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Critical Commentary

The death of emancipatory social work as art and birth of socially engaged art practice

Leanne Schubert* and Mel Gray

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, Australia

*Correspondence to Leanne Schubert, Research Associate, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, NSW, 2308, Australia.
E-mail: Leanne.Schubert@newcastle.edu.au

Abstract

The growth of socially engaged art practice over the last decade is considered in light of the relationship between social work, art, and social change. The question posed is ‘has social work – caught in neoliberal paternalism – given way to socially engaged art as a medium of social change?’ The paper argues that, as social workers have vacated public spaces of activism and change, so artists have moved in to fill the void and suggests there has never been a better time to reinvigorate critical social work and its emancipatory potential.

Key words: (Critical) social work, art, socially engaged art practice, activism, social change

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The emergence and growth of arts-based organisations like Beyond Empathy (BE; see http://be.org.au, accessed on 13 March, 2015) highlight the need for social work to pause and reflect. Framed as a flexible, adaptable organisation, BE purports to work at the margins of society to address multiple disadvantages by responding to local needs. BE aims to promote change through empowering and enriching lives via re-engagement with communities, breaking cycles of disadvantage, and building new skills, attitudes, and capacities. As an organisation, BE appreciates that change within communities requires a long-term view. This description reminded us of the way things once were, when, surrounded by like-minded social workers committed to generic practice, creativity was welcomed (Barker, 1978). However, BE is staffed predominately by artists, albeit some with prior experience in welfare or community services, with ne’er a social worker in sight. What might this mean for social work?

Social work, art, and social change

Art in social work has been conceptualised in diverse ways (see Gray and Webb, 2008; Schubert, 2012). In our view, if social work were art, it would be important to honour its historical beginnings in community-based agencies, where practice was a space for the social imagination and the envisioning of a better future, where ‘artful practice’ connected, skill, social change, and practice through communication, advocacy, and activism (Rapoport, 1968; Schubert, 2012). Lydia Rapoport (1968) drew attention to art as expressive of a larger social purpose – ‘a process involving transformation’ (p. 142), claiming ‘both social work and art can be conceived as instruments of social change’ (p. 144). Aligned with the need to address the human problems of society, she viewed social work as the caretaker of ‘our failures in social living’ (p. 144) through the provision of welfare for people unable to help themselves. She understood social work’s role critically as a powerful agent in institutional and
structural change and social reform. Influenced by the work of artist, Alex Comfort, she believed ‘all creative work speaks on behalf of … [the] voiceless’ (Comfort, in Rapoport, 1968, pp. 144–145) and art and aesthetic values enriched practice by bringing about a change in thinking – a new awareness (Weir, in Chamberlayne and Smith, 2009). As subsequent developments embroiled social work in definitions of art grounded in skills, relationship, communication, meaning, and so on, so its propensity for social change diminished in favour of a more individualistic focus (Gray and Schubert, 2013).

While some authors have explored the challenges of neoliberalism on social work practice (see for example Abramovitz, 2012; Garrett, 2009, 2010; Ferguson, 2004, 2008; Woodcock, 2011), its impact remains largely untested (Wallace and Pease, 2011). For example, Garrett (2010) notes:

> since the 1970s, the neoliberal project to define social work’s essence and thematic boundaries has been reflected in the constant to shape and mould its dominant perspectives, ways of thinking and acting … [and] within … social work education there has been, on the whole, a failure to see this ‘bigger picture’. Consequently, there appears to have been an inability to grasp how, oftentimes, even the micro and the molecular can, although seemingly lacking any pattern of association and connecting threads, be rooted in more structurally embedded neoliberal shaping mechanisms (p. 352).

Despite pockets of resistance, social work has been unable to reverse the tide of neoliberal paternalism (Carey and Foster, 2011; Garrett, 2010; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2011) that, for Schram and Silverman (2012), signals the end of social work. Political and economic conservatism has brought welfare austerity, increasing managerialism, and a loss of professional autonomy and creative social work practice.
However, Gray et al. (2015) offered a slightly more optimistic interpretation. They proposed three perspectives on neoliberalism to show the state is important, and how it is important – as is statutory social work, given the collective contestation of the organisation of the state and other significant organisations is an ongoing part of where social workers conduct their work. They argue that, despite its limits and challenges, a different interpretation of neoliberalism’s impact might enhance the diagnostic, analytic, and action capabilities of social work. With a will to invent new ways of practising their profession – in collaboration with service users and other social and political actors and agents – collective political action is again possible. Social work can ill-afford to ignore this macro framework and must find ways to open the possibility for a new boldness, a new willingness for political contestation at a collective level, and a new approach to governmental invention – a new politics (Gray and Webb, 2013).

**Socially engaged art practice**

However, while social workers have been caught in managerial, risk-aversive environments that have squeezed out room for creativity, artists have moved into spaces for community engagement, activism, and advocacy (McRobbie, 2004). Resonant with social work, and informed by new genre public art (Lacy, 1995), relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), and dialogical or conversational art practice (Kester, 2004), socially engaged art involves a social process that depends for its ethical and aesthetic content on living through contradiction and articulating ambivalent interests and identities. There are parallels here with social work; like dialogical art, its work is accomplished through communication and meaning making; like socially engaged art, its focus is the constant tensions between diverse interests.

