

MANIFESTOS OF PRACTICE

*Mobilizing Feeling
in a Community Arts Practice
Program*

HEATHER HERMANT



Figure One:
Kari Pederson, from *Finding the Paper, Deciding to Fold*, photo on transparency, 2010.

A bed. A desk. An empty chair. A sloping ceiling. A wall painted green like an empty chalkboard. Kari Pederson's series of photos on transparency are documentary traces of processes of folding she undertook as part of her Manifesto of Practice as a student in the Community Arts Practice (CAP) Practicum Seminar at York University in Toronto. Her image (figure one) suggests an intersection of institutional and personal spaces. A solitary space, a learning space feeding the shared space of a classroom. The image could as easily suggest a fraught folding into each other of boundaries—real, imagined, or constructed—between the private place of feeling and the cold concrete and fluorescent lights of a conventional classroom. Or it could suggest the power, potential, even necessity of foregrounding feeling as a key to learning.

Working from *feeling* as a pedagogical strategy raises important issues about the value and limits of risk within the time-deprived economy of the corporate campus. What is too much to ask? Is it fair and possible to ask students to simultaneously feel, while critically viewing "feeling," when I know as an artist myself that it is nearly impossible for me to create while consciously assessing and critiquing what I am creating? Working from feeling also questions assumptions about what "feeling" actually is, how it is understood and framed, how "feeling" might exclude or marginalize some students, and whether and to what extent an introspective focus on feeling can, in a social justice-oriented program, divert attention from critical issues themselves. And how on earth can feeling-centred learning be graded?

This photo essay introduces readers to students of the CAP certificate program through the lens of an assignment called The Manifesto.¹

¹ Diane Roberts, Canadian Theatre artist and current Artistic Director of urban ink productions in Vancouver, oversaw the first group of CAP students in the first Practicum Seminar and included a manifesto and devised the manifesto assignment, inspired by designer Bruce Mau's Incomplete *Manifesto for Growth*. I have kept the manifesto assignment and expanded it to become an increasingly important component of the course.

The Manifesto is the culminating assignment of the CAP Practicum Seminar, the final core course in Canada's only undergraduate certificate in community arts.² In the Practicum Seminar, students undertake internship from September to April with seasoned community artists, community arts organizations, and social and environmental justice-oriented organizations, and also participate in a weekly on-campus seminar. The CAP program is jointly offered by the Faculty of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Environmental Studies, attracts students from any division, and also draws practitioners from outside the university. Students have one foot in the community and the other on campus, reporting back to class weekly to share, troubleshoot, and critically analyze their experiences.

I explain The Manifesto assignment in the course syllabus:

is the student's evolving ethical framework, derived from critical reflection and community-based practice, addressing sources of inspiration, evolving principles and approaches, and awareness of the positionality that each student brings to practice as an aspiring community artist. This is a very personal, creative production in any medium/media. Students are encouraged to experiment with form.

The Manifesto is a means by which students can speak consciously from their intersectional standpoints, articulate what motivates them and why, who they wish to speak to, and how they hope to practice. The manifestos take a range of forms, from still photography and spoken word to site-specific, time-based collaborative action, blogs, and music. At the end of the course, students use their manifestos to decide collectively how to present themselves publicly as emerging community-engaged artists.

What follows is a sequential series of "manifesto-profiles" derived from interviews with former CAP students.³ The photo essay explores possibilities for educators investigating "feeling" as pedagogy.

•

I like to think of "feeling" ...as your spark. Your desire, your will. For me, it was the feeling of wanting to change, of wanting better than what we have, of wanting equality. I wanted to learn more about alternative ways to build communities...[T]he politically-radical person that I was in high school died a bit when I entered university... CAP breathed a life into me that I remembered, that I loved. It reawakened political activism and a desire to work as one.

– Siobhan Ozege.

