

I AM BECAUSE WE ARE: Towards a critical analysis of *Heart- to-Heart* – a series of artistic interventions carried out on Valentine's Day 2004 organized by Kingston, Ontario's Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre. Participants included Maureen Addie, Mary Akenson, Cindy Baker, Koren Bellman, Kyle Bishop, Andrea Doggett, Julie Fiala, Tina Hagberg, Elizabeth Hanson, M. Harrison, Matthew Hoult, Sandra Jass, Christine Kim, Jenny Keith, Neil N., Jennifer Roche, Brenda Shantz, and Kama and Aron Wilson.

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*... When Tao is lost, there is goodness,
When goodness is lost, there is kindness.
When kindness is lost, there is justice,
When justice is lost there is ritual.*

Extract from the Tao Te Ching, (verse 38 translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English).

To possess is to give.

From the gift exchange code of the Kula ring – the ceremonial exchange of the Massim peoples who occupy the South Sea Islands near the eastern tip of New Guinea as cited in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* by Lewis Hyde.

People derive their sense of meaning from their culture. What does it mean to be human? What is - or ought to be - the nature of human relations? These notions feed into the attitudes and values that we choose to embrace, which in turn determine how we interact with each other. Cultural attitudes and values therefore provide the foundation for the social norms by which people live. Through internalizing and sharing these cultural attitudes and values with their fellow community members, and by handing them down to future generations, societies can - and do - re-construct themselves on the basis of a particular cultural image.

From Timothy Murithi's *Practical Peacemaking Wisdom from Africa: Reflections on Ubuntu*

Artwork understood as a figure is not an object but a work in the active sense of an occurrence, an event, or an act. The accent in the word 'work' falls not on the fact that it has been created but rather on how and what it works, on what kind of work art performs. The active sense of working, of art working on its audience but also soliciting the audience to work with and through it, deemphasizes the static concepts of form and content and draws attention to the temporality operating in art.

From *The Social Figure in Art in Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries* edited by Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos

Art practice that seeks completion through its audience is a form of dialogue in which the conditions of art's emergence correspond to the formation of the subject, that is, fundamentally relational. This is an ethical practice whose very condition is contingent on a participation in the construction of meaning and renewal of value that invents the possibility of recognition of both difference and commonality between each other.

From Dr. Charles Merewether's (Collections Curator, Getty Research Institute) web summary of his keynote address at a recent Australian conference on ethics and aesthetics.

WHAT SOME PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY BEFORE THE INTERVENTIONS

Kyle: *Won't you let me in and play Lego with me?*

Art is about gets things wrong, misinterpretation and sometimes persuasion. I can arrive bright eyed because I am still very enthusiastic about Lego without cynicism, like my daughter.

Christine: *Working as I do for Cyrano Services, I can help you write a love letter: We can spray it with perfume if you like.*

The idea of the letter comes from a personal relationship with letters. I write many that I don't send and don't ever have the intention to send. I grew up in a quiet that resolved nothing because no one brought up any issues. I am interested in how people will talk about their own love life.

Andrea: *Let me give you a kiss – my lipstick tracing the shape of my love transferred onto glass for you to keep.*

When someone opens the door I will kiss a 4"x6" piece of glass and handing it to them I will wish them a happy Valentine's Day, though I may do this on the street with passersby. I am interested in the unexpected audience phenomenon and questions of safe sex.

Julie: *I'm prepared to shovel your walk, clear your stairs or driveway of snow.*

I've recently found out that my neighbor Brian has been shoveling my driveway. With this ode to Brian, I will offer to clean the driveways of some Swamp Ward District residents. I have purchased salt, an ice pick, a wheel barrel, and some sand. Afterwards, I will ask them to suggest whose driveway I should clean next and give them the choice if they want to remain anonymous. In each situation the structure of the gift and the gesture will remain the same.

Cindy: *I've declared my love for the citizens of Kingston, will you declare your love for me?*

As a child I was encouraged to give Valentine's Day cards to everyone in my class and always found it strange. There seemed to be a negation of the significance and a devaluing of the connections that were special by being forced to give everyone a card. With a certain cynicism, I want to make the same point today. However by making personal connections, my intention is to open a space of dialogue and question the nature of donation and interaction with people new to a community.

Jennifer: *I have these coupons for goods and services in the local community – can I offer you one, no strings attached – well except that you will become part of this art project. Is there someone you know who might appreciate a coupon – I could bring one over to them after I leave here.*

I am aware of the artists' compulsion to making art and personally I like the feeling of putting a lot of work into something and then giving it out at a low value so not as to participate in the economy. I am interested in the notion of value as it relates to art and how art has been pushed to the margins of Canadian society. I believe that altruism exists and that performance art can be a key to a personal and social exploration of it.

Koren: *I will make a snow angel on your property with the imprint of my own body and leave a flare to light up the space I have carved with my body as the sun goes down.*

I am interested in sustained movement, repetitive gestures, and leaving evidence of a performance as an integral part of the performance itself. I am interested too in how these snow angels might be perceived as gentle and spiritual, but jarring as well. I need a bit of edge to get to the beautiful, for it to make sense to me.

Sandra: *Would you take my picture? I would like to take a picture of you. If you like we could be in the photograph together.*

The idea for today's gesture is based on one of my previous works called "Old News / New News" and questions how we are simultaneously part of the present and part of the past. Archiving documentation is part of the process; the documentation becomes the interaction. I want to open up a space to question what value we place on permanence and the ephemeral, on objects, and especially on photography.

