Abstract

This multiple-case study examined the factors that influence activist artists in the production of their work. Four artists who were well established in their careers took part. The research was designed to gain insight into what motivates artists to become activists. The research methodology was rooted in qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological traditions with a descriptive, interpretative and exploratory approach, using data collected from in-depth interviews. This study sought to explore and synthesize common patterns and similarities of activist artists. Seven themes emerged: identity, place, and personality as style, life experience, world issues, community and change. Regarding activist artists using a variety of what is typically considered “style” to present their work, this study concluded that there are similarities that support the notion that activist artists can be seen as a group.
Dedication

To children, youth and adults who took and are taking the road less traveled to make a wrong right, who extend a hand unconditionally to those who are suffering and who engage in acts of kindness to all living matter on the planet in the pursuit of social justice.

- Heather B. O'Reilly

Each time a man [and woman] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he [she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

- Robert F. Kennedy

Capetown, June 6th 1966
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Chapter 1: Introduction

For an activist artist, the trick is not to allow the ritual
to become so compelling,
so much a world unto itself,
so easily repeatable, that it pushes aside
the issues that inspired it.

-Michael Brenson
Culture in Action

This research interconnects the domains of art, activism and politics, with the overall aim of exploring factors that influence activist artists and their work. Each activist artist has a story to tell and a perspective (expressed via their art) that encourages us to think more deeply about social justice and our role in relation to society. My research takes me on a journey to listen to the stories of activist artists. Thomas King (2002), a Canadian novelist, broadcaster and educator, tells us that our lives are about stories and that is all we are, there is not any centre to the world but a story. Similarly, Ben Okri, a Nigerian storyteller says:

In a fractured age...we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted, knowingly or unknowingly, in ourselves. We live stories that either gives our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (p. 46)

Stories can offer an insightful way of looking at our excessive, turbulent world and show the wealth of freedom that is available beyond the confines of our usual perceptions. Antonio Gramsci (1971), Italian socialist, political theorist, and activist, wrote that, “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship” (p. 350). His idea of hegemony is tied to capitalism, which rules through economic control and curtails the economic freedom of people in society (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci was also referring to the bigger places where people are socialized to identify and validate power. If we see these places as institutions of political persuasion, then Gramsci’s theory of education becomes important. Organizers and leaders of the
working class help build society. The working class needs to cultivate a culture of its own, which would undo the belief that status quo values represent normal values for society (Trend, 1998). Activist art may achieve one of the goals of Gramsci, which is not only to understand oneself but also to understand oneself in relation to others, and to understand others as you would understand yourself (Said, 2001). Giving yourself to activist art means feeling the discomfort of indecision and allowing it to become a condition while your responses evolve. And it is into the world of activist art that an increasing number of artists, overwhelmed by the social and political conflicts around them, want to go (Brenson, 1995). The stories of activist artists and their pursuit of “freedom” and social justice for all people are important to understanding their art, and are useful for other artists, activists and educators (Barndt, 2006).

**Key Terms**

The terms activist art, political art, social justice, visual culture, postmodernism, and critical thinking are fundamental to this study. These terms are defined in various ways, although for the purpose of this research, they are defined as follows.

**Activist Art**

Activist art is the response of artists to injustice toward human beings and the planet. Ideologies are found at the root of activist art. These ideologies include important issues and values that artists seek to change and scenarios they want to illuminate. Leo Tolstoy, one of the greatest novelists, viewed genuine [activist] art as infectious, meaning that a complete work of art establishes for its audience what its author has experienced or imagined. The essential ingredients for genuine art are diverse: they communicate, aspire to inform the viewer, and disclose something original while engaged in the process of their subject matter (Mounce, 2001). Artistic communication involves dialogue between the artist, the audience, and the work. “The
consciousness that an artist derives from producing a work and the consciousness that audiences derive from inspecting it are related to the totality of their respective worlds” (Clignet, 1985, p. 15). Art is a form of communication, and activist art communicates by giving expression to what an artist feels about injustice in order to impact others with a similar feeling.

Activist art is process, rather than object or product oriented in its form and object (Felshin, 1995). Throughout the process, activist artists are engaged in discourse and dialogue around issues of public art making, and the dialogue is as important as the projects themselves (Olsen, 1995). Moreover, artists see activist art as a form of work that is pliable and forward-thinking rather than fixed and unchanging (Kester, 1998). As a practice, it usually occurs in a public place as opposed to an art-world business. In addition, the form incorporates such interventions as performance activities, exhibitions, media events and installations. Bridging art and life is sometimes complex: for example; there can be challenges in gaining permission from private and public owners in order to use space, forming partnerships, and addressing community populations to offer them a voice in the creation of artworks (Olsen, 1995). Activist art may upset its audience, regardless of its intention to inspire. Activist art seeks to discover the way things really are or the way they should be. Activist art adheres to Glatzberg’s (2006) truth principle: “Not merely must truth obtain in virtue of word-to-world relations, but there must be a thing that makes each truth true (p. 16).” Activist art points beyond itself, through convincing those it reaches to challenge its targets, not itself (Danto, 1991).

**Political Art**

Although all art may be considered to have political underpinnings, the term political art is used in this research in a specific way. Political art addresses societal upheaval and offers a critical lens in periods of cultural and political turmoil. Various authors see political art as
occurring where works of art build or destroy perceptions that are believed in all facets of media and beyond. Political art suggests ideals and deliberately warns about mass delusional leaders, unthinking obedience, good and evil. An artist operating politically is not one who only pontificates but one who is an active member in society. It is true that political ideas and political thoughts are essential elements in political art. The symbols of the good, the bad and the ugly emerge in political art and play a role in explicating the meaning of issues and circumstances in society. For that reason, political art infuses its ideas and principles into the senses and morals of people’s lives (Caruso, 2005; Group Material, 1990; Hersch, 1998; Schlossman, 2002).

As one aspect of contemporary art, political art may also identify closely with political anthropology, that branch of anthropology that deals with origins, forms, and practice of politics or political authority. Political anthropology has an interest in cultural and political identity multiculturalism, gender, post-communism and political institutions which taken together are making anthropology more political (Lewellen, 1983). Political anthropology helps provide the theoretical base for questions raised by political art. Our lives are “directed through the questions we ask. Questions raised reveal several fundamental issues that plague us, as well as identify our particular interests piqued on the course of a day or throughout our lifetime” (Bolin, 1996, p. 7).

Social Justice

The term social justice refers to a vision of society in which the sharing of resources is equitable and all people are entitled to be physically and psychologically safe and secure (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). This includes a society where people are able to develop to their fullest capacity and able to interact within community democratically. Social justice involves people who have a sense of social responsibility towards others.
The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviours in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are part. (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p. 2)

Research exploring what good citizenship is and what good citizens do, in democratic education programmes was conducted by Westheimer & Khane (2004). This research identified programmes in the United States and Canada that promote democracy through schooling. As a result, three visions emerged: (a) the personally responsible citizen, (b) the participatory citizen, and (c) the social-justice oriented citizen. For Westheimer, the third kind of citizen is one who critically assesses social, political and economic structures and seeks ways for change. In educational institutions where social justice is emphasized, “students are prepared to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustice” (Westheimer, 2005, p. 29). The resulting transformative work is seen as a collective effort related to people’s lives and issues in their community.

Educators who support the teaching of social justice see it as a way to prepare students to use knowledge and analytic skills they develop to identify ways to treat people more humanely and fairly. Many educators see social justice involving the critique of societal inequalities and strive to create socially just conditions within schools (Westheimer & Khane, 2007).

Visual Culture

The term visual culture refers to multiple forms of visual content where the content migrates from one form to another. Visual culture could refer to, for example, print, graphics, television, film, music, internet, digital media, fine art, photography, fashion and architecture. It is associated with visual events, often in interaction with technology, through which the participant seeks pleasure, information or meaning.
It has been agreed that the visual culture that merits inclusion as the objects of serious study...includes print advertising, billboards, product packaging and other commercial design, television commercials, television shows, movies, buildings, shop window design, zines, anime and Manga, Web sites, even pop-up ads on the Internet—in short, the consciously designed visual environment. (Vallance, 2008, p. 39)

Visual culture is an important direction for contemporary educators who are dedicated to exploring social justice issues and promoting democratic values throughout their teaching (Darts, 2004). Arguing for visual culture education, Tavin (2003) writes, “The analysis and interpretation of popular culture should engage students in confronting specific and historical, social, and/or economic issues. This challenges students to become politically engaged in real life issues” (p. 200). Justice Bruce Wright states, “Participating in the system doesn’t mean that we must identify with it, stop criticizing it, or stop improving the little piece of turf on which we operate” (Group Material, 1990, p. 1). It is suggested that one significant area in crisis in democracy is education (Group Material, 1990). The art world usually does not want to talk about politics, yet every social or cultural relationship is a political one. A two-year study on social political beliefs of art students indicated their invisible beliefs surface when they are engaged in doing art. The resulting consciousness assists students’ understanding of their responsibility in society (Albers, 1999).

Visual culture means that the concepts that define culture are shaped by images and symbols that surround us. In particular, words have become symbols that breach the boundaries of traditional language with pictures and images driving our understanding. Possibly the influence of rapid movement and instantaneous flick of images has intentionally placed the visual aspect of writing and reading in the background and vision and touch have been integrated (Düttmann, 2002). Visual culture also encourages the expression of particular sub-cultures within the larger community. One of the important tasks of visual culture education is to understand how these intricate images come together, as they are not drawn from one medium or in one place. Visual
culture directs our attention away from structured, formal viewing settings like the theatre or museum to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life (Mirzoeff, 1998). The study of visual culture is an attempt to “theorize the visual as part of a general theory of communications, not just a specialized activity” (Duncum, 2002a, p. 16).

Postmodernism

Postmodernism refers to the belief that a correct description of reality is impossible and assumes that all truth is limited, subjective and constantly evolving. When speaking of postmodernist beliefs:

We must reconcile ourselves to a paradoxical-sounding thought: namely, the thought that we no longer live in the modern world. The modern world is now a thing of the past...the post-modern world... has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what it is, but only in terms of what is has just-now-ceased to be. (Toulmin, 1982, p. 254)

Postmodernism is a cultural phenomenon and is the challenging of convention, the mixing of styles, the tolerance of ambiguity, emphasis on diversity and the acceptance of innovation and change (Beck, 1993). Beck’s views coincide with the sentiment of Lyotard (1983), which is that “the post modern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)” (p. 46). The world of postmodernism would be one in which the un-presentable is presented. Postmodern thinkers agree that it is possible collectively to reach for the unattainable, seeking new presentations not for the sake of pleasure but to present a more intense sense of the unpresentable. Postmodern artists, in principle, are not governed by existing rules. Their work cannot be judged by applying familiar concepts in art such as rules of painting. The existing rules are exactly what the artist is exploring and reacting against (Lyotard, 1983).

Postmodernism can supply educators with a platform for critical thinking by equipping them with new directives to question the meaning of narratives and how they are constructed.
One notion shared by several postmodernists is that all worldviews are political (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Lyotard, 1983).

**Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking raises questions, identifies logical flaws in arguments, searches for evidence to support claims and explores consequences of proposed actions (Noddings, 2004). Critical thinking is “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis, 1987, p. 10).

Critical thinking entails a creative dimension. In certain instances, it lends itself to questioning viewpoints of others, breaking rules, and re-arranging elements of thought. In this way critical thinking begins to present the un-presentable as noted by Lyotard (1983). “Our ability to reason and think critically has been viewed, and continues to be viewed today, as our highest tool, the best tool we have in order to judge what good arguments are” (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p. 3). Critical thinking is important since it allows people to question unsubstantiated truth claims prior to making life choices. By helping people to become more critical in thought and action, progressively minded educators can help learners to see the world from different perspectives and to act accordingly (Ross, 2003). Critical education can increase freedom and enlarge the scope of human possibilities (Burbules & Berk, 1999). The concept of critical thinking refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of society. Therefore critical thinkers must be able to think for themselves to arrive at an ideological position they consider a personal truth. Truth is the aim of assertion. A person making an assertion, aims to say something true (Dummett, 1959; Glatzberg, 2006). It is important to give students the central position of power in making decisions, which encourages them to be autonomous people (Friere, 1970, 1985).
critically helps us to question alternate viewpoints and to think in new ways.

**The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence activist artists in the production of their work. I focused on activist artists who were well established in their careers. By exploring these artists’ lives and work, I hoped to gain insight into what motivates artists to become activists. It was intended that these insights would contribute to the scholarly literature on this topic. Examining influential factors such as how activist artists see themselves socially and politically may lead to a deeper understanding about activist art. This examination is important for art education, as it is only through education that productive change can be realized (Trend, 1998). The detailed views of activist artists’ processes may help teachers design instructional strategies that will increase their success in integrating activist art activities and ideals into their instructional programs.

**Research Questions**

This research serves to respond to the following questions:

1. What motivates artists to become activists?

2. What influences the intentions, content, and presentations of activist artists’ work?

3. Activist artists use a variety of what is typically considered “style” to present their work. Are there similarities that support the notion that activist artists can be seen as a group?

   Max van Manen (1997), reminds us that using personal experiences as a starting point allows for the opportunity to draw on these when approaching others who have had similar experiences. My life experiences as an activist artist may help to open up dialogue possibilities.
A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. (Dilthey, 1985, p. 223)

The experience of being an activist artist is present in my research, although my purpose is not to trouble the artists with my own biography. This research is an exploration of four activist artists who offer insight regarding the factors that influence the production of their work.

**Rationale**

Activist artists are committed to both social justice and the arts. They recognize the connection between the two, and how people’s lives can be changed by presenting viewpoints and ideas not imagined in mainstream culture (Schwarzman, 2007). There are numerous connections between activist art and social justice. Specialists in the arts field indicate that activist art’s capacity is to strengthen public culture and facilitate dialogue across communities (Brenson, 1995; Kester, 1998). Activist artists bring together visual culture and the desire for social justice. Further, voicing these injustices through activist art allows the unseen to be seen, and stories to be heard. Through activist art, the struggle and inequities of people are presented to the world community (Lott & Webster, 2006). By looking at the relationships which structure society, activist artists’ work will help education policy makers focus on issues of power and how we treat one another (Gewitz, 1998).

James Hillman, a Jungian analyst, suggests that it is no longer possible to separate the condition of the individual soul from that of the world. The patient suffering the breakdown is the world itself (Hillman, 1995). According to Gablik (1995), Hillman argues for a world of attachment, only to be told, “it is not therapy’s job to be concerned with the social, economic or political ills of the world” (p. 178). Artists are political creatures and no one can jump out of his or her skin, white or yellow, black or red and not be responsible for their time and place in the
world (Kuryluk, 1994). If the series of crises in which we have lived since the beginning of the 21st century can teach us anything, it is that this is a time to be socially responsible and there are no standards to evaluate our failed judgments (Kohn, 2003).

Pablo Picasso, one of the most recognized twentieth-century cubist painters, announced at the end of World War II, “painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy” (1946, p. 248). Bertolt Brecht, a theatre practitioner of the twentieth-century, proclaimed in support of this ideal, “art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it” (as cited in Seltz, 2006, p. 30). The crisis of society and culture continues to affect the activist art world, offering no reason for activist artists to change their judgments and responsibilities (Rosler, 1994). At the heart of activist artists’ work are profound ethical investigations. They confront the inadequacy of traditional moral truths as standards to judge what they are capable of doing, and to distinguish good from evil and right from wrong (Kohn, 2003).

Activist artists are interested in the potential for students to understand their responsibility in society through activist art education. “We should not gloss over the controversial aspects of issues such as war but should challenge our students to confront them, grapple with them, and arrive at their own conclusions” (Noddings, 2004, p. 489). We must educate students about past wars, genocide and the perpetrators of genocide (Noddings, 2004). Above all, students should be engaged through words and images. A Soviet soldier who served in Afghanistan said: “We’re invited to speak in schools, but what can we tell them? Not what war is really like, that’s for sure… I can’t very well tell the school kids about collections of dried ears and other trophies of war, can I?” (Glover, 2000, p. 168). Students must hear and know that similar stories, right down to the cutting of human ears as trophies, could be told by veterans of past and recent wars (Noddings, 2004). Knowing the educational value of even painful stories,
there is a growing core group of political artists interested in socially interactive art and building community through listening (Gablik, 1991).

Encouraging responsibility is also currently being approached through a study of visual culture (Duncum, 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Freedman, 2000, 2003; Tavin, 2003). Visual culture is an important direction for contemporary educators who are dedicated to exploring social justice issues and promoting democratic values throughout their teaching (Darts, 2004). The increasing importance of visual signs in everyday life and the broad cultural and social dynamics attendant to these developments present new challenges. Opportunities across and within the academic disciplines can present, “The analysis and interpretation of popular culture [and] should engage students in confronting specific and historical, social, and/or economic issues. This challenges students to become politically engaged in real life issues” (Tavin, 2003, p. 200).

Group Material (1990), an artist’s collaborative, was founded as a constructive response to the unsatisfactory ways art was being taught, exhibited, and distributed in American culture. Their response to art education is that every social or cultural relationship is a political one, yet the art world usually does not want to talk about the political. Group Material (1990), echoes the opinion of Justice Bruce Wright who believed that we must continue to criticize our society and encourage students to express their beliefs through art. Such a challenge in art education will help students, educators and schools understand their role in a larger society. They will develop astute social and political awareness (Albers, 1999). As an educator with a passion for activist art it may be possible to discover ways to make activist artist’s process accessible to schools, as well as to inform educators of the value of presenting their art in the classroom.
Summary

In the introduction I spoke of my interest in the domains of art, activism, and politics with the overall aim of exploring factors that influence activist artists and their work. My interest in telling stories is in line with Aboriginal storytellers, who believe there is a proper place and time to tell a story (King, 2003). Now it is the time to tell the stories of four activist artists. Though the issues are complex and multi-faceted, activist artists view their art primarily as a series of engagements with social justice issues. Activist art is a necessary element in the constellation of events and tendencies that expose injustices. Dissolving the stable boundaries of public education in order to expose students to more controversial issues might offer students opportunities to create change in their daily lives. When we engage in speaking out about social issues such as class struggle, racism and white privilege, immigration, sexism, heterosexism, transgender oppression, religious repression, anti-Semitism, Islamism, ableism, ageism, environmental oppression, we come to know ourselves better (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

An Overview of the Thesis

Chapter 2 of this thesis presents a literature review of (a) the boundaries of activist art, (b) the influences on activist art, (c) collaborative art practice, and (d) studies of activist art. Chapter 3 presents an account of the research method adopted for this study. This account includes an explanation of methods including a rationale for a qualitative approach, design of the study, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the results and findings of the study through case study explorations and stories. Chapter 5 discusses the recurring themes and the implications of those themes. In addition limitations, future research and concluding thoughts are presented.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The real issue is that art can no longer be understood as an isolated phenomenon, pursuing its own imperative without reference to the outside world.

-Eleanor Heartney
Art & Today

Introduction

Activist art has always tried to describe the human condition. Some of the most powerful art of the past sixty years has engaged in social and political causes (Selz, 2006). As there is a paucity of empirical studies associated with activist art, this chapter presents a view of the conceptual literature associated with the movement. The literature reviewed is intended to establish a context in which the study data can be examined. The first section of this chapter highlights the boundaries of activist art. Discussions on art and the artist in relation to activism; autonomy, politics and creating change through activist art are outlined. These areas are discussed with the intent of reviewing understandings of activist art and providing a context for my research study.

In the second section of this chapter, literature is examined that deals with three aspects of activist art. The first aspect is the intentions of activist artists’ work, the second their content, and the third the presentation of activist artists’ work. These three areas illustrate some of the themes that warrant further research. The second section of the literature review concludes with an abbreviated overview, which is pertinent to creating a context for studying the influences as they relate to what motivates artists to become activists.

Perspectives on collaborative participation in art are explored in the third section of this chapter. Topics include a discussion on art and collaboration, social art and
collaboration, the creation of activist art through collaboration, community and collaboration and the delicate nature of collaboration. This section of the literature review concludes with a context for working collaboratively as it relates to activist art and how collaborative practices in the art world tend to be socially and politically progressive. The final section presents an overview of scholarly work associated with activist art that will help place this study in an appropriate research context.

**Boundaries of Activist Art**

Activist art is multifaceted, and so the literature requires an examination of multiple sets of interactions. The literature also reflects how such works affect and are affected by the environment in which they are produced.

**Activism, Art, and the Artist**

There has been a long period of confusion between the concepts of “political and activist art, which is really, a confusion between political and activist artists, exacerbated by the fact that they frequently cross over unmarked boundaries” (Lippard, 1999, p. 49). Activist artists work primarily in a social and/or political context. They spend a large portion of their time thinking publicly, and are less likely to show in galleries. Activists may “snipe at the power structures from the art world’s margins, or simply bypass conventional venues to make art elsewhere” (Lippard, 1999, p. 49).

Involvement in activist art allows artists to situate themselves in new ways in different social settings, posing questions and creating new forms of disorder and modes of interaction directed towards real social change. Besides encouraging social change, each activist art project has a political intent. It has its own “political character, which produces and is produced by its historical moment and subsequent reception” (González & Posner, 2006, p. 213). Many activist
Art projects have become more important in the global spread of liberal political views, in promoting social justice issues and in demonstrations that have taken place around the world. Creating activist art plays a crucial role in challenging and contesting the realities of present day social structures. Thus, the communication of liberal political views and social justice issues has had as great an impact on the shape of the art world today as on any other aspect of social life (Dufour, 2002). Activist art can stimulate innovation, tell stories, teach moral lessons, bear witness to history, convey humour, evoke social concern or simply comment on art itself (Trend, 2007). This idea of activism in art operates in the tradition of art connected to everyday culture.

Many radical artists build their own cultural networks outside traditional art institutions. Public participation in the arts in a museum or gallery does not exist for a great many people. Increased involvement of corporations in the economic support of art channeled through government and local art institutions disenfranchises people. One outcome of these situations has been the re-imagination of the idea of the internationalist and interventionist, a type of artist who has less to do with corporate or official recognition and more with the ability to work in multiple locations and world communities (Dufour, 2002; Thompson, 2004). Artists all over the world have rejected the current social order and are busy contesting it, practically and symbolically. Many activist artists find “they can’t be bothered with the art world…and that interventionism looks to various inflections of anarchism” (Rosler, 2004, p. 218).

Artists who lean towards interventionism have created art that does not view well in galleries. Early interventionist site specific art was a direct critique of the institution of gallery space and what could be accomplished within it, symbolically, politically and experientially (Kwon, 2004; Thompson, 2004). The streets are the domains of the public, a space where citizens can participate democratically and freely. Intervention artists wanted to reach the general
public and the streets, even though the street is “at times...far more hostile than museums” (Thompson 2004, p. 17).

More recent interventionist artwork moves the site into the community as activism, with various activities, and for a different reason. At times the activity is an untethered and risk-taking intervention within communities by the artist or artistic group without official approval. This creates complex and continuing problems within communities (Kwon, 2004). By working closely with both local and world communities, interventionists are able to explore differences. They recognize that cities and streets are vital spaces for interaction, a hub for social activity and a place for artistic exchange. Ideologies and practices vary among artists and activists and they represent the differing methods of protest and public education connected to larger social movements (Thompson, 2004).

Activism in art is sometimes perceived as “anti-intellectual, anti-aesthetic, dumbed down, or reduced to the lowest common denominator” (Lippard, 1999, p. 56). Serious recognition is not given to activist artists’ creative street posters and some critics consider the work naive and simplistic. This is not fair, since the same activist artists could be and at times are producing innovative studio art for the market system. Artists who avoid the commercial domain choose to approach different avenues, making courageous choices not supported by “art educators, art critics and art funders” (Lippard, 1999, p. 56).

Although interventionist art is often associated with political demonstrations, another popular form is the street parade held on specific dates or impromptu in North America and Europe. It is a way to challenge the use of public space by celebrating community and diversity while managing to incite public participation (Lafuente, 2004). A parade is defined in the Oxford English dictionary as: “a public procession, especially one celebrating a special day or event; a formal march or gathering place of troops for inspection or display; a series or succession; a
boastful or ostentatious display.” The defining elements of the interventionist parade are
celebration and self-representation, while protest and self-representation lie at the heart of the
demonstration. “The ability of the parade to create subjectivity is where the artists’ political
aspirations lie” (Lafuente, 2004, p. 4). The notion that there is a message in art, even when
politically radical, indicates to some people that the artist is trying to camouflage her/his approach
and the viewing audience can only be rescued from this deceit by refusing to participate (Adorno
& McDonagh, 1979). To counteract this belief, the audience needs to be persuaded that activism
in art plays an important role in modes of interaction directed towards real social change. When
the audience acknowledges this, intelligent political engagement becomes a possibility, which
will enhance activist artists’ ability to produce innovative art.

**Autonomy, Art and the Artist**

A major problem for activist artists is the issue of autonomy. The political systems of
today affect an artist’s autonomy in many ways.

An authoritarian system tends to yield more diversity in quality, but less diversity in the
type of art produced…centralized political systems favour large monuments…federal
systems increase artists’ freedom offering sources of support, government support for the
arts crowds out …motivation and therewith creativity. (Frey, 2002, p. 363)

In this tradition, activist artists and art groups who create work out of line with what is defined by
government as acceptable art find it difficult to obtain government support. If their art is not
marketable they have to leave the geographic area or wait until a government with an art policy
more suited to their art comes into power (Frey, 2002). “Dangerous as it is to suggest that any
external ethical and moral forces should control artistic expressions, what about the internal
forces?” (Lippard, 1999, p. 43). According to Lippard, artists should be allowed to include
images that explicitly speak of hate and fear, even when they do not reflect the official
government line.
The output of an artist’s creative activity is dictated to a large extent by the setting within which she/he works. The people through majority voting control democratic governments and democratic government art policy concentrates on the preferences of the median voter “i.e. to the average art taste” (Frey, 2002, p. 366). Such “average taste” is unlikely to encourage either a very innovative or a very disturbing art form, in such an environment the activist artist may fail to receive government support.

On the other hand, rulers in authoritarian countries are decisive in regards to art. Greater diversity in the arts is supported and created depending on the artistic tastes of the ruler. In a centralized government that has exclusive control, an artist or art group that adheres to policy can receive funding. The requirements to receive the funds are conformity by the artist, and this reduces her/his artistic freedom and autonomy (Frey, 2002). The need to conform does not support activist art, which is complex, contradictory and challenging (Frey, 2002; Wilson, 1995).

Many aspects of individual activist artists and art groups’ experiences of government funding can be understood by the complexity of “crowded theory” (Frey, 2002). Crowded theory links intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and analyzes the effect of external interventions on intrinsic motivation. There are two types of crowding theories. The crowding-out effect appears when the external incentive introduced is so powerful that intrinsic motivation is no longer needed. The crowding-in effect appears in instances when external intervention raises intrinsic motivation. If artists perceive government support as controlling, her/his intrinsic motivation, creativity and autonomy are undermined. Depending on the extent of crowding and the amount of funding, government support may have a dampening affect on artistic creativity and autonomy (Frey, 2002).

Intrinsic artistic motivation and creativity are often undermined by government policy. Artistic innovation tends to be crowded out if government funding is contingent on how artists
behave. Government support tends to undermine innovative art in many situations; when
governments remain neutral, much more is accomplished. Government support does not
necessarily need to be curtailed but politicians and bureaucrats should not believe they can
control activism in art. Rather, the government should concentrate on setting up institutional
conditions whereby artists are given autonomy to create innovative activist art (Frey, 2002).
Ultimately the artists themselves determine the output and creativity of socially engaged art. The
more artists are creating innovative art, the more stimulating and effective activist art will be
(Lippard, 1999). Artistic autonomy gives incentive to artists to create art in response to social
disorder and social justice issues without bureaucratic smothering.

Politics, Art and the Artist

For artists who have adopted or been awarded the epithet of political artist, the question
arises as to “what is the relationship between art and politics?... and what is the relationship today
Artists who consider themselves political may make gallery/museum art with political subject
matter and or content “but may also be seen calling meetings, marching, signing petitions or
speaking...on behalf of various causes” (Lippard, 2002, p. 49). The philosopher J. J. Bernstein,
“while lamenting the limited political utility of art, also sought to redefine its social contribution
in terms of an ethical commitment” (cited in Papersteriadias, 2001, p. 74). Politics in art can
never escape from the wider political context. Political artists who are involved in the struggle
against the dominant order and who engage in the politics of opposition, dwell on the possibility
of fair politics and strive to reveal the political struggle of rhetoric (Clignet, 1985;
Papersteriadias, 2001).
The relationship of art to the political is not confined to fixed opposition but is formed in the dynamics of mutual understanding. Much of the confusion over the political meaning of art is related to the uncertain social context claimed by the artist. At times a milieu is created where the artist has not articulated the meaning of their work to their viewer (Papersteriadias, 2001). However, individual artists who use political issues as a subject for gallery based art “are privileged over the diversity of creative practices that attempt to engage and subvert dominant cultures and institutions, whether it is global capitalism or specifically the art market” (Swinson, 2001–2002, p. 60). The artist who chooses to work outside the traditional artistic institutions may find herself/himself in an antagonistic situation with the status quo. An ongoing relationship between art and politics is of value when the integrity of both voices is acknowledged. From a perspective of an idealist, one who pursues high principles and goals, political art may be a witness to political struggle where democracy is not practiced, or be a precursor to change not yet seen.

