative manifestations of autistic experiences, and the ethics of cultural leadership. Within their different contexts, each article tackles various ways the creative arts can contribute to building resilience.

Social cohesion, connection and attachment to place.

The journal itself, as a meeting place of sorts, works to connect contributors across disciplines, practices, continents and communities. We continue a commitment to creative arts that connect communities in pursuit of social cohesion, but that also draw our attention to the challenges this might present. These challenges arise from specific constellations of individuals, their experiences, their histories and not least, their geographical location. The projects described in this volume reflect experiences within diverse communities in varied geographical and socio-political settings and address conditions for creativity and cultural leadership specific to these contexts.

Dermot Daly draws out connections between communities in various cities in the UK where his community theatre work aims to trouble the dynamics of power that label some communities as 'hard to reach' because of their socio-economic and geographical situation. We are reminded that

‘intersections which can, and rightly do, frustrate the notion of a homogenous community, and it is understood cogently that one person can be seen as a member of many communities’. Attachment to place here is challenged to be more than geographical, and layered with participants’ attachments to multiple groups. In these contexts, Daly proposes focussing on project planning strategies that prioritise engagement in the process over the outcome as a framework for cultural leadership. In the very different geographical context of rural Queensland in Australia, cultural leadership is again emphasised in support of resilience-building amongst communities, this time in the wake of environmental disaster. Following the bushfires of 2018 that ravaged rural communities, arts and creativity have played a significant role in nurturing reconnections between people and place. Sasha Mackay, Elizabeth Ellison and Wanda Bennet make the case here for a set of principles “that identify success factors or the resilience-building features of arts and cultural projects” and encourage shared learning across affected communities.

Rebecca-Eli M. Long, in their article ‘Making Meaning Material: A Textile Politics of Autistic Interests’, foregrounds a cohesion and community connection found through social and political activism within the autism community, primarily in the United States and connected online. The absence of a specific geographical location here gives way to a place where the terms for connection may be imagined together. Long draws our attention to the site of autistic ‘special interests’ - a term that provides a way to describe the intensity and depth with which some autistic people engage in particular activities - and in this case, it is the textile craft of knitting that represents the location for building and articulating resilience. The community in this context uses their textile crafting as a form of activist textile politics that offers space for resistance and autistic self-advocacy. Conversely, Joachim Aagaard Friis describes how his curatorial project in the Norwegian city of Kristiansand sought to connect audiences with geographic places via a series of site-specific artworks. Focusing on the physicality of local environments, artworks, such as Tora Balslev’s participatory performance *CITY MATTERS*, encouraged people to consider ‘the long and complex temporalities of the city’s materials’, and to reflect upon their own position within the networks of human and more-than-human relations of which our places are formed.

The Medium: Art as practice; practice as an art

The articles in this volume engage art forms (specifically theatre, textile making, and curatorial practice) as a medium for creative exploration, research, and practice. Art as practice and practice as art is central to the discourse. For instance, Friis offers a case study of the ways the arts can be engaged to increase awareness of climate issues. Specifically, the author focuses on the ‘educational turn in curating and recontextualizing it in a current curatorial practice that seeks to cultivate ecological awareness in its participants, defined as developing relationships between human and other-than-human beings through a process of sensory pedagogy’. In responding to the medium of art as practice, Mackay, Ellison and Bennet query: How can a community recover and support resilience-building from natural disasters? And Daly explores how collective forms of creativity can ‘dispel disparity and heighten inclusion’ within communities. Further to this, Long’s case study on ‘disability craft,’ an ethnographic knitting project, shares how collaborative knitting pattern design was used to explore autistic adults’ ‘special interest’ practices. The project engages participatory textile making, an activist method with political dimensions that underscore textiles’ methodological and theoretical potential for representing diverse experiences and activating social justice issues.

Through the case studies, the art and creative ingenuity of the community members serve as connectors and builders for collective imagination and innovation. Art cannot make itself. Art making takes an individual or a collective, a partnership and collaboration. The artists, collectives and projects featured in this volume created space for, participated in, spearheaded, conducted research with, and consumed art. From communities of practice in curation and theatre to participants in disability craft projects, people are pivotal to the medium. This collaboration reveals relationships between art as practice and practice as an art because it requires *demos*. The projects shared are examples of creative

ingenuity and contributions of communities in putting their collective imagination to repair, rebuild new hopes and regain old connections or establish new relationships.

Ways of knowing and acting in the world

Art as a means of knowledge-making is a thread which runs through this volume, with examples of how creativity can generate and mobilise diverse and often marginalised forms of knowledge presented by the authors. The sensory and embodied nature of creativity is identified as a key way in which art practice, as opposed to other forms of social activity, can provoke alternative understandings of oneself, others and the more-than-human world. Friis's 'sensory pedagogy' encourages a greater 'awareness of the interconnectedness of different life forms, consciousness and temporalities' by attending to the sensuousness of our encounters with everyday places and highlights the potential for embodied experience to transform how we 'sense individual or collective ecologies'. Mackay, Ellison and Bennett describe how 'the non-verbal forms of expression enabled through artmaking' also 'support people to go beyond the constraints of discursive communication', enabling young children, culturally diverse groups and survivors of trauma to express indescribable feelings and share their individual hopes and collective visions for the future.

For Long, the 'experiential and sensory' outcomes of creative practice research challenge perceptions of 'what counts as meaningful knowledge and who can create it'. As creative producers, the autistic people within Long's study present themselves as experts on the 'various ways that autistic people make meaning and engage with the world', challenging perceptions of disability as a subject for therapeutic intervention and reframing it as 'site of creativity rather than a lack'. Discussing the effects of community theatre, Daly describes how creativity can facilitate 'a level of agency' amongst participant-producers that is missing from mainstream social initiatives, by creating spaces in which under-represented groups are spoken 'with' rather than 'to'. Within the post-disaster contexts described by Mackay, Ellison and Bennett, such spaces 'enable diverse experiences of place and disaster to emerge and be acknowledged, without homogenizing voices or experiences', building a 'coherent sense of a world that was shattered' and a foundation for collective rebuilding. In this way, the embodied and sensory knowledges produced through creative practice have the potential to reshape our worlds in ways that foreground expertise and aspirations that have traditionally been suppressed.

Concluding thoughts

In these times of political and ecological instability and increasing cultural division, feelings of isolation and powerlessness are common. Whilst addressing the harm experienced by people as a result of environmental catastrophe and social inequality, the articles of Daly, Friis, Mackay, Ellison and Bennett and Long also offer hope. Detailing the impacts of their respective projects upon their collaborators' and their own well-being and agency, they present creative strategies for building supportive communities of knowledge, which prioritise lived and embodied experience. These communities, in turn, demonstrate the power of creative practice to forge new relationships, challenge cultural norms, build resilience and create new spaces of collective action and resistance.