INTUITION AND ANALYSIS

Last April for the preliminary version of this essay (published in Modern Fuel's spring newsletter), I wrote: "walking along the Lachine Canal emptying my mind in preparation for this writing, my attention was drawn to the Canadian Geese returning to their nesting homes. Three times the gaggles flew overhead, each time coming closer and lower to my own center, breath, and awareness as if to show me something – offer a teaching. On the third and last pass, I finally understood the lesson of their flying formation. With each powerful wing stroke they individually and collectively affirmed what I was struggling to articulate about interdependence and individuation: *I am because we are.*

Now it is late summer and the geese once again will soon fly overhead, only this time heading south. I am once again trying to come to clarity about how best to approach this writing. Now, I can only imagine the lines traced in the sky and have to rely on a conceptual knowing rather than an experiential one in order to make sense of the lesson of interdependence that the geese still have to offer. In *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Henri Bergson writes:

To think consists ordinarily in going from concepts to things, and not from things to concepts. To know a reality in the ordinary meaning of the word 'to know,' is to take ready-made concepts, apportion them, and combine them until one obtains a practical equivalent of the real. But it must not be forgotten that the normal work of the intelligence is far from being a disinterested work. We do not, in general, aim at knowing for the sake of knowing, but at knowing in order to take a stand, gain a profit, in fact to satisfy an interest. We try to find out up to what point the object to be known is this or that, into what known genus it fits, what kind of action, step or attitude it should suggest to us. These various possible actions and attitudes are so many conceptual directions of our thought, determined once and for all; nothing remains but for us to follow them; precisely in that consists the application of concepts to things. To try a concept on an object is to ask of the object what we have to do with it, what it can do for us. To label an object with a concept is to tell in precise terms the kind of action or attitude the object is to suggest to us. All knowledge properly so-called is, therefore, turned in a certain direction or taken from a certain point of view. It is true that our interest is often complex. And that is why we sometimes manage to turn our knowledge of the same object in several successive directions and to cause viewpoints concerning it to vary.

Bergson goes on to differentiate between intuition and analysis as two very different ways of knowing. Suggesting that one cannot reconstitute the real from a conceptual/analytical mode of thinking (that the real can only be perceived through intuition) Bergson states:

Analysis operates on immobility, while intuition is located in mobility or, what amounts to the same thing, in duration. That is the very clear line of demarcation between intuition and analysis. One recognizes the real, the actual, the concrete, by the fact that it is variability itself. One recognizes the element by the fact that it is invariable. And it is invariable by definition, being a schema, a simplified reconstruction, often a mere symbol, in any case, a view taken of the reality that flows. But the mistake, Bergson suggests, is to believe that with these schemas one could recompose the real. It cannot be too often repeated: from intuition one can pass on to analysis, but not from analysis to intuition.

I want to suggest that the experience back in the spring along the canal was an experience of intuitive knowing. Sitting with this material now can only be a mere suggestion of that reality as it has already passed into the realm of the conceptual, the analytical, indeed the invariable – a knowing that is to serve a purpose, to present a position, to describe a point of view, or at best (due to the complexity of the subject matter), a number of points of view in the hope of getting as close as possible to the real.

Co-conceived by Saskatoon-based artist Cindy Baker and Julie Fiala (then Program Director at the Modern Fuel Artist Run Center in Kingston Ontario – host to this event), as a participatory performance, the project included a preliminary workshop during which local artists developed a series of gestures to be performed throughout Kingston's Swamp Ward District on Valentine's Day. While paying homage to the New York-based *Love Commuter Project* (a Valentine's day project that consisted of a number of donative interventions at subway stations), the goal of this public performance was as Fiala described in an email to me back in October 2003 "to set up a forum wherein to discuss the degree to which relational or connective practices in performance art can generate real emotion and meaningful people-to-people connections". And although this project was meant primarily to stimulate discourse within the arena of performance art, in fostering exchange between artists and the community, it was also intended to contribute to the discussion on artist and community collaboration activities.

The project included a post-performance discussion in which, as the *rapporteur* for the event, I was asked to summarize the project and critically discuss its relationship to the discourses on relational and connective aesthetics. In a before-the-event meeting with the project's directors, during the preliminary workshop and in the post-performance session, I brought up the issues of bearing witness and the burdens that often accompany this. I hinted at how this project might trigger unresolved personal issues for the artists and for the citizens of the Swamp Ward District. We talked about personal safety and fear, vulnerability, gender and access, motives, values, definitions of success, how to frame the gesture within the context of the *Heart-to-Heart* event, the ethics of documentation and what consent and permissioning means within the context of a public intervention such as this. I asked the participants about their needs in relation to this project. Responses included: *I need to have an entry on my CV for 2004 for my artistic practice... Because I am so giving of my time and how I value my art practice, I find it difficult in this community because of the paradigm of art seen always as object... I have a desire to do things in groups, especially art and I recognize a certain need for the autobiographical... I have a need to do something nice in order to feel good about myself...*

Part of the difficulty that I face in coming clear to this writing is the question I have about the conceptual framework imposed on this project from the very beginning. Having emerged within a context of analysis and in comparison to another art experience, the proposition and subsequent invitation to local Kingston artists was already, according to Bergson's terms outside of what is (or even the capacity to be) real. And though I can allow for the possibility that the participants might have come to define and manifest their own gestures from a place of intuitive knowing and proceeded from that (real) place to one of analysis and concept, trying to explore actions such as love, kindness and generosity within a framework of conception is like living values because they are imposed as part of a religious imperative. By the time the artists had gathered in the morning for the preliminary workshop, they had each considered most if not all of their projects' components and came prepared to enact the gestures. No one approached this project by saying that they would come open to whatever experience emerged and presented itself. The forms, materiality and parameters of each of the projects were pre-determined to the extent that the frame was well drawn; only the specificity of each encounter was left to unfold in time.

IMAGINING A GIFT ECONOMY

In the preliminary article I wrote how the research I have been doing over the past several years into the ethics and socio-cultural codes of benevolence would be the lens that I would use in constructing meaning and for critically asserting that the greatest question that emerges from the constellation of events that was *Heart-to-Heart* seems to be how to individually and collectively live as if we each would say “I am because we are.” Yet I cannot avoid taking into account how economics played itself out in each of these gestures. Labor and resources in many ways were at the heart of these gestures. Moreover, the gestures themselves were considered on the part of the artists to be gifts that were to be bestowed upon the residents of the Swamp Ward District.