**Change, Art and the Artist**

“Do you think anyone else cares enough to change the art world? If artists don’t do it, who do you think will?” (Lippard, 1999, p. 47). The impetus to initiate change does not come out of nowhere. It comes from the pressure of unsolved problems and urgencies in society and a reaction to those in power that suppress revolutionary practice. The art world will not change if the world is not changed. Change appears through the avant-garde and there is no single avant-garde. There are “plural historical cells, groupings, networks and movements” (Ray, 2007, p. 241). Avant-garde is defined in the The Oxford Dictionary of English as new and experimental ideas and methods in art, music, or literature; a group of artists, musicians, or writers working

The emergence of the artistic avant-garde contributes to new revolutionary situations. “The role of the [new artistic] avant-garde is to confirm the institution of autonomy and accomplish the rescue of art [and social justice issues] under capitalism” (Ray, 2007, p. 246). The job at hand is to approach the notion of the artistic avant-garde as a directional force, as a deliberate break with business as usual and see where this might take the artist. This new directional force can be restructured and reinvented in new ways at any time.

The new directional force is not for every artist. The objections raised may be that the avant-garde artist is too extreme, zealous or aggressive. The split and choices that are made by artists will cause artistic divisions, hardships and anger. Any decision to support a social justice cause not favoured by the status quo triggers forms of anxiety (Clignet, 1985; Ray, 2007). Contributing to this anxiety is the fact that artists who have an interest in the re-emergence of avant-garde art, especially activist art, are not receiving a welcoming embrace from art institutions. “If the radical force and aspirations of past avant-gardes would be remembered…this is how things appear and are bound to appear” (Ray, 2007, p. 250).

The directional force of avant-garde art is not to manipulate and ask people to behave in an involuntary way. It is offered as a bond, a commitment, and closeness existing out of experience, and passion to aim for change in the social and art system. Artists have the power to humanize social issues and offer people confidence that they can be the bearers of change for the future. However, before she/he embarks on such a role there may need to be some kind of agreement on the position of avant-garde art and its artistic autonomy (Paperstergiadis, 2001; Ray, 2007). To use the term avant-garde does not mean a return to vanguardism, which attempted to place itself at the center of a movement. Although the word appears to have become degraded
over the years it has re-emerged to implement a tradition. Until there is another way to express it in a more acceptable way no one should oppose its presence (Ray, 2007). This directional force has not disappeared. Instead, artists are restructuring and reinventing avant-garde and giving it new names and new forms. In common with anti-capitalists the new avant-garde artists are incensed over past wrongs and have moved beyond pessimism to organize responses (Ray, 2007). As individual artists move toward art being more than decoration, the audience has to see it as expressing other kinds of philosophical and political meaning without it ceasing to be artistic (Clignet, 1985; Price, 1993; Ray, 2007).

The price the avant-garde activist artist pays for revolutionary and innovative artistic ideas is a certain amount of alienation, living on the edge of society, and possible exile or self-exile. This alienation is collective and is experienced with other artists who have made similar decisions (Clignet, 1985; Osmolovsky, 2004; Ray, 2007). Wherever social justice movements are not impassioned to change society, activist artists realize their collective alienation is fragile. In addition there is risk and increased exposure to legalized violence. Yet, she/he decides to create innovative activist art in the tradition of the avant-garde and not think about the negative (Clignet, 1985; Ray, 2007; Lippard, 1999; Leger, 2008). The boundaries of activist art, including autonomy, politics and implementing change in society, as well as the art world, will provide inspiration for artists to make choices and take risks because they have made an ethical commitment to change (Clignet, 1985; Osmolovsky, 2004; Ray, 2007; Lippard, 1999; Leger, 2008).
Influences on Activist Art

Intentions, Art and the Artist

The artist’s intention in the making of her/his art begins with the contrast between inspiration and the rational process of artistic creativity. An artist’s intentions are necessary to her/his art making and are part of the creative process. In addition, the blending of spontaneous and deliberate, planned and unintentional moments are part of the artist’s creative process. We should not assume that every aspect of the phenomenon of artistic creation must be explained. Not all artistic production is a matter of creativity in the sense of an activity producing highly innovative and valuable results. Artists also prolifically produce formulaic stories and reproductions of their work. The expression “artistic creation” is used to cover routine and conventional art-making as well as exceptional creative breakthroughs. However, intentions are necessary to the creation of art (Clignet, 1985; Danto, 2000; Livingston, 2006).

The creation or production of art is a matter of intentional activity. Assuming that acting intentionally entails the intention to perform that action, or at least the intention to try to do, it would follow that intentions are necessary to the making of art. (Livingston, 2006, p. 34)

The link between the intention and the product may or may not differ from the accepted standards of society. The artist acts on her/his intention, and produces results matching that intention. However, there are challenges to the general idea that art making must be intentional. For example, a surrealist exercise *le cadaver exquis* or exquisite corpse illustrates this point. Each artist completes one segment of a work, with any parts previously finished being concealed from that person. Even though the artists cooperatively act on a shared scheme of taking turns in completing the image, they do not see the products of the others’ efforts. Therefore, they cannot have intentions with regard to all of the emergent figure’s features although they do share some intentions (Livingston, 2006). One unifying plan for justifying the intention in art is “to contend
that being intentionally created is a necessary condition of an item’s status as an artifact, and the latter is in turn a condition on being a work of art” (Livingston, 2006, p. 40).

Completing a finished artwork and presenting it to the public is usually prompted, guided and informed by intentions, the content of which are the artist’s plans. The latter could emerge on the spur of the moment, often subconsciously, in the process of the artist’s active engagement with artistic media and materials (Clignet, 1985; Danto, 1991; Livingston, 2006). Artists may not be fully aware of everything that they are purposefully doing; intentions can have a blind spot. Yet there are serious problems with this line of thought. Intention falls on both sides of the broad contrast between conscious and subconscious and there may be important distinctions to be drawn with the particular place of consciousness (González & Posner, 2006; Livingston, 2006).

Both future-directed intentions and approximate intentions fulfill a range of functions in the artist’s activities. “Artists are hardly likely to set to work suddenly with a blank, unspecified intention to make some art” (Livingston, 2006, p. 43). The contents of an artist’s intentions, conscious and subconscious, can be broadly described in terms of both a large and small plan. This is not to say that when the artist plans the beginning of a work of art she/he knows exactly what the final product will be. Sometimes plans emerge in and through the artist’s activity, guided by critical ideas but leaving many factors open (Clignet, 1985; Danto, 2000; González & Posner, 2006; Group Material, 1990; Livingston, 2006.)

**Content, Art and the Artist**

Works of activist art are always about something. As artists create works of art that have strong content, they assume that the viewer can tell the work apart from ordinary things as easily as the viewer can tell one ordinary thing from another (Danto, 2000; Livingston, 2006). In Danto’s argument that centres on Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box he pointed out that there are two
senses of content. There are the Brillo cartons that physically contain soap pads, and the Brillo carton that we speak of as the content of a work of art. The artwork may physically include ordinary objects: chairs, sticks, boots, and clothes that we speak of as the content of a work of art. Many works of art contain content in both which then contribute to the larger meaning of the work. Content is more than visual quality (Danto, 2000.) Content is the “expression, meaning, and significance…of a work of art” (Ocvirk, Stinson, & Philip, 2001, p. 250). To a great degree the meaning of an artwork is identified with what the artist does in the work in virtue of her/his intentions. The artist continues to remind the viewer that identifying this meaning does not exhaust the acceptable interpretation of her/his work. This notion of meaning as basic content is also identified as work meaning. Although not a precise analysis, work meaning is whatever artistic content a work possesses, including conventions, context, linguistic, cultural, and creative ideas of the artist (Stecker, 1997). Having said that we need to be reminded of the formulation of ideas and the process of art. It takes attentive research to reveal the many fundamental cues that reveal the content of art.

**Presentation, Art and the Artist**

The innovative content of activist art creates a dilemma. How does the artist find a way of presenting her/his work that is physically and financially possible without compromising the message? Many artists at any particular time, work within the constraints set by whatever space they are using. But, significantly, it is a distinctive feature of many innovative works of art that the artist extends or pushes against the limitations of that space and the conventions of the environment (Wilde, 2007). An increasing number of artists are using more varied methods of production: installation, site-specific interventions and digital media. In the midst of this environment questions continue to surface regarding the importance of the gallery as an
institution. Equally, it is thought by many artists that when contemporary art is placed in galleries and museums, the art loses its sense of meaning and becomes part of the capitalist market (Hughes, 2005). Artists seek space for their innovative artwork and in some instances have replaced the gallery with new spaces to avert involvement in a commercial environment. On the other hand, there are organizations such as the Chinati Foundation, a contemporary art museum that preserves and presents permanent large-scale installations for a limited number of artists (Chinati, 2009).

Sometimes the presentation and space of the artwork is of prime importance. For example, the activist artist Liz Canner created a site-specific public art video projected on the façade of the Saskatoon police service building. She addressed troubled Aboriginal–police relations in a neo-colonial context in which police are suspected of causing the deaths of Aboriginal men. Canner said, “It’s about hoping that the people who are watching the projection will meet each other and talk and that there’ll even become just within the audience and some form of civic engagement” (Latta, 2005, p. 46). The outcome of this experience was that the viewers were standing on the sidewalk and street, watching the video as part of the articulation of the political process (Latta, 2005).

Artists in Chelsea, New York, chose a space outside the traditional gallery, a space having no windows, no heat, no staff, and no rent. It was suggested the real estate listing would read something like this, “Approximately 800 square feet, ground floor, no windows, no heat, no drain pipe under the sink (slop bucket required), constant traffic noise, fine coating of black gunk on everything” (Kennedy, 2008, p. 1). Although situated in an affluent artistic community, the old warehouse structure is colonized by artists and referred to as the no-profit gallery or the autonomous gallery. There is no sign; the gallery is open Tuesdays to Saturdays but most of the time no one is attending it. If you like the art inside you call the artist’s telephone number on the
cards lying on the floor. The artists hope that the viewer appreciates the cultural value of the space in the fast pace of development in the booming upper-scale area of Chelsea (Kennedy, 2008).

Many non-gallery artists see the gallery and museum space as limiting on their ever-changing artwork. A term, which has been used recently in the same context as activist art, which is, “socially engaged practice, an arts practice which directly engages with social and political issues” (Hughes, 2005, p. 31). Artwork that is referred to as socially engaged practice deals with social issues and involves people; the majority of the artwork is produced and presented outside the gallery space. By placing the artwork outdoors it becomes part of the everyday environment, and viewers are able to experience the work in a space where they are apt to be more comfortable. “The whole experience is not just about viewing an object but about finding the work, the process of arriving and how the viewer interacts with the work; for example looking at or moving around within the space” (Hughes, 2005, p. 36).

Artists, gallery owners, and the public gravitate to wherever innovative art is occurring. It is generally recognized that the platform of some contemporary artists is to create shocking forms of presentation. The art is specific, and it relates to the real world: politics, medicine, science, business and the environment. Another way of presenting innovative artwork is creating a milieu, which encompasses activities of several people united in a “disjunctive synthesis” (Osmolovsky, 2004, p. 645). This notion of disjunctive synthesis intertwines different forms of activity that differ completely from each other, “musical, political, theatrical, analytical, editorial and curatorial” (p. 648). This type of artwork has turned from a presentation of visual images into a presentation of milieu and situations. In the past such presentations were linked to political activity. In rejecting gallery and museum space for art presentations some current artists, “claim in favour of situations and communications in the present, and thus aspire to become a permanent
event in art rather than a recollection of an event stored in a museum” (Osmolovsky, 2004, p. 648).

Whether art is influenced by politics, or by the ups and downs of everyday life, the artist’s desire is to touch public consciousness and spread the experience of art in the public domain. In the contemporary world, artists find themselves in dynamic exchanges between local and global communities (Papastergiadis, 2007). As the temporal and social context changes, so does the way in which art is presented as it interprets and understands the shifting processes of the everyday.

**Collaborative Art Practice**

**Art and Collaboration**

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in collective action throughout the art world. Different kinds of collaboration between artists, and between artists and non-artists, are increasing as an established working method. For some artists, artistic work naturally involves the joint activity of a number of people and it may be a conscious choice based on value judgments. “Collaboration in art is as much bound up with value–artistic value, the value of artistic labour, the value–form of capitalism–as it is with politics and representation” (Roberts & Wright, 2004, p. 531). Collaboration is the space of interconnection between art and non-art, art and other disciplines, which constantly probes the boundaries of where, how, with what and with whom art is made. Theoretical discussion regarding collaboration has been in suspension in Anglo-American art for the past three decades (Roberts & Wright, 2004). However, discussion on collaborative practice in art and art’s cultural form has taken place recently (Roberts & Wright, 2004).
For some artists, collaboration is a choice based on common sense, allowing the possibility of shared resources, equipment and experience (Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007). There are many forms of collaboration: stable multiple authorship with duos, larger groups who have been together a long time, and single issue groups that dissolve when their goal has been developed and achieved. There are other collaborations with artists that involve people from different professional backgrounds: architects, sociologists, environmentalists, and others who nurture a desire to change society with their work. The collaboration within this context entails contact, confrontation, deliberation and negotiation and goes beyond individual judgment based on individual personal impressions, feelings and opinions. As well, single and double artistic collaboration have specific forms of production (Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007). The single artistic author formulates the idea and other participants’ contributions are given as part of the realization. In a double collaboration, the authors initially envision both the idea and the presentation. The idea is developed together with others who are awarded a similar status to the artistic author and together they participate in the execution of the project (Lind, 2007). Double collaborations seem to be most typical of present day collective art production (Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007; Lind, 2007).

The unique aspect of today’s artistic collaborations is the desire for self-determination, which allows artists to be a more powerful force in society and to create intellectually and emotionally stimulating work. This new side of collaboration is gaining momentum and being developed as a way for artists to create space to maneuver (Lind, 2007). This maneuvering space is referred to as collective autonomy through which strategic separatism from mainstream art systems are both a sign of protection and an act of protest (Holmes, 2004). However, some of the practices that are considered collaborative, collective, social and participatory “do more to hide differences and disagreement than they do to confront or reveal them” (Gabri, 2007, p. 128).
Involving others in a collective practice one must allow participants to question the rules in the collaborative, and above all have an equal voice to alter those rules by their engagement or their withdrawal. Conversely, collaboration risks becoming formalized when interest in collaboration increases on the part of cultural institutions (Gabri, 2007). Above all, it is vital to experiment with how humans work and live together but, as it is pointed out, “collaboration as an end in and of itself is insufficient” (Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007, p. 14).

Social Art and Collaboration

Social artistic collaboration offers an opportunity for society to reflect collectively on the issues and images that influence its behaviour and its self-understanding. Our societies are “failing and failing miserably as a result of the way artistic invention and display has been instituted” (Holmes, 2004, p. 549). Artists who have embraced social collaboration as an extension of their conceptual art practice form what avant-garde we have today. Social situations are utilized to create anti-market and politically engaged projects. The political task in socially engaged collaboration is seen to be important as an artistic gesture of resistance and opposition (Bishop, 2006). With the act of artistic resistance “there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond” (Bishop, 2006, p. 178). Collective involvement in the gesture of resistance and opposition is an attempt to reshape society.

However, serious criticism has surfaced in relation to the social art collaborative and how it is undertaken. For some, art collaboration can stand for treachery and ethical irregularities whereby the collective is serving the enemy, and is therefore not trustworthy (Lind, 2007). Artists are criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to fully represent their subjects. The emphasis on process over product is oppositional to a capitalist structure where product is the
expected outcome. Accusations and concerns are pointed at artists who work for their own interests and welfare instead of allowing a project to surface through consensual collaboration. Artists are being judged for their working process and the degree to which they represent good or bad models of collaboration (Bishop, 2006). As a result, collective process has become a key term for active participation in collaborative art. This process influences discussions about working conditions and motivation of collective cultural production. In the discussion of political art activists, “a quantitative collectivity is required as a tool to articulate political protest and to attract public attention” (Schlieben, 2007, p. 32). Positive values such as loyalty, the ability to change, altruism and solidarity are embedded into the concept of collaboration. Therefore, artists involved in an art collaborative process acknowledge the complexity of group dialogue and that it is an arduous process (Schlieben, 2007; Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007).

Socially collaborative art goes by a few names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogue art, littoral art, participatory, research-based, intervention, or collaborative art. Artists engaged in collective practices work within existing communities, establish interdisciplinary networks, and are interested more in socially creative art work than in monetary rewards. The art world is extremely competitive, artistic difference and capabilities are exploited, and acceptance of and insistence upon nonpayment for artwork prevent attempts at serious collaboration. For example, Google called illustrators to create new skins for Google Chrome, but they did not offer them any money (Schroeder, 2009). Meetings between artists and artistic creativity are likely to be “strategic rather than co-operative; deceit and bluff tend to be the rule, and teamwork the exception” moreover; the art world “prevents things from happening, including meaningful collaboration” (Wright, 2004, p. 534). Despite this situation, artists who prefer to work in an open-ended, process based work environment choose to trust each
other. While the objective and output of the artists differs, all are connected by a belief that social collaboration enables them to take collective action with their shared ideas (Bishop, 2006).

**Activist Art and Collaboration**

Present day art collaborations “operate horizontally and consist of agents from different fields; very often these collaborations lie on the border between activist, artistic and curatorial activities” (Lind, 2007, p. 27). The idea of collaboration is undergoing radical transformation. Although collaboration in the sense that has been described here has existed over the last two decades it has not been until recently that it has entered the mainstream. The collective process in the activist context “refers to an instrument for formulating a political protest and for attracting attention (Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007, p. 9). There is consistent collaboration as a conscious process among artists who use it as a working method. Groups of artists and non-artists “show a pronounced affinity with activism and other current ways of getting together around shared concerns, as well as market interest in alternative ways of producing knowledge” (Lind, 2007, p. 16).

Activist inspired methods have developed and they flourish in the context of neo-radicalism. Collaborative activist art becomes a springboard for protest against capitalistic logic and the consistent steering of politics by economics. The arts then become the arena for ideological discussion. Under present conditions the production of most social resistance is considered illegal and as a result the public condemns it. Collaborative activist art is able to operate as a venue where the emphasis on the political is permitted (Lind, 2007).

**Community and Collaboration**

Collaborative art groups, focusing on social issues, which are of concern to the
artists and to the communities in which they have chosen to work, are referred to as community specific art projects. Community can be defined in relation to space or the boundaries of institutions, for example, urban and rural neighbourhoods, prison populations and trade unions, etc. Traditionally, a community has been defined as a group of interacting people living in a common location and often referred to as a group that is organized around common values and social cohesion (The Oxford Dictionary of English online, 2005, “Soanes & Stevenson, 2nd Edition Revised,” Para.1 & 2.). Community takes on a life of its own, as people become free enough to share and get along. The sense of connectedness and formation of social networks comprise of what has become known as social capital. The central premise of social capital is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all “social networks” and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other, which is “norms of reciprocity” (Putnam, 2000). Community also refers to people united by specific issues such as free-speech or by certain identities: racial, ethnic, gender or class-based. Of course, these areas are superimposed and become complicated (Kester, 1995).

Hence, community specific art projects are created in direct partnership with a local community and address such urban and rural issues as low income housing, homelessness and poverty, HIV/AIDS research and care, labour and workers’ rights, minority youth leadership, ecology and the environment, and woman’s achievements. These concerns offer a genuine point of contact and a place of mutual interest between the artist, her/his art, the viewer and the community. Most important is the dialogue, which occurs between an artist and a community group. When identified in relation to a social problem, the dialogue is often associated with marginalized and disenfranchised communities (Kwon, 2004). The community in community specific art projects at times refers to people marked as culturally, economically, or socially
different either from the artist or from the viewer for the particular project (Kester, 1995; Kwon, 2004).

Art created through the dialogue with marginalized groups may also be known as “art in the public interest.” Art in the public interest is activist and communitarian in spirit. Its method of expression includes a variety of traditional media, including sculpture, and painting, as well as non-traditional media such as page art, billboards, street art, guerilla theatre, video protest actions and demonstrations, dances, environments, oral histories, poster and murals. In particular, art in the public interest acts to promote social justice and thereby encourages community coalition-building in pursuit of social justice (Kwon, 2004). Artists who are engaged in this type of art “aspire to reveal the plight and plead the case of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged, and to empower what they [the artists] view as humanitarian values” (as cited in Kwon, 2004, p. 105).

Equally important, many artists involved in this type of art do not view their work within a historical framework of public art. Rather, they create within their art practice a contemporary form of socially conscious, activist political art, reflective of the history of the avant-garde (Kwon, 2004). Community-based art is not necessarily the same as public art. The public artist acts together with architects, urban and rural planners and agencies concerned with the administration of public buildings and spaces. The community-based public artist acts with social service agencies and social workers within the community. Thus the artist and the community are connected through professional institutions and common ideologies (Kester, 1995).

At the same time, within the art community, others are questioning the rhetoric of community artists who situate themselves as representative agents with no intervention of expressivity on the part of a given community. It is an abusive claim of artistic exclusive rights to the detriment of the community for the advancement of the artist’s personal agenda. Certain collaborative community artists, “claim the authority to speak for the community in order to
empower [herself] himself politically, professionally and morally” (as cited in Kester, 1995, p. 3). In these cases, pressure and intervention from institutions may hinder a healthy relationship between artist and community.

Another problem of politically motivated community specific art is the failure to venture beyond what is normally accepted. Although artists wish to produce work that is not accepted by the status quo they sometimes lack the courage to step beyond the boundaries. Stepping beyond the boundaries means not knowing what the result is (Kwon, 2004). “As the artistic, political and ethical pitfalls of community [specific] art become more visible, the need to imagine innovative possibilities of togetherness, and collective action, indeed of collaboration and community becomes more pronounced” (Kwon, 2004, p. 153).

Studies of Activist Art

Introduction

There is a lack of empirical research that explores what motivates artists to become activists and what influences the intentions, content and presentation of their work. Two studies worthy of consideration are the work of Werner and Aagerstoun, two American researchers of activist art. Both are published dissertations: Werner (2004) explored “The Sociology of Contemporary Activist Art (1990–2003)” assuming the role of critic in a reflexive relationship to her participants. Aagerstoun (2004) examined the “Cultural Intervention of Activist Art and Discourses of Oppositionality in the United States (1980–2000)” assuming the role of participant observer.
**Werner’s Study**

Werner’s (2004) study is an attempt to develop more rigorous ways of writing about activist art, in order to better understand both art and activism within the area of sociology. The relationship between activist art practices and institutional contexts such as funding agencies, art schools, galleries and museums is considered. How activist art has informed Werner’s practice as a sociologist and educator is discussed. Werner reviews a range of practices and identifies three ideal types of contemporary activist art. These are: (a) social movement art, (b) new genre public art, and (c) subversive palette art. Her presentation of three case studies is based on participation and interviews. Werner provides a form of critical distancing by drawing on insights from the sociology of art.

**Werner’s Findings**

The findings indicated that the defining characteristics of activist art, such as a spirit of vitality and boldness, are shared by (a) social movement art, (b) new genre public art and (c) subversive palette art. In the matter of social movement art, the artwork is part of a committed collective effort and promotes direct action leading to social change. In new genre public art, the artwork is part of an amorphous progressive agenda but is not directly connected to a grassroots or social movement. In terms of subversive palette art, the art is connected to an overwhelming and prolonged effort to diversify representation in the cultural realm. Artistically, the work encompasses aesthetic and art world conventions, while integrating critical social content (Werner, 2004).

The three case studies drew on the following participants (a) Platform, an art collective, (b) Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an artist based in New York City, and (c) Reclamation Artists, a large group of Boston artists. At the conclusion of the three case studies Werner suggested the
studies support the defining characteristics of activist art which are: (a) a spirit of associative logic and metaphoric play, (b) a bold reframing of a social issue, (c) a critique of the accepted notions of art, and (d) a desire to transform perceptions and status quo power dynamics (Werner, 2004).

In recognizing cultural work as a potential tool for social change, while also acknowledging the social construction of art, Werner supported sociologist Janet Wolff’s claim that “there is no contradiction between the view that art is socially and ideologically constructed and the view that artistic and cultural intervention in politics is a possibility” (p. 150). Through the research about activist artists it was discovered that creating life-affirming institutions meant demanding they be humanizing spaces that support personal and political transformation. A life affirming space is one that encourages associative, reflective, and engaged pragmatic work. By digging into the common ground between art, sociology, and activism the researcher arrived at understandings that assist in articulating and refining a creative sociological, activist practice (Werner, 2004).

This study of contemporary activist art brought Werner a deeper appreciation of sociology as a practice. The study revealed core struggles within sociology, struggles over what constitutes reliable sociological knowledge and what end this knowledge might serve. Werner’s study prompted this researcher to explore whether there are core struggles in activist artists lives. Werner’s research approach assumed the role of critic in a reflexive relationship to her participants; this researcher’s approach explored and related the stories of activist artists in the pursuit of discovering what motivates artists to become activists. The common denominator was the exploration of the activism within art and the artist.
Aagerstoun’s Study

The study by Aagerstoun, (2004) explored the intersection of definitions of activist art with major discourses related to art production during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. The four parts of the study considered how definitions of activism in art during this period changed when considered in conjunction with notions of transgression, postmodernism, the avant-garde and the monstrous/grotesque/abject. In part one, Aagerstoun noted that one key discursive element of the 1980s included the relationship of market forces to successful transgressivity, as well as successful activism in art. “An important feature of recent approaches to transgression is that transgression is increasingly understood as a condition of both established and emerging norms as well as of all kinds of identities and normalities” (RUBAVIČIUS, 2008, p. 69). In addition, certain forms of art put forward as activist were seen as transgressive, and debates occurred over controversial content related to social and political issues of the day. In part two, activism in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s was considered in relation of the fortunes of the artistic category of the avant-garde. Part three explored activist art portrayed as aggressive, sexual, and wounded. The final part proposed two works of art as exemplary of monstrous/grotesque/abject that can aggressively activate the erasing and misconstrued presentations of the feminine and of people of colour in dominant culture. The discussion sought to demonstrate how, in two extremely complex works of art, the monstrous/grotesque/abject raises to high profile issues of activism, postmodernism and the avant-garde (Aagerstoun, 2004).

Aagerstoun’s Findings

The ways, in which definitions of activism have been activated as discourse is tracked, suggesting that the way Foucault, (1977) sees discourse, as fusion of power and knowledge, accurately describes the process. The findings of the discursive theme of transgression in the
early eighties revealed that only a respectable number of centimeters of strong sensationalist print were needed for a work to be controversial, thus trangressive. Subsequently, at the closing of the 1980s the evidence of aesthetic transgression is established and is viewed as a genesis of public art such as guerrilla street theatre, billboards, protest and action. In the early 1990s, trangressiveness had transformed to art activism. The researcher claimed this kind of oppositionality brought to the forefront the profile of art activism by stressing homosexuality, genre and racial stereotyping and other areas of cultural concern as expressed around the abject body (Aagerstoun, 2004).

The researcher indicated this form of cultural activism could be seen as the new avant-garde. In the early 1980s, avant-garde was seen as a dirty word; however, during the 1990s the term avant-garde began to be used to describe individual artists who had stepped beyond cultural boundaries. The two works selected for focus of exemplary monstrous/grotesque/abject art were Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Temple of Confession (Aagerstoun, 2004). Two aspects of the 1996 exhibition of Sexual Politics demonstrated the durability of the The Dinner Party: fear of the overwhelming power of the work to eclipse anything near it, and its domination both of the Sexual Politics exhibition and the reception of the show and how it was physically presented. The Dinner party is an immense, multi-dimentional art work. It is not only sculpture, but painting, needlework and history of the private female world. It is a triangular banquet table measuring fifteen meters a side and celebrates in symbolic form the role of women in myth and history through a series of thirty-nine place settings (Chicago, 1979). The second work that was studied, Gómez-Peña's Temple of Confession emphasized in the militarization of the United States Mexico border and the savage globalization of economy and culture. According to Aagerstoun, The Temple of Confession took advantage of the willingness of the people to express resentment publicly about political correctness, pried open even further
the Pandora’s box of racial and ethnic antagonisms, and used stereotypes as its metaphorical
crowbar. The findings also indicated the artwork fell in line with the category of what constitutes
appropriate, effective and engaged politicized art (Aagerstoun, 2004).