2 See www.yorku.ca/fin-earts; www.yorku.ca/fes; and www.yorku.ca/cap. Five groups of students have completed the Practicum Seminar course. The introductory course, Community Arts for Social Change, enrolls one hundred students. The CAP program includes collaborative research initiatives, programs and events. CAP was the brainchild of Deborah Barndt, a professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. For more information see Barndt. For background on the institutionalization of community arts, see for example Fernandez, Ford-Smith, and Gagnon.

3 I asked students via email questions directly related to their manifestos, and questions related to the CAP program more generally including asking students to describe the manifesto; their intentions; the relationship between form, content, and intentions; what they saw as the seed or starting point; key experiences that fed it; how it evolved over the year; how they presented it publicly; whether they were satisfied; and what lasting impact they saw. Eleven student out of the more than fifty students have completed the Practicum Seminar responded. Several female students, both white and of color, directly addressed the predominance of white, particularly white female students in the Practicum classroom, and that it was not reflective of the broader population on campus or the community.



PHOTO: HEATHER HERMANT, 2008.

Figure Two:

In an interactive yarn installation at the Practicum Seminar 2008 year-end exhibition entitled TRACES, visitors to York University's Eleanor Winters Gallery, especially children, tossing yarn into a delightfully messy web through which exhibited student manifestos were viewed. The yarn installation derived from a group exercise led in the seminar-lab by student Sama Bassidj.

Sama Bassidj: (wo)manifesto (an excerpt)

for a long time before it becomes a speaking
poetry is only a listening.

a poem

contemplates what language can't do:
then it does something with language –
in homage, or grief, or anger,
or praise.

and art

defies what people can't do:
then it does something with people –
musing.
a metaphor, a handshake, an embrace,
a wide glimpse of the small moments.
wonder.

and (aesth)ethics –

to let beings be...free?

or: to acknowledge–

a responsibility, a need

to understand:

it is foreign-ness that remains foreign.

it is individuality that remains individual.

we are not above helping anyone–

but for there to be a “we” in this, the “me” in all of us
must commit.

there is so much comfort and joy in moving
from me to we.

I realized that my wo.manifesto will never be finished. It will continually evolve and change with new experiences.... I chose to bring the words to life, to lift them off the page...through spoken word, indirectly resisting the conventional domain of preservation and permanence through academic writing. I revisit my manifesto from time to time only to delve into that truer form of self-expression, to revisit my deeper self.... Sharing such a personal piece was at first daunting—but also liberating.... Feelings, to me, are undervalued and underrated, particularly in the academic environment.... The manifesto allowed for the surfacing of ignored and invalidated feelings— and for a deeper reflection on their source and intentions. In particular, unravelling the layers of structural oppression and cultural guilt was a meaningful experience.

Maggie Flynn: Key Cuttin', Shit Shootin'

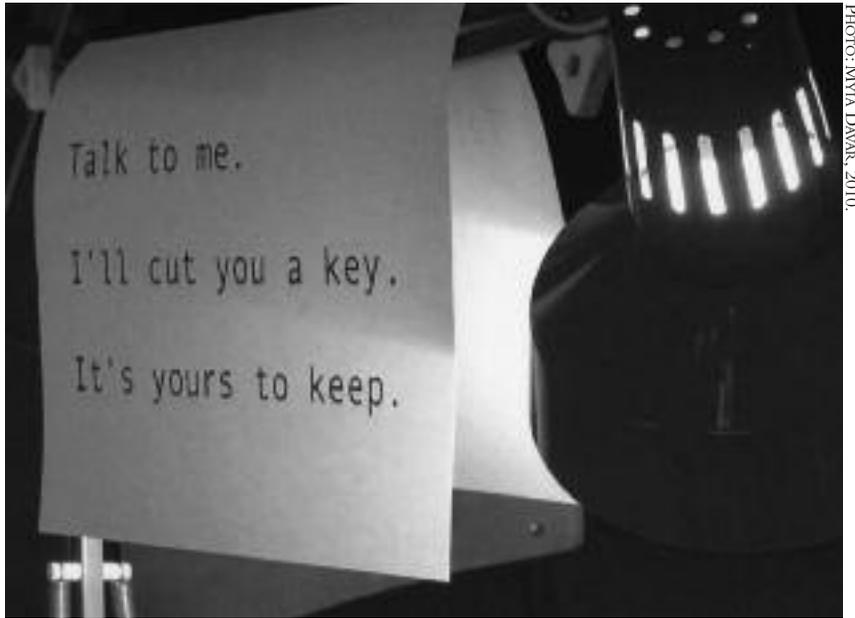


PHOTO: MYIA DAVAR, 2010.