Lewis Hyde (in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*) writes:

We are indentured to our gifts until they come to term. But this is a willing bondage, and the bond is loosened with the maturation of the gift. Our servitude is ended by the act of gratitude which accomplishes the transformation... Bondage to our gifts (and to the teachers who wake them) diminishes as we become empowered to pass them along. It is true that when a gift enhances our life, or even saves it, gratitude will bind us to the donor. Until it is expressed that is. Gratitude, acted upon or simply spoken, releases the gift and lightens the obligations of affection between lovers, family, and comrades... Gifts bespeak relationship. As long as the emotional tie is recognized as the point of the gift, both the donor and the recipient will be careful to structure the exchange so that it does not jeopardize their mutual affection.

So what does it mean to give a gift to a stranger? What is being asked of this relationship? What kind of mutual affection can be present? What is being offered? What is being received? Hyde quoting Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* published in France in 1924 writes:

Mauss noticed, for one thing, that gift economies tend to be marked by three related obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate. He also pointed out that we should understand gift exchange to be a “total social phenomenon” – one whose transactions are at once economic, juridical, moral, aesthetic, religious, and mythological, and whose meaning cannot, therefore, be adequately described from the point of view of any single discipline.

What provision has been made for the necessary (according to Hyde) component of reciprocation? How do we understand what reciprocation can mean in such a complex and contrived gifting situation as was the *Heart-to-Heart* project? Hyde continues:

A gift is consumed when it moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return. There is little difference, therefore, between its consumption and its movement. A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body to body... In commodity exchange it's as if the buyer and the seller were both in plastic bags; there's none of the contact of a gift exchange. There is neither motion nor emotion because the whole point is to keep the balance, to make sure the exchange itself doesn't consume anything or involve one person with another. Consumer goods are consumed by their owners not by their exchange... Gift exchange is not a form of barter... Partners in barter talk and talk until they strike a balance, but the gift is given in silence... A gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation.

Writing about how the gift continues its path often along a circular route and moves always to the empty place as long as the spirit of the gift is honored, Hyde warns of what happens when the gift cycle is arrested:

If a pair of goats received as a gift from another sub-clan is kept to breed or to buy cattle, there will be general complaint that the so-and-so's are getting rich at someone else's expense, behaving immorally by hoarding and investing gifts, and therefore being in a state of severe debt. If the object is a gift, it keeps moving, which in this case means that the man who receives the goats throws a big party and everyone gets fed. The goats needn't be given back, but they surely can't be set aside to produce milk or more

goats. Where someone manages to commercialize a tribe's gift relationships the social fabric of the group is invariably destroyed.

What social fabric is revealed in the *Heart to Heart* exchanges? How can one speak of the gift economy as an artistic preoccupation in this late-capitalist, market-driven, multinational socio-economic-political context? What role have the artists taken on in revealing these questions? How does this actually matter / manifest itself? Where is the place of the public discourse around anxious questions of interdependent gift exchange (as manifest in gesture, photograph, willingness to listen to another's story, invitation to play, to write love letters on behalf of one who may not know how or is too timid to do so, coupon value for goods and services)? Does it matter that the community at large took little interest in this work? Does it matter that there was little participation on the part of the local Kingston residents? Is it enough for these questions to have been raised? But then who is listening to the questions? Is it enough for the artists to be asking them? How could the community really get engaged in this dialogue? Do they even care? Should they be made to? What kind of social contract is being drawn when artists engage in performative interventions of this kind? With whom are they drawing the contract? Who holds the empty space of the counter-signature?

Cindy declared her love for a social group and requested a personal declaration in return. What is the nature of this exchange? What shifts between her one-to-many offer and the demand for a return on her terms one-to-one? Is this about a group of artists offering not quite random gifts to individuals (as individuals) and asking something back of society without the coherence and cohesion of a shared set of agreed upon values - without even the benefit of a dialogue about what values are at the heart of this effort that would allow the community to participate on its own terms? Was the community in this case considered *subject* or seen as *object*? Can a gesture, any gesture in and of itself create the kind of intimacy and contact that the organizers had hoped for? Or was this an exercise in revealing the limits – even limitations – of punctual, one time gestures in the absence of a sustained, mutually agreed upon, mutually beneficial and deemed necessary, culturally accepted– set of exchanges and participatory connections?

ALONG A CONTINUUM OF ARTISTIC PRACTICE

It seems as if Valentine's Day has been more about buying into the consumerism of 'love' than about creating sustainable and significant inter-personal bonds. In North America, this day obligates us to give, share and exchange. Can depth, sincerity and reciprocity actually be generated through the distribution of Hallmark greeting cards and candy? And, more importantly here, can performance art be employed to develop alternative formats for exchange that stimulate sincere inter-personal connections?

What motives this? Whose needs are being addressed? What are the beliefs about interpersonal relationships (and particularly about those with the stranger) are operative here? How can a project conceived for a world center urban transitory dynamic be transposed successfully to a community whose relationship with contemporary art is significantly different?

Definitions are significant and necessary if we are to have a clear sense of what we mean when we speak of artist and community collaboration activities. Julie Fiala's (unpublished) essay *Collaborative Ethics* traces an understanding of terms while examining the practices of Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago and Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge. Citing David Michael Levin's *The Listening Self*, Rita Irwin's *Listening to the Shapes of Collaborative Artmaking*, and Suzi Gablik's *Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism*, amongst others, Fiala draws a continuum of intersubjectivity implicating responsibility, trust, accountability and openness, power sharing and, above all, ethics.