The research found the assertive presence, effect and aesthetic of the
monstrous/grotesque/abject remains intact in the first part of the 21st Century despite attempts
inside and outside the art world to squash the movement. In addition, the cultural intervention of
activism and discourses of oppositionality in the United States shows that the best kind of
resistance or activism for art is “the politicized gestures that mirror, extend and enhance
expression of trangressive energy, which gather at the limits of dominant power” (Aagerstroun,
2004, p. 448). Aagerston’s research related to this researchers study of activist art. Participants in
this researchers study parallel those of Aagerstons where the participants believe a just society is
one in which the right balance of liberty and equality should be enshrined in the basic structure of
that society.

Summary

The literature in this chapter has reviewed Boundaries of Activist Art, Influences on
Activist Art, Collaborative Art Practice, and Studies of Activist Art. These issues form a
conceptual context for this study that explore:

1. What motivates artists to become activists?
2. What influences the intentions, content, and presentations of activist artists’
   work?
3. Activist artists use a variety of what is typically considered “style” to present their work. Are
   there similarities that support the notion that activist artists can be seen as a group?
Chapter 3: Method

Can there be revolutionary art without revolution?
We need to find a new word for revolution.

- Lucy Orta, Intervention Artist
  Interview with C. Ondine Chavoya
  February 2, 2004

Introduction

This chapter examines why a qualitative research methodology was the most suitable for this study and explores multiple case studies as a method of inquiry. Subsequently, the research plan discusses the collection and analysis of the data. The importance and limitations of this study are outlined in the closing section.

Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

The position of a qualitative researcher is a predisposition toward working with and through complexity rather than around and in spite of it. Qualitative researchers “embrace the challenges of turning familiar facts and understandings into puzzles” (Schram, 2006, p. 6). Qualitative methods, “permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance” (Patton, 2002, p. 227). This understanding is balanced with sound argument for proceeding with the research that shows the significance, situation, transferability, and credibility of the work (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Patton, 2002; Schram 2003; Stake 2006).

The qualitative approach used in this study relies on descriptive, interpretative and explanatory aims. First, descriptive aims provide the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting. These allow the researcher to document and describe what is happening in the participants living environment. Second, by going beyond the descriptive, interpretative aims
allow the researcher to make sense of her/his findings, offer explanations and draw conclusions.

Third, the basic premise of explanatory aims is to add depth and detail to the data. Explanatory aims identify and analyze themes and patterns including unanticipated influences related to what is happening (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003).

Other important connections in the design process were practical purpose, perceptions, and applicability. A practical purpose is focused on accomplishing something, or gaining insight into what is going on in a setting. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influenced activist artists in the production of their work. These influences included, but were not limited to, intentions, content, and modes of presentation. By exploring these artists I gained insight into what motivates artists to become activists. The discussion of practical aims flowed from the primary focus of the research purpose (Schram, 2003). Perception presents the researcher with evidence of the world, not as the world is thought to be but as it is lived. Thus, understanding the everyday life of artists is a matter of understanding how they perceive and act upon their experiences in life (Schram, 2003; Siedman, 2006; van Manen, 1997). The significance of applicability allows the researcher to get at the focus of the research facilitating “owning their study” which is “embracing more fully the epistemological assumption that the significance of their study lies not within the data per se but in the meaning they make of the data” (as cited by Schram, 2003, pp. 130-131.) The participant responses to their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge allowed me to investigate and interpret important categories of meaning. In addition I was able to understand how a particular context in which the participants’ work influenced their behaviour and actions.

Qualitative research “describes and analyzes people’s individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions. The researcher interprets phenomena in terms of the meanings that people assign to them” (McMillan & Schumacher 2006, p. 315). Qualitative
researchers care about social issues including those associated with democratic society. “We see democracies as depending on the exchange of good information, which our studies can provide. But we also see democracies as needing the exercise of public expression, dialogue, and collective action” (Stake, 2006, p. 86). This idea of action corresponds to the dynamic that takes place in each of the participants in the study throughout their artistic lives. This is the necessary mind work that carries fieldwork toward a more proactive stance of sustained, intentional inquiry (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Schram, 2003). The consideration given to detail in data gathering, communicating and observing accomplished by the researcher are paramount in obtaining an understanding and ability to interpret the participants meanings and constructs within specific social, political, cultural, economic and other contextual factors (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003). By implementing the above interpretative inquiry in addition to descriptive inquiry, whereby the researcher documents the experiences of participants in the study a finer focus on what motivates artists to be activists could be achieved. In addition the issue of voice is pivotal to qualitative research. Instead of being research subjects, the people in the research setting are given voice allowing them to become co-investigators. This allows the researcher to uncover reliable and important artistic experiences from their individual and personal perspectives (Patton, 2002).

The Design of the Study

Multiple Case Study

A case study focused on a phenomenon seeks the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003; Stake, 2006; van Manen, 1998). This focus prompts the researcher to establish an understanding of how the concept or phenomenon of interest might exist across settings or contexts (Schram, 2003). In a case study design, the data
analysis is concentrated on one phenomenon, where the researcher chooses to understand the phenomenon in depth (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). A case is an arena to bring many functions and relationships together for study. Moreover, the reason for delving into what is and what is not a case is fundamental to qualitative case study (Stake, 2006). A descriptive, interpretative and exploratory approach with the studied cases allowed me to understand the complex and constructed reality from the point of view of the participants. The descriptive, interpretative and explanatory approach enabled me to investigate how particular contexts in which participants act influences their behaviour and actions and to document and describe what is happening (Stake, 2006, p. 2).

In qualitative research design, “the researcher must search and explore with a variety of methods until a deep understanding is achieved” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 26). It is explained that by working inductively where patterns and areas of interest are revealed that “what is discovered may be verified by going back to the world under study and examining the extent to which the emergent analysis fits the phenomenon and works to explain what has been observed” (Patton, 2002, p. 67). The design of an emergent case study focuses on connecting categories according to a set of criteria (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003). The degree of involvement in this research design refers to the researcher being present as an engaged spectator who is experiencing, but is not overtly involved in what is happening around her. In this way the researcher is able to create trust between her and the participants and the participants’ stories can be told (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003).

Understanding the complex nature of artistic presentation, representation and the driving and powerful experiences of activist artists required the use of qualitative strategies. In this multicase study, the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases. The individual cases share a common characteristic and the cases in the collection are somehow
bound together (Schram, 2003). In this study, the collective cases focused on exploring what motivates artists to become activists in three different contexts. The design of the qualitative multicase study allowed for individual cases to be studied, to be understood in-depth and to learn about their complexity and uniqueness. This multicase approach revolves around the pursuit of the participants’ experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge based on the “process of searching for patterns and themes that may be distinguished” (Patton, 2002, p. 453).

**Phenomenological Approach**

Phenomenological research aims at “gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences…and is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being” (van Manen, 1997, p. 9). Phenomenological studies investigate “the meaning of the lived experience of a small group of people from the standpoint of a concept or phenomenon” (Schram, 2003, p. 70). Qualitative inquiry involves fieldwork that puts the researcher in close contact with participants, a situation that makes somewhat questionable the stance of the researcher toward participants and the focus of the research. The phrase empathic neutrality suggests, “that there is a middle ground between becoming too involved, which can cloud judgment, and remaining too distant, which can reduce understanding” (Patton, 2002, p. 50). In taking on epoche, the ability to distance ourselves, researchers look inside themselves to become aware of personal bias, and to gain clarity about preconceptions (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003). Rigor is reinforced by “a phenomenological attitude shift accomplished through epoche” (Patton, 2002, p. 485). One of the most important observations in a qualitative phenomenological approach is that in-depth interviewing recognizes and affirms the role of the instrument, the human interviewer. It is only by recognizing that interaction and affirming possibilities can the researcher as interviewer use her/his skills to minimize the distortion that can occur because of
her/his role in the interview (Siedman, 2006). The use of in-depth interviewing in the multicase studies allowed me to obtain a certain degree of depth and richness. I was able to gain more informed understanding of the participants’ experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge through phenomenological research since it has as its aim the fulfillment of our human nature to become more fully aware of who we are (Sideman, 2006).

**Participant Selection**

The research was cleared by the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) of Queen’s University in December 2007, initiating the commencement of the data gathering. Following the criteria, which were implemented for the selection of artists, a short list was established. Qualitative inquiry focuses in-depth on relatively small samples. The logic and power of purposeful sampling “lie in selecting information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). It is important to select information-rich cases from which to learn about important issues and which are therefore suitable for in-depth study. In the process of selecting participants who consider themselves activist artists, I made certain that they integrated social justice themes into their work. These included, but were not limited to, themes of oppression, labour, environment, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, Islamism, classism, ableism and ageism. Participants consisted of both male and female mature adult activist artists. To identify possible activist artists for interviewing I consulted directories and other print material from arts organizations that routinely report on noteworthy artistic activity recognized by the larger arts community. These organizations included: Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Art Council, National Endowment for the Arts, art magazines, artists for democracy, art galleries, humanitarian organizations and left-wing on-line newspapers. From these resources, I created a list of possible participants with the goal of
identifying three artists for the case studies. To identify a meaningful list of participants I considered the following prioritized characteristics:

1. Participants from eastern United States and Canada in order to limit travel costs.

2. Activist artists who explore ideas about social justice. Because it is impossible to consider every theme that activist art may be concerned with, this study will focus on artists working on issues associated with social justice.

4. Subgroups of artists working from similar points of view. These subgroups can be organized to facilitate a final selection representing a variety of perspectives.

5. Artists with readily available contact information.

6. Participants that represent variety in place of residence, gender, artistic perspective and points of view.

My initial list of possible participants consisted of six activist artists. Two of this original list consisted of a Métis Treaty Aboriginal from Gordon’s First Nation and an artist from British Columbia with the Dunne-za First Nations. These two were subsequently eliminated from the list because they did not respond to any of the three invitations to participate in the study. The remaining four responded positively to the invitation to participate. Two of the artists who responded positively worked as a team and were considered as a single case, in the study. The four participating artists included, (a) Natasha Mayers, (b) Mendelson Joe, (c) Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge.

I made initial contact by sending an e-mail to each artist. Following a positive response to the e-mail I spoke with each potential participant on the telephone to explain the nature of the research along with her/his anticipated role in the study. Once I had confirmed their willingness and interest I sent each a Letter of Introduction re-explaining the research and requesting participation in the study to these four possible participants (see Appendix A). The artists were informed that this was a preliminary inquiry towards an agreement for an interview. The letter
indicated that they would be contacted to provide a more detailed explanation of the research including the important contribution they would make.

All of the initial four artists contacted consented to participate in the study and to be interviewed. Prior to the interview, the four artists who agreed to participate were sent an “Information About an Interview” letter describing the study, along with a Consent Form for an Artist’s Interview and a Consent Form for the use of a Digital Video Camera during the Session (see Appendix B, C, and D). The artists were notified that they were free to withdraw without consequence at any time during the process, and that they might elect not to answer any particular questions throughout the interview. The collection of the data commenced on December 13, 2007, and took place over a five-week period until January 13, 2008. All participants were informed that since they are an important part of their work, their identity would be included in the thesis along with personal statements made during the interview.

**Context**

The interviews took place at the personal residences/studios of each artist. Two of the locations were in Ontario, Canada with the third in Maine, U.S.A. For this study, I chose to focus on activist artists who were well established in their careers. By exploring these artists I gained insight into the motivation for their ideas, behaviour, choices and actions. It was intended that these insights might contribute to the scholarly literature on activist artists. In particular, by examining influential factors such as how activist artists see themselves socially and politically, a deeper understanding about the process associated with the production of activist art might be realized. Through such learning, productive change can be realized (Trend, 1998). As an art educator, it was hoped the detailed views of activist artists’ processes may help teachers design
instructional strategies that will increase their success in integrating activist art activities and ideals into their instructional programs.

Data Collection

For this study, data were obtained from three ninety minute in-depth interviews. Interviews were recorded using a voice digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. Some of the data are visual and environmental; as a result I used a digital video camera, and field notes for documentation. By using multiple data sources I was able to verify my findings by comparing my observations with the interviews and by comparing body language in the video recording with verbal responses. This means of comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information allowed me to compare the perspectives of the participants from different points of view. I increased credibility of the results using triangulation, which is comparing and integrating data from different sources and situations to see whether the same pattern keeps recurring (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Patton, 2002). As I described the data I considered at all times the relationship between my presence in the interview and how I established my credibility, and the necessity of attending to some things and not others (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003). My emphasis on trustworthiness allowed me to seek and increase the integrity of my research.

How I Came to Interviewing

One of the first interviews I conducted was part of an Independent Study, which took place on March 20, 2007 with the artist Mendelson Joe. The interview was conducted at his residence/studio in Emsdale, Ontario. This study was titled Understanding Political Art and allowed me to explore the concept of political art answering questions associated with, what is political art and how is it defined from an activist artists point of view.
The Independent Study interview followed a sixty minute Standardized Open-Ended Interview. In a Standardized Open-Ended interview model the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance and questions are worded in a completely open-ended format. In this type of interview six kinds of questions can be asked of participants. They are (a) experience and behaviour questions about what a person does or has done to elicit behaviours, experiences, actions, and activities, (b) opinions and value questions aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretative process, (c) feeling questions aimed at eliciting emotions, experiences and thoughts, (d) knowledge questions inquiring about the participant’s actual information, and what they know, (e) sensory questions ask about what is seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled and (f) background questions which locate the participant in relation to other people (Patton, 2002). Four major reasons for using the standardized open-ended interview are:

1. The exact instrument used in evaluation is available for inspection by those who will use the finding in the study.
2. Variation among interviewer(s) can be minimized where a number of different interviewer(s) must be used.
3. The interview is highly focused so that the interviewee time is used efficiently.
4. Making responses easy to find and compare facilitates the analysis.

With a desire to increase the richness of detail and depth of the data for this new study I chose to use a modified in-depth, three-tiered phenomenological based interview for this study. This approach capitalizes on the benefits of open-ended questions but adds tiers of questions that sequentially build meaning.

**Characteristics of a Three-Tier In-Depth Qualitative Interview**

In a three-tier in-depth qualitative interview approach researchers use, open-ended questions in three distinct question groups. Seidman (2006) states in the first question group the
interviewer’s task is “to put the participants’ experience in context by asking her/him to tell as much as possible about herself/himself in light of the topic up to the present time (p. 17). The purpose of the second question group “is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience in the topic area of the study” (p. 18). In the third group participants are asked, “to reflect on the meaning of their experience” (p. 18).

In a typical three-tiered qualitative interview the three question groups are ordered in such a way that each successive question group builds on the understanding from the previous session and are separated by 3 days to a week apart. “This allows time for the participant to mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two” (Siedman, 2006, p. 21). To enhance the results I might expect from a Standardized Open-Ended Interview I chose to incorporate some aspects of the three-tiered interview model.

For this study I chose to conduct a single interview for each participant divided into three distinct sections rather than run three separate sessions. The expense of traveling for three visits added to the difficulty of arranging interview times with busy artists made it necessary to collect data in a single meeting. Although the “mull time” in this structure was greatly reduced I attempted to maintain some of the benefits of the tiered question groups by separating the interview into three thirty-minute tiers. Each tier consisted of between three to four questions with a total of eleven questions in the interview.

I met each participant for a single interview session and began our conversation by reading a preset introduction (see Appendix E), which included the dialogue “I have divided the questions into three parts.” The first thirty minutes of the interview explored the inner person. I put the participant’s experience in context by asking her/him to discuss her/his relationship to activist art. This tier consisted of four questions, for example, if you consider yourself an activist artist what does that mean? The second thirty minutes was designed to discover the day-to day
life of the artist. As the topic of this study is what motivates artists to become activists it is important to understand her/his past experiences in relation to the everyday in the progress of their development. One of the three questions in this tier was, could you tell me about an average day in your life as an artist? The final thirty minutes spoke to the outer person. This third tier involved discussion of how various factors in their lives converge and impact their work. By progressing through the three question tiers, the participants were able to help me deeply understand their motivation, practice and their work. The third tier of the interview was extremely productive as the foundation for it had been established in the first two tiers (Seidman, 2006). This tier consisted of four questions. For example: “If I wanted to have someone else see art and the world like you do, what would I tell them?” Participant specific, probing questions designed to deepen explanation and expand meaning followed each prepared question. This approach allowed each artist’s personal understanding of her or his process to become detailed in a unique way.

**Why I Chose Interviewing For This Research**

“Stories are a way of knowing” (Sideman, 2006, p. 7). The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to tell their stories. According to Vygotsky (1987), every word that participants use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness (as cited in Seidman 2006). Accordingly, interviews are a powerful way to gain insight into important social issues through understanding the experience of the participants whose lives reflect those issues (Patton, 2002: Seidman, 2006). A good interview feels as though a connection has been established in which the activity of communicating information is conveyed both ways. Depending on the structure of the in-depth interview questions the major task is to build upon and explore the participants’ responses to those questions. As a method of inquiry, in-depth interviewing is the
most consistent with people’s ability to make meaning through language (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006; van Manen, 1998).

The type of listening the researcher brought to the interview took the participants seriously, valued what they said, and honoured the details of their lives. The reciprocity I offered in the interview is my interest in participants’ experiences, my attending to what they say, and my honouring their words when I present their experiences and stories. In this research situation the in-depth interview as the primary investigation is the most appropriate approach as it generates an enormous amount of data (Seidman, 2006). In this case, the interview affirms the importance of the artists and it is deeply satisfying to me as the researcher who is interested in the artist’s stories.

**Photo Documentation**

Photo documentation was used as a source to record images of the participants in a particular time and place and to document images of their artwork. The photographs assisted the researcher when reviewing conversations about the artists work. As the physical work represents an actual realization of an artist’s ideas and intentions, these photographs helped to shape the interpretation of the interview data. The photographs of Natasha Mayer’s artwork was taken inside her residence and inside her studio, which is a separate building on her property in Whitefield, Maine. Mendelson Joe’s artwork was taken at his residence and at the Karen Robinson Gallery in Emsdale, Ontario following the interview. Images of Carole Condé’s and Karl Beveridge’s artwork were taken with permission from their web site. The photographs serve as a confirmation and realization of the words the participants used to talk about their work and process.
Field Notes, Digital Voice Recordings and Digital Video Recordings

The analyzed data collected from these interviews were triangulated with field notes (see Appendix F), digital voice recordings, digital video camera recordings, and observations. The studio notes and recordings allowed me to have an in-depth understanding of the data and to examine the data from each artist’s perspective. Every participant in the study had a 90 minute interview. During the interview I made notations on a participants exuberance and animation in response to a question. If the response was animated I prompted the artist to add to their explanation allowing the issue to be explored further. After leaving the interview setting I went over my notes to make sense of what I had written and doodled. Immediately following this I recorded my thoughts, feelings and how I felt the participants observed me. The reflex notes provided me with the opportunity to add insight on descriptive data, to make sense of comments indicated as important, and to interpret explanations and meanings offered on specific issues.

Field notes are, “the fundamental database for constructing case studies and carrying out thematic cross-case analysis in qualitative research” (Patton, 2002, p. 305). In addition to the participants’ stories about what motivates artists to become activists, I had the opportunity to select narratives about what influences the intentions, content, and presentations of activist artists’ work.

The physical environment and informal interactions of the participants during the interviews was important to the study. In addition to recording the interviews with my digital voice recorder, I used a digital video camera. Although my field-notes included my insights, and interpretations about what was happening and what it meant, the digital video recording added another dimension, particularly for moments that I missed. Even though, the focus of the camera was directed to one visual setting for each participant the ability to re-visit the digital video recording of the participant’s interview permitted me to re-visualize that setting. I was able to more clearly describe the colours, space and purpose of her/his interview setting. Watching the
digital video recording for interactions, body language and facial expressions in the case studies allowed me to notice the intensity of those interactions. The importance of nonverbal communication is pertinent to the interview. Therefore, body language, which reflected openness, animated interaction between artists and the researcher became cues about how the interview was progressing.

**On-site Direct Observation**

In situations where motives, attitudes, beliefs, and values direct much, if not most of human activity, the most sophisticated instrument we possess is the careful observer (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Direct observation allowed me to better understand and capture the context within which the participants interacted. Observation became a feasible way by which I could get close to the participants in the setting and draw on her/his personal information. As the “direct observer” I was able to capture information and form impressions that went beyond what I obtained in the words of the interview.

Patton indicates, “Everything that goes on in or around the program is data” (2002, p. 286). As the “direct observer” I combined field note data from personal eyewitness observations with information gained from the interviews about the experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge of what motivates artists to become activists. The exploration of these artistic experiences through this method allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied. Prior to entering the field to observe disciplined training and rigorous preparation is required so that the “direct observer” is prepared mentally, physically, intellectually and psychologically (Patton, 2002; Siedman, 2006). From the observed setting “the personal, perspective-dependent nature of observation can be understood as both a strength and a weakness, a strength in that personal permits first hand experience and understanding, and a weakness in
that personal involvement introduces selective perception” (Patton, 2002, p. 329). I was aware upon entering the setting and throughout my observing and interviewing that my presence involved self-questioning and self-understanding. Considering these characteristics I strove for thick, deep, and rich descriptions in my field notes.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process that involves organizing data into categories, patterns, and themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Patton, 2002). Becoming skilled in this process requires many competencies on the part of the researcher in choosing participant stories that divulge the integrity and intricacy of each single case. Making the connection between the purpose and analysis directs the researcher to assemble the data into meaningful findings. Patton (2002) states, “do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (p. 433). Analyzing data is an eclectic activity where the technique of comparing and contrasting is used in practically all tasks during the analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). A sense of the data and the quality of what is collected continually emerges as the researcher organizes and chooses what is to be reported.

I began by reading all of the interview transcripts, field notes, and viewing the video recordings several times trying not to impose one interview process on the next. This does not mean that as researcher I strictly followed the suggestion that, “between interviews, interviewers avoid considering what they have just heard…” (Siedeman, 2006, p. 113). In fact, I lived with each interview during the process of asking questions, being aware of issues that had surfaced in a previous interview. Subsequently, after reviewing all of the interview transcripts, listening to the digital recordings and viewing each video on several occasions over a period of time,
significant themes began to emerge. For example, in the interviews references to “community” surfaced when the question was posed, if you consider yourself an activist artist what does that mean? Similarly all four artists responded to the second question of the interview, what kind of issues in our world are you concerned about? with strong comments about world issues as influence. During this interview process I did my best not to impose meaning on the participant’s responses.

I heard of their hopes, personal experiences and journeys in life and was sensitive to expressions of what was important in their present living environment and in streams of thought from the past. I respected each participant’s life and immersed myself in their words in the transcript, and digital video recording noting voice inflection and body gestures on those words. Nuances, and personal traits about what motivated the participants to become activists began to surface. Statements relating to patterns and themes were reviewed. Reference to field notes was made to confirm excerpts that were important. An idea was considered important if it was mentioned or identified several times during the interview or if, when presenting an idea, the artist brought special attention to it. This special attention may have included but was not limited, to creating emphasis through change in voice, separating the idea with a pause, or simply stating “this is important.”

Following immersion in the data I began using the dedicated analytical software Atlas.ti. The software tool Atlas.ti facilitated the coding, categorization and analysis of the data from the transcripts, and field notes. The analysis of the data permitted the identification of significant patterns and themes that were discovered through on-going reflection by the researcher, which involved identifying, categorizing, classifying, labeling and coding the data (Patton, 2002).

The primary coding process broadly identified different issues the artists were associated with and what was important to them. Personal experiences and how those experiences at
different times in the artists’ lives affected them was important. For example each artist relocated
at one point in their lives and/or visited another country, which impacted their art. The artists’
responses to the questions (a) Can you tell me about an average day in your life as an artist? and,
(b) As an artist why do you do what you do? provided depth regarding who they are and how they
live. All three interviews took place in the homes/studios of the artists. The place where they live,
the things they hold important, the hospitality and warm acceptance I received became an integral
part of the interview process and were documented. I examined these patterns, and
interrelationships closely through a process of re-reading the text in the codes and re-confirming
with the original copy of the transcribed interview and viewing the interviews.

The second coding process refined the categorizing and labeling of each participants
interview. I continued to read the passages that were coded and other passages emerged that were
connected to the same category. Other categories that seemed promising in the early process were
eliminated and other categories that seemed separate and distinct folded into one another. After
coding all the excerpts I re-read each participants comments and once again reviewed the audio
and video recordings. The researcher’s field notes, digital video recordings and observations were
also categorized, labeled, coded, and helped shape the major themes of the study. Voice
inflection, laughter and intentional emphasis added increased meaning to the interview data. The
coding used for the digital video recording was manually input as opposed to using the Atlas.ti
software.

The third and final coding process brought me to a point where the participants general
comments became loud and clear. What emerged was a convergence of what the participants had
said. The final themes arose out of the passages and patterns that were present. The repetition of
an experience that was already mentioned in other interviews took on increased weight and were
refind into major themes. The overall identity of each artist continually emerged throughout the
coding of the interviews. Home and their places of residence are important in understanding who they are as artists. The framing of their personalities over time developed because of family, where they were raised and the circumstances of the times. I noticed excerpts from a participant that connected to passages from another participant. Some passages were contradictory and seemed inconsistent with others, however, I kept some of these passages because of their importance in relation to the other data. Connections between the categories informed the final seven themes of the study. Those themes were distinct identity, place of the interview, personality as style, life experience as influence, world issues as influence, community and its importance, and change as a driver in her/his work.

The coding procedure and formulation of data involved consultation with a peer reader who was another graduate student at Queen’s University, Faculty of Education. She was experienced in the arts and was presently conducting her own doctoral research and assisting in other research projects. In addition she had valuable experience using Atlas.ti computer software and was able to assist me in the initial stages of coding the data. The peer reader assisted in the open coding of data using the Atlas.ti computer software Her perceptiveness regarding the organization of the data was invaluable. To add to the inter-rater reliability part of the study, she double-checked my previous coding of the interview transcripts. She familiarized herself with the coded data, and confirmed and enhanced the codes by making refinements in the transcripts on Atlas.ti. Careful considered judgments about what was really significant were discussed and we both agreed that our parameters regarding the findings were compatible. Findings are judged by their substantive significance, “Where…reviewers agree, one has consensual validation of the significance of the findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 467).
Cross-Case Analysis

My intention was to work vigorously to understand each particular case, one case at a time. “To study a case, we carefully examine its functioning and activities, but the first objective of a case is to understand the case. In time, we may move on to studying its functioning and relating it to other cases” (Stake, 2006, p. 2). Recognizing the case as an integrated system I analyzed the data for clarity and sequence. I tried to capture the experience of the activities, generate a picture of the case, and present the case for others to see.

Once the categories were established through inductive analysis, confirmation of the information was affirmed by examining data, through a deductive process that did not quite fit categories that were developed (Patton, 2002). I approached the results by moving from specific experiences and pieces of data to a more general explanation of an idea. Regarding world issues relating to the environment Mendelson Joe spoke of Robert Bateman as a visionary because Batemen connects with the natural world. Joe stated, “that is pretty important to me.” Similarly Condé and Beveridge are concerned about world issues relating to the environment having recently completed a piece on water. They are working on the other three elements, earth fire and air. They expressed that what they contribute to society, “becomes very important then that becomes expressed in the larger community.” By working deductively, I looked at the multi-cases with the intention of finding data that matched, supported and validated my findings. My aim was to present the multi-case studies in such a way that the single case findings remained intact. I then present a cross-case analysis with emphasis on the question of what motivates artists to become activists. In addition I relied on what I already knew about the phenomena, the collection of artists, activities, politics, strengths, problems and relationship, in the literature.

Stake calls the deeper research questions “issues” (2006, p. 8). For both the multi-case project and the single case studies “issues” were identified by all participants, which proved
crucial in bringing out their concerns. To maximize understanding of each case I sought issues that showed compelling uniqueness and helped my understanding of the phenomena. For example, community was expressed by Mayers, and Condé and Beveridge. Mayers thinks of herself as a community artist and activist artist. She thinks activist art is community building. Condé and Beveridge described an activist artist as one who sees their work as having some impact on the world and its people. People being defined as community specifically the labour community and the social justice community. I arranged each single case in terms of its own situational issues, interpreted patterns within each case, and then analyzed cross-case findings to make assertions about the connections. Certain story lines and impressions were guides but my conclusions were based on the evidence of the data. Keeping in mind that the phenomenon “is something that functions, that operates, that has life” (Stake, 2002, p. 83), I strived to provide disciplined interpretation and an emphatic representation of the setting in the field. During the cross-case analysis and writing of the findings, I endeavoured to enrich the reader’s experiences with as much of the action and context of the cases as possible. What I sought to offer was the detailed views of activist artists’ processes.

