

Capturing community

Melanie Ohm and **Judy Butzine**, co-directors of the Cultural Arts Coalition describe how they capture the whole story for whole communities through purposeful documentation

Humans create, exchange, and pass along ‘knowing’ through material forms and expressive means. This is art-making, and art-making is for everyone. The artifacts of human history reveal these things to us from the beginning of time, documenting our movement across the earth. What are the artifacts of participatory art-making, for dance as community-making? Do we have methods for documenting that are purposeful and meet the many human needs for communicating our work? This article describes a fresh way of considering, and creating, documentation as a practice of participatory art-making offered by the Cultural Arts Coalition, a non-profit networking organisation that supports community arts practices in diverse contexts.

‘Capturing community’ is about animating people through participatory arts programming that places them at the centre of their own experience – and documenting that experience in such a way that their voices and images are revealed, honoured, and celebrated over time. In Immigrant Participatory Arts, Pia Moriarty defines participatory arts as ‘forms of artistic expression in which everyday people actively engage in the process of making art.’ Thoughtful documentation in this context recalls for us our purpose, acknowledges community, honours the individual, and also allows for participation in and interpretation of a gathering long after the event has passed. The arts and community are expressed in time, space, and relationship. In an 1889 essay ‘The Decay of Lying,’ Oscar Wilde states that “The self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression... Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy.” Life is realised in our work. According to Merriam-Webster online, the term ‘document’ comes from a Latin word for ‘precept, teaching, proof’ and the Microsoft Word thesaurus gives the synonyms ‘provide evidence, authenticate.’ What does evidence of it look like? ‘Evidence’ brings to mind artifacts: photos, a logo, a t-shirt, curriculum, a funding report, newsletters, a brochure, or a video. What if we ask, “How do we authenticate our community building and art-making?” ‘Authenticate’ holds the idea of action, a process, such as celebration and reflection. Our documentation then can be both artifact and process in an ongoing cycle, telling the story of the work. Thoughtful documentation is the inner journey of participatory art-making, with milestones carefully mapped.

When documenting, a dance practitioner captures not only the detail of an event, but also:

Context – place, ideology, historical perspective

Connections – between people, ideas, places

Action – a sense of motion that encompasses the

physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual **Story** – and stories inside of stories.

With these concepts in mind, we ask many questions. Meaningful documentation is a search to see, to hear, to honour, and to learn. Each purposeful question begins with ‘quest,’ and is one small gesture on a pilgrimage to know and to understand.

About Context, we ask...

- How can I capture the geographic location?
- Does the story of place tie to the intent of this project?
- Why is this project occurring?
- Is it driven by a larger movement or social issue over time or geography?
- Who are the catalytic people?
- Does national or local news reveal any information?

About Connections, we inquire...

- In this place, where do I see ideologies creating tension or symmetry?
- Are there symbolic elements that reflect connections to something deeper?
- Where in the interactions among people and activities can I capture purpose, focus, revelation, immersion, emotion, tension, etc?
- Have I included all participants, representative individuals and organisations as well as key players?
- Can I make connections to other events, literature, people?

About Action, we explore...

- How can I capture people in the act of connecting?
- Or in the act of creating?
- Where can I capture the energy of the space?
- How can I record vital motion as small as a brush stroke or a facial expression and as large as a dance or a crowd?
- How can the movement of colour or concept be expressed?
- How many ways can the action be documented?
- And with what materials?

About Story, we investigate...

- Is there a small plot inside the larger project, or a larger plot in a single idea that reaches beyond the project?
- Is there a single story (one person, one idea) that is hidden inside the story of this project, which is but part of a larger social issue?
- Will my narrative create a story’s arch through both images and text?

Purposeful questions are our first tool for the work of documentation, and set the framework for its practice. The next consideration is our equipment, our physical tools. What >



Photo: Kristin Elise Fukuchi

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is required? Minimally, a camera that is flexible enough to ‘grab’ pictures on the move and in various light conditions; a notebook or recording device to capture participants’ words; and a computer. We do not use expensive cameras. Ours were selected for their capacity to take high quality images, and the video feature. The battery may be a consideration as well. Slipping rechargeable batteries into a camera may prove less expensive over time, and a battery that is common (in the U.S., AAA, AA) is easy to replace on the fly. The video feature can serve as a means to capture sound as well as motion. We generally travel with notebooks and cameras only. The computer is both archive and production centre for creating products from the materials gathered.

Moving through a participatory art-making process and snapping pictures is simplest with more than one practitioner in the space. Some practitioners become adept at briefly stepping back from the action and snapping pictures or jotting down comments. It is not ideal but definitely doable. This takes practice and becomes automatic with time. As one of our young colleagues said in reference to us, “It’s hard to do this work alone. You need to be like Judy and Melanie, and find a partner to keep you going.”

Through the Cultural Arts Coalition (CAC), we document to bring recognition to the stories being told through and with the arts in our community. While we are creative, even innovative in this practice, we almost always produce a photo narrative in conjunction with other strategies. A photo narrative is not a recounting of an event; it is the human story as expressed through a participatory arts experience. As a tool, it is invaluable because it is not high tech, and can be distributed in multiple formats: web, email, and as a handout. The photo narrative provides background information, photos and text about the action interspersed, and contact information for the practitioner and collaborators. It doesn’t need to be long on text, only to tell the story. Advanced photo editing experience is not required either. Most computers are programmed with a simple photo editing tool, allowing the user to make simple adjustments to photos, such as ‘cropping’ to zoom in on one section of the photo, rotate, resize, and even ‘auto correct’ the image. Photo editing programmes are also available on the web as freeware. Colour frames can be added to photos once they are pasted into the word processing programme. A web version may have video and music added, but the photo narrative can easily be printed and handed out as an

advocacy tool at meetings, or forwarded by email to a new contact. A variety of photo narrative examples are viewable on the CAC ‘events’ page at www.artscare.org/cac6.shtml and at www.communityarts4peace.org

Finally, documentation begins with attention to the way we look at the world, as individuals and organisations, and being aware of our values, ideas, and beliefs. The individual must continually assess, ‘Do my questions come out of my values only, or do they respond to what my community of participation values as well?’ Because we are thoughtful, walking in with our eyes full of intention, we SEE – perhaps differently than we ever have before. Then as we look at the materials and language we’ve gathered, yet more is revealed. The image, when seen in hand or on a computer screen, communicates far more than the initial framing of that captured moment in time.

One ever-present objective for any participatory arts initiative is to provide strategic, purposeful documentation. Therefore, preparation is essential. While planning is commonly understood to be necessary for evaluation and assessment, as is needed for funders, it is often considered after the fact in regard to other purposes. Documentation as we practice it through the CAC is a deliberate process, not a random collecting of artifacts. Its development is as intentional as any other organisational effort, and includes marketing, communications, archiving, learning, research, policymaking, recognition, and advocacy in addition to evaluation and assessment. Documentation is specific, creating different products for each strategy and each community. The processes are used for single projects as well as larger organisational goals over time. With planning, an additional piece of information – a quote, an image – can be acquired to fulfil multiple purposes. Whether we are sending a message of respect for a particular issue or group of people (migration/immigrants), or working to create a change in public policy (health and dance/services for youth on probation), preparation and planning are part of the practitioner’s work. Ultimately, documentation is not the end of a course of action; it is the beginning. As a process, it is one aspect of the complex rhythms flowing through our work. As a product, it is the embodiment of our work communicated to an expanded audience over time.

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