While Canada is still struggling to define and place community arts collaborative projects within a spectrum of definitions, Australian federally supported community art has a thirty-year history. What we can learn from this history is that definition is more than simply semantics. Delineating the terms provides a clear sense of direction on the part of the artist that is critical to setting intentions, contextualizing commitment and understanding the affective and aesthetic processes and results that emerge from such projects.

In a recent email conversation I had with my friend and colleague Robert Hughes of Gasworks Arts Park (Melbourne, Australia) about the meaning of terms such as community service and exploitation of human subject research, Rob suggested the following three designations:

Community Arts Projects, on one end of the spectrum, are those projects wherein the artist(s) is of or from the community (or is willing to take the time to become part of it and develop an ethical relationship). The artist(s) work with the community in such a way that the collective has control over the process, aesthetics, subject matter, production and diffusion of the joint creative process & product. Such projects are generally a process of discovery that may result in expressive forms presented within the community and sometimes outside of it. Alternatively such projects sometimes do not result in specific creative product, but in small incremental changes over time e.g. a decade, whose result is community cultural development.

Community Arts Advocacy Projects occur when an artist, sympathetic to community issues, works with and uses an individual or group process to express (and to a lesser degree discover) significant community issues relevant to the project's objective. The artist(s) for the most part maintains creative control and generates the aesthetic direction (usually with, but sometimes without, community participation and approval). The objective of advocacy projects is to promote, celebrate or highlight a particular community event, cause or issue.

At the other end of the spectrum is what may be called Community Derived Projects. In this instance the artist's inspiration derives from a community or locality, but results in a personal expression of it. These projects are not co-creative; the product may or may not be exhibited or shared with the source community. The artist(s) here is always in control of the creative and editorial issues and produces work without the approval of the subject community.

In *What is Performance Art, Anyway? A provisional, Partial Answer* Lynne M. Constantine and Suzanne Scott state that "performance art is more interested in opening a subject than in closing it". There is little expectation that a problem will be resolved within the performance. The "actor" is more interested in exploring through a specific action, what happens to her/participants and to observers when the action occurs. The distinction between creator/initiator, participant and audience begins to blur.

Some of the gestures associated with *Heart-to-Heart* were site-specific, others, site-independent. Furthermore, as the body and the use of the body is often a key element, even material for the performance, questions of gender, race, and clothing are central to the performance's meaning. Performance Art's accessibility, flexibility and the ways in which the unexpected can often occur make these gestures portable and intriguing enough to reach a wide range of individuals who would not necessarily enter into the Modern Fuel's gallery space.

Modern Fuel's documents reveal that *Heart-to-Heart* was meant to "hinge on developing processes for relating to or connecting with audiences and for enabling audiences to become participants/co-performers." Constantine and Scott provide us with definitions of three types of performance art, each having a different impact on its audience/participants. Each one of these types has been enacted with the *Heart-to-Heart* project:

Cognitive/perceptual: Performance art is out of place, not what we expect from the environment we are in, not pre-packaged into something we already know how to look at and make sense of. Performance art uses sound, color, movement, light, text, and the tremendous resources of the body to disconcert and to make our everyday perceptions, usually taken for granted, difficult. Like someone looking at a grain of rice through an electron microscope, the familiar becomes strange: What are we hearing, seeing, making sense of kinetically?

Subjective: Performance art is designed to provoke our emotions. It may make us angry, hyper-stimulate our senses, or break social rules. Also, it frequently puts so-called "observers" into a space in which they become part of the experience and can observe and respond to other "audience" members' responses. The work isn't outside us-it is within, demanding our attention.

Conceptual: Performance art often exposes the contradictions hidden in the day-to-day character of our lives. A street performer making music on trash cans, oil drums and curbs challenges our sense that music and noise are unrelated and opposite. Seeing a break-dancer or a painted human cyborg in a park on your lunch break can challenge you to ask questions: What is work? Why don't these performers get jobs? Why would anyone do this instead of going to work? Perhaps even, "Am I a corporate robot watching a robot-performer?"

Aside from asking questions about the performative nature of these gestures and the ways in which they engage with the audience, I want to suggest that we consider where this project would fit in Hughes' continuum of artistic practice, especially if we consider community art above all as an art of relationship. Within a community context, the connections between artistic inspiration and its application become entangled with and by a myriad of people, their beliefs, thoughts, opinions, intentions, actions and proficiencies. Requiring a high degree of collaboration, community art necessitates that artists be willing to engage interdependently and be present with integrity to community and community processes. This is a big and challenging commitment.

In practice and the emerging textual discourse the term community art refers to a heterogeneous range of visual and performing arts practices that involve the collaboration of a professional artist (or artists) and members of a self-identifying community. While communities can be organized around a shared geographic location, traditions, or common interest and most often have an agreed upon structure, in its current discursive and practical usage, the term community has also come to stand for groups of individuals who share a social, economic, cultural, or political marginalization or inequality. Community art projects are most often motivated by the desire to address social injustice using collective, creative production as a means to invite personal change – often of a healing nature – and /or social improvement.

No one singular project type can define community art. At its core, community art is radically and profoundly interdisciplinary. It is more an attitude than a genre; more a present time transformative co-creative praxis than an artistic style or discipline. And though aesthetics play a significant role in community arts, because aesthetics are emergent and place/time/participant specific, generally it is the values of community that are the determining factor rather than the signature style of the artist(s) involved. The aesthetics of community arts tend to be different and distinctive from other types of contemporary production precisely because they are multivocal, context arising and process driven. Often their effects are unsettling, seemingly unfinished or open, offering dissensus rather than a unified or seamless whole. Privileging the process of collaborative production and committing to this ethically is fundamental to community art.