**Trustworthiness**

Researchers use triangulation, “which is the cross-validation among data sources, data collection strategies, time periods and theoretical schemes” (McMillan & Schumacher, p. 375). Combining three-tiered interviews, voice and video digital recordings, field notes and observations supported this qualitative inquiry strategy. The three-tiered interview model incorporated comments in context and allowed participants to comment on similar ideas from three different perspectives. The three-tiered model exposed idiosyncratic responses made during
one tier of the interview allowing me to check the internal consistency of what they said (Patton, 2002; Sideman, 2006).

Triangulation for the multi-case studies served the same purpose as in a single case study. Triangulation was used to assure that I had presented the findings as clearly and meaningfully as I could, and that I did not mislead the reader. As a form of validation, triangulation showed whether the new information was consistent with what was already well known in the literature about the phenomenon. The case study findings were informed by reflexivity, which is the understanding of how my own experiences and background affect what I know about activist art and how I act in the world, including my behaviour during the interview (Patton, 2002). I included information in the study about what I bring to the interview. This included both personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis and interpretation (Patton, 2002).

**Reflexivity and Voice**

One of the central strategic themes of postmodern qualitative inquiry is reflexivity. Qualitative research regards reflexivity as an emphasis on the importance of self-awareness, and is one of the few topics about which there is a broad consensus (Patton, 2002). The progress of my study depended on the relationship I had built with the participants. In this study I was interested in the participant’s stories and was aware that what they had to say would be useful in the research. Given this background and emphasis on self-awareness I created a research design that allowed for rigorous self-scrutiny throughout the entire process. The in-depth interviews did not include all the strategies that reinforced validity of the data. Multi-method strategies “permits triangulation of data across inquiry techniques” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 325). To support the validity, other strategies were implemented such as multi-case studies, researcher on-
site field notes, observation and audio and visual digital recordings. The validity and reliability of the data was supported by the cross-checking of the various means of inquiry. The detailed descriptions of the participants and settings were presented in a way that helped the reader to understand what motivates artists to become activists. In addition, any discrepant data that contradicted emerging patterns of meaning were incorporated into the findings (McMillan & Schuster, 2006; Patton, 2002). By recognizing the discrepant data the credibility and validity in the research was strengthened.

**Role of the Researcher**

The research role may vary with the degree of interaction and intensity in qualitative research, and the credibility of the researcher determines how the findings are accepted (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Patton, 2002). A consideration in establishing relationships is the ability to maintain clear and distinct intentions in the role as researcher, interviewer and observer. The responsibility of the researcher is to engage with participants while adhering to the primary aim of conducting research. Although the interviews took place in the homes/studios of the artists, which made for a relaxed environment, my dedication to the purpose of my presence kept my focus in perspective. The researcher’s presentation of herself/himself is critical to the integrity of the relationship that is formed in the field. The key is the researcher’s presentation of her/his genuineness and the multiple roles that the researcher brings to the field. The initial information disclosed to all four of the participants, the researcher’s role as an activist artist, which immediately formed a connection, and allowed for future conversations. Sharing this information enabled me to engage authentically with the artists; however, I never lost sight of balancing my roles as researcher and activist artist. The mantra that I took with me and remained with me constantly was “it is not about me.” According to Patton (2002), “Be as involved as
possible in experiencing the setting as fully as is appropriate and manageable while maintaining an analytical perspective grounded in the purpose of the fieldwork” (p. 331). Coming to know participants from the inside out, as an informed researcher, rather than from the outside in, allows the researcher to get inside the setting and relationships of the participants (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2006).

Understanding through field-based research means that the researcher engages in personal encounters and exchanges with self and others. Research that entails the presence of the researcher with people means that she/he is present to make choices. Although some of the choices about what to consider and interpret may be made consciously, others are from personal qualities that are there prior to and through the researcher’s interactions with situations and participants in the field. This is referred to as the play of subjectivity (Patton, 2002; Schram 2006). By being aware to what extent personal qualities, emotions and personal sensibilities come into play the researcher is able to gain insight through rigorous self-reflection. By engaging and monitoring subjectivity the researcher uses her/his feelings and emotional responses as cues to inquire perceived and interpretive stances. This process reduces bias and serves as filters through which the researcher perceives the phenomena (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2006).

As the researcher, interviewer and observer, in order for my research to carry respect for its credibility, it was crucial for me to be forthcoming regarding my subjectivity in the research. The precision that was undertaken to clarify the credibility was present at every step of the process. I had instruction in qualitative research, a research informed supervisor, and a log of accepted ethical procedures, which furthered my ability to obtain rich data, intensify reflexivity, and achieve credibility. The issue of voice is crucial in qualitative research as it expresses the stance relative to the distance and the relationship between researcher and participant. Throughout the research my voice is reflected in the directness and candor I sought to foster in
discussions with the participants. I have approached this research from the perspective of one whose own history in activist art seeks to explore what motivates artists to become activists, and the influences on intentions, content, and presentations of their work.
Chapter 4: Case Studies: A Description

In a world where there is a common lament that there are no more heroes, too often cynicism and despair are perceived as evidence of the death of moral courage. That perception is wrong. People of great valor and heart, committed to noble purpose, with long records of personal sacrifice, walk among us in every country of the world.

-Kerry Kennedy
Robert F. Kennedy Center For Justice and Human Rights

Introduction

In this chapter I present and shape the data relative to the first two research questions framing this study: (a) What motivates artists to become activists? (b) What influences the intentions, content, and presentations of activist artists’ work? Here I detail and describe my interviews with Natasha Mayers, Mendelson Joe, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge. The description of each interview is organized around the seven themes that emerged during the data analysis. These major themes include: (a) distinct Identity, (b) the place of the interview, (c) personality as style, (d) life experience as influence, (e) world issues as influence, (f) community and its importance and (g) change as a driver in her/his work. The most significant value of this study resides in the rich data accounts included in this chapter. These seven themes provide a framework to accommodate a shared conversation between the artists’ accounts.
Case Study 1: Natasha Mayers

As an activist artist my job is to be outspoken, to be creative, to find fresh ideas, unexpected ways to communicate, and to reach people. I want my art to be relevant, to help explain what’s going on here, to tell the truth, and reveal the lies…

-Natasha Mayers, January, 12, 2008

This case study includes an in-depth interview exploring distinct identity, the place of the interview, personality as style, influences on Natasha Mayers’s life and world, community and its importance and change as a driver in her work. As a citizen of her community and the world, Natasha Mayers shows her interest in a life of questioning rather than submission to authority.

Distinct Identity

Through her art, Natasha Mayers reveals compelling images from her community, her country, other cultures and the environment, with the intention of opening the hearts and minds of viewers. Following her return from Nicaragua in 1984, and driven by her belief that an artist has an important role to play in society, she created in collaboration with her former husband an art installation (“Central America House of Horrors” Image 1). As artist-in-residence for Peace Action Maine, Mayers organized and participated in the collaborative (“Warflowers: From Swords to Plowshares” Image 2). She created and facilitated murals, (“Bath-Brunswick Maine Peace Activist Mural” Image 3), and painted images with a political theme (“Sign of the Times” Image 4). According to Mayers, her most effective art is completed in collaboration with participants from her community where they create and execute themes for the July 4th hometown parades in Whitefield, Maine, (“Death of The Honey Bees” Image 5). She is persistent in speaking out through her art on topical issues and in helping to encourage and bring solidarity to community art projects and educational institutions. Mayers’s role as an artist is to be outspoken, creative and to find fresh and unexpected ways to communicate with people. As an activist artist,
her job is “to avoid forgetting, help people remember, to spread art out, not down, and to make the art experience available to everybody.” Mayers indicated:

Creativity is about looking inward and finding the most effective, compelling, and appropriate image or response, and everybody is capable of this. So, I try to use my art to help people feel alive that way, feel creative and effective in the world.

From 2007-2008 she created a vibrant visual forum for discussion as Artist-in-Residence for the online progressive newspaper Commondreams.org. Natasha continues to extend her art practice, collaborative exhibitions, reading, workshops and her thirty-five year practice as a volunteer art educator for mental health and social organizations.

Natasha Mayers: The Place of the Interview

In order to understand what motivates Natasha Mayers to be an activist artist, I visited her home in Whitefield, Maine and interviewed her there. Prior to the visit, she provided me with travel directions that were certain to be safe on that cold snowy winter day in January 2008. The town of Whitefield is a small community located in Lincoln County near Augusta, Maine. The interview began at 11:00 a.m. I drove from the Evergreen Hotel in Augusta to her wooden shingled home surrounded by sixteen foot evergreen trees and, as advised by Mayers, I trod carefully in front of her house due to the packed ice. I arrived safely and knocked on the door and she greeted me with a welcoming smile. The entrance led into the kitchen where she continued to tend to her homemade cornbread. She offered me a fresh cup of perked coffee and we waited a few more minutes for the hot cornbread to bake.

Ms. Mayers invited me to sit at the wooden kitchen table where, in the centre, small local seashells and smooth stones gathered on her walks were displayed. Her cat sprawled himself on one corner of the table as she indicated which art images on the kitchen walls were hers and which were those of her son Noah. She told me about the town of Whitefield, her neighbouring
writer and artist friend, and the local flavour of her community. Whitefield is a mix of farmers, artists, woodsmen, and professionals who live and cooperate with one another as a community. Her geographic surroundings are centres for summer tourist activity. One area she mentioned was Bristol, a fishing and resort area in Lincoln County, Maine, not far from Whitefield. Bristol includes the village of Pemaquid and even though it was winter, she suggested I visit the Pemaquid Point Light Station and view the ocean.

She showed me a small room off the kitchen where shelves contained masses of files, papers and books. The floor was piled with boxes containing research material and information she had gathered over the years. She explained that not only did all of this material need to be catalogued, but her extensive artwork should also be catalogued. Her interest is in creating the art, not cataloguing it.

Mayers indicated that some of the rooms were closed off for the winter and that we would conduct the interview in the adjacent family/sun room. After we became more acquainted, she invited me into the family room and we settled into the interview. This is a favourite room of Mayers, where she relaxes, reads and thinks. The room was bright with radiant sunlight from large paned windows in the back wall of the house looking toward open wooded acreage; the other three walls were covered with art, wooden bookshelves stacked with eclectic reading material and small works of clay sculpture. Green plants were scattered around the room, a piano sat in a corner, and comfortable chairs and a settee were strewn with Navaho style fabrics. A painted cylinder, the adaptation of an outdoor school utility pole project, stood at the entrance to the sun room. The pole project was one of Mayer’s most innovative projects, using the utility poles in Whitefield as “canvases” for school children’s work. The paintings had themes that focused on Whitefield, its people and history. Beside the settee in the sun room was an old cast iron stove which rested on a stone base in front of the large windows. On top of the stove, slowly
cooking, was a homemade pot of baked beans, which I was invited to eat later with more cornbread.

After the interview she suggested we visit her studio, which is located a short walking distance from her house. The building is nestled in a cluster of deciduous and evergreen trees and on this particular day was surrounded by deep snow. The exterior is built from the same material as her house but with a two-tier room structure, one room being much higher than the other. The interior is open, with extensive high wall space and large windows where shimmering, glowing light enters. Mayers had not been using her studio as much as she would like, because of her commitment to digital work on the computer.

I retrieved the piano stool and set it next to the stove as Natasha perched on the bright red settee and propped herself up with cushions. She wore a black-t-shirt with In Artists We Trust printed on the front. Natasha offered me the freedom to record, film and take photographs. Natasha was prepared, as she had requested I forward the questions to her prior to our interview. Her pleasant personality and smile contributed to the coziness of the room.

**Natasha Mayers: Personality as Style**

Natasha Mayers was born in 1946 into a family that were fighters for the underdog, and her parents flirted with socialist ideas in the 1940’s. Her father was a psychiatrist who never billed his patients. He asked his clients to pay him what they could afford or what they thought the visit was worth. There was always the expectation that one should help others. Her father’s philosophy was about making society more just, it wasn’t about greed nor was it about making money. As a result her family did not have a lot of monetary wealth. Natasha stated:
I feel the artist has certain permission in society to speak out, somehow I’m not bound [with] as quite as many rules as other people…but it is also in my own growing up, my family didn’t have a lot, and [I] didn’t seem to have the same rules that a lot of the other kids grew up with. Way more questioning authority and I think I’ve just grown up questioning authority all my life.

The habit of questioning authority continues in Natasha’s work as an activist artist.

In the early 1970’s she was very interested in prison reform and prisoner’s rights and with her former husband and community participants she set up a bail fund to bail individuals out of jail. She went to the Maine State Prison and made inquires as to whether she could teach art to prisoners; they hired her. “After a short period of time,” she said “they kicked me out.” It was following this experience that she volunteered to teach art to the incarcerated at the Lincoln County Jail. In 1974 she approached the Maine Insane Hospital, now the Augusta Mental Health Institute, to volunteer as an art teacher and work with their on-staff therapists because she thought “I might be interested in that.” Combating the stigma associated with mental health issues is important to her. The hospital did not have an art therapist and the idea appealed to them. Thus she received on the job training. She worked at the Maine Insane Hospital once a week teaching art, although she had a Master of Teaching degree in Social Science not in art therapy. She indicated with a smile that the acronym for her degree is MAT and sounds like a Master of Art Therapy, but it is not. “I’m really not so interested in the therapy part of it, I just wanted to teach art and I believe that’s the therapeutic part.” She continued as a volunteer at the Augusta Mental Health Institute until 1981.

Natasha revealed the many years of conflict between her and her former husband to whom she had been married to for almost twenty-eight years. During that marriage, the time spent in her studio working on her art was perfect therapy. She reported that presently she does not have personal issues that need art therapy and, as a person that is not easily depressed, she is
able on a daily basis to make art that focuses on world issues. Her work is presently much more outer directed, partly because she is much happier.

Natasha was part of the anti-recruitment movement against the United States military, and also withheld her taxes. When she was audited, she decided that she did not want to pay taxes. As a result, she lives on sixteen thousand dollars per year, and none of her earnings support the American military effort. Civil liberties, which are people’s legal and constitutional protection against the government, are a driving force for her.

She would like to receive grants, but not enough to spend the time required to apply for them. Previously, she wrote grants for school projects and for Peace Action Maine where the money went to the collaborative project and not to her. It is very hard for Natasha to ask for money for herself; as she says, “It’s genetic, after all my father didn’t bill people.”

Natasha Mayers indicated, “I am often referred to as a political artist,” but she is emphatic in declaring herself an activist artist and one who is socially responsible. She reacts to being called political because it seems to be a box that the “art world will just sideline.” For her, the term “political art” is often used to connote that an artist who speaks out on certain issues creates work that might reflect that. She holds the opinion that activist art making is probably political or a lot of it is political; however she believes that political art is a narrower concept than activist art. She stated, “I help people make art, help my whole community make art, help the mental health community make art and help people discover they are able to create a culture for themselves.” It is important for her to guide people to learn how to express and empower themselves. Part of her mission as an activist artist is to make people more visually literate, to look at art, and to appreciate and value the artist’s role in society. She stated, “When people forget that it’s art and experience it and forget the label that it’s art maybe that’s when it’s most effective. And that’s what activist art is…somehow it doesn’t have that capital ‘A’ art.”
Natasha explained that in the United States, “we’re so atomized and individualistic.” She admitted that she had not spoken to her uncle in two years since she discovered he swears by Fox News and is a supporter of President George W. Bush.1 “In my family, my father’s brother could be a Republican…I don’t know how to dialogue with him.” Tilting her head she quietly commented, “That is my fault also, as my country has become polarized and divisive where it is difficult to talk to the other side.” Returning to our conversation on activist art she indicated that activist art is not gallery orientated, you know, putting a dollar sign on it” and artists know “there is not enough money to go around to support us so we may as well do our art, love doing it and not worry about the money.”

When she is focused on her painting she may spend six to twelve hours a day in her studio. She keeps strange hours and her days may extend to 3:00 a.m. She claims that she makes art because she hates doing housework. She was definite about her art, “I would much rather any day, any night paint or draw…I’d rather do that than almost anything else in the world except for eating, sleeping and exercising.” Each day in the winter she tries to do one of the following: walk, swim, hike, cross-country ski or skate. She loves to skate! She does not have an ultimate ambition to become more famous or see her face on the cover of Rolling Stone nor does she have a five-year plan, but she did wake up one morning and thought, “Hmm I wonder if they give Pulitzers for the kind of work I’m doing.” She has a wonderful sense that she has achieved enough and created worthwhile projects; however, she shows that she does have ambition left by thinking about the Pulitzer.

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1 President George W. Bush ended his eight-year term in office January, 2008.
Life Experiences as Influence

Natasha Mayers grew up in a town where the only natural fear was the town’s giant dam. Her family lived on a hill and she was always fearful that the dam would burst but she knew she would be safe because she lived on the hill. She reflected, “maybe that is why I called my son Noah, like Noah’s Ark, I never thought of that.” Memories of government instilling fear into her life came when she was in kindergarten in 1951. She recalls being shown movies such as *Duck and Cover*, released by the United States Federal Civil Defense, and doing practice drills where she and her classmates would get under their desks and cover their heads. This was the cold war era and there was always the fear that “this big bomb was going to fall.” Her town had many residents who were considered intellectuals, who came as part of the summer colony but stayed on. They included writers and publishers and some people were black. The 1950s were McCarthy years and a time of anti-communist suspicion, and many people in her town had been blacklisted. She was very aware that McCarthyism had instilled fear in people, ruined people’s lives, and divided her town.

She was also aware of racial fear in the 1950s because there were famous riots in the next town at a Paul Robeson concert where many people were hurt. Robeson was a black American actor who performed negro spirituals and spoke out against fascism and racism. Natasha recalls, “There was a lot of racial fear instilled in the minds of white working class people that with blacks moving in they would take away their jobs.” She thinks a lot about fear, how it affects people, and is directed towards keeping people silent and not talking about issues. Her thoughts turn to teachers and how some are pressured since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 not to talk about war with their students. She explained:
I think I was somewhat blacklisted from teaching at the university because some of the students complained that I was trying to get them to talk about the [Iraq] war when it began in 2003. I wasn’t giving an opinion but I was trying to get them to dialogue while they were drawing. Some of the students complained.

Natasha was approached by her university supervisors and asked why she encouraged that kind of talk in an art classroom. She has not confronted the university, has not been invited back since 2003, and has a feeling that it is because of her allegedly encouraging war dialogue in her art class.

Natasha Mayers has hope that her work will inspire people to become active and informed citizens. She believes that her most effective work might be in her hometown of Whitefield, Maine. Every 4th of July parade, she and members of her family and community collaborate to create a float about current potentially divisive issues, for example, global warming, tax cuts for the wealthy, clear cutting, and human addiction to oil. The issues and execution of the designs always provoke laughter, thought, puzzlement and sometimes hostility. She indicated that everyone who participates agrees that humour and creativity disarms people and gets them to pay attention. She explained:

In the Global Warming parade we had grown men in diapers trying to lift the national debt, a gas guzzling SUV that eats protestors and life size camels dancing through the eye of a seventeen-foot needle. Art is powerful as an act and changes the people that experience it.

She declared that one of her best art shows was *Sign of the Times* in 2006 in the beautiful space at the Atrium Gallery, University of Southern Maine. As an artist she believes she has an obligation to her culture to tell the truth and tell us what we need to know to lead honest lives. In *Sign of the Times* her paintings are asking people not to run and duck for cover but to stop, feel an act (Shetterley, 2006). Mayers wrote about *Sign of the Times* that, “it may be simultaneously seen as a cry of joy and a cry of rage, a damning critique of [her] government’s policies, and also an artist’s coping mechanism for living with the onslaught of news.” The hanging of the artwork
took one week and she put a lot of effort into hanging each piece. The show was not attended by many of the people that she expected to make the effort to get there. She explained:

I understand the show was a little bit further away [from where people she invited live] and were used to driving, but because of the low attendance I said that’s it, I’m not doing any more gallery shows. I never had the expectation to make a lot of money or any money but I do want people to see my work.

In the fall of 2006 she enrolled in a digital imaging course at the university and one of her first projects was planning the layout for her show Sign of the Times. When Natasha decided she was no longer going to exhibit in gallery shows she wondered how she was going to get her work out to more people. Natasha is an image-maker, “I’m addicted to and love making images!” Much of her artwork is done in series where she produces one hundred of one series and two hundred of another series. Learning digital imaging gave her infinite opportunities to take her current images and begin to Photoshop them. She became addicted, and sat in front of the computer all day.

Natasha knew the co-founder 2 and wife of the editor of CommonDreams.org, a progressive online newspaper. She made a proposal to be their artist-in-residence for one year and they would not have to pay her. They agreed to place one of her images in a prominent spot every day where it would reach 150,000 people. Her work first appeared May 1, 2007 and she recalled it was like a dream. She wanted her work seen by the largest possible number of people and she wanted feedback, which came immediately. The feedback was amazing, “Never since Guernica have I been so moved. Never since Goya have I been so moved. Do you know the artist Sue Coe? It was like whoa! I got addicted to that.” People around the world are communicating with her: an individual who is working on a special project in Somalia, an NGO employee in Darfur, a collection of individuals working on border issues regarding immigrants in California and people

who operate a Buddhist Centre in Sri Lanka. A woman from Korea, in broken English wrote her and said:

I is 49, I raises five children, I work very hard, I feeds my children, I reads where you say that compassion, action…I gets very sorry, very sad reading about problems in the world, I is 49 is it too late to start painting.

Natasha delivered a deep authentic laugh enveloped with a sense of caring. She is trying to reach as many people as possible and make each image different and timely. She is mindful that her audience will be looking at the web site daily for her relevant image of the day.³

**World Issues as Influence**

Natasha Mayers has learned to care about world issues through education, reading, and through her own travels. She experienced an important moment in her life when she attended a speech by a German theologian who spoke for two hours without notes on the value of time and living. She does not recall the exact words but it went something like this, “you’ve got to do something, you’ve got to act even if it’s like pissing in the wind, every drop counts.” That was a real wake-up call for her.

Reading has influenced her decision making, for example, *Bitter Fruit. The Story of the American Coup in Atubtaqui* by Stephen Kinzer, a United States author and newspaper reporter. *Bitter Fruit* is a comprehensive and insightful account of the CIA operation to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1954. She was also influenced by reading *Endless Enemies: The Making of an Unfriendly World* by Jonathan Kwitney, a longtime journalist with the Wall Street Journal. *Endless Enemies* offers a penetrating

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³ As of May, 2008 Ms. Mayers discontinued publishing her work for free on CommonDreams.org. The person responsible for the hiring decision did not want to pay her.
criticism of U.S. interventions and meddling throughout the world, mainly during the 1960s to 1980s. She indicated:

It is one of the first times I was very moved to make art about an issue…the disappeared in Central America in 1984. I learned about all the dirty tricks of the CIA and the overthrowing of governments all around the world.

In 1984 Natasha traveled to Nicaragua. During this time, the United States attacked San Juan del Sur in Nicaragua, bombs exploded at Contra rebel headquarters, and the country held its first free election in fifty-six years. Amidst this she saw a government that validated, recognized its artists and increasingly held the artists in high esteem. She saw a community of artists who were effective and had power in their art, their work was discussed in their communities and people were excited and involved in the art. Diverse viewpoints were freely and openly discussed and action vigorously taken by its people. She explained:

It seemed like the artists were helping the country envision the future and portraying the past. It was an exciting time in my life. It was a very new and different experience that changed a lot of my attitudes about what my art should be about, about the power of art, how it functions, what my role as an artist in the community of artists and non-artists could be…

Prior to her travels in Nicaragua she had no idea that an artist could play an important role in society, but after returning, she was driven by the belief that such a role was possible. This was the start of her taking on big issues, encouraging other artists to do the same, organizing shows and bringing artists together to collaborate on their ideas and work. The first large scale and political art project she undertook after returning from Nicaragua was Central America House of Horrors. With exuberance and passion, she described in detail the content and presentation of the show. Over two to three days, four thousand people went through the gigantic army tents, and one prominent viewer was Democrat Senator George Mitchell of Maine.4 He

4 As of 2009 Mr. Mitchell is special envoy to the Middle East for the Obama Administration.
said, “this should tour every shopping centre in the United States, this is important for everybody to see.” Natasha continued to connect her art to activism, remained dedicated to her reading and stayed abreast of the political situation and relationship between the United States and Central America (“Central America Hands Off” Image 6). She subscribed to journals, cut and kept clippings, which today fill a room. “It was really important to me at the time. I got very involved with it.”

A second important trip was to Venezuela. Her time spent there gave her insight into Unites States fear tactics. She explained:

The United States government needs a bogeyman and it may be Muammar Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi, leader of Libya, Saddam Hussein, President of Iraq 5 or Osama bin Laden, founder of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda. It’s like if you don’t have one this year you have to create one. President of Venezuela Hugo Chávez is a hero there but the United States tries to make him a bogeyman to justify its military industrial complex.

From the beginning of the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq she demonstrated, spoke against the war and created innovative art. In her State of the War Maps, 2003 she tried to create images of war in the United States because she felt the government makes war on other people but they cannot imagine what it is like. Natasha said, “We can’t empathize with people because we have no imagination, we lack the compassion…we lack that compassion partly because we can’t imagine what war might be like for them.” After the United States bombed Fallujah in 2004 her response was to create Iraqi Camouflage. These were paintings on upholstery fabric samples: for example, one pattern is titled War Crimes and the colour is dirty brown. In her Iraqi Camouflage artist statement she wrote, “The siege in Fallujah left thousands of Iraqis dead and hundreds of thousands without homes. 60% of homes in the city were made uninhabitable. USA’s goal was to bring increased security to the region.”

5 Sadam Hussein was hanged in 2006 for crimes against humanity.
Mayers needs to make art and she explained, “the important reason why I make art is so I
don’t despair about what’s happening in the world.” She would like there not to be a million
issues to deal with so that she could focus on one thing. She struggles with a need to do
something about Darfur, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. She is concerned about the
Appalachian Mountains being bulldozed and the tops of the mountains being removed. At the
same time she would like to deal with some of the more pressing issues in Maine. Natasha
reflected, “It’s just constant.”

**Community and its Importance**

Whatever activity Natasha is involved in within the community she tries to use her art to
help people feel alive, creative and effective in the world. Besides being an activist artist she
considers herself a community artist. During most of her life she has volunteered in her
community, helping those in need, working on the homeless issue and as an art educator. She has
given of her time to work in her community soup kitchen, serving and preparing meals,
collaborating with other hunger agencies in developing an efficient network for the collection and
equitable distribution of food.

She wants to be connected to her community and is proud that she has initiated many
projects to bring people together. In 1990 she invited a collective of twenty-five different artists
and groups to create individual installations in vacant storefronts in Portland, Maine. The title was
*Home* and the theme was “What does home mean and what is homelessness?” The installation
was exhibited for two weeks during which passers-by took the time to stop and look. According
to Natasha, the storefront attraction was participatory from both the artists and community and it
demanded an active response.
As artist-in-residence at the Riverton School in Portland, Maine, in 2004 she worked with culturally diverse grade five students on the *Hero and Heroine* art project. The lives and stories of immigrant and refugee children really touch her and they are important to her. Her impetus for the art portraits was to get the children’s stories spread out to white rural Maine in order that the changing face of Maine could be seen and understood. She felt that this “was a good way of working on that issue.”

As an art educator and facilitator of community murals she believes mural making is a good model for education because it is a collaborative process and not competitive. Creating murals is not based on one person’s achievement but on the group’s. She has been involved in working with students and the community in creating over five hundred murals. Her role is one of facilitator, where participants make most of the decisions, and the group is responsible for how the mural turns out. She sees a coexistence of diversity; everyone is working in his or her own unique style with a different point of view but in a collaborative process. Working together on a mural “builds solidarity because the whole is greater than the parts.”

The force of her conviction about the power of art was evident when she told me, “it takes a lot of courage to make art.” She goes on:

I did this mural, with the Bath-Brunswick Maine Peace Activists, it’s about 20 feet long and 6 feet high (see image 3). It’s big, it was made for a demonstration. I usually design the mural but for this one…It was just going to be done in a day. I know it’s going to be used for the backdrop for the big concert….so I gave people just the outline of placards in a demonstration, and ten people came and we spent the day painting, and the despair that everybody felt and had been feeling, and the depression over, you know, all this stuff that’s happening in the world gave way to elation. There were three or four days, even me, who had this experience of painting…I felt fabulous for the next couple of days, like I was walking on air that somehow coming together and doing this together was totally relevant. It felt like you were doing something, working in solidarity, working collaboratively. Somehow it just gave you a sense of hope. It was great.