Figure Three:

Maggie Flynn, Key Cuttin', Shit Shootin', at "balancing acts," the 2010 year-end group event.

I was thinking about the ways in which what my dad does as a locksmith could be similar to what I try to do in my artistic practice. My dad's shop is a really social place.... I used the activity of filing keys because it was simple, took a while to do, and gave people a reason to sit down.... It was a practical process that I was using for useless means—the keys wouldn't open anything.... Cutting the keys acted as an imprint, a record of time spent chatting.... Sharing like that was just an amplified version of what any person who works with people...goes through on a day to day basis.... There was a very pivotal moment in class.... I cried through most of my presentation.... I was racking my brain to figure out how my placement turned out to be such a frustrating ordeal. [The placement was with Power Tools Drag Racing (PTDR), a project meant to bring tradespeople and artists together to make robots with low-income kids in a campus gallery.] I realized that my hopes and expectations...were so deeply intertwined with wanting to have and impart very practical skills—not just "art" lessons.... I hoped I'd be able to gain and impart useful skills [and] be able to share the work I was doing there with my father and have him find a connection with it. When it hit me that this was why I had decided to be involved with PTDR, I wanted to do something that would help me understand and challenge that instinct.... The most lasting impact was the realizations that came before the manifesto, that were its impetus.... Though I often took the time to reflect on *how* I was doing things, I rarely considered why.

Jared Both: Our future is at dawn



PHOTO: MICHELLE DREW, 2008

Figure Four:

Our future is at dawn, photo performance conceived by Jared Both. Poster from photo of the same title by Michelle Drew, 2008

I used symbolic language to re-stage the Lord's Supper in an alley next to a dumpster with my friends with graffiti as the backdrop. The idea was from an environmental philosophy project in which I dumpster dived as a spiritual practice.... The main challenge was trying to include my Christian beliefs without the imperialist baggage and pre-suppositions. Performing the photo was a little edgy and miraculous. Someone who looked after the building asked what we were doing while we were taking pictures with masks and the spray paint still wet on the wall. Somehow we got away with it! The final picture was rasterbated [tiled printing] and wheatpasted onto plywood, like street art.... The street art form described the subculture of the subjects, which was young Christian anarchy. I loved the playfulness of the photo that my friends created.... I think that playful spirit is what made the photo compelling enough to win the Geez photo prize [Best Photo 2008 "from the fringes of faith and the front lines of social change"]⁴ In sharing my manifesto at the group event, there was a vulnerability and defensiveness expressed. I was the only male and Christian in the class and I often felt like I might be the imperialist enemy. The gender imbalance was at times a non-issue and other times brutally difficult.... CAP pushed me to think in non-oppressive frameworks and connect my art to larger social issues. "Feeling" for me was staying true to my core religious beliefs while navigating the territory of the class material.

⁴ <http://www.geez-magazine.org/magazine/article/winners-geez-photo-contest-2008/>