Similar to advocacy, activist, relational aesthetic, and sometimes performance art practices, community art is a hybrid of creativity, politics, and community organization. And although related, community art is dissimilar in that it implies long-term personal development and the development of ongoing reciprocally beneficial relationships. Community art takes into consideration the implications of this personal development and these relationships especially as the artist(s) must be of or from the community or is willing to take the time to become part of it. Additionally, community art is distinguished from other forms of art by a commitment to active cooperative and collective choice making. One possible way of perceiving the difference between activist, advocacy, relational practices and community art is to consider how the implicated group self-defines its connection to the artistic process and product. No longer spectators or audience members, no longer even participants, community members are full collaborators and co-creators.

For those who participate in community art projects, the creative process can be personally empowering, allowing individuals to experience parts of themselves that maybe closed off else where in their lives. By their very nature artistic practices have a potential for opening up and offering solutions and possibilities because they are always functioning within the realm of the creative, the subjunctive realm of "what if?"

Given the vibrant interconnected nature of community art, this assumption of “what if?” is even more pronounced as the personal, spiritual, and the political – the individual and the social body – merge and blend, driven by, and resulting in, a generative strength and fluidity.

In short, community art involves artists getting involved in and with communities in ways that serve the communities’ self-determined needs and that are consistent with their values. Individuals with artistic skills and experience along with a background – or at least an interest – in other fields such as social work, education, psychology, anthropology, health sciences, and/or conflict management, choose to focus their creative energy to facilitate personal and social transformation and support maturation processes. Rather than produce paintings, sculpture, video, websites, dance or music, etc. (though not excluding the possibility that such work will be collectively produced), artists and community members collaborate to envision, articulate, and create better conditions within which to live, while addressing issues that are pressing for the community and its members. Ultimately it is the community group that must determine the elements and criteria for success they wish to achieve with any creative endeavor. Basic to community art is the degree to which ethical relationships have been developed and enhanced through the process of collaborative creativity.

I have questions about what it would have taken for this project to be fully within the realm of community art, as defined by Hughes. How much planning and integration would have been necessary to evolve a project emergent from the interests and intentions of Kingston’s citizens? What kind of dialogue would have been necessary to examine what common values and what ethical questions are of significance to the residents of the Swamp Ward District?

WILL THE REAL ST. VALENTINE PLEASE STAND UP?

When I first read the project description for *Heart-to-Heart*, I questioned the underlying assumption of contextualizing loving-kindness and acts of generosity within a Christian framework. However commercialized and removed St. Valentine’s Day is from its origins, it still remains a day named and dedicated to a Christian saint and contains vestiges of ancient Roman traditions. Though I was assured by Julie Fiala that a predominant number of individuals within Kingston’s Swamp Ward District could relate to St. Valentine’s Day, my own non-Christian background and the study of Buddhism kept me questioning the presumption and associations made between aesthetic (relational) practice and cultural norms and behaviors.

What I found out from doing some research on the web is that the history of Valentine’s Day -- and its patron saint -- is shrouded in mystery. The following information is reprinted from <http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/valentine/history.html> (August, 2004):

Today, the Catholic Church recognizes at least three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus, all of whom were martyred. One legend contends that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men – his crop of potential soldiers. Valentine, realizing the injustice of the decree, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When Valentine’s actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death. Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons where they were often beaten and tortured.

According to one legend, Valentine actually sent the first ‘valentine’ greeting himself. While in prison, it is believed that Valentine fell in love with a young girl – who may have been his jailor’s daughter – who visited him during his confinement. Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter, which he signed ‘From your Valentine,’ an expression that is still in use today.

There are varying ideas about what actually became of Valentine. While some say he was beheaded, others contend that he became sick in prison and died. In 1835, the remains – or what are believed to be

the remains of St. Valentine were given to an Irish priest named Father John Spratt by Pope Gregory XVI, after Spratt impressed the Pope with his passionate preaching during a visit to Rome. The gift, in a black and gold casket, can still be viewed every Valentine's Day at the Whitefriar Street Church in Dublin, Ireland.

Although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky, the stories certainly emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and, most importantly, romantic figure. It's no surprise that by The Middle Ages, Valentine was one of the most popular saints in England and France.

While some believe that Valentine's Day is celebrated in the middle of February to commemorate the anniversary of Valentine's death or burial -- which probably occurred around 270 A.D -- others claim that the Christian church may have decided to celebrate Valentine's feast day in the middle of February in an effort to 'christianize' celebrations of the pagan Lupercalia festival. In ancient Rome, February was the official beginning of spring and was considered a time for purification. Houses were ritually cleansed by sweeping them out and then sprinkling salt and a type of wheat called spelt throughout their interiors. Lupercalia, which began at the ides of February, February 15, was a fertility festival dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture, as well as to the Roman founders Romulus and Remus. To begin the festival, members of the Luperci, an order of Roman priests, would gather at the sacred cave where the infants Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, were believed to have been cared for by a she-wolf or lupa. The priests would then sacrifice a goat, for fertility, and a dog, for purification. The boys then sliced the goat's hide into strips, dipped them in the sacrificial blood and took to the streets, gently slapping both women and fields of crops with the goathide strips. Far from being fearful, Roman women welcomed being touched with the hides because it was believed the strips would make them more fertile in the coming year. Later in the day, according to legend, all the young women in the city would place their names in a big urn. The city's bachelors would then each choose a name out of the urn and become paired for the year with his chosen woman. These matches often ended in marriage.

Pope Gelasius declared February 14 St. Valentine's Day around 498 A.D. The Roman 'lottery' system for romantic pairing was deemed un-Christian and outlawed. Later, during the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed in France and England that February 14 was the beginning of birds' mating season, which added to the idea that the middle of February -- Valentine's Day -- should be a day for romance.