This was one of the many stories that Natasha told me that demonstrated her sincere belief in community involvement.
“Oh, I’ll tell you the best story!” The following was her example of where you can do something positive and be an example for children:

The day the surge\(^6\) was announced I got fifteen to twenty people in Whitefield to go and stand in front of The Whitefield Elementary School. When the buses arrived in the morning…very cold out and we stood there with our signs protesting the surge so that all the kids in town would see us and go home and ask their parents what is the surge? What’s this about?

The reasoning was that their presence and the signs displaying SURGE would spark dialogue in and out of the classroom. According to Natasha they succeeded as one of the teachers exited the school, approached the group of demonstrators who stood across from the school on public property, and let them know he would be talking with his students all day with questions such as “who were those people, why do you think they were standing there?” She knew it was important to get a discussion going and the presence of the Whitefield community demonstrators empowered the teacher to talk about the issue.

**Change as a Driver in her Work**

Natasha sees her work as having some impact on the world, engaging the world in some way or another and initiating change. Among the many thoughts she has on an artist’s role is that “the role of an artist is to help other people make art, the role of an artist is to tell the truth…I feel obligated to tell the truth, it feels like a burden that I’ve been willing to assume.” Natasha’s art images tell many stories of government policies and the painful disruption of the planet and human life and she is excited and able to communicate those images in words. The story of her early exhibition of Central America House of Horrors was told with an enormous amount of excitement.

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\(^6\) The surge refers to United States President George W. Bush's 2007 increase in the number of American troops in order to provide security to Baghdad and Al Anbar Province.
I got the biggest, biggest, biggest army tent from the National Guard for free and set it up at the Bowden College Museum of Art Festival in Brunswick, Maine. I did this with my ex-husband and he dressed up as a Latin American General and he was bribing everyone who entered the tent to vote for him. He was running in every single party so there wasn’t any way for him not to get elected. The ballot box was made of glass so you couldn’t hide your vote. There were giant fingerprints done by my famous artist friend Abby Shaw, so you had to get fingerprinted to go in. Then you walk into the first room where bodies are all over the floor and you had to walk on and over the bodies to get through. There were all sorts of voices coming at you about the lives of the people who’ve been killed and disappeared.

It seemed that her art installation pointed out how absurd it all was and that people needed to change. As Natasha was telling the story her excitement grew; she was using her arms and hands, and smiling. It was as if she were physically in the army tent.

Oh! And a strobe light so that you were disorientated by the light. Then you walked into the next room and there was this bulb and a chair you had to sit in and get interrogated by these giant puppet heads and each puppet head was about yea big and they’re going at you and the voices are firing these absurdist questions at you.

She delivered the next few sentences with such accelerated speed, excitement and she was laughing.

How do you like your beans? Do you like your rice with your beans or your beans with your rice? And very, very fast, very scary questions coming at you. Then you went into another room where there was a black light and there were all these hanging bodies, arms and legs hanging in the room. I painted everything so it glowed in the dark; everything was eerily reflected in the light. There were voices of the women in Guatemala who had disappeared. Then you walked into the next room where there was Latin music blaring, and a body was laid out in a coffin with a lid and goldfish swimming over the face, real goldfish and flowers everywhere.

At this point Natasha was sitting upright, feet off the coach, looking inquiringly at me and she asked, “Should I keep going? Do you like stories like this?” She laughed, appeared happy, clasped her hands and brought them to her chin. I replied, “It’s a story, it’s your story.”
Okay! Then there was a cut out of Augusto Sandino a Nicaraguan revolutionary and they had to walk through the cut out of Sandino, with the big hat. The minute you stepped into the next room, which was dark and if you tripped a light went on and a firing squad shot you. Then you walked into the next room and that was the all American room where there are American families sitting playing video games, watching T.V. and the husband reading the Wall Street Journal. The kids are playing video games, eating junk food and then you walk out and there are these huge pads of paper where you could write your responses.

The show was a lot of work and it took a great deal of her energy but she had that kind of energy for a while. She said, “Yeah, it was big, that was my first big public thing I did.”

Natasha participates in a lot of demonstrations and politically themed parades hoping to change public perceptions. She does not want to just speak to the elite, she wants to engage with people and she works hard to have her work out there. What she likes about activist art is that it goes beyond the usual art audience. She explained:

I went to a big demonstration in New York, an anti-war demonstration. I had to walk about twelve blocks to get to the demonstration and then I walked with sandwich boards, one in front, and one in the back and walked straight up 5th Avenue. I had never had so many people come over to me, including two policeman, and ask me about the images…who I was, I mean in a very friendly way, and very curious about what were these images about…telling me how strong the images were. I was so taken with how it brought people to me.

She indicated that an hour later when she was walking in the parade no one spoke to her and asked what she was doing. It made her think, “that’s a great way for artists to show their work, just wear it and walk down the street.”

She sees her work as an activist artist being relevant in education and a good example of that is The Whitefield Elementary School Pole Painting project with Grade 5 and 6 students. They researched the history of the town in order to learn about the life stories and painted these stories on seventeen Central Maine Power utility poles. Its importance was that it told the town’s stories out where the town could see them and “it connects the town’s people to the kids and the kids to the town’s people.” Her work on CommonDreams.org reached a vast audience and she received an e-mail from a viewer who wrote, “I open Common Dreams every day and I often
can’t read the words, but I look at the images and it opens my heart and then I feel I can deal with the issues of the day.” She received a lot of feedback from CommonDreams.org and she knows that she changed people’s attitudes, lives and the way they think about art and issues.

People whom she has met in life come up to her and tell her, “I’m working in a soup kitchen now, I’m volunteering every week because of you.” Other people in the community thank her for working with their children as they have gone home and been creative. Natasha showed a sense of pride when she said, “Kids whom I worked with who are grown up now have said, ‘I’m creative because of you, because you showed me that I could paint.’” She knows art contributes to education because she went into the same school from kindergarten to grade eight once a week. She stated, “That class had the highest achievement scores than any other class that’s gone through the school.” She is most emphatic in her statement, “it’s because they had, they had Natasha coming in there once a week giving them that extra creativity.” Inspiring people to change and contribute to community has been a lifetime journey for Natasha Mayers.


Case Study 2: Mendelson Joe

Lawyers are in charge of the world, lawyers and thugs and advertising people. Those people run the whole world…it used to be the farmer, now it’s the corporation.

Mendelson Joe, December 13, 2007

This case study includes an in-depth interview exploring distinct identity, the place of the interview, personality as style, influences on Mendelson Joe’s life and world, community and its importance and change as a driver in his work. People make creative decisions every day from the minute they get up in the morning…”(Trend, 2007, P. 37). Mendelson Joe fits this description and more. As a nationally acclaimed Canadian artist, he is direct with his viewpoints whether it is through his painting, writing or music.

Distinct Identity

Mendelson Joe stopped the researcher at the beginning of the introduction and said, “You can’t use any of this to make money, including the university, that’s all. I want to get paid somehow, somewhere. Artists don’t get paid, especially people like me.” The researcher continued, “If there is anything you do not feel comfortable with…” there was a pause, and Mendelson Joe responded, “Oh, I know how to look after myself.” He was prepared and ready to begin the interview, “Let’s do it.”

Mendelson Joe has been considered a professional musician since 1964, and a professional visual artist for the past three decades. His art has drawn from the faces of everyday people, and politicians from the landscape. He does not separate his music from the visual art. He commented:
In the music business anybody can pick up a guitar and play it, but they are not necessarily going to make a living from it... I guess you could say anyone could pick up a paintbrush and they can make a living from it but... do they do it every day and do they make it their life’s work... I am still making music [and art] every day, that is the best I can do.

He does not think of himself as an activist artist as much as he thinks of himself as an artist and a Canadian engaged in democracy in an active way. He considers himself lucky to be a creative person, otherwise he might have applied his thoughts and views to something that might not have been constructive. He explained, “Art is constructive for his mind and even the most disgusting art is constructive.” If he had not been an artist he thinks he would be in prison.

His belief is that there is not any social justice and that everything in existence is random. He stated that his Buddhist friends disagree with him, as they think everything is karmic and recycled. The only thing he likes about Buddhism is that they “believe in taking responsibility for their actions. I love that, that’s why Buddhism is the best if you have to join a club.” He explained, “We have to look after our responsibilities of whatever they are, whether it’s obligation to others, commitments made prior to others, helping the community. I mean that’s just all part of living.” Joe stresses that you can either “notice stuff or ignore it” and most people retreat into delusion. He views the world this way:

Human are... chronically being lied to and deceived by people who want to prevail, power structures, its everywhere, it’s in everything. In other words that’s what politics is all about... politics of a corporation, politics of the school board, politics of the church, politics of the government it’s all about winning and how to manipulate people without having to murder them.

He stated that, there are two ways to get control, “You either kill people or you manipulate them.” Mendelson Joe commented on what humans can do: “They can develop, become conscious and act in concert with their consciousness but without action it’s all just... masturbation of the mind.”

He believes that justice occurs occasionally in nature by accident if there is such a thing as a just outcome. He is an artist who follows his mantra, “I am what I do, I do what I am... and
true creativity, and pure creativity is the opposite to all the lies.” He continued, “When a painting looks at you…if it really connects with you it’s all over, it’s already happened that’s a great thing about visual art.” At this point in his life he does not think his work moves people but he revealed, “Once I’m dead maybe one hundred years from now... maybe some people will look at my stuff and say oh I get it. That’s one of the downsides of being ahead of the time, being van to the van-guarde.”

Mendelson Joe: The Place of the Interview

The first interview with Mendelson Joe was at his residence in Emsdale, Ontario on March 20, 2007 for an independent study Understanding Political Art. He spoke about the way that everything we do, every action we have in life, could be construed as political. At that time, he declared that in relation to art there is passive politicalization and then there is active politicalization and that he has always been fairly overt about everything.

Nine months later, after he was contacted through his art representative, Karen Robinson Gallery, he agreed to participate in this thesis study of activist art. We communicated through his agent Karen Robinson and we agreed on a face-to-face interview date.

On December 13, 2007, we met in his log cabin home/studio in Emsdale, Ontario. A long driveway led up to a parking area adjacent to his story and a half log cabin, but not before I drove past three signs which said: Sign #1: NO ENTRY, Sign #2: KEEP OUT and Sign #3: YOU ARE TRESPASSING, BACK OUT NOW. Mounds of snow covered the landscape and piled high except for the pathway leading to the door. A small front deck overlooked undisturbed bushes, brush and trees which has, as part of is picturesque view, an aboriginal teepee painted with a bare breasted mermaid swimming in water among fish and sea plants. Another portion of the teepee is painted with pink bunnies that appear to be engaged in an aboriginal dance. Following Joe into
his cabin, I walked a few feet facing north in the cabin where on the wall hung a board approximately 24” x 24” with the following text printed in phthalo blue paint on a gold background:

IT’S NO SECRET* THAT THE
HUMAN RACE HAS RUN ITS
RACE OR DAMN NEAR. IN
THE NAME OF PROGRESS,
IN THE NAME OF SECURITY
IN THE NAME OF CONVENIENCE,
MAN RAPES MOTHER,
MAN RAPES HIS MOTHER
AND THE EARTH MOTHER,
THERE IS NO OTHER MOTHER.
SO IF YOU ASK ME, WOMEN
ARE THE ONLY HOPE © M JOE
THAT I SPELL POORLY TRULY

To my right was an open-spaced room, which was part living quarters and part studio area. Joe paints in a corner of the room, which has a southeast exposure, and to ward off the brilliant sunlight he drapes large Canadian flags across the windows. His working area is a chair and table jam-packed with used and new tubes of paint, glass jars with brushes, and personal photographs. Track lighting on both the ceiling and a vertical steel pole is concentrated in the southeast corner of his working space. The room is filled with completed canvases, mid-way completed canvases and blank canvases, boxes of art supplies, a couch, bookshelves and his musical instruments.

Earlier art works about former Canadian Prime Minister of Canada, Brian Mulroney, (“Blah Blah…” Image 7) and (Pasta?” Image 8) are two of the thirty Mulroney paintings in his extensive collection of portraits, some of which would later be known as Joe’s Politicians. These paintings have similarities to (“Death Mask” Image 9) of former United States Vice President Dick Cheney where Mendelson Joe, through his art, expresses his scorn for bureaucratic rhetoric
and lies. His painting of the natural world in his version of the (“Picture of May” Image 10) epitomizes the statement attached to the painting: “sometimes the best antidote I can produce to counter the militant stupidity of humans is a picture of beauty; beauty helps heal me.” Very few areas have escaped his paintbrush, including his telephone, chairs and his guitar, which he plays every day.

Joe directed me to my left to an open doorway where a circular table was set back from the entrance and I was invited to sit on a wooden chair laminated with American currency. On the table is a wooden miniature chair, which Joe indicated is for former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. After the camera equipment and digital recorder were set up, and tea brewed for both of us, Joe sat on a chair facing me, ready for the interview. I realized that Mendelson Joe was wearing similar clothing to that which he wore during our first interview; a gray long sleeved fleece hoodie, generously speckled in paint. His face, with a well-trimmed white beard, protruded out of the hood, which covered his balding head. Over the hoodie he wore a short sleeved blazon-orange coloured fleece top with two lemon yellow safety reflector strips on either side of his chest. Permanent large paint patches on the front of the fleece and under the arms were evident. Grey work trousers and work boots completed his attire.

Living far from city lights allows him many tranquil moments to look up and admire the sky and clouds. He is a big admirer of clouds and he hears people say, “clouds, who cares.” He is overwhelmed by beauty and struck by nature.” He told me:

I once saw a herd of otters crossing my lane and I went insane. I couldn’t believe it. There were four right away. I said to myself, well there’re some otters, but then there were another five. I had never heard of a group of otters in that number so I called them Herd of Otters. Of course I painted them.

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7 A hoodie is short for “hooded sweatshirt,” which is a heavy upper-body garment with a hood. The characteristic design includes large frontal pockets, a hood, and (usually) a drawstring to adjust the hood opening.
Mendelson Joe: Personality as Style

Mendelson Joe was born in 1944 in Toronto, Ontario and at birth named Birrel Josef Mendelson. He began his singing, song writing, and guitar playing career in the 1960s using the name Joe Mendelson. It was not until the 1970s when he began to paint that he became professionally known as Mendelson Joe. He is a proud Canadian although he knows there are inequities in his country. He did not understand hatred as a young boy but stated:

I was beaten up when I was four years old and called a dirty Jew pig. So, what are you going to do about it, well you either become a victim or you fight back, and fighting through art you can’t get your legs broken as quickly.

He was raised in a middle-class family; his father was a lawyer and although he was not an activist “he knew what was just.” His father was an example of a parent who indicated what was reasonable and fair even though he did not conduct his life in accordance with what he said. Joe believes that a lot of people’s values come from how they are raised whether it is by parents or guardians. He acquired values from his parents, “some definitely hypocritical, some good, some kind, some cruel; my father was cruel.” He felt his father was a hypocrite but a good man. Joe stated that people should not underestimate “the smartness of kids.” When he was six years of age he agrees that he did not behave, but he had original thoughts and knew what hypocrisy was and said firmly:

My father says one thing but he tells me to do another. [Joe is firm when he speaks.] I had all the answers then and as I grew and developed I become more conscious and acted in concert with my consciousness.

He is direct with his opinions, “almost everybody’s a hypocrite, and it’s a question of how much hypocrisy one lives.” He admitted to having been a hypocrite and painted a self-portrait (“Hypocrite” Image 11) with Hypocrite tattooed on his upper left arm. Joe’s mother had a sense of humour, which he portrays, in his painting, (“My Parents” Image 12) depicting his mother mocking his father. She was, “acting like a baboon because he’s wearing a suit.”
Mendelson Joe is not a dabbler in painting nor in his music, he is a “ten-thousand percenter.” He is good at painting and music and he declared, “You’ve got to stick with what you’re good at naturally” and he reiterated, “I am good, but good doesn’t interest me, I’m interested in being the best possible.” He paints almost every day and is either priming or painting on boards or canvas. He is working on a series, which he referred to as “pretty pictures”, and for Joe they have no other existence than beauty, for “beauty is the healer.” In the context of what is political, he believes that beauty is part of the mix and it is a question of whether it has a resounding message. As he placed his right hand over his heart, he indicated “well it is with me and beauty is like the friendliness cookie…beauty keeps me from wanting to commit suicide immediately.” Joe is very good at not wasting time and for him the key is being efficient with one’s time, not to be scattered and to move from one thing to the next.

According to Joe “making art is a very indulgent job…it’s not hard work…it’s doing exactly what I want and I don’t play to anybody’s tune.” He is a self-taught visual artist with a certain style and holds the view that you cannot teach art, creativity or style. If an artist wants real style they have to create it themselves. He stated, “This is why the best, the best of anything, I don’t care whether it’s a car design, any design, any creative thing, anything that humans make when they figure it out themselves it’s going to be the most original.”

Joe is blunt when he approaches political issues. He knows many artists who make a lot of art that he considers serious and significant but they are not waving a flag or trying to make a serious political statement. Joe considers everything a statement and in Canada there are many situations to comment on if one chooses. He is engaged in what is going on in the world and as an engaged Canadian who happens to be an artist he believes, “your art and your politics are one and the same.”
As an avid reader, he owns and reads poetry books and non-fiction. He recognizes that fiction tells stories and that people learn from those stories, however he is much more interested in the notion that “This moment” is important and he states, “I’m not a fiction guy.” He isn’t good at interacting with people and that is why a fan who wrote him recently thinks he may have Asberger’s Syndrome, “Which may be the case” he stated, “I may have it at some level, I’m definitely dyslexic, so anything is possible.” Joe does not consider himself a deep person. “Deep people ponder. I don’t ponder.” The answers are completely obvious to him most of the time and when they are not, a person in the know tells him and then he sees the answer. Joe explained about the time he went to see a “shrink” in England in 1969 and the doctor stated:

Do you understand the way you are? And he went on to describe how after I had spoken for forty-five minutes, he told me the way he perceived me. I said, yeah I understand the way I am. And he said well you’re not going to have a very easy ride if you keep thinking and saying what you’re saying. He said what you have to do if you’re going to be this way you better learn how to protect yourself. That’s all I ever have to do because I already know most of the answers.

Joe reinforced his statement “there’s nothing deep about me.” What is important to know is how to filter away “all the maze of crap, propaganda, deception, delusion and all that stuff in existence.” His art agent tells him he is sagacious; he prefers to be called kind. When I used the word kindness he responded fervently:

Kindness, no you can’t teach kindness. Kindness comes from the heart…I’m as kind as anybody I’ve ever met, and I mean I’m not waving my flag but, I’m a philanthropist, but I don’t talk about it. I’m telling you kindness comes from the heart, you can’t learn it…you either got it or you don’t.

Joe’s mantra is “I believe Thanksgiving should be celebrated every fifteen minutes you’re awake.” This is the way he thinks. Because he considers today may be the day he dies, therefore he makes certain he is engaged with life. He has lived this way and thought this way since he was in his mid 20’s. Joe figures every day he is going to die, “I honestly do, and every time I wake up I’m surprised.”
Life Experience as Influence

Mendelson Joe was fifteen when his best friend’s father, the Reverend Robert Manning, was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s\(^8\) disease. Joe attended Richmond High School during that time and his best friend was Jim (Jimsie) Manning who was the second eldest of seven children in the Manning household. The Manning family were poor and lived in a small house on a fifteen acre farm outside Toronto, Ontario where Joe would help by fertilizing the apple orchards with horse manure. His friend’s father stayed home the last year of his life and Joe watched him lose control of his muscles, become unable to swallow and consume food, and die at the age of forty-nine. Joe liked Mr. Manning “a lot…he was a decent guy…you notice there are actually some people in the world who are decent, they can influence a kid.” Joe told me:

How can you ignore watching someone die, especially when you see eventually that he can’t feed himself and he gets thinner, and thinner, and thinner. And then one day, I don’t know, one day he wasn’t there and they took him to the hospital and a few days later they buried him. That changed my life…that changed my whole life.

He realized the importance of “living in the moment” when Reverend Manning died. It was simple to Joe; everybody dies, it’s just a question of when and one has a choice in life: “You can either notice stuff or ignore it and most people retreat into delusion.” He tells me he had a wake-up call at the age of fifteen and another as he approached the age of thirty. When Joe was twenty-four his “best friend in the whole world,” a girl whom he was friends with since the age of nine, was diagnosed with cancer and she died five years later.

Mendelson Joe is interested in risk. He is a “motorcycle nut” and has been riding a motorcycle since he was sixteen. He understands that riding a motorcycle involves risk and that

\(^8\) ALS or Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease is a progressive, usually fatal, neurodegenerative disease caused by the degeneration of motor neurons, the nerve cells in the central nervous system that control voluntary muscle movement.
one’s life can end. It ended for his friend Daryl in 1976 at the age of thirty. When Daryl died, “that really confirmed to me that you better wake up and make the most of what you have and become more and more engaged in whatever you think is important.” He has opinions on what is important and though he does not have children, he does have friends and family, some of whom he can tolerate and the ones he can tolerate he expresses his care for regularly. He returned to his mantra, “I believe Thanksgiving should be celebrated every fifteen minutes you’re awake” because he knows today is his last day. He was sincere as he continued, “So I’m spending my last day on this planet with you, so that’s how I think at 63.4.”

During Mendelson Joe’s earlier years he had been “very, very poor.” He owned a green card that would allow him to take one hundred dollars five days in row to pay his rent. He stressed “I hate those cards.” He pays his bills immediately, he does not purchase or do anything unless he can pay for it, and he never buys anything on credit. Joe has purchased a few motorcycles over the years, each one paid for with cash and he would never take delivery on the bike until he could pay in full. He told me, “when I make money I spend it right away, and when I make lots of money I give lots of money away, that’s my life.” That is how he lives because he does not want to “get sucked into owning things.”

Joe owns a log cabin in Emsdale, Ontario because he inherited money when his parents died. He could not believe that he had lived long enough to inherit anything, as he thought he would never survive beyond forty. If he had not had access to these funds he would still be “living in a toilet…I don’t know…that’s why I say everything is totally random, whereas most people think you’re destined for this or you’re ordained for that.” Everything he does in life is a natural integration of everything he believes in. He never thinks about things; they just happen.

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*Mendelson Joe counts each month and day of his age. On the day of this interview December 13, 2007 Joe was 63.4 years of age.*
He knew he loved playing music, so he played music. He wrote songs and played in a band and he progressed to writing more songs and during that time he “inevitably became less of a jerk.” He knows he became less of a jerk after the deaths of Reverend Manning and his friend Daryl’s death, and after he experienced poverty and saw others experience poverty and abuse. For Joe it is important that “you either write about your life or paint about your life or sing about your life or you’re fabricating fiction.”

**World Issues as Influence**

Joe’s explanation of why Canadian democracy is in jeopardy is because its citizens have elected politicians such as former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1984–1993) and others since him who are “not the best we could do.” He considers most people passive and Canadians passive aggressive, which for Joe “is a sickness.” He has traveled Canada from coast to coast as far north as Inuvik\(^\text{10}\) and spoke in reverence of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. He has made decisions as to who would be the best to run Canada. If we want the best, he would choose his mentor, author and environmental activist Maude Barlow, as Prime Minister of Canada, author Margaret Atwood as Minister of Cultural Affairs, friend Madam Justice Denise Bellamy as the Attorney General of Canada and a decent man, Dr. Philip Berger Chief, Department of Family and Community Medicine and Medical Director at St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, as Canada’s Minister of Health.

Mendelson Joe has been interested in Brian Mulroney for a long time. Television viewing is not part of Joe’s structured day; however, prior to my arriving for our interview he viewed former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney testifying about the Airbus before an ethics

\(^{10}\) Inuvik is a small community of about 3500 people near the north end of the Northwest Territories, Canada. Residents: There are Inuit, First Nations, Métis and non-aboriginal.
committee in the Canadian House of Commons. This was a case involving alleged bribery at the highest levels of government to secure Airbus sales of aircraft to Air Canada. Joe informed me that Mulroney said he should not have associated with German businessman Karlheinz Schreiber nor should have he accepted bundles of cash which he placed in safety deposit boxes in two different countries. Nonetheless, Mulroney denied accepting kickbacks. Mulroney’s testimony incensed Joe; “the guy is a song and dance man…he is Karlheinz Schreiber’s anus… he can’t say anything without half truths or lies in it.” According to Joe, Brian Mulroney sold Canadian citizens out to the United States with the Free Trade Agreement. He cut taxes, and of course raised taxes, for example, the GST which “censors art because when I sell a painting we, Karen Robinson Gallery and I, have to charge a tax on that painting.”

Joes reads newspapers voraciously and posts his responses regarding pertinent issues to people at all levels of government on very large “Joe Art” cards. He made reference to the Canadian Federal Government, “The larger the piece of mail the less disposable it is. Everybody in the post office to the people who receive them read my mail, that’s what I want.” Joe does not back down from issues that are important to him and he is prepared to die for what he believes in, which “makes life a lot easier because then you know why you’re here.” Joe is concerned about the “asphyxiation of the planet”. Other people may refer to this as global warming, climate change, or carbon based burning, “yeah carbon-based asphyxiation, that’s my word

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11 Pasta? 20”x16” Acrylic on Canvas (see image 8).

12 A free trade area as defined by the General Agreement On Tariffs And Trade (GATT) is a group of two or more customs territories in which duties and other restrictive regulations of commerce are eliminated on substantially all the trade between the constituent territories in products originating in such territories. The deal came into effect on January 1, 1989.

13 The Canadian Goods and Services Tax (GST) is a multi-value-added tax introduced in Canada on January 1, 1991 by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Finance Minister Michael Wilson.
asphyxiation.” He calls humans asphyxiators because:

> We all breathe the same air and at a certain point we are going to asphyxiate a large population of the living …experience enormous ecological destruction as result of the big mommy, that is Mother Nature, I call her the big mommy…and she is going to take a big poo on us and she should.

He agrees he is “nipple deep in the apocalypse right now” and people think he is nuts but he says, “I used to tell people thirty years ago what was going to happen.” In 1980 he wrote a song and it goes like this:

> I am a cockroach and you are a cockroach too
> We live on this planet together; we breathe the same air as Margaret Thatcher
> We live on the brink of destruction; we rape the Garden of Eden
> Then we pray to Gods to absolve us, to save us from ourselves
> Apocalypse is very near, watch TV, and drink that beer,
> Me and the boys and our 50, we make a lot of pee pee

He continued:

> I always remember hearing and reading about what was seen by astronauts, photographed by satellites and studied by physicians about how they look at the Earth from space. They saw millions of manmade patterns on the land surface of Earth that resembles skin conditions of cancer patients. Slag heaps and garbage dumps that can be compared to raised skin lesions. Humans are the cancer of the earth and there is no question at a certain point cancer usually kills the host or at least damages the host dramatically.

He added that, Robert Bateman is a vanguard artist because he has painted the natural world since he was a child. He continued, “It is presently occurring to people that humans pollute, kill off large portions of animal life, animals are dying because of DDT and from chemicals humans put into the world and this guy paints this stuff.” He makes it clear that although some people may not think Bateman is the greatest painter, they should stop and think about his subject matter.

> All of a sudden he becomes a visionary because all he’s connecting with is the natural world. So all the art critics, art intellectuals and academic types who put him down, they better take a second guess and look at the content of what he does. All he’s doing is embracing nature, pretty important to me.

Mendelson Joe’s approach to living on the planet is as simple as being observant of his world and the influences that affect him.
Community and its Importance

Joe explains he has been an outsider since the age of six and has lived his life as if he were from another planet. “I am only visiting from another galaxy I tell people because they can’t understand my brain patterns…or what I may say about something, they can’t put two and two together.” Many people who were supposed to be his friends have dismissed him, he told me, “just so you know I’ve dismissed a couple…I’ve been dismissed by people because I’m obviously a pain to some people.”