*Elaine Teguibon:
Manifesto in Progress*

Being at the centre of a great force,
trying to understand its story

Being at the centre of a great force,
trying to choose my medium

Being at the centre of a great force,
trying to speak clearly and authentically

- From *Manifesto in Progress*
Elaine Teguibon, 2006

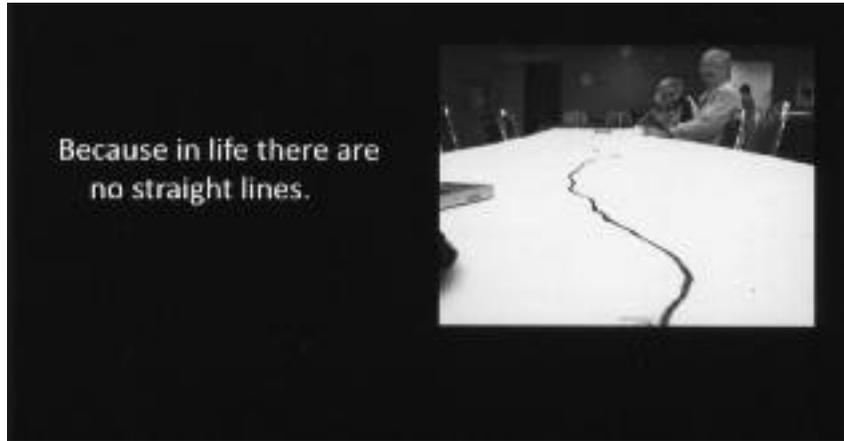


Figure Five:

Elaine Teguibon, Manifesto In Progress, Ink drawing, 2006.

My manifesto was fragments of images, texts, music notes. A lot of it describes moments and questions that addressed my own insecurities.... “Being at the center of a great force, trying to speak clearly and authentically” was the seed. A key moment was with my internship with the Carlos Bulosan Theatre, writing a play on an experience that continues to inform the art I make today.⁵ The play was called “The Recital.” ...[Writing] with the Carlos Bulosan Play Creation Unit, I...uncovered how music was used in my childhood as a symbol of status and perfection. In a way, as a kid playing the piano was never really about the music, but to please my parents, to be a “good girl.” I included the play in my manifesto...it was another source that brought light to something in my life that made me feel anxious and insecure. I included some Tagalog. By using the language in a tense situation, it shows my own insecurities with Filipino culture, while still trying to practice Western Classical Music.... My parents and sister were at the [public] event, which still makes me feel weird that I did it.... [E]verything that I have managed to uncover still resonates with me.

⁵ The Carlos Bulosan Theatre produces theatre reflecting social and political issues affecting the Filipino and broader community. <http://carlosbulosan.com/>

Michael Burtt: Manifesto*Figure Six*

From Manifesto by Michael Burtt, Power Point image, 2010.

I found much of the work in the Practicum to be quite introspective.... While I welcomed this opportunity, I found it a little counter to my experience of community arts practice—which is very responsive.... I attempted to convey this responsive/relational process through my manifesto by selecting a series of images that crossed over different projects.... I attempted to respond to the people in the pictures, as honestly as I could. The result was honest and biographical but not rooted in “my feelings,” “thoughts,” “actions” as if they somehow exist at all outside of a given context. The end result [a Power Point presentation] was very simple: images on the right, single line reflections with white letters and black background on the left.... [N]o music or other mediations.... [V]iewers were to take in the images and text as they felt fit.... As a community artist, I am constantly walking on a tightrope, balanced between the abyss of sentimentality and the trite on one side and the chasm of the worst experience of suffering on the other. I am learning that the transformative art is rooted in that space in between. I like to think that my manifesto reflected that.... But there is a larger question: Can community arts, a deeply relational practice be taught in the classroom at all? I fear that many people are learning a critical approach...without first having them rooted in these feelings of connection and separation...learning about boundaries without learning the inner tools to touch and approach these boundaries.

Myia Davar: Documentation of Illusion



PHOTOS BY MYIA DAVAR, 2010



PHOTOS BY MYIA DAVAR, 2010



PHOTOS BY MYRIA DAVARIS, 2010.

Art as it's talked about in industry, academic, or other institutional worlds can be completely alienating.... Part of feeling able to even pull off this [manifesto] was the language used to describe what the project was about—"evolving ethical framework" was really important language to me.... The Personal Legacy work was pivotal in pushing me to think about family identity in the production of work, as well as the connectedness and spiritual experience of creativity, and creating art together.⁶ The performance, in addition to the mixed media fabric installation, where as I spoke I rolled out strips of fabric to everyone sitting on the floor, felt like a crucial addition.... I was satisfied in large part because of the reaction...that others "got" it, that they felt a part of it although it was about me and my practice.... My sense is that most progressive programs require that you learn at least a bit about

⁶ Personal Legacy is an ancestral research and creation process developed by Diane Roberts.