In Great Britain, Valentine's Day began to be popularly celebrated around the seventeenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, it was common for friends and lovers in all social classes to exchange small tokens of affection or handwritten notes. By the end of the century, printed cards began to replace written letters due to improvements in printing technology. Ready-made cards were an easy way for people to express their emotions in a time when direct expression of one's feelings was discouraged. Cheaper postage rates also contributed to an increase in the popularity of sending Valentine's Day greetings. Americans probably began exchanging hand-made valentines in the early 1700s. In the 1840s, Esther A. Howland began to sell the first mass-produced valentines in America.

According to the Greeting Card Association, an estimated one billion valentine cards are sent each year, making Valentine's Day the second largest card-sending holiday of the year. (An estimated 2.6 billion cards are sent for Christmas.) Approximately 85 percent of all valentines are purchased by women. In addition to the United States, Valentine's Day is celebrated in Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia.

LOVE IS A VERB

Clearly there is an historical association between St. Valentine's Day and offering a token of one's love especially to someone who has impressed upon us a sense of passion. That love is a verb – a deliberate, moment by moment ethical choice beginning with embracing oneself unconditionally and spreading outward toward familiars, sometimes strangers and on occasion even extended toward one who has been named the enemy – is something that the organizers and participants clearly understood. But let us consider whether or not passion is a viable indicator and sustainable imperative to take action concerning

love, kindness and generosity. Passion's nature is often like fire: quick to ignite, spreads easily under the right conditions and is then doused either deliberately or by attrition because of its devastating power.

Indeed bell hooks describing the conditions for and actions of love in *all about love: new visions*, places little emphasis on passion. Hooks suggests that rather than consider love a feeling we begin by thinking of love as an act of will, even an intention to experience loving as a combination of care, commitment, trust, honesty, knowledge, responsibility, respect, integrity, compassion, acceptance of change, willingness to surrender, living in the present, and profound listening. These act(ion)s are replete with the underlying assumption that love inspires us to grow and expand -- to unfold fully ourselves -- without qualification, despite and because of the struggle to do so.

Considering how often we get in trouble trying to find love outside of ourselves she writes:

We can never go back. I know that now. We can go forward. We can find the love our hearts long for, but not until we let go grief about the love we longed for long ago, when we were little and had no voice to speak the heart's longing. All the years of my life I thought I was searching for love I found, retrospectively, to be years where I was simply trying to recover what had been lost, to return to the first home, to get back the rapture of first love. I was not really ready to love or be loved in the present. I was still mourning – clinging to the broken heart of girlhood, to broken connections. When that mourning ceased I was able to love again.

And just as the South African code of *Ubuntu* (which I will discuss below), emerges from a powerful connection to religious practice, so bell hooks affirms: "All awakening to love is spiritual awakening." Did the artists consider their *Heart-to-Heart* gestures in religious/ritualistic/spiritual terms? bell hooks again: "To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility... To think of actions shaping feelings is one way we rid ourselves of conventionally accepted assumptions such as that parents love their children, or that one simply "falls" in love without exercising will or choice... If we were constantly remembering that love is as love does, we would not use the word in a manner that devalues and degrades its meaning."

Would the gestures of these artists be the same if they emerged from the place of self-love that is at the heart of true interdependence? As bell hooks suggests:

Self-love is the foundation of our loving practice. Without it our other efforts to love fail. Giving ourselves love we provide our inner being with the opportunity to have the unconditional love we may have always longed to receive from someone else. Whenever we interact with others, the love we give and receive is always necessarily conditional. Although it is not impossible, it is very difficult and rare for us to be able to extend unconditional love to others, largely because we cannot exercise control over the behavior of someone else and we cannot predict or utterly control our responses to their actions. We can, however, exercise control over our own actions. We can give ourselves the unconditional love that is the grounding for sustained acceptance and affirmation. When we give this precious gift to ourselves, we are able to reach out to others from a place of fulfillment and not from a place of lack.

And as much as questions of acceptance and affirmation are at stake, there are the additional issues of location and object to consider, especially in a pluralistic society in which there are many subjectivities, ideas, even ideologies, vying for attention and attempting to either subvert or enforce the dominant socio-economic-political agendas, despite a semblance of homogeneity. Let us, as hooks has, consider some non-western understandings of love and kindness as we come to a greater meaning for the implication of artistic practice that deals with relational aesthetics.

UBUNTU (humanism)

The Nguni / Zulu word *Ubuntu* (humanism) describes an African worldview that is as much a factual description of interdependent behavior and a guide for social conduct or ethic as it is a philosophy of coexistence. More than simply an appeal to treat others with respect and decency, this maxim holds significant spiritual meaning referring to familial and non-familial connections and considerations that

reach beyond the grave. Representing personhood, humanity, group solidarity and morality its core belief is (according to Alex Boraine in *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*): *Umntu, ngumntu ngabantu, motho ke motho ba batho ba bangwe*. Literally translated this means "a human being is a human being because of other human beings," or as Dirk J. Louw suggests "a person is a person through other persons."

What became evident in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is how the concept of *Ubuntu* is linked to the notion of agreement or consensus (where the decision making process is often linked to lengthy discussions amongst all interested parties). It is said that although there may be a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, every person gets an equal chance to speak up until some kind of an agreement, consensus or group cohesion is reached, (though sometimes leading to the suppression of individual minority rights and what can be perceived – even felt – as the oppression of a few by the majority).

As with other codes of behavior that favor the community over the individual, agreement and conformity are likely to be cherished while innovation and difference spurned. Yet there are those who would argue that this is a false distinction based on a misguided Cartesian concept of the individual. In *Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other* Dirk J. Louw of the University of the North states: "Ubuntu directly contradicts the Cartesian conception of individuality in terms of which the individual or self can be conceived without thereby necessarily conceiving the other." Citing John Macquarrie, Louw contends that:

The Cartesian individual exists prior to, or separately and independently from the rest of the community or society. The rest of society is nothing but an added extra to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being. This modernistic and atomistic conception of individuality lies at the bottom of both individualism and collectivism." Furthermore, "individualism exaggerates seemingly solitary aspects of human existence to the detriment of communal aspects. Collectivism makes the same mistake, only on a larger scale. For the collectivist, society is nothing but a bunch or collection of separately existing, solitary (i.e. detached) individuals.