Joe continued talking about people, “humans are the disease, so being around them is not good for my health because human behaviour is destructive, thoughtless…and we’re the most negative force on the planet.” He knows he lives a charmed existence in his log cabin in the woods but he would like to be a lot further away from humans. His nearest neighbour is approximately nine hundred feet away from his property and that is too close because they make noise. Most people make noise and he does not mean with just their vehicles; he means they play their radios for everyone to hear. Joe informed me the Township of Perry where he resides has a bylaw that forbids any use of amplified equipment, but “most people do not consider their car as an amplified piece of equipment, including the noise that emanates from their car stereos.” He does not want to hear the noise or the stereo music and those around him say, “Well wouldn’t you like to hear your own music? No, I don’t want to hear anybody’s music.” He lives in the woods “to listen to the birds not car stereos” and he shakes his head, “humans really bug me.”

Even in relationship to the art community, Mendelson Joe is an outsider. When it comes to art exhibitions he tries to “control how everything is done.” If he has a choice, he tries to curate the whole show. “I control what they pick because I’ve already picked what they get to pick from.” For example, when art gallery people arrive to choose his paintings he likes to design the hanging of the show because he has strong opinions regarding his work. He usually does not like
a gallery’s sense of logic or design. Even though he is a productive and prolific artist he stated
the hanging of art should use the “less is more” approach as opposed to having one hundred
paintings in a show. Joe likes less to allow viewers the time to focus, as “art is so potent that
people can’t deal with what they’re experiencing after one or two works.” Sometimes he has to
relinquish these decisions to the gallery because they do not want his input. Although many in the
art community prefer to do it their way he offers his ideas for consideration and they take it under
advisement. He goes on to explain, that people cannot be controlled but asks if I have heard of the
expression control freak, “well maybe, I am considered a control freak.” He does not go to his
exhibitions any longer to check whether they are hung right but he always supplies his viewpoints
regarding how it should be done. If they follow his instructions he is pleased and as he says, “If
they don’t, what am I going to do?” Once in a while, “People have the grace and elegance and
taste, and they’ll actually display the work in what I would describe as a very respectful well
thought out way.”

He is willing to share his work through the art community, but on his own terms. A major
concern is that his paintings are not damaged; therefore, he insures all his work. He draws up
contracts prior to the art leaving his residence or the Karen Robinson Gallery and makes certain
that his fee is paid up front or the art does not exchange hands. As for loaning his work to art
galleries, he recognizes that it may benefit him professionally as his work gains exposure, the
gallery benefits and the relationship between him and the gallery is balanced. At this point he was
direct in his speech:

But I’ve been screwed by enough people for various reasons that I recognize that there’re
people whether they’re big institutions or small institutions. You’re still dealing with
people who sometimes are not actually the smartest apples in the batch, and some of them
are liars and some of them are opportunists.
**Change as a Driver in His Work**

In his art, Mendelson Joe’s intention is “to tell the truth, expose the rot, be silly, expose the thugs, the liars and the creeps.” His work is integrated with his values, politics, his love of life and through this he tries to make things right and create change for the common good. As noted above: “there is no social justice, and everything in existence is random.” In terms of society, where there are systems and laws in place that allow charges and indictments against people to be implemented, “justice can’t exist, it does exist on occasion, but I think a lot of the time it is just still random, it’s who has the best lawyer.” Joe adds that social justice education occurs in the home when parents are “doing their job or not doing their job”. He stated, “parenting is where real social justice comes from.” He believes if a child is raised in a family where parents, guardians, brothers, sisters or an influential voice or face says “this is not right or that individual stands up for something important, then that begins to be a social kind of engagement with what may or may not be fair or true.” Joe never thought about social justice as a youth as he was only interested in the beat of music, making music and within his home he stated, “his mother was not socially just.”

As Joe reflected about his art and the world he explained, “no one is going to see it the way I do, they’re going to see it the way they do.” He elaborated that it all starts by “noticing stuff when you walk down a street, listen to music or look at art.” When he ventured to big cities he saw graffiti and believes it can be art, although many people would disagree with him. To Joe, in some cases it is more legitimate than what is in art galleries and the most important thing is, “Noticing what your eye tells you is art, it is in the eyes, ears or mind of the beholder. Things

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14 Graffiti is the name for images or lettering scratched, scrawled, painted or marked in any manner on property. Graffiti is sometimes regarded as a form of art and other times regarded as unsightly damage or unwanted.
evolve and it is about being aware and that awareness leads to greater awareness where change is enormous.”

As a product of his own time, Mendelson Joe has participated in many demonstrations and was the instigator of many. There are certain basics to Joe’s life. First, his right to freedom of expression, a functioning cornerstone of Canadian democracy which assures him the means to attain the truth and maintain the balance between stability and change in society; second, his right to free speech which is predicated on the belief that a free society cannot function with coercive censorship in the hands of people supporting one ideology who want to use power to suppress his viewpoints. He reiterates that his right to freedom of expression, which he practices everyday, is very important to him. Although he appreciates the fact that under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom there is freedom of the press, and other media he hesitates to speak of the media and artists like Norval Morriseau in the same sentence. Unfortunately the press waits until someone of that ilk dies to praise them and that is an issue for him. As he said, “we love’em dead in Canada.”

Mendelson Joe is not the biggest fan of English Canada’s treatment of their artists. In every society artists act as cultural carriers and harbingers of change and for Joe, Quebec is dynamic in that regard as the province and government support and treat their artists with a degree of respect. As an artist he feels fortunate to spend each day of his life doing what he really wants to do. He said, “If today is the last, everything is just fine with me because my ducks are in a row.”

15 Norval Morriseau, also known as Copper Thunderbird, was an Aboriginal Canadian artist known as the “Picasso of the North.” Morriseau created works depicting the legends of his people, the cultural and political tensions between native Canadian and European traditions, his existential struggles, and his deep spirituality and mysticism.
Image 7. *Blah Blah...*Courtesy of Mendelson Joe

Image 8. *Pasta?* Courtesy of Mendelson Joe
Image 9. *Death Mask*. Courtesy of Mendelson Joe

Image 10. *Picture of May*. Courtesy Mendelson Joe
Image 11. Hypocrite. Courtesy of Mendelson Joe

Image 12. Parents. Courtesy of Mendelson Joe
Case Study 3: Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge

An activist artist is an artist who sees their work as having some impact on the world around them, and engaging in the world rather than art being about self expression or about personal experience, essentially art that engages in the world in some other way.

- Karl Beveridge, January 4, 2008

Equally so, you do it within the work itself. You also function within organizations to change them in ways that you think is the direction that you would like to see them go.

- Carole Condé, January 4, 2008

This case study includes an in-depth interview with Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge exploring distinct identity, the place of the interview, personality as style, life experience as influence, world issues as influence, community and its importance and change as a driver in their work. This case is slightly different from the other two cases in the study as Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge work as a team to create single works of art. As we discussed how the interviews might take place they explained that they interview together. After we settled in and became more comfortable while sipping freshly brewed cups of coffee, we established that a question would be asked and then each of them would respond individually.

Distinct Identity

In Chapter I of this study, activist art was defined as the response of artists to injustice toward human beings and the planet. Ideologies were found at the root of activist art and these ideologies include important issues and values that artists seek to change and scenarios they want to illuminate. An artist operating politically is not one who pontificates but one who is an active member in society. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge fit the description of activist artists who are
active members of their community. They create subjectivity\textsuperscript{16} from original thought, produce works as installations using multimedia, and use photography to tell stories and advance a social issue agenda.

One of their main concerns is the labour movement, and their intention is to provide an understanding of issues related to organized labour. Condé and Beveridge recognize that in engaging in cultural processes with workers, education becomes very important. It is a means by which people can gain an experienced perception of their work world and also participate. They recognize that people take pride in their jobs, as Condé and Beveridge depicted in their work (“\textit{Class Maintenance}” Image 15). Karl stated that pride is a very key thing because, “Pride, I mean is at the base of activism…so you know that becomes very important. That’s kind of the base in a sense of our activism or what we’re trying to express in the work.”

Telling stories through their art is a way to educate. Carol stated:

> What’s missing are stories of people from South Asia, people from First Nations…we’re telling one kind of history which is the labour history or working people’s history but there is a whole culture… what was it like when you lived in an Inuit area, or Palestine.

They see these additional stories of history as important although they have, “a very narrow viewpoint because we grew up in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) Canada.”

Responding to whether they are successful artists and at the top their game Carol stated:

> They are part of a critical mass of artists across Canada who are engaged in the kind of work they do and are seen as a part of… but it depends on the area you are talking about. If you were saying who is new and upcoming…

Karl continued, “by de facto leaves you out of it, I mean we are not new…I always see myself as continually emerging.” Carole elaborated:

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\textsuperscript{16} Subjectivity refers to what is personal to the individual, and what makes the individual who she or he is in distinction from others. It is what is inside and what the individual can see, feel, think, imagine, and hope for etc.
It depends on whether you’re saying labour artists then you would say oh yeah then everybody knows who we are…If you said a couple, some people might name couples, so again it depends…When somebody asks you to speak about being an artist…none of these questions are related to being a father and mother or grandparent.

Carole explained that all the questions are related therefore depending on how narrow one creates the alleyway one could say, “Yes of course we’re famous.”

**Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge: The Place of the Interview**

I scheduled an interview for Friday morning January 4, 2008 with Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, who reside in Toronto, Ontario. Traveling to their house I drove across The Bathurst Street Bridge, which carries four lanes for motor vehicles along with the Toronto Transit Commission’s streetcar tracks along Bathurst Street. The sidewalks were busy with early morning pedestrians and the streets with commuters in personal automobiles, taxies and streetcars making their way through snow slush. People of different ages and ethnicity were traveling to different destinations. I pulled up to a parking space left vacant for me by their neighbour who lives in the adjacent brick building. Carole and Karl’s semi-detached building stood in an older neighbourhood located in downtown Toronto and consisting of private and public housing and commercial venues. The area is bounded by Dundas Street on the north, Spadina Avenue on the east, King Street West on the south, and Bathurst Street on the west.

Carole and Karl met me at the door and welcomed me into their home. Throughout the first floor there was antique furniture, including a large wooden dining table and carved wooden chairs, which Carole inherited from her parents. A long wall-hanging, displaying a collection of old and new union pins, hung on one wall. Moving towards the back of their house, we entered a recently renovated sun/sitting room enhanced with large plants. Through sliding glass doors was a fenced landscaped garden with a semi-dwarf tree, a haven for birds to which Carole pointed during our interview. A porch that had once extended off the back of the house had been removed
and placed at the end of the garden facing the house. This was a place of “retreat” for Karl.
For the interview, we sat around a wooden table with antique chairs in the sun/sitting room.
Carole and Karl were completely charming, and asked me if assistance was needed in setting up
the camera equipment.

They explained that, as full time activist artists, they were part of the genesis of the
Workers Arts and Heritage Centre in Hamilton; they continue to be involved in the labour
movement and attend yearly demonstrations on Labour Day. Both are active in the Mayworks
Festival of Working People and the Arts in Toronto, a multi-disciplinary festival that celebrates
working class cultures. For over thirty years they have been involved with A Space Gallery in
Toronto, which is one of the oldest artist-run centres in Canada. The gallery has played a
significant role in the evolution of contemporary art in Canada. Carole explained that being
involved as an activist artist means, “fighting for artist run centres as opposed to dealer run
organizations.” A Space Gallery supports artists and enables them to show works that they feel
are appropriate. Both Carole and Karl are involved in negotiating copyright collective and better
fees at the National Gallery of Canada - Musée des beaux-arts du Canada. Individually, Karl is
National Vice-Representative for Canadian Artists’ Representation/Le Front des artistes
canadiens (CARFAC)17 and Carole works with Deborah Barndt at Community Arts Ontario.18
These are only some of the places, people, issues and talks in which they are socially engaged.

17 CARFAC is an association of professional and media artists who have worked for 40 years on the legal
and economic issues facing visual artists.

18 Community Arts Ontario is an arts service organization that currently represents a network of more than
180 arts agencies, institutions, and municipalities across Ontario and close to 40 individual artists and
public supporters.
Karl stated, that as activist artists, “they have some impact on the world around them…essentially [their] art engages the world in some way or another.”

Their community consists of their house, streets, buildings and people in downtown Toronto that they engage with on a daily basis. Their house is a place where friends, colleagues and artists meet regularly to exchange ideas and discuss interests. Carole stated, “It’s one thing to actually be active with the work… but I also think that an artist is a person within community and their job in that community is to change the institutions.”

**Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge: Personality as Style**

Carole Condé was born in 1940 and Karl Beveridge in 1945 and since meeting in 1967 they have shaped a national and international presence for themselves as cultural, political and activist artists. In a careful response by e-mail to Barber (2007) on their class origins Carole and Karl wrote:

In regard to your question: we’ve always recognized ourselves as you put it, as part of the professional middle class (cultural/intellectual worker sub-section.) Carole’s mother came from a working-class/farm background and her father was a lower middle class garage owner/mechanic. My mother was a professional copywriter, and my father was a political organizer (he was left on the doorstep of an orphanage and died working at Ford [Motor Company] in Ilford, England. Both were active in the CP [Communist Party] in the 1940’s (p. 9).

We talked about why they do what they do; both replied, “That is the big question” and then Carole deferred to Karl. He believes that culture is not valued as much as other types of activities in North America but that it is fundamental to human existence. Society has health, education and culture and these are the things that make up who we are and how we articulate our existence. “Culture is an incredibly important way in which we understand ourselves and learn

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19 Bruce Barber is an artist, writer, curator, and educator based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he teaches at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) University.
about ourselves.” Karl explained it is as if, “Health is the body, education is the mind, and culture is the soul or the spirit…without being religious.” The repartee that exists between Carole and Karl was evident when she spoke about, “But why did you individually take it up?” Karl, “I think for those reasons.” Carole, “Bullshit, at what age? You thought those things at what?” Karl, “Sure.” Carole decided to offer her insight as to why she does what she does and it was totally different. She did very well in some areas in school but floundered in many others. During her first and second year in Grade 9 she worked on stage sets and other aspects of production, which gave her prestige, a sense of identity, and a sense of who she was. At the age of sixteen Carole attended the Ontario College of Art (OCA)\(^2\) and “did well and stayed with it. But Karl obviously came at it intellectually at the age of what? Ten, did you think those things?” Karl, “I originally wanted to be a trumpeter then I realized I was tone deaf.” Smiles and laughter ensued. They search for and find humour in each other.

Karl explained that they both came out of the fine arts and recognized that most people were really not interested in art and could not develop a relationship with what they were doing. They found this alienating and not interesting; therefore, they decided to reconnect themselves and other artists to the places and the people where they live. They asked themselves “What would constitute an art that would engage a lot of people, bring people who are uninterested in the arts to see the value of the arts and have art that they can actually relate to?” Asking these questions lead to the activities and issues they are involved with, the art they create and how they engage people in the cultural process. As activist artists they are following their own agenda in terms of what they believe needs to be changed in the world but they also move and engage other people in the process. In that way, they engage with the world around them.

\(^2\) The Ontario College of Art was renamed Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) in 1996.
As they work together, they grasp fragments of everyday experiences and create photographic visual statements. Their art includes elements of avant-garde, kitsch, humour, overt awareness, symbolic representation and open-ended concepts (“The Fall of Water” Image 13). They use photography because it is a neutral signature that allows them to collaborate in the same ways as people in the film and video industry. Carole and Karl work with people on a continual basis and part of their process is getting people to tell their stories. They realize that there are many ways to tell stories, for example; in the theatre, and murals, but they choose photography as “people expect [their stories] to be photographed…not painted.”

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge complement one another and bring out ideas and visualization of scenarios from two different perspectives. As artists they collaborate and refine each other through argument. Carole attested, “I’m one of those people I see the word house, I actually see a house…most of the time I visualize in my head the thing that’s being talked about, Karl does not, he sees more naturalistically or more abstract.” During these exchanges, “he talks and talks and talks and I keep saying but how the hell will you do that in the studio.” Carole is continuously taking the word and translating it into something that is visual, perhaps a structure that is going to be twelve foot by twelve foot with a camera distance of a certain amount of feet. Only then can she see the depiction of the whole thing.

They take symbols and language and bring them together; both figure a way to translate the stories into ten or twelve images that have a beginning, middle and an end. Through these images they create a narrative, as it is easier for people to read a visual than a text. Within the art they may create two collages that become two images working against each other, thereby creating a third, and lastly they place symbols in the piece such as a falling Air Canada airplane symbolizing situations out of control. The symbol represents the threat of free trade agreements and diminishing of such institutions as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Petro
Canada, national rail (Via Rail) national health care and public education ("Free Expression"
Image 14). After that, “It then becomes text, and so we’re now trying to come up with twelve
images to tell a three, four or six hour interview [in] a visual language with people acting and no
words, that takes forever.”

Carole and Karl explained the importance of having pride in what they contribute to
society, “if you feel that what you do contributes to society is important, you’ll take action.” This
pride is evident among custodians with whom they conducted a series of workshops and
photographed at elementary and secondary schools in Edmonton ("Class Maintenance” Image
15). What ultimately informs the work they do is hope of a world that cares about immigration,
migration, racism, classism, environmentalism, women’s rights and all issues that relate to social
justice. What becomes important for them is that these issues are expressed in the larger world
community

Life Experiences as Influence

In our conversation about working and creating within a social community and
collectivity Karl explained, “you’re involved in social processes, and all art, basically, is a
collective production, you’re begging, borrowing, stealing, sharing and doing all that all the
time.” Carole continued, “Because you’re off to gallery openings and you’re there all the time
and you’re looking at the newest work and you’re thinking, Oh! I could use that.” Both agreed
that the reality of this is, “It is all open and everybody steals, shares and talks.” This was what
they learned in the first five years of production in New York after they went there in 1969.
Carole said that while they were in Toronto it was possible to have artists doing individual things.
Yet, when they arrived in New York they discovered twenty artists doing the same thing. For
example, artists from Australia, England and Germany were doing the same line on exactly the
same type of canvas. They began to see this as a collective process because these artists were “doing the same thing and going to the same dealers because that was the dealer who dealt with lines.” Carole and Karl joined a collective art group in New York and called themselves *Art and Language*. They also became part of a larger collective that took a critical stance toward the international art world.

They discussed how the group looked at language, and described their involvement writing for a magazine called *The Fox* \(^{21}\) and stated that:

Somebody said to us that they could not decipher what is being said in it, and we said well because you had to have read the one before that. In other words you have to move along with us. We were producing something so esoteric and so individualized. We started thinking about this but at the same time we were critical of our art world.

During this time of being critical of the art world they picketed the Whitney Museum of American Art for their lack of women in the exhibition. Carole told me she was part of a women’s group that wanted to start up a women’s gallery in New York. Their group became known as the *East Coast Women’s Group* and they joined with another anti-war group the members of which were also artists. Through the combined monthly meetings of the anti-war groups and weekly meetings with the *East Coast Women’s Group*, which Carole referred to as “our own little group of inward looking conceptionalists”, they created a collective voice of the arts community in Soho. Although the collective lasted for only a year and a half, the women made banners and organized discussion panels with participants from *Artforum*.\(^{22}\) As a collective they became critical of the relationship between New York and countries such as France and Italy and the money that was being spent by the American government to send American art

\(^{21}\) *The Fox* magazine published in New York and was begun and paid for by artist Joseph Kosuth.

\(^{22}\) *Artforum* is an international monthly magazine specializing in contemporary art.
elsewhere. It was at this juncture that Carole and Karl said, “What are we doing? What are we doing in New York and what are we not doing about our own community?” They returned to Canada in 1977.

The merging of their ideas produced a show, *A Political Tirade*, at the Art Gallery of Ontario. They held deeply critical opinions of the art world, which came from their experiences in New York. Their association with anti-war groups, and their involvement with Black and Puerto Rican groups in New York caused them to become politicized. At the same time they realized that they were not connecting with people and that the art that was being produced when they returned did not have a political voice. They began to connect with local political groups, for example, anti-racist activists, the union movement, and especially the women’s movement. Karl explained, “That informed a lot of our discussions at the time and led directly into the competitiveness.” The competitiveness he was referring to was between him and Carole.

Because they worked in two different mediums they explained, “Working collaboratively in paint and sculpting did not make a lot of sense.” They negotiated by initially creating cartoons and silk screens; however, they recognized that they took photographs in order to create their cartoons and eventually they focused on photography. Karl explained why they use photography as a collaborative process, “Adopting the use of photography made sense because it is signature neutral…23 the nice thing about photography is it allows us to collaborate in a way that people collaborate on film or video” which is what they were looking for. They elaborated:

Even in the cartoons people would continuously say which one did you do because we would alternate panels. We would never admit which one was ours. So, they wanted to know which one was yours. Again, it is about signature.

23 Carole Condé is a painter and Karl Beveridge is a sculptor. They use photography as a collaborative process, because it is signature neutral.
To Condé and Beveridge, the process of their work determines their day. Karl indicated, “So often a project will germinate out of a series of things, it could be out of our own experience.” Karl was ill in 1997 and spent time in a hospital where he experienced firsthand the stress people encounter working in the healthcare environment. Through his experience they became involved with the Buffalo healthcare workers and the healthcare workers in hospitals around Ontario. It is very important that they have a stake in the issues they are working on and this is important not only to them but to the people they are working with. The concern and involvement comes through in the conversations they had with the healthcare workers. Karl explained:

The health series, you know that was an actual experience we had, so we had a stake and interest in doing that. Because if you do not have that interest then you do not have an emotional connection with the issue and you need that.

As Karl was reflecting on their artistic creativity in healthcare ("Not a Care: A Short History of Health Care" Image 16), Carole interjected, “Okay stop here, because we apply for grants.” Her voice projected strength and a sense of the importance of what she was about to say. They have been showing and working in the arts community for forty years and this means they are conscious that in order to obtain grant money one has to show within certain kinds of institutions. She continued:

We have been on juries for both The Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. If we jury sixty people, we are looking at where they have shown their work, what level and type of gallery they have shown in or in a museum, what nationality, and what nations have they shown their work in.

They are conscious that they are making a choice on the jury not only for their own preference of work but also for how the external world accepts or rejects the person who is applying. They are acutely aware that two criteria are being taken into consideration. Carole states that, “First the applicant’s curriculum vitae and their biography and second the artwork. As members of the jury we read and view these on two separate occasions.” As Carole emphasized, “You’re making two
choices.” Carole explained, “We keep this process in mind when we are applying for a grant.”

Once Carole and Karl make the decision on an issue that is of personal interest, they look at how they will approach the economics and funding of their work. They take into consideration how publicly funded art organizations include minority communities on their juries. Knowing that juries move in that direction and that juries also consider the social issues that are presently being accepted or granted they apply accordingly. Carole continued, “So it’s those balances you must consider and then you actually write a grant saying you’re going to work with for example, an environmental group or the environmentalists.” They both agreed that if they were working with an environmental group, the funding organization might indicate, “Why don’t those people pay for it? So we kind of have to coach that more.” Both Carole and Karl believe that public funding “is an important and essential thing.” They believe that issues they seek funding for such as migrant workers around the earth, or the environment should be publicly funded for two reasons; “One, it’s the people’s money and it is the people we are working with who have paid their taxes that provide the money and two, the mandate of public funding is that it is for the public.” Carole and Karl deal with “the local” and it is usually a specific workplace or environment as opposed to it being global but they “try to articulate the issues within the larger local context.”

**World Issues as Influence**

In our conversation about criticizing the politicalization of the art world while at the same time being a part of it, they explained, “We were already part of the establishment and hanging around the nobs and all that sort of stuff in New York…we were already in a position to critique.” However, what was interesting is that Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge were critiqued by the art world for behaving as traitors because they were “doing it from the inside.” There were a lot of
people from the outside saying the art world was fractured, including author Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, but they were not taken seriously because they were outsiders. Their friends who returned to England, and Australia from New York also experienced criticism from the art world. Carole stated that in order to actually survive they came back to Toronto where they had already made connections with people in Canada who were politicized. In Montreal, David Fennario had set up the *Cultural Workers’ Alliance* (which first recommended a living wage for artists to the *Federal Cultural Policy Review* committee in 1982) and Carole and Karl organized the same in Toronto.

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge discussed the art movements of the 1970s when there was a shift in ideas that gave rise to postmodernism. The art world became more politicized in terms of itself, and engaged in critique and development. Karl explained, “It was a shift from the American monster. Europeans began to challenge the dominance of American art, and were becoming involved in the Women’s Movement. All these issues began to challenge and raise questions at that particular moment.” Carole and Karl suggested that it was the beginning of an understanding of community arts in North America, even though it had existed earlier in Europe and parts of the United States. It was also a challenge to the Centre when people from Los Angeles, Vancouver and elsewhere began creating from individualized ideas. Karl elaborated, “We began to communicate with each other and we began to learn about people working outside the Centre, outside the mainstream doing stuff that was challenging.”

24 David Fennario is an Anglophone playwright born in Montreal, Quebec.

25 Centre usually refers to the political idea of promoting moderate ideas and policies, which land in the middle between different political right and left extremes.
One theme that is very important to Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge is how work is portrayed. They always notice when they enter a workplace and speak to people that people have pride in their jobs. Both stated that, “It’s not necessarily just the actual physical work they do, but also what that works means socially…what it contributes to society.” What Carole and Karl have realized is, “In our society pride in work has become trivialized. People in public service won’t tell people what work they do because people will say, oh they’re just lazy public servants.” They have also realized that pride in work has been replaced by pride in consuming.

The separation of pride from work to consuming means it is not what you do, it is what you have and it is not what you contribute to society but what you buy. Karl stated, “This is an important issue and anchors a lot of what we do and …it ties to globalization…in terms of the shift in politics and a shift in values.” Although the public display of pride in work is not evident, they do not believe it is disintegrating. Karl continued, “It’s not socially articulated and this is why culture becomes important because people have pride in their work but they keep it to themselves.” He explained that the introduction of technology and the spread of consumerism has created an absolute crisis situation on the planet. One can say it started obviously with the industrial revolution. Carole interjects, “It did but not at the level that it is now.” Carole stated:

I was born late to my parents. My parents were born at the turn of the century, my grandparents in the 18th century. I can actually see my grandparents pulling water out of the well, hanging their laundry on the clotheslines to dry. My parents lived through the 1930s the time of the Great Depression and an economic downturn. They were extremely frugal to put it mildly so I grew up on second hand clothing, and blah, blah. When I was attending Art College at the age of sixteen in the 50’s and 60’s I was telling my parents to get rid of this old furniture, which of course are the antique furnishings you are looking at. But, it was get rid of the old furniture and go modern because that was the thinking. She continued, “You’ve got this incredible idea; get rid of the old and bring in the new and that was called progress, it was the opening of consumerism. It was the beginning of the concept of consume, consume.”
In terms of planetary consumption, Karl elaborated, “the forest industry went from the axe in 1950 to the fellow-buncher 26 in 1980 which can take down a tree in five seconds as opposed to an axe that takes three hours.” When Carole and Karl were invited to Vito, which is a city in Galicia, Spain, they thought that it was important to create images that told the story of the decline in the cod fishing industry from a Canadian perspective (“on haberá nada para ninguén There Will Be Nothing for Anyone” Image 17). Karl explained, “Cod fishing went from inshore fishing to fishing trawlers that pull a trawl which are fishing nets dragged along the bottom of the ocean that can operate one or more trawl sets at the same time.” Both try, through their art, to inform people of the challenges, and controversy over natural resources in the world and Canada.

Informing students and making them consciously aware of issues is not always easy. Carole explained:

What happens with age is that you assume the person at the age of twelve or eighteen experiences what you do. You try to tell your experience, and the reason I say this is having been that age when my parents talked about the WWI or WWII, to me they were eons apart. Now, I am in the head space they were when they were telling me of these experiences. Nothing in my background could make me collapse that short period of time which were the years 1918 to 1940. They tried to tell me but of course that was before my lifetime. It’s useful to give a history but students can’t emotionally experience, so you have to find ways that relate to them.

The basis of relating is storytelling, according to Karl, and storytelling is the basis of their work. The educational arts programmes have to link to their own communities and bring in people to tell those stories. He added, “Educators could bring in someone who worked in a plant to see how their work is done for example people from the forest industry” (“Pulp Fiction” Image 18). They connect art to telling stories, which they suggest is the basis of culture.

26 A fellow-buncher is a mechanical tree harvester.
Karl stated, “You need to get communities to tell their stories and it is the stories we tell about who we are.”

**Community and its Importance**

It is important to Carole and Karl to engage people, “people being referred to as community and/or social justice community,” in the larger process of cultural production so that they have some relationship to it. Both understand that they are unable to do their work, “individual by individual so you work through the places in which people organize themselves” such as the labour movement. Carole stated, “They have to have confidence in you, then they will give to you and open up ways for you to work with anybody.” Karl continued, “Two key elements of working within the community are, “One you have to build trust and two you have to accept the culture.” The reason both he and Carole work long term within community arts is that it takes time build trust and to build familiarity. He explained:

The other thing that is very important to us and our practice in terms of balancing the arts in community, is that it’s not only important that you radicalize the arts in terms of how you perceive the practice of art but that the art needs to deal and reconnect with communities, you also radicalize the community about issues of culture.