Contemporary socially engaged art practices resonate with the idea of art as a
medium for social change. They bring people together and provide a sense of connection and community, much as BE envisions, offering unlimited possibilities for transformation and change (La Shure, 2005). That art inheres in liminal spaces where new possibilities might be imagined through collective effort is surely an idea that resonates with the social work imagination.

James Lingwood (2013), founder of Artangel, a UK Community Arts organisation, used the anthropological term ‘entanglement’ to suggest the fundamental complexity of socially engaged art as it connects to ideas, people, and places. Though an odd and ill-defined practice, there is some agreement on the transformative potential of socially engaged art. The artist serves as a catalyst, creating the conditions and means through which people meet and communicate (Rosler, 2004). In these circumstances, the work of art is a ‘pragmatically structured sequence of interpersonal events through which fresh models of reality can be constructed by the actual experience of the audience’ (Glew, in Kearton, 1998, p. 61); without the conversation and context, there would be no work of art.

Lucy Lippard (1997) suggests that ‘good community artists “animate” what is already there’ (p. 283) and, in so doing, engage with the community in a collaborative process of art production. In this way, art addresses significant community issues. Working in public spaces, and with the community, is much harder than working alone, and, when it works, is immensely satisfying: ‘It is harder, more time, more discussions, more personalities, more questions, more opportunities for misunderstanding, but when it works well, the work you produce is greater than the sum of its parts’ (Thompson et al., 2004, p. 45). Some public artworks achieve a magical transformative quality, offering creative solutions, which have the power to communicate difficult but essential understandings of what it is to live as a
community, in a shared space, with compassionate regard for others.

As understandings of art in society are reshaped and redefined, its liminal and temporal nature opens spaces for the social imagination and the envisioning of a better future. Thus BE conducts its community capacity-building projects across a diverse range of areas, including disability, social enterprise, leadership, education, and health and well-being.

These shifts raise important questions. With *art* now conceived as an instrument of social change (Rapoport, 1968), has it moved into the space once occupied by social work? Bounded by the risk-aversive managerial environments in which social workers are employed, has social work lost its emancipatory potential to art?

**Has social work lost its emancipatory potential?**

While the ‘social turn’ in art enhanced its potential for community engagement, activism, and transformative change (Bishop, 2006, n.p.), the common ground between social work and art was lost (Gray and Schubert, 2010). Though an as yet unfinished product, *socially engaged art* and the more recent development of *social practice* signals a move from the previously exclusive focus on art making and art as product to art as social interaction (Helguera, 2011).

Like BE’s commitment to community development, Occupy Wall Street is a powerful reminder of the social role of art in society. Socially engaged artists have taken an active and highly visible role, readily participating in protests against social injustice. By comparison, there have been few references to social workers’ involvement in the Occupy movement. This may suggest artists are more engaged in high-profile activism and political action, rather than the complete absence of social work involvement in promoting social change. Social action has become increasingly
difficult for social workers within the current practice milieu.

As socially engaged art matures, so too does its supportive body of scholarly literature (see for example Bishop, 2006; De Bruyne and Gielen, 2011; Helguera, 2011; Thompson, 2012) bolstered by its visibility in the popular media (see for example Schulman, 2014), grey literature (see for example Keller and Sandlin, 2013), and online (see for example the curatorial collection of Jules Rochielle at www.Scoop.it).

De Bruyne and Gielen (2011) argue that, in neoliberal contexts, art projects are offered as compensation for the breakdown of social infrastructure, structural investment, and social services provision. For social work, this is a disturbing development. It effectively implies that artists can undertake social work (Helguera, 2011). Never has there been a greater need to revisit the potential of critical social work to reinvigorate social work’s commitment to emancipatory practice and transformative change (Gray and Webb, 2013).

Schubert (2012) a social worker and artist, attempted to recapture social work’s connection to art and social change through the engagement of a critical approach to social work, in so doing, reconsidering what progressive social work practice might require (see Allan, Briskman and Pease, 2009) … She used an art intervention to highlight domestic violence and produce visual documentation of a socially engaged art practice involving a community in the development of a mosaic in a local park (Schubert, 2011a, 2011b). The mosaic, which measured six feet in diameter, comprised 100 mosaic sections based on community member’s drawings about being safe at home and free from domestic violence.

Schubert (2012) worked at the nexus of the personal – derived from her considerable experience of working with survivors of domestic and family violence in
individual therapeutic work – and the need for social change – to raise awareness of and challenge attitudes supporting this recurrent social issue. The goal of practice shifted from attending to the individual to considering the broader social justice implications of domestic and family violence. Her less individualised, critical perspective view was reinforced by an understanding that violence against women continues to be a key determinant of the health of women which sat at the foundation of inequality (Humphreys, 2007).

Stepping outside the increasingly restrictive Australian health system, which limited staff from engaging in social action and change processes, allowed a more creative, politically engaged response to the intractable problem of domestic and family violence. This radical action allowed the reclamation and enactment of the long-held feminist understanding that the ‘personal is political’ and the critical view that the citizen (social worker) is – and should be – a change-agent in society (Halmos, 1978).

**Conclusion**

We have argued that, as social workers have become confined by the neoliberal restraints applied by many organisations for whom they work, they have vacated the public spaces of activism and change. As this has occurred, there has been an emergence of arts-based organisations, like BE, where artists conducting socially engaged art projects are moving in to fill the growing abyss. If social work is to maintain a focus on social change, the role of art must be reconsidered. We suggest there has never been a better time for each and every social worker to reinvigorate critical social work and consider its emancipatory potential within their own practice.
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References