By contrast, Louw surmises:

Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others. According to this definition, individuals only exist in their relationships with others, and as these relationships change, so do the characters of the individuals. Thus understood, the word individual signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands. Being an individual by definition means "being-with-others". "With-others", as Macquarrie rightly observes, "...is not added on to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being; rather, both this being (the self) and the others find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related.

Economics and economic relationships are part of what one has to consider within *Ubuntu* practices. Louw contrasts Western competitiveness with the African preference for co-operation, group work or shosholozza ("work as one", i.e. team work). Much like the Orthodox Jewish tradition of *G'machs* and the *Chevra Kaddisha* (self-identified groups that bury the dead, collect objects and sometimes money for people in need within the community), Louw says:

There are approximately 800,000 so-called stokvels in South Africa. Stokvels are joint undertakings or collective enterprises, such as savings clubs, burial societies and other (often formally registered) cooperatives. The stokvel economy might be described as capitalism with siza (humanness), or, if you like, a socialist form of capitalism. Making a profit is important, but never if it involves the exploitation of others. Profits are shared on an equal basis. As such, stokvels are based on the Ubuntu "extended family system", i.e. all involved should be considered as brothers and sisters, members of the same family.

Citing W. J. Ndaba's 1994 *Ubuntu in comparison to Western philosophies*, Louw points out that:

The collective consciousness evident in the African culture does not mean that the African subject wallows in a formless, shapeless or rudimentary collectivity...[It] simply means that the African subjectivity develops and thrives in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others. Ndaba's emphasis on the 'ongoing-ness' of the contact and interaction with others on which the African

subjectivity feeds, points to a final important ingredient of the 'mutual exposure' prescribed by Ubuntu, viz. respecting the historicity of the other. Respecting the historicity of the other means respecting his/her dynamic nature or process nature. An Ubuntu perception of the other is never fixed or rigidly closed, but adjustable or open-ended. It allows the other to be, to become. It acknowledges the irreducibility of the other, i.e. it never reduces the other to any specific characteristic, conduct or function. This accords with the grammar of the concept Ubuntu which denotes both a state of being and one of becoming. As a process of self-realization through others, it enhances the self-realization of others.

The Essential Desmond Tutu put it this way:

I am human because I belong. Ubuntu speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, affirming of others, does (sic) not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole and are diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. It gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them. It means it is not a great good to be successful through being aggressively competitive, that our purpose is social and communal harmony and well-being.

TAKING AND SENDING BEGINS WITH ONESELF

The intention to bring awareness of (the potential for) interdependence with this project can be seen as and intervention in the cycle of self-serving individualism that is often associated with Western economic and social values. Moreover, given the culture of violence and exclusion that we all participate in, relational practice and gestures of kindness, care and generosity offer each participating individual – including those who bear witness in any way – an opportunity to reflect deeply about what kind of society we are co-creating and what service we can render for the sake of humanity and our fragile ecosystem.

How do we evaluate the degree of integrity and trust that was established with these gestures and is an evaluation even necessary? If one takes as a guide Buddhist *Tonglen* practice of sending and taking the determination of what is appropriate in any given moment cannot be predetermined or directly calculated with regard to its consequence. The four part *Tonglen* meditation is something we do for ourselves in order to make space for and with the other to live with compassion and kindness *and* something we do this for/with the other in order to make space and strengthen our own capacities to live wholly present with an open heart.

Pema Chodron in *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*, writes about polarity and interconnectivity:

There are two slogans that go along with the Tonglen practice: Sending and taking should be practiced alternately. / These two should ride the breath. The slogan Begin the sequence of sending and taking with yourself, is getting at the point that compassion starts with making friends with ourselves, and particularly our poisons – the messy areas. As we practice tonglen – taking and sending – and contemplate the Lojong slogans, gradually it begins to dawn on us how totally interconnected we all are. Now people know that what we do the rivers in South America affects the whole world, and what we do to the air in Alaska affects the whole world. Everything is interrelated – including ourselves, so this is very important, this making friends with ourselves. It's the key to a more sane, compassionate planet.

WHAT SOME PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY AFTER THE ENCOUNTERS

Some comments from the artists immediately upon entering the gallery after the gestures were enacted:

I am exhausted. I've talked with only a handful of people and I am feeling overwhelmed with exhaustion... I am tired... A rejection is not the same as failure... I realized I am not acting, it was real and I needed this real connection... My handicap was that everyone thought I wanted money... I felt judgmental when people said they were busy, but they were only watching television... I was tired but found I had a lot of energy; that I could still continue though I was tired because it was the thankfulness that drove me forward... That Devora was a witness made a big difference to me... I felt invigorated because of the first success; it took a bunch of rejections to pull me back to normal... The stakes aren't high, your life is not dependent on it... It started to get cold... Most people I ran into already knew about the project, so the interactions were short, but I look at it over the long-term – I think that this project created an openness to what art is and how we can interact – community impact takes time... The absence of an intervention may be interesting as well.

And this from one of two Kingston citizens who attended the post-gesture discussion:

I conned my neighbor into coming with me. I am very inspired by you artists. You are all young, full of ideas. We thought it would be important to come from the community so that you can report this to the Canada Council, so that you can get more money... I remember going door to door to fundraise as a child. My parents were scared silly but I went with my friend selling the campfire donuts, we ended up in the local AA office, they were so intense, we ran out. It never dawned on me to have any feelings about this. I was just there to get money for the donuts...