Karl indicated that one of the problems that happens when working within community is that the community is the dominant factor and the community dictates the terms. He stated:

The community has to be politicized around culture at the same time that culture has to be politicized around politics and social justice. The equation works on both ends…and you have to work critically with the community but with trust and respect.

For Condé and Beveridge, trust cannot be achieved by jet setting into a community. Carole related:

You can’t just decide, oh I’m going to work with whatever community up the street. The community has been functioning forever then this artist comes in and depicts it. Well they are still on the outside…they are looking at it from a distance; they are not looking at it from internal so again it takes a long time.
They explained they have to become active within the culture of the community that they are working with and they do that through how the community organizes itself. When they start their conversations within community their focus and vision is through, “The long term lens.”

Things are always evolving when Carole and Karl work with communities. Whether they are working with labour, immigration, or unions they meet with a local and convince the leadership to introduce them to the rank and file. They explained:

What we talk about with them is not only issues but their issues which may be migration, environment, workplace management. We also talk about culture and the problems of culture and the issues of culture and why we are here so it is a two-way conversation. While people talk about their workplace and their concerns we will talk about our workplace and our concerns. We build bridges with the similarities of issues in terms of how you are treated at work and how you are represented in the world.

They explained that these are issues of identity and that they are continually working to create conversations that become exchanges and negotiations.

As they work with people in the community they gather stories and in some instances, “We’ll even have them visualize those stories.” Part of their process is to conduct visual workshops and out of that they will develop a story and storyboards. Karl says:

We’ll go back to people and say, okay given what we talked about, given what we looked at, here are some ideas of how we may portray that, and then they’ll feed into that and we’ll adjust and then go into production.

Karl elaborated, “I think that it’s important in terms of culture and in particular in working with community, that it give us an autonomy in relationship to that community.” Both agreed that:

People gradually understand that the arts is an autonomous activity and that the artist needs to be able to do what they do. And it is interesting that that autonomy is critical because it allows for the artistic process to develop.

The connection of art with activism and with community came out of their experience of the art world itself. Karl reiterated:
One, our work didn’t really mean anything to the majority of people out there, it was a very narrow audience and, second, the art world was hugely competitive, very collective and this output of the individual was a total fiction.

The question they asked themselves was, “How do we make art relevant to a larger world than just the art community?” One of the things that Carole and Karl often say is, “Every artist is a community artist, the unfortunate thing is that they work with their own community,” In other words, “Artists are community artists within the arts community rather than within the larger communities they live in.”

For Carole and Karl it is important to make the connection to communities and tell the stories of those communities. Carole explained how they came out of the arts community as opposed to being community artists. By coming out of that direction they:

Give voice to people who they work with. In other words, someone may have written a book, or an article dealing with an issue they were involved in and it provides an opportunity for other people to see that issued based work.

Carole thinks, “That is a contribution that functions for people who have this belief that you should be locally based, issue based, community based and socially interactive based and without that you end up not seeing [hearing] any voice.” She continued, “It is important to allow the community artist to function in the arts community, allow them that voice and give credence to that way of functioning and working.” Both realize everything is always strategic and that they are always weighing out the political landscape and saying, “What do we do at this point in order to achieve these sorts of ends?”

**Change as a Driver in their Work**

Carole enjoyed the dialogue regarding her concerns on social justice issues and whether she sees change happening. She sees change:
In a negative sense, although it is more difficult having been around what is to be considered the left of social justice groups. If change and it is happening with younger people it is difficult to see because of our age.

She continued:

In the arts community people do say that recently social justice issues are showing up with student work, it's showing up with the work itself whether you are talking about a document, and that’s in the visual arts now and it is coming forward in that work.

Both Carole and Karl are more overt about what they put in their work. Carole stated, “What they’re [students] considering to be political you almost have to read into it and we’re more upfront about the issue,” Karl thought, “Change has occurred, maybe not in the ways we had hoped.” Carole agreed. Karl continued, “When I was in my twenties and now today there’s a substantially different world in term of women’s issues and in terms of race.” Both thought some ground had been lost. Karl continued:

The class war has been won by capital to a huge degree and that needs to be revisited and moving global maybe will shift the ground in terms of that. There’s been some interesting oppositions to globalization and there has been a shift away from that. They’re not winning the World Trade Organization (WTO) rounds so there is resistance and it’s happening in different ways so I think there has been change.

Carole and Karl think people are knowledgeable and both find no matter whom they speak with that there is a consciousness and an informed perception of what is going on. Karl stated, “there is a real frustration with what you’re able to do.” Carole explained if people start going back to the local whether it is their union, workplace or themselves they can make change.

She said:

Because we’re continuously hearing things in a global sense or on a national sense, you don’t know how to function. In the past the idea was you knock over the government and put in powers and that will correct it. That was the logic you would use but the problem is that nation state is gobbled up…

At this point Karl continued Carole’s sentence, “And it’s been neutered by the global powers that control economic powers. If you look at free trade and the barriers that are produced with it you feel that you couldn’t do it [make change].” They agreed that if people begin to think locally
again that change would happen. Carole and Karl indicated, that presently we’re just going through a different perception of the world and we have not found a way to think and feel hope that can bring about change. They continued, “It’s shifting, that consciousness around us, it’s coming…its contested in different ways and the ways it’s contested always shift.”

Carole and Karl shared their opinions about where they see their work going in the future. The dynamic response was from two different perspectives as Carole said, “I’m the pessimist and he’s the optimist.” Carole doesn’t see very much difference between what they are presently doing and what they will do in the future. She explained:

It’s funny, I think when you’re thirty-five you’re at a point where there is this sort of break between what you were doing prior to that point and somewhere between thirty-five and fifty your expectation is that you will rise…I guess with age what happens is that you are probably not speaking with the voice of the present.”

Carole responded to Karl’s look:

I know it’s a very negative comment, but I think you continue as we are trying to and whether or not you’re able to do it is what’s at question. I think because I am getting close to seventy so there is this thing of being in the present and on top of things. You have this experience and you use the past and you can evaluate where you are which is a good tool to function with.

Carole indicated that Karl could give me another whole version because she is the pessimist and he is the optimist. She nodded to Karl, “Okay you can pick it up from here, now give the positive version of the same thing.” He explained that they would probably continue to work. Karl stated that what they are moving into is:

The conflation of environmental and social issues because the environment is becoming absolutely critical in terms of the ability to develop change. What is going to force change are the environmental issues and the consequence regarding the larger global issue. I mean the only thing that I think is going to stop corporate globalization are issues of the environment, they’re just going to grind to a halt once they’ve run out of oil and everything else. These issues are going to be critical issues.

Karl continued, “In terms of where the political stuff will develop it will be the conjunction of social and environmental issues. This will mean that our art will engage more and more in that.”
Carole and Karl are working on a series around the environment and how it will connect to different social issues. Karl spoke more about community, “In terms of involving the community, it is bridging…the environmental movement, the labour movement, and the social justice movement and seeing where those kinds of things come together.” Both agreed that with environmental change and social justice issues the situation would become more volatile. Karl continued, “It’s frightening and it’s where you have both despair and hope. Despair in that it will lead to a real crisis and it already is leading to real crisis and hope in that it will actually finally generate change.” Carole added:

The complexity also happens because the place that Canada is within that issue…we have mostly raw resources and people are coming here and buying and stealing it and dragging it to other places…and it is putting Canadians out of work…In a sense Canada is in a very privileged position but at the same time we better change.

Considering how they work and function within their work Carole stated:

An artist is a person within a community and their job in that community is to change the institutions whether it be the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, an artist run centre, churches, community choir…it is important you have a say in making a change within that, and that is a responsibility not just in your two dimensional or three dimensional production, but to your activity within that whether it be the arts or outside the arts.

In our conversation about whether their art practice has made changes in the world, Karl said, “yes, or you wouldn’t do it. You have to believe that even if it might not be true, but you have to believe it.” Carole added, “I think everybody changes the world…everybody contributes with the skills that they have towards that change whether it be the child you raise, whether it be the community you function within.”

Courtesy of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge


Courtesy of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge

Courtesy of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge


Courtesy of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge

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Image 17. on haberá nada para ningún (There Will Be Nothing for Anyone) 1994. The demise of the North Atlantic cod fishery and the communities dependent on it. 10th of 10 images.

Courtesy of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge

Summary

The case studies illuminate the motivation behind the four artists as they reveal how their art functions as an ethical act. The seven themes (a) distinct identity, (b) place of the interview, (c) personality as style, (d) life experience as influence, (e) world issues as influence, (f) community and its importance and (g) change as a driver in her/his work were viewed as unique to each artist yet similarities emerged.

Although each artist is unique, similar influences affected who they are and what their work accomplishes. People, family, other artists, social groups, social origin, norms, values and practices all worked together to shape what they do. They were affected by the choices they made and how they were treated at different stages in their lives. These effects are not absolute and differ from one artist to another. The artists have an active give-and-take relationship with their environment and their communities. As individuals they have been hindered, impeded and obstructed from pursuing courses of action. When freedom is threatened they react to restore that freedom. Opposition to interfering forces and personal resistance has given strength to what they are trying to achieve within their work. They have come to some basic ethical conclusions: It is not enough to do good, one must do it the right way. The end does not justify the means, and Never good through evil. They distinguish between the value of their artwork and the value of people. Theirs is a quest for truth, justice, and order in a chaotic world where their work stirs strong and conflicting feelings among the public at large. Champions of this ilk help us understand that activist art is involved in the continuous disruption of power and the established order.

I would suggest that the artists’ lives took shape because they bore witness to the forgotten and the excluded, whether themselves or others. It is in this practice of witness that it is possible to locate their ethics and politics. Their ethics can be understood as a sense of
responsibility based on individual personal impressions, feelings and opinions. They assert that something is true because they themselves witnessed its authenticity and are convinced that the situation requires an active response. Hence, the creation of works of activist art that calls for change and critiques the status quo.

Political questioning and the forming of a revolutionary identity are at the heart of these artists. They share a hope that their work can help realize a just society. When the artists become skeptical, tend to disbelieve, distrust, and doubt ‘a just society’ they have art which they create from symbols, found objects, photography, paint, wood, sculpture, and installations. They must use art; they must connect their ideology to their media. They know they are answerable for their actions and they cannot abdicate their responsibility to themselves and society.

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27 Authenticity is worthy of trust, reliance, and belief.

28 A just society is based on or behaving according to what is morally right and fair: a just and democratic society fighting for a just cause. (From The New Oxford American Dictionary in English Dictionaries & Thesauruses Electronic Resource)
Chapter 5: Recurring Themes and Concluding Thoughts

Each artistic discipline is characterized by recurrent tensions between normal and revolutionary practices.

-Remi Glignet, Sociologist
The Structure of Artistic Revolutions

Recurring Themes

Notwithstanding that the most significant value of this study is contained in the rich data accounts of the interviews, in Chapter 5 I attempt to bring details from the various artist stories together with the hope of beginning a more general conversation about activist art. In this chapter, Question 3 of this study is explored which states, “Activist artists use a variety of what is typically considered “style” to present their work. Are there similarities that support the notion that activist artists can be seen as a group?” Here these themes are revisited as common drivers that influence the creation of activist works of art and include: (a) distinct identity, (b) place of the interview, (c) personality as style, (d) life experience as influence, (e) world issues as influence, (f) community and its importance and (g) change as a driver in her/his work. Through these recurring themes we might begin to see activist art as a movement of disparate artists that share some deep common spaces. These themes may help us understand activist artists’ processes in ways that will assist educators in their work to incorporate activism, activist art and social responsibility into their curricula.

Identity

According to identity theory, social identities are constructed through interaction with significant others and are largely influenced by the social structures or contexts within which people are embedded (Erikson, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1994).
Natasha Mayers collaborates with people in her community, creating art-works reflecting her sensitivity and receptivity to situations. “Collaboration in art is as much bound up with value, artistic value, the value of artistic labour, the value-form of capitalism as it is with politics and representation” (Roberts & Wright, 2004, p. 531). Mayers speaks out on war in order that others may understand the laws that govern human interaction in the state of chaos and war. The streets are the domains of the public, and Mayers uses the space where she and citizens of her community can participate democratically and freely. Each year on July 4th a controversial theme is chosen for their local parade. Giving up her right to whatever she desires is not rational but it is rational for her to pursue what she sees as the right thing to do. She believes people want peace and a healthy planet to pursue their desires more effectively. As an artist, Mayers wants to reach the general public and the streets are her platform. The streets at times are far more hostile than museums (Thompson, 2004). It is a way to challenge the use of public space by celebrating community and diversity while managing to incite public participation (Lafuente, 2004).

As an artist, Mayer’s role is to be outspoken, and to find new and unexpected ways to communicate and reach people. Mayers suggested, it is important to be aware, because what is presented to the public may in fact conceal a variety of political issues. She believes that by looking inward and finding the most effective, compelling, and appropriate image or response, everyone can respond creatively. She tries to use her art to help people contribute and be effective in the world. She is persistent in speaking out on topical issues and paints many of her works with political themes.

Mendelson Joe is direct with his viewpoints and does not separate his music from his visual art. As a Canadian he is engaged in democracy in an active way. His politics and justice are all tightly wrapped up in a series of claims that have profoundly shaped his political philosophy. He is engaged with the natural world around him and paints and speaks out on social and political
issues. As one moves toward art being more than decoration, the audience can see art-work as expressing other kinds of philosophical and political meaning without it ceasing to be artistic (Clignet, 1985; Price, 1993; Ray, 2007).

Joe’s stance is that people have to look after their responsibilities whether it is an obligation because of ones position and circumstances or a commitment made freely to become involved and willingly invest time and effort for others, or helping the community. In other words, the culmination of a person’s nature is to be found in the realization of an issue that all people agree is just, rather than living with the notion of self-interest. As an artist who speaks out on social and political issues, he joins those political artists who are involved in the struggle against the dominant order. Artists engage in the politics of opposition, dwell on the possibility of fair politics and strive to reveal the political struggle of rhetoric (Clignet, 1985; Papersteriadias, 2001).

Mendelson Joe sees himself as a man before his time. Indeed one could stop here, leaving the reader to mull over the basis of his political activity. However, I think it is important to push with regard to our understanding of why he is “a man before his time.” He thinks differently about the activity of politics in Canada, which does not use the tools that are the best for human nature; nor does he believe that politicians build new structures that prioritize justice. As an artist, that is engaged in thinking about politics, and one who tries to stretch the boundaries of its practice and language it could be argued that Joe is indeed pushing against mainstream society. Understanding Mendelson Joe’s distinct identity is to understand that he is an artist whose work at times has an abrasive social or political edge. Artists make a commitment to make political leaders accountable for their statements and actions, and aim for change in the social systems (Paperstergiadis, 2001; Ray, 2007).
Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge are active members of their community. They produce works that tell stories and advance their social agenda. By creating activist art one is able to challenge and contest the realities of present day social issues (Dufour, 2002). Many of Condé’s and Beveridge’s discussions revolve around questions of culture. The answers they give certainly influence the position they adopt within their conversations and artwork. These conversations may speak to the claim that people are fundamentally individuals endowed with reason and capable of making autonomous choices. Another conversation can involve the discussion of others who claim they are products of their upbringing in the sense that their cultural heritage plays a central role in their sense of self. We can see the tension between these two approaches but there is significance in the telling of these stories through their art. Out of these stories the viewer is able to respond to the overall content in a variety of ways (Jameison, 2008).

As activist artists Natasha Mayers, Mendelson Joe, and Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge engage in art that promotes social change with political intent. Activist art projects have their own political character, which produces and is produced by each one’s historical moment and subsequent reception (González & Posner, 2006). Thus, the communication of liberal political views, and social justice issues have a great impact on the shape of the art world today as well as on other aspects of social life (Dufour, 2002).

Considering themes associated with “Identity,” artists in this study have:

• Used images, themes, and concepts that they see impacting people in negative ways.

• Adopted methods of inquiry from a social perspective.

•Been able to facilitate making change by following a variety of cultural paths.

• Demonstrated a rigor of commitment to their art, focused on systemic inquiry and constructed knowledge that transforms human perceptions.
Place

Social bonds and solidarity are transformed from affective ties into more diffuse relationships as individuals purposively use the externally shared meanings of living environment and community. Individuals situate themselves in society by simultaneously locating themselves with others who share their values and perceptions. Individuals also situate themselves by asserting their social status and social identity to others (Lindstrom, 1997). In our initial conversations the artists and I spoke of the place of the interview and their surroundings as an important factor in discovering and presenting their personal environment.

For Natasha Mayers social relations and solidarity have been maintained in the rural community where she resides. She has integrated into her cultural environment of Whitefield, Maine, and has located herself with others who share her values and preferences. Mayers has access to education, employment and public services in her rural location where she has become partially autonomous. Her home is also symbolic revealing what she finds personally significant and worthy in her socially constructed built environment. Mayer’s place has its own niche within its ecological development. When she suggested that I visit Pemaquid Point Light Station and take in the view of the ocean, I sensed a pride in the area where she lives and works. The output of an artist’s creative activity is dictated to a large extent by the setting within which she/he works (Frey, 2002). One is able to share a sense of place where collaboration is a choice based on common sense, allowing the possibility of shared resources, and experience (Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007).

Mendelson Joe inhabits a place that allows him to make the choices and decisions that he considers are best for him. His log cabin rests in a semi-secluded setting with minimal physical connection to others. There are intentional signs of “Joe’s Art” in various locations outside his log cabin. Walking up his driveway you would encounter a painted boot with laces mounted on a
wooden post or an open area with an aboriginal teepee painted with a bare breasted mermaid. His place of residence and surroundings allows him the freedom to be who he wants to be. He stated, “I am what I do, I do what I am.” His place has a personal dimension, reflecting both his needs for space, privacy, comfort and the way he wishes to present himself to others. Indeed, the image of his log cabin in the woods creates an image of a secure, protected environment with implicit exclusion of outsiders. His place is also a symbolic environment; a world in which he can create a creative environment that embodies what he considers significant.

Carole Condé’s and Karl Beveridge’s place is situated in the core of a large cosmopolitan city among tall, short, commercial, residential and cultural buildings, with playgrounds here and there. A large population, noise, crowding, and other forms of stimulation surround their place. City life offers them a rich social and cultural environment where ethnic differences are evident and predominant. Working with these world differences one is able to recognize cities and streets are vital spaces for interaction, a hub for social activity and a place for artistic exchange (Thompson, 2004).

Condé’s and Beveridge’s place influences their process of identification with their physical, social and cultural environments. The distinctiveness, scale and boundaries of their environment enhance their identification by providing significant meanings for the articulation of self. Guest & Lee (1983), provided some evidence in a study of place and neighborhood in the metropolitan context, where proximity to local landmarks increased identification with place and neighborhood. Although their place contributes to their identity it also communicates their social position through their interior decoration of inherited antiques and fenced in cultivated landscape in a metropolis location. Condé and Beveridge have created a home with emotional ties to their place, but it also has a sense of shared values and interests.
Place is expressed by feeling at-home, rich in its attachment to multiple locales, and complex in spatial structure. All participants expressed some sense of belonging, and all three locales contributed significantly to this process of place.

The importance of “Place” in an activist artists work was evident in that:

• Their sense of self is reflected in the places where they live.
• Their feelings of place through personal experiences brings attachment and familiarity.
• Their assurance of being nurtured and feeling secure in the sounds and smells of daily activities increases their sense of place.

**Personality as Style**

“Personality as style” is the artists’ relatively consistent inclinations and preferences across contexts. Their personality is their organizing principle. It propels the artists on their life path. It represents the orderly arrangement of all their attributes, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, behaviours and coping mechanisms. It is a distinctive pattern of how they function, the way they think, feel and behave, that makes them definitely who they are (Oldham & Morris, 1995).

Family background played a significant role in how Natasha Mayers thinks, feels and the actions she seizes upon. As a child, Natasha Mayers listened to her psychiatrist father, who flirted with socialist ideas, tell his patients to pay him what they could. His expectation was that they in turn would do something good for people. Mayers explained that her father’s philosophy was about making society more just rather than making money. Her father’s sense of connectedness, doing good for people and forming social networks are examples of what has become known as social capital. The central premise of the social capital position is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all “social networks” [whom people know], and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other creating “norms of reciprocity” (Putnam, 2000). This means that people will respond to each other by returning one
form of exchange for another. To understand Mayers is to see that her lifestyle includes her sense of giving back to others. Relevant characteristics of her personality entail her way of thinking about situations and how she interacts with others. She continues to perpetuate her father’s legacy by doing good for people.

Mayers is emphatic in declaring that she is an activist artist and not a political artist. For Foucault (1977, 1979), sees the realm of the political reaching into our bodies. It is the way we talk, the way we greet someone, and the posture we adopt in a situation, which are all a result of nuanced processes of normalization. In light of this Mayers political ideas and political thoughts are essential elements in her art. Political art imparts its ideas and principles into the senses and the moral and human part of people’s lives (Caruso, 2005; Edelman, 1995; Group Material, 1990; Hersch, 1998, & E. Schlossman, 2002).

Family background had a strong influence on where Mendelson Joe ended up. His early childhood personality characteristics were acquired from his parents. Some of these values were hypocritical, cruel, good, and kind. His artistic career was influenced by an emotional experience in early childhood. He experienced anti-Semitism and learned how to contain his physical response by speaking out through art. Through this reasonable reflective thinking he focused on deciding what to believe and do (Ennis, 1987).

As Mendelson Joe grew into adulthood he became better adapted to social experiences although he continues to be blunt when he approaches political issues. His political beliefs and attitude demands the even distribution of justice and punishment under the law. We can consider Mendelson Joe among the artists who are involved in the struggle against the dominant order, and who engage in the politics of opposition. Joe works for the possibility of fair politics and exposes the empty words of political rhetoric (Clignet, 1985; Papersteriadias, 2001). What is important to Joe is getting the balance between authority and liberty. He sees government as wielding power.
as if it were a mighty person bearing down on its people.

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge were influenced by their respective families. Political participation was passed on to them where they became involved in issues and took control over their lives. Their energetic political participation has resulted in free and open discussions with many of Canada’s art organizations. Carole and Karl work towards improving people’s lives and security with all areas of their work. As artists one of their main tasks is to keep pluralism alive and well, on the grounds that the political world is set up by deep, and difficult to reduce pluralities. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge through discussion aim to reconcile differences and create structures through which workers can be recognized and respected without subjugation. They follow their own agenda and their beliefs about what needs to be changed in the world. They complement one another and bring ideas and visualization of scenarios from two different perspectives. As artists they collaborate and refine each other through argument and humour. Their collaboration produces work that offers an opportunity for society to reflect collectively on the issues and images that influence its behaviour and its self-understanding (Holmes, 2004).

The parallels in the personalities of activist artists Natasha Mayers, Mendelson Joe, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge show that they are tightly wrapped up in a series of foundational beliefs and behaviours that have profoundly shaped who they are.

In this study, themes associated with “Personality as Style,” have:

- Mediated tension between early childhood and adulthood.
- Experienced conflicts between the status quo and who the artists are.
- Demonstrated a propensity towards selflessness.

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29 Pluralism is a form of society in which the members of minority groups maintain their independent cultural traditions and there is an acceptance of a diversity of opinions, values, theories, etc.
Life Experience

Another theme found in this study was the unfolding of life experiences for Natasha Mayers, Mendelson Joe, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge. These life experiences were found to be a vital part of what motivated them to become activists.

Natasha Mayers grew up during the 1950s, which were a time of anti-communist suspicion. In early 1950, President Truman announced that the United States would develop a hydrogen bomb. Albert Einstein warned that such a weapon could end all life on earth and Americans began to build bomb shelters (Stone, 2005). Mayers learned how to adapt from these experiences against the damage of stress and fear. She also fostered positive beliefs about her ability to successfully manage threatening situations. As an adult she thinks a lot about fear, how it affects people, and is directed towards keeping people silent and not talking about issues.

According to Foucault (1977, 1979), liberal regimes are not ones that are defined by the freedoms they enshrine, but rather by the fact they instill into individuals a sense of freedom. Mayers was allegedly blacklisted from teaching at her local university because some students complained that she was trying to get them to talk about the Iraq war. Foucault (1977), gave a famous example of this lack of freedom in action which is the use of surveillance in society.

When Mayers created Sign of the Times, she was asking people not to become victims of government and political activities but to stop, feel and act (Shetterley, 2006). She declared that she had an obligation to her culture to tell the truth and tell us what we need to know to lead honest lives. Despite how proud she was of the quality and amount of work produced, she remained disappointed that more people did not make the effort to attend. Hence, upon becoming experienced in digital imaging she made a proposal to CommonDream.org, an online progressive newspaper, to be their artist-in-residence. Through her form of artistic communicative interaction she enabled differences to flourish. Genuinely open conversations allowed for a rational exchange
of views from global viewers. It was interesting to notice that Mayers had time to reflect on the real lasting value of that experience.

Mendelson Joe has lived through traumatic events in life. Experiencing death of people who were important to him has been a part of his life since he was fifteen years old. People we are close to die. Despite the universality of this experience Joe experienced significant distress. How he coped with these premature deaths was to move on in a positive way with his life. This did not mean that he did not think of the loss of his friends. He successfully met these losses by being highly pragmatic and goal directed.

Having the ability to reflect on himself is a distinguishing feature of Mendelson Joe. Perhaps the most important outcome of this process was for him to acknowledge that there was a time in his life when he was “very, very poor.” He lacked the resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities, which are customary to others. He was in effect excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities. His self-awareness has made an indelible impact on his development of individuality and personal responsibility.

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge became engaged in an international art community in New York City, 1969. It was a time of political change and they joined with other artists to find new ways of self-expression and new avenues for displaying their art. Increasingly, though, it was not enough for them to say things differently in New York. Their return to involvement in the Canadian art community meant challenging political habits and presuppositions, rather than just being an artist strategizing about the next artistic wave. Underneath it all they engaged with life, and a mode that was political where it involved the creation of new forms of social interaction. They were engaged in thought and action together.
During this time, Condé and Beveridge found that their work led to competiveness with each other. They worked in two different mediums, therefore negotiated a solution and now use photography as a collaborative process. Collaboration is a choice based on common sense (Billing, Lind & Nilsson, 2007). It is important that Condé and Beveridge have a stake in the issues they are working on and this is not only important to them but to the people they are working with. Condé and Beveridge became involved with health care workers in Ontario after Beveridge emerged from his illness in hospital. He experienced firsthand the stress medical professionals and personnel people encounter working in that environment. He saw that workplace events that create a sense of personal threat has ongoing effects on health care workers, and that these effects may contribute to job dissatisfaction. This event in Beveridge’s life created an impetus for both him and Condé to become personally involved in the issues of healthcare and make a commitment to use art to give voice to those issues.

Linking experiences within the lives of Natasha Mayers, Mendelson Joe, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge indicated that they were oriented toward making sense of life events, in terms of lessons learned from experience.

In this study recurring themes suggest “Life Experience,” have:

- Affected the artist’s personality and reshaped their later reactions.
- Played a part in understanding reactions to unpleasant episodes or events.
- Dictated their response to the challenges and adaptations reflected in their work

**World Issues**

The attitudes and behaviours of the various artists in the study are both a by-product and revealer of inequalities in prestige and power within the world (Clignet, 1985). These attitudes are relevant to what motivates artists to become activists and leads them to change the intention,
content and presentation of their individual work, and hence the audience to which that work is directed.

Worldwide events shape the structures and policies of nation-states and other national and local people in virtually all domains of rationalized social life which includes family, education, and politics. One major problem Natasha Mayers has is that the American intelligence apparatus is shielded by official secrecy. Mayers talked about readings that influenced her decision-making, readings in which she learned about the dirty tricks and covert programmes of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). She believes this secrecy can sometimes weaken under the onslaught of public curiosity but usually the public—or the outside scholar—can only know what the government chooses to disclose. For example, she spoke of the 1954 covert operation organized by the CIA to overthrow Jacobo Gusmán, the democratically elected President of Guatemala.

Mayers was in Nicaragua in 1984 when the artists were an effective force in redefining, shaping and defending their country’s culture and art. She described how there she saw a community of artists who were effective and had power in their art. Diverse viewpoints were freely and openly discussed and the right to free speech vigorously exercised by the people. Human rights and freedom in society are important to Natasha and she wants to promote a socially just society. A just society is where people are able to develop to their fullest capacity and able to interact within community democratically (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Her visit to Nicaragua was an exciting time in her life, a very new and different experience that changed her attitudes towards what her art should be about.