Asked individually what their experience was like, the artists responded as follows:

Kyle: I had success with my very first house. A second year Queen's University engineering student just arriving home from work opened the door and I explained that I was doing Lego. I went inside, we were there for about 25 minutes at his kitchen table, we talked about all sorts of stuff, we hung out... he stayed at it until his was done. After that I had a lot of 'no' answers until the end when I met a woman who had never done Lego before. She made a portrait of herself in three pieces. She said she was small and quiet. She had to learn how they went together. And another person who had a recent knee operation put a different color in the knee of their figure. I realize now that we were working with self-portraiture.

Christine: One rejection was from an elderly woman who said: "No thank you." She closed the door and then she locked it. It was really about testing boundaries all the time. People would tell me a bit about themselves. One man said: "This is very useful, very convenient." I spoke to some couples that were really receptive. I found that I began to size people up before approaching them. Many men at the beginning were less open. There were two incidents when I stepped out of my representative role and explained that I was an artist participating in an art event.

Andrea: The abstraction of the action made people look at me strangely as I gave them the lips-kissed glass. Putting it into the context of the art project made it easier for most people to take though I didn't do that until the end. I didn't give any answers to those who asked: "What am I supposed to do with this?" My favorite was one woman who was coming back from the park with her dog. She gave me a cookie to give to her dog. There is a vulnerability to being an artist, and yet it is comfortable and in a way it makes it easier to do things that couldn't otherwise be done... but it is putting a piece of yourself out there, it almost as if I am asking people to judge me and place a value on me and on the value of how and what I've done.

Julie: I found it difficult to frame this gesture as part of this Modern Fuel art project. It made it artificial and institutional. Other projects I have done without such a frame were more successful, though the framing did offer a measure of the safety and legitimacy, it felt less sincere on my part... almost like I was fulfilling a mandate that was not my own. For the most part, people were interested in my Ode to Brian, but then it became almost bureaucratic, and about contemporary art... it was too chaotic. I wanted the people to take more control in setting the parameters of our engagement, beyond the question of salt and sand. I only shoveled where people were home. I don't like that it has become about the successes and that "success" is being measured by the number of people who responded.

Cindy: *I have eight signatures and three consent forms from people who allowed me to document them. I was initially disappointed by how many people were not home. A girl, about 12 years old, opened the door in her pajamas looking like she was sick. She wanted to participate but her parents weren't home. For the most part, the exchanges did not happen, I didn't have enough of a rapport. I felt lucky enough to be turned down and then when people said yes, I was happy... the success was that people were willing to acknowledge their love for me. The people who said yes... it felt like a really big gesture for them.*

Jennifer: *The first bunch of people weren't home or didn't come to the door. Then there was a fellow who was coming out of his car and knew about the project from the pre-publicity that was distributed this past week. He suggested that I offer a coupon to his neighbor, but as it turned out, the neighbor wasn't at home. Then there was another guy who was very suspicious and who didn't want anything to do with me. I had almost no luck knocking on doors: I had a much better experience on the street. A 16 year old who had also heard about the project took bus tickets and agreed to have his picture taken. A couple took some bus tickets but didn't want to be identified. A man carrying groceries was welcoming but said he didn't need any gift certificates. I have three left and I will continue to try to distribute them next week.*

Koren: *I made 16 snow angels on people's front or side lawns – about half of them will come as a surprise when the homeowner returns. I first made the angel and then knocked on their doors. Each of them will glow when the sun goes down. The experience was sweet: I got to plop down on the snow and look at the sky. Only once did someone come out and ask: "What do you think you are doing?" When I explained what I was doing, she said "Oh carry on." Some people were confused... no one was offended. I wanted to protect the heart. Some people didn't want to talk much, but if they did I asked if there was something in their home that they could use to protect the heart... they thought about what they had. One woman opened the door and said: "I think something special has just happened." She became really gentle from the top of her head to her feet and wanted to touch me, reached out.*

Sandra: *I walked around with my tripod and small disposal camera. I had my clipboard with the forms. I needed a signature each time. At the beginning of each encounter it seemed like a business transaction until sometimes a connection started to emerge. Many times, no one responded to my knocking. I also experienced many people saying: "No thank you." One woman actually said: No thank you, but it seems like a good idea." Another woman was suspicious and didn't want to have her picture taken but was willing to take a picture of me in front of her house. It was easier to get a positive response on the street. Also, more people agreed to take my picture; I suppose that this was about them being able to do something for me. I really enjoyed empowering them to frame the picture themselves. A woman who declined to have anything to do with the photography told her story of how she used to take pictures. The object transfer didn't happen, but the interaction did. Throughout, I was challenged to learn about myself and about the fear that kept arising about which house or person I could safely approach. When an interaction happened there was a spark and then it felt like I wanted to go further. I have to consider now what each interaction can tell me about myself.*

POSTSCRIPT

I believe that this project and others that center on *relational* or *connective aesthetics* cannot be spoken/written about without inquiry into the values that guide the hearts/minds/gestures of the individuals who participate. And values cannot be addressed without a profound reflection on the beliefs and presuppositions that these are based on. If beyond the concepts and analysis, the organizers, artists, Swamp Ward District citizens and you dear reader can respond to the invitation to creatively perform acts of generosity, kindness and love, perhaps we can individually and collectively reveal the problematics of living such values in a commercialized market driven economy. As with anything unfamiliar, conscientious practice can hone skills and strengthen abilities. If, as this project suggests, acts of kindness, generosity

and love are unfamiliar (at least within certain communities), then performance and performance practice might indeed be an appropriate way to stimulate dialogue and practice interdependence. Projects such as this may in fact encourage us all to explore and establish healthy ways of living dynamic interdependence. The danger is that after a while, practice becomes a hindrance to living mindful presence. Taking heed of Berkson, hooks, Hyde, Chodron and the wisdom of *Ubuntu*, beyond practice and beyond conceptual frameworks, may we live present to each moment – and each encounter with self and other – with compassionate hearts, intuitive minds, and open to what is real.