After returning from Nicaragua, Mayers took on big issues, encouraged other artists to do the same and to collaborate on their ideas and work. It was evident that her values were a significant component in the formation of her national consciousness. Mayers, embraced socially
engaged collaboration as an extension of her conceptual art practice, and views her collaboration as a political task, important as an artistic gesture of resistance and opposition (Bishop, 2006).

World issues for Mendelson Joe have been focused on Canada, as he has traveled from coast to coast and the north end of the Northwest Territories of Canada to Inuvik. These travels in Canada have led him to be concerned about the whole planet’s natural environment and all living things. He knows the dangers referred to as global warming by the scientific community. He knows how climate change and human-made releases of greenhouse gases, most notably carbon dioxide, have had adverse effects upon the planet, its natural environment and humans’ existence. He has advocated various actions in the interest of protecting what remains of the natural environment.

Mendelson Joe continually comments on the institutions created by the Canadian government that regulate or conduct their common affairs. Hillmer & Granatstein (1994), wrote that foreign policy is the face that Canada presents to the world, and that foreign policy to an extent is what the world uses to define Canada. From this insight Joe stays abreast of foreign policy and Ottawa’s global persona, in an era when politicians and factors affect Canadian external relations. Regarding former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s global engagement Mendelson Joe offers his viewpoints privately and publically how Mulroney conceptualized Canada’s role in the world. Joe explained, that six years following the Airbus sales of aircraft to Air Canada and Mulroney’s association with German businessman Karlheinz Schreiber, Mulroney had yet to explain to the Canadian people a convincing account of the deal. Mendelson Joe’s bluntness in “telling it like it is” inferred that Mulroney did not have a good story to tell. And so, Mulroney under oath, told the inquiry, and the Canadian people, a story that does not stand up. Whether Joe’s interest in foreign policies of Canada or other countries are the result of questionable practices he is strongly devoted to ideological beliefs.
World society and culture generate expansion, conflict and change especially in large culturally diversified cosmopolitan cities. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge lived in New York City in the 1970s. The Village a neighborhood in the New York City borough of Manhattan was the downtown of that time where the major art scene took place, not the sanitized and respectable Soho and Chelsea of today. Although Condé and Beveridge were already part of the art establishment, they criticized the politicalization of the art world. They explained that the art movements during the 1970s experienced a shift in ideas that gave rise to postmodernism. Postmodernism is a cultural phenomenon that challenges convention, mixes styles, tolerates ambiguity, and emphasizes diversity and the acceptance of innovation and change (Beck, 1993). The art world became more politicized in terms of itself and engaged in critique and development. At that particular moment Europeans began to challenge the dominance of American art and Condé and Beveridge began asking questions of themselves. The issues Carole and Karl faced in New York brought them back to Canada and to new questions.

Another major issue that concerns Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge is consumerism and its effect both on individuals and the planet. For Beveridge, consuming means that it is not what you do, it is what you have, and it is not what you contribute to society but what you buy. What interests Condé and Beveridge are the collateral causalities of consumerism and the effects of the way in which the shaping of consume, consume was planned and delivered. They are interested in those who planned it and delivered it and the lack of care shown even when the damage spills over ethical boundaries.

Through their art, Condé and Beveridge show the effects consumerism has on society and explore the controversy over essential natural resources in Canada and the world. It is the political lie thus far, a lie deployed in the service of explicitly political power struggle and political efficiency that has stayed in the focus of their attention. Beveridge elaborated on the depletion of
natural resources through planetary consumption. He explained, the forest industry went from the axe in 1950 to the fellow-buncher in 1980 and depleted Canada’s forests faster. For communities like fishing villages, fisheries provide not only a source of food and work but also a community and cultural identity. Karl explained that the cod fishing industry went from inshore fishing to fishing trawlers which also depleted Canada’s fishing industry faster. Through their art Condé and Beveridge voice their opposition to the perpetual flow of enticement to consume, and to consume more.

Natasha Mayers, Mendelson Joe, and Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge all have a connection to working for the world good through their art. As activist artists they are devoted to not just the actual physical work they do, but also what the work means socially and what it contributes to society.

Considering themes associated with “World Issues,” artists in this study have:

• Believed that culture and cultural diversity are essential features of the world.
• Acted for the world good rather than for themselves, thereby increasing the total welfare of society.
• Allowed world issues to impact the dynamics (intention, content and presentation) of their artwork.

Community

In conversations with the artists I gained insight into the relationship between their communities and the art they create. Their communities are widespread, rich in attachment to multiple locales, and complex in spatial structure. In Chapter 2 I explained the importance of the dialogue that occurs between an artist and a community group. In particular, art in the public interest encourages community coalition-building in pursuit of social justice.
Natasha Mayers’s interaction and dialogue with community allow her to use art as a catalyst to help people trigger change in the world. During most of her life she has volunteered in her community, helping those in need, working on the homeless issue and as an art educator. Community has characterized her social interactions with others and she has shown the bonds of solidarity through her volunteering and community murals. She wants to be connected to her community and is proud that she has initiated many projects to bring people together. Immigrant and refugee children’s stories are important to her. Natasha worked with children to create their art portraits and then presented an opportunity for the artwork to be seen and understood so that white rural Maine could see the changing face of their community.

Community plays an important role in her political discourse where she highlights her commitment to the common good. She and members of her community protested outside a local school showing opposition to the deployment of additional American soldiers to Baghdad and other provinces in Iraq. The participants reasoning were that the people in Iraq and the Middle East are not their enemies. Mayers is fervent in not stepping back and allowing more troops to be sent to Iraq or the situation will be more lethal and more people will die. Artists demonstrate that the communication of liberal political views and social justice issues has a great impact on the shape of the world today (Dufour, 2002.)

Likewise, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge spoke of how important it is to engage people, both within the geographic community and the social justice community. Understanding that they are unable to do their work individual by individual, they work with organizations such as the labour movement. For Condé and Beveridge community begins in the local, is built through empowerment, and is maintained through the common good. Two key elements of working within community are, that trust needs to be built upon and the community culture needs to be accepted. For both Condé and Beveridge trust cannot be achieved by jet setting into a
community. They become active in the culture that they are working with and they do that through existing community groups. As local pluralists they start their conversations “through the long term lens” with labour, immigration, and unions. They create their artwork based on the idea that community is comprised of distinct groups, each of which has its own social characteristics and interactions with others in the political arena.

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge build bridges by talking about their workplaces and their concerns so that people in turn will talk about their workplaces and their concerns. They believe that when people join together and take action community change can occur. They start with people and through that experience of working with people and joining together a strengthening of community occurs. Condé and Beveridge know that individuals acting collectively can accomplish more than one person acting alone. Community change has several strategies, such as organizing an action group, or planning a local programme, or involving people in decisions that affect their lives. It has steps in the process, such as assessing community conditions, making action plans, or building support for programme implementation, each one of which has various tools and techniques which can be fitted to the particular situation (Checkoway, 1995; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005). Artists unique collaboration within communities fosters their desire for self-determination, which allows them to be a more powerful force in society and to create intellectually and emotionally stimulating work (Lind, 2007).

Mendelson Joe’s sense of community differs from Natasha Mayers and Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge and his concept of community has multiple meanings. His community is his sense of being-in-the-world and is just as real. He lives apart to decrease his vulnerability to

dependence on the infrastructure. He relates to his community on his own terms, determined by his daily habits and needs. For example, socializing with local residents will occur when he ventures into the nearby town for shopping and errands, receives a visit in his home from a musical friend or arranges a sitting for a portrait.

Mendelson Joe’s art community is distinguishable by its interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup, and intergroup differences; its social identities; and its interest in a range of issues. There is an assumption that Joe shares similar social characteristics within the art population group and that he will think and act like that group, an assumption, which is not correct. Representatives from the art gallery community assume that they can effectively present his works of art regardless of his opinion. This it is not correct as he has opinions as to how his art should be presented. Joe does hold representatives from the art gallery community accountable and is gracious when they effectively represent his work. He does find common ground in the art community and communicates with others who are different from him.

The intention to look at community in different ways is expressed through different approaches and involvement to the art community. Besides being an activist artist, Natasha Mayers considers herself a community artist. Condé and Beveridge explained how important it is they make the connections to community and how they tell the stories of those communities. They spoke of how they came out of the arts community as opposed to being community artists. By coming from that direction, they “give voice to people who they work with.” Mendelson Joe is again quite different, because his aim is not to work on teams or in groups. Mendelson Joe likes to control the degree of contact with the art community as well as with his neighbours.

Community attachment to particular locales provides a significant locus of sentiment and meaning for each of the artists.

Considering themes associated with “Community,” artists in this study have been:
Enhanced creatively by their urban or rural environments and local landmarks.

Affiliated with and identified with people in communities regarding social issues.

Influenced by these experiences of community and reinforced by the characteristics they brought to these experiences.

Change

The artists in the study have undergone many changes in their lives and they have also worked for positive changes they see as important to society. Internal change was signaled by shifts in organization and reorganization of the artist’s identity, place, personality, life experiences, world issues and community. These shifts were in some measure coached, furthered, and forced by external agents. To add to this, change occurred when people joined together and took action. It was previously mentioned in Chapter 2, “Do you think anyone else cares enough to change the art world? If artists don’t do it, who do you think will?” (Lippard, 1999, p. 47). The impetus to initiate change did not come out of a vacuum for Natasha Mayers, Mendelson Joe, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge.

As an activist artist Natasha Mayers has sought progressive social change for decades, not without cost to herself. Her art images tell stories of the painful disruption of human life and the planet at the hands of government policies. The Bath-Brunswick Maine Peace Activists and Mayers created and painted slogans for a mural to be used in a demonstration, ie: Stop the Arms Race in the World, Torture is Not an American Value, War Leaves Every Child Behind, Create a Peace Economy and Free Water for All.

Mayers is dedicated to making a difference whether through her art, demonstrations, or speaking out publicly for change in social institutions. Her strong egalitarian values encourage her commitment to social movements, which she believes are necessary for social change. She joins in demonstrations to show that the power structures can be challenged. Mayers went to a
large anti-war demonstration in New York, where she wore sandwich boards, one in front, and one in the back. She walked twelve blocks to get to the demonstration and during that time there were many people who approached her, including two friendly policemen, asking her who she was, and what the images on the board were about. Mayers was deeply affected by the way her art brought people to her and by the response her images generated. As an activist artist Mayers provides the stimulus to find openings in the power structure and develop ways to draw everyday people out of their routines to participate in the process of bringing about social change. Her first public work, *Central America House of Horrors* was her depiction of the disruption and electoral corruption allowed by leaders, and the struggle of the people in Nicaragua. Mayers tends to emphasize participatory democracy rather than representative democracy in her pursuit for change.

Mendelson Joe seems to have doubts about the effectiveness of deliberately working for change. He explains that no one is going to see the world the way he does, people are going to see it the way they do. It all starts by “noticing stuff” when he walks down a street, listening to music or looking at art. There are certain basics to his life, first his right to freedom of expression and second his right to freedom of speech. He practices his right to freedom of expression and speech every day and this is very important to him.

Joe believes there is no social justice, everything in existence is random and justice occurs in nature by accident, if there is such a thing as a just outcome. In terms of social change he suggests a possible decentralized form of organization that makes it possible to have leaders and spokespersons that represent and spread the collective sense of egalitarianism while limiting the tendency for power to congeal at the top. Research identified programs in the United States and Canada that promote democracy through schooling (Westheimer, 2005). As a result, three visions emerged: (a) the personally responsible citizen, (b) the participatory citizen, and (c) the
social-justice oriented citizen. Joe is identifiable as a participatory citizen, one who would like to dismantle the structures of power and place emphasis on participatory democracy. Joe is progressive in his thought and actions and his artwork is integrated with his values, politics, love of life, and through this he tries to make things right.

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge are overt about the politics in their work. They agree that one has to almost read meaning into the present day art student’s work where they are more upfront about their desire for change. They recognize that the energy and dedication they bring to the battle of creating change through their social movements help make possible what later comes to be seen as progressive victories. Both Condé and Beveridge agree that change has occurred but not in the ways that they had hoped. Some ground has been lost. Comparing to when Karl was in his early twenties and today there is a substantially different world in terms of women’s issues and race and he believes that the class war needs to be revisited. Condé and Beveridge believe that change will occur if one works within “the local” and recognize that globalization is experiencing opposition. Indeed it may be suggested that what they mean by globalization is more or less synonymous with post-colonialism, as it signifies the integration of third and fourth world economies and cultures into the post-Cold War\(^{31}\) order. They both agree that there is a consciousness and informed perception of what is going on; however, they experience frustration with what real change has been accomplished. Artists have the power to humanize social issues and offer people confidence that they can be the bearers of change for the future. However before she/he embarks on such an elevated role there needs to be some kind of agreement (Paperstergiadis, 2001; Ray, 2007). An artist, say Condé and Beveridge, is a person

\(^{31}\) The Cold War (1945–1991) was the continuing state of political conflict, military tension, and economic competition existing after World War II (1939–1945), primarily between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the powers of the Western world which included Canada and the United States.
within the local community and it is important that artists have a say in making change.

Each of the four artists in this research sees her/his work as having some impact on the world. Natasha Mayers feels obligated as an artist “to tell the truth” and it is a burden she is willing to assume; likewise, Mendelson Joe’s intention is “to tell the truth, expose the rot, be silly, expose the thugs, the liars and the creeps.” Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge believe their art practice has made changes in the world. Carole and Karl responded to the question of whether their art practice has made changes in the world, “yes, or you wouldn’t do it.”

Considering themes associated with “Change,” artists in this study have:

• Believed that change is both desirable and possible.
• Developed new knowledge that contributed to the process of change.
• Engaged and remained committed to diverse social and cultural groups in a common issue.
• Worked to expose issues that would facilitate change in society.
Summary of Recurring Themes

In summary, the interview data led me to the seven themes, which I have explored in Chapter 5. From these interviews, it appears the recurring themes; identity, place, personality as style, life experiences, world issues, community and change deeply influenced each of the four artists in the direction of their art and artistic careers. All four artists indicated as they changed, their artwork changed. Becoming artists who are active in social issues was part of their progressive mindset, as the artists described colourfully and energetically incidents in their lives that informed, affected and moved them towards a new direction.

There was a definite sense that the artists identity, place, personality as style, life experiences, world issues, community and change were stronger at some times more than others in the artists lives. As the four artists persevered and aged they became better prepared to confront issues that were important to them. Their dedication to social justice issues within the realm of their artwork and outside in demonstrations, participation in organizations and confronting and writing politicians emerged from much of the data. It is this passion to make a wrong right or stop the wrong before it gains momentum that drives them to be activist artists. Art was characterized throughout as the main outlet through which these men and women achieved these goals as activist artists. As they continuously work as artists, they have a strong belief that they make a difference in the world and they offer insights through that form of artwork we call activist.

Limitations

One of the most important steps in the qualitative research process is the design of the method. In the process of developing design the researcher is trying to consider the kinds of arguments that will lend credibility to the study as well as the kinds of arguments that might be
used to question the findings. There is recognition on behalf of the researcher that there is no perfect design (Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003).

Although interviews were conducted in different geographical locations and at different times, the participants were not that far from one another in relation to the ideological world, as all were North American activist artists. In today’s increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to interact among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities. This diversity was not represented in the study to its fullest extent as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity. By not including a diversity of cultures, a free flow of ideas, and cultural traditions was not explored to show that all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known.

An artist’s language is closely connected with the social structure of her/his society and is a way of perceiving her/his meaning of life, feelings and thinking in her/his social system. By exploring only English speaking artists, opportunities for breaking down the boundaries of cultural identity and opening the possibility of exploring a new social network were hindered.

It is also important to understand that perceptions of artists who are mature, established and earning their living as artists full time are different from those artists who have other full or part-time careers. The shortcoming of selecting established mature artists and eliminating younger artists may also limit perspective and range of the study. In this study, youth and young adults were not interviewed. Their political attitudes towards government and ideas of democracy, capitalism, corporatism, or with revolutionary forms of participation may reflect a lack of lack experience and wisdom. They may also be radically different from the attitudes of their elders. By examining only older artists the opportunities to discover younger artist’ lives, their history and art discipline was sacrificed.
Future Research

This is an opportune time to teach activist art. Society is marked by perpetual war, the decrease of civil liberties, growing economic inequality and a narrow mainstream of political spectrum. The findings suggest a need to explore with students the tradition of artworks that seek to challenge injustice, promote oppositional thinking and spark political and artistic activism. More specifically, the development of a detailed exemplar for teaching and learning of activist art instruction is deserving of further research.

As I proceeded through my research regarding what motivates artists to become activists, several questions surfaced. I realized these questions extended beyond my initial research. Thus, the following set of questions is presented to serve as a starting point for future research in this area of activist art (a) What are the profiles of activist artists beyond North America specifically Germany, China, and Russia? (b) What are the controversies surrounding interpretation and intent of activist art in the public space in North America versus Europe and Asia? (c) How might we advance the creation and understanding of activist art globally? (d) How might we explore its unique, vital contribution to society?

Concluding Thoughts

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.

-Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha

In this study, three case studies with four activist artists who make significant contributions to the art world were explored. From the interviews, themes were analyzed to discern what motivates artists to become activists. These themes represent some key ideas about
activist art that may increase student interest and ability while experiencing activist art as an artistic endeavour. As teachers simulate authentic environments, they will help students understand the possible place and workings of activist art within the art curriculum. Authentic learning environments are those learning environments whose design is consistent with the principles of the more recent constructivist tradition on how people learn. Herrington and Oliver (2000) state, such learning environments provide authentic contexts and activities, access to expert performances, and support multiple roles and perspectives. Such environments also support collaborative construction of knowledge and promote reflection and articulation. If teachers are able to introduce art concepts and principles authentically, students will be able to recognize, appreciate and explore activist art with insight.

Although this study has to do with artists and what motivates them to become activists, the recommendations I provide are for art educators and their students. An approach to learning that empowers students and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in their specific area of interest. Educating through activist art gives students the freedom to formulate opinions on complicated matters where they will become engaged, allowing them the opportunity to “express how they are able to creatively express themselves.” The study and creation of activist art can be a valuable part student’s art education. The imaginative and intellectual work by students doing an activist art project initially entails research that includes a systematic inquiry into issues that are important to them. Through critical inquiry, students and educators can explore the seven themes found in the study: identity, place, personality as style, life experience, world issues, community and change in preparation for creating activist art that is based on their personal beliefs.
This research was guided by predominant questions, (a) What motivates artists to become activists? (b) What influences the intentions, content, and presentation of activist artists’ work? and (c) Activist artists use a variety of what is typically considered “style” to present their work. Are there similarities that support the notion that activist artists can be seen as a group?” The research addressed artists who had made choices in their lives to dedicate themselves full time to creating art that has activist content. The initial exploration addressed what motivates artists to become activists. The exploration led to the inquiry of “identity” constructed through the artists’ interaction with others and the influence of the social structures or contexts within which they were embedded. This inquiry led into “place” or where the artists situated themselves in society by simultaneously locating themselves with others who share their values and perceptions. The explanation of “personality as style” revealed relatively consistent inclinations and preferences across contexts and among the artists. The study examined the “life experiences” and “world issues” that influenced the attitudes and behaviours of the various artists. Both attitudes and behaviours are by-products and revealers of inequalities in prestige and power within the world and are relevant to what motivates artists to become activists (Clignet, 1985). The examination of “community” approached the importance of the dialogue that occurs between an artist and community. In particular, art in the public interest encourages community coalition-building in pursuit of social justice. The exploration of “change” in the study showed how the artists have undergone many changes in their lives and how they have also worked for positive changes they see as important to society.

Regarding activist artists using a variety of what is typically considered “style” to present their work, this study concluded that there are similarities that support the notion that activist artists can be seen as a group. The extent to which a group is able to achieve its goals and enhance the satisfaction and personal growth of its members is greatly influenced by the way its
participants are recruited, selected and oriented to their role and function. The composition, homogeneity and compatibility of the group greatly affect its cohesion and effectiveness (Dimock, & Divine, 1996). The common denominator in the study among all artists was the tension between and urge to assert their activist artistic independence and the constraints imposed on that independence by various elements in society. There was an increasing tendency to individuate themselves in relation to other artists as a way of constructing their own professional identity and authority through their activism and self-promotion. This stance influenced their posture of artistic independence, clear direction and sense of autonomy. Similarities of competence and shared goals were found from within this group cohesion. Likewise, satisfaction with their decision to create activist art related to conflict they view within society.
References


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Kennedy, R. (2008). No windows, no heat, no staff, no rent. This is a gallery? Retrieved February 18, 2008 from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/18/arts/design/18gall.html?ex=1204002000&en=486103e50dfc7671&ei=5070&emc=eta1


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Appendix A — Letter Of Introduction

Date:
Name:
E-mail:

Dear ,

I am a Graduate student and Sessional Adjunct at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario. Canada. I am also an artist with an activist emphasis on social justice in my work and have been registered with the Canada Council for the Arts. I am currently conducting research about activist artists as part of the requirements for a Masters in Education degree. I have been impressed with your work and am writing to ask if you would consent to be interviewed as part of this study.

I am very excited about the educational possibilities of activist art. One purpose of this study is to explore what influences activist artists’ in the production of their work.

Of course, this is a preliminary inquiry towards an agreement for an interview. I will contact you to provide a more detailed explanation of the research including the important contribution you will make. If you wish to speak to me ahead of that time you may contact me at my residence (613-335-4090) and/or e-mail me at 1hbo@queensu.ca

Thank you for considering this request.
Respectfully,

[Signature]

Heather B. O’Reilly
Artist in Community Education
1hbo@queensu.ca  A364, Duncan McArthur Hall,
Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, K7L 3N6
Telephone:  533-6000 x 75553 Web site: http://educ.queensu.ca/ace/index.shtml
Appendix B — Information About An Interview

Date:
Student's Name and contact number: Heather B. O’Reilly 613-533-6000 ext: 75553 or 613-335-4090

Dear Participant,

By this letter, I invite you to participate in a ninety-minute interview. This interview will be used as part of my Master of Education thesis at Queen’s University and will explore what influences activist artists in the production of their work. The thesis titled “Activist Art: Moving the Artist, Shaping the Work”, is supervised by Dr. Steve Elliott. My goal for this interview is to explore some important influences on your art, which may include intentions, content, and modes of presentation. To collect information I will record the interview using a standard tape recorder and video/digital camera. I will use field notes to document other relevant information. The structured interview question part of our visit should take 90 minutes.

I am seeking your permission to use information from our interview as well as relevant images of you and your work. Since you are an important part of your work, your identity will be included in the thesis along with cited statements made by you during the interview. By signing the consent form, you are agreeing to participate in this interview and consent (upon prior review of the material) to allow the information to be incorporated into my thesis. If you change your mind about your participation in the interview, or are not happy with the presentation of the information, you may withdraw from the interview at any time or ask that the information be removed without pressure or consequence of any kind. In asking you to participate in this interview, I am assuring you that you may choose not to answer any question that you find objectionable or that makes you uncomfortable in any way. There are no foreseeable risks, and your participation is voluntary.

Should my final research document be published or presented again in any form (apart from my Master in Education thesis), formal permission will be sought from you prior to the publication or presentation. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the data. Data will be retained indefinitely in a locked filing cabinet and will not be used without your prior written approval. Any specific data including transcripts, recordings and images can be destroyed following the thesis upon your request.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this interview, please contact Heather B. O’Reilly at 613-533-6000 ext 75553 or 613-335-4090 or my thesis supervisor Dr. Stephen Elliott at 613-533-6000 Ext. 77288. “For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this interview, contact the Education Research Ethics Board committee at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, 613-533-6000 Ext. 77034 (greb.chair@queensu.ca).”

Sincerely,

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Appendix C — Consent Form For Artist’s Interview

INTERVIEW OF:
INTERVIEWER:  Heather B. O’Reilly
DEPARTMENT:  Faculty of Education
DATE:  
LOCATION:  
STUDY NAME:  Activist Art: Moving the Artist, Shaping The Work

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning the Master of Education thesis *Activist Art, Moving the Artist: Shaping the Work*, and have had all questions sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study, and I have been informed that the interview will be recorded by audiotape and video/digital camera.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the interview and I may request the removal of all or part of my data without consequence to me. I have also been told that since I am an important part of my work, my identity will be included in the thesis along with cited statements made by me during the interview.

I understand if I change my mind about participation in the interview, or am not happy with the presentation of the information, I may withdraw from the interview at any time or ask that the information be removed without pressure or consequence of any kind.

I understand that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this interview, I may contact Heather B. O’Reilly at 613-533-6000 ext 75553 or 613-335-4090 or thesis supervisor Dr. Stephen Elliott at 613-533-6000 Ext. 77288. “For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this interview, I may contact the Education Research Ethics Board committee at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, 613-533-6000 Ext. 77034 (greb.chair@queensu.ca).” Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Heather B. O’Reilly.

Retain the second copy for your records.
Please check one of:
I am willing to have data pertaining to me retained indefinitely. ______
I request that data pertaining to me be returned after the university—mandated five year holding period. _____

Participant’ Name__________________________________________________________

Signature________________________________________________________________________

Date____________________________________________________________________________
Appendix D — Consent Form For The Use Of Video/Digital Camera Of The Session

Please fill out either Section A or Section B

Section A

I agree to allow Heather B. O’Reilly to use the video/digital tape or photographs of our session for one or more of the following purposes:

1) Publication in a Journal  
   Signature:  

2) Demonstration to Students  
   Signature:  

3) Demonstration at a Conference  
   Signature:

Date:

I understand that my name will be associated with the work.

Section B

I prefer not to have the video/digital camera tape or photographs of me shown in classes or at conferences or reproduced in any form.

Signature:  

Date:

Section C

Would you be willing to participate in future studies?  
Yes ☐  No ☐
Appendix E — Interview Questions

In-Depth Open Ended Interview Questions

Ninety-Minute Interview

Set up the camera on a tri-pod and test for visual; put the tape recorder on and do a trial talk using the following script.

This interview is being conducted as part of my master’s thesis on activist art. The questions I will be asking are related to my specific field of interest, elements of activist art and may assist educators and artists like you. The purpose of this study is to explore what influences activist artists in the production of their work. Some important influences may include intentions, content, and modes of presentation.

As an artist, you may be in a position to describe what you know to be important about being a socially conscious activist artist. Therefore, this interview will be about experiences and meaning as it relates to your art.

You have agreed that information and images of you and your work from our interview may be used. Since you are an important part of your work, your identity will be included in my thesis along with cited statements made by you during the interview. As we go through the interview, if you have any questions about the content simply ask and I will do my best to answer. Of course, if there is anything that you do not feel comfortable answering just say so. The purpose of this interview is to explore and understand your art. Feel free to add as much description and details of your story as you please. I have divided the interview into three parts. The first part deals with the inner-person, the second part approaches the day-to-day and, the third part relates to the outer person. Is there anything you would like to ask me before we begin?

First Part =30 minutes (Inner-person)

1. If you consider yourself an activist artist what does that mean?
2. What kind of issues in our world are you concerned about?
3. How do you see your concerns in the context of the broader idea of social justice?
4. How are your ideas about social justice related to your work as an artist?
Second Part = 30 minutes (Day-to-day)

5. Can you tell me about an average day in your life as an artist?
6. In your life as an artist how did you come to connect art with activism?
7. As an artist why do you do what you do?

Third Part = 30 minutes (Outer person)

8. Given what you said about the intention of your work and content of your work how do you choose the presentation of that work?
9. Given what we have discussed today where do you see your work going in the future?
10. If I wanted to have someone else see art and the world like you do, what would I tell them?
11. In what ways can your experience, as an activist artist be relevant to education today?

* Sometimes it may be easier to ask the artist to tell me a story about what they are discussing.

Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating. I appreciate your sharing, and your participation has been very helpful. I wish you all the best with your art work.

Tape-off and digital camera off. “end of Interview with artist X”
Appendix F — Example of Field Notes

Mendelson Joe

Engaged in his responses. Direct when he got into political stuff.

Uses his hands when he expresses himself. Shoulders when talking about Bush.

1991 Iraq through Mullahs.

also closes hands together — circulating his thumbs.

when he spoke about Religion — he was emphatic — his voice changed.

When he talks about how he thinks, he points to his head.

Rev. Robert Manning

Story — about Timmy Manning & Lou Gehrig’s Disease.

This is what changed him.

Got very confortable — when telling this story — looked back, closed his oak

on his head.

A friend died of cancer when he was 49.

FATHER was a lawyer.

Social Justice is in the home.

Parenting is where Social Justice Comes from.

Did not stomped his feet to the beat of the music.

Existence is Random — who has the best lawyer.

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