Figure Seven

A-D: From Documentation of Illusion, an interactive performance installation manifesto presented in class by Myia Davar, 2010.

your positionality, but in a very objective way: “I am a middle-class, passing as White, Western female student.” But there’s a distance even in that self-identification... CAP asks you how are you going to work with people, given that that’s your positionality...the messy next step. The Manifesto came from a place of “feeling”...gut instinct, working with uncertainty... trusting embodied responses to questions and issues.... This is an important challenge—to really *feel* that the work is necessarily messy, emotional, and that examining the *why* of those emotions helps to further the work.

Ray Godin: Community Arts Manifesto

Community Arts Manifesto Side A (excerpt)

Can this manifesto really be for you?
 When I still struggle so hard to see the strands of the web?
 That's where the manifesto pushes me,
 To move beyond the page and find the revolution,
 To move internal mountains, and shake the foundation.

My manifesto states that:
 That life: is a war against all! A battle between us and them.
 But my dreams, my dreams are slow burning stories that can change
 these realities.

Community Arts Manifesto B Side: Is the Personal Political? (excerpt)

See sometimes, If it's nice outside
 You can let sleeping dogs lie,
 Even face down on the train tracks while I
 feel like I don't want to kick up a fuss,
 Sometimes if you feel tired
 You can let that band-aid slowly peel away forever,
 so it wont make a sound.
 Even still if silence isn't consent then what is it?
 Is it Best friends Forever? Forever?
 Forever.

Calling it a manifesto...changed the way I thought of an "assignment."
 Instead of it being something to be submitted for grading by an educator
 I found that I thought of this assignment as a personal work. In my other
 courses we would read about and discuss many different social and envi-
 ronmental issues. I found it difficult to hear about issues both globally and
 locally and then not take any action.



PHOTO BY HEATHER HERMANT, 2009



PHOTO BY HEATHER HERMANT, 2009



PHOTO BY HEATHER HERMANT, 2009

Figure Eight A-C

CAP student Ray Godin (far right) takes in fellow students' storytelling at anitAFRIKA! dub theatre in Toronto, 2009. Dub poet d'bi.young (second from right) was invited as a CAP Commissions Project visiting artist to the Practicum Seminar to lead a workshop for students and community members. Entitled "The Storyteller's Integrity," the workshop introduced the principles of dub poetry, and seeded Ray Godin's Community Arts Manifesto B Side. .

Laura Hartley: Manifesta

My practice breathes life in (and out)
 It is as calm and reflective as the ocean's surface can be,
 with a fury of activity swimming just beneath.
 It is the joyful possibility of an open sky.

From *Why Community Arts Is Feminist, Or Why as a Feminist I Engage in Community Arts: A Manifesta of my Principles of Practice*
 (Manifesta Part II)

Being asked to tell my own story in the digital storytelling workshop at my placement was a really pivotal point in my learning process of what it means to do activist arts work and how I see my position as a facilitator. Making my own digital story was fraught, at times uncomfortable, and an experience that at the time I really did not enjoy. The most difficult part...was being asked to “tell my story” to a group of strangers within hours of having met.... Firstly, I wondered well what is my story and what makes a good story? Secondly, I wondered who are these facilitators to be asking me to share a personal story, making myself vulnerable to a group of strangers? It felt like a very forced space and in my journal I reflected that “I felt so vulnerable and put on the spot...I left the story circle feeling embarrassed.” Having the experience of feeling so uncomfortable in that story circle cemented for me the importance of building reciprocal relationships of trust with those I’m working with.... The process of engaging in the placement, the manifesto, and sharing the manifesto allows students to...gauge what their values are not, which can help in the process of discovering and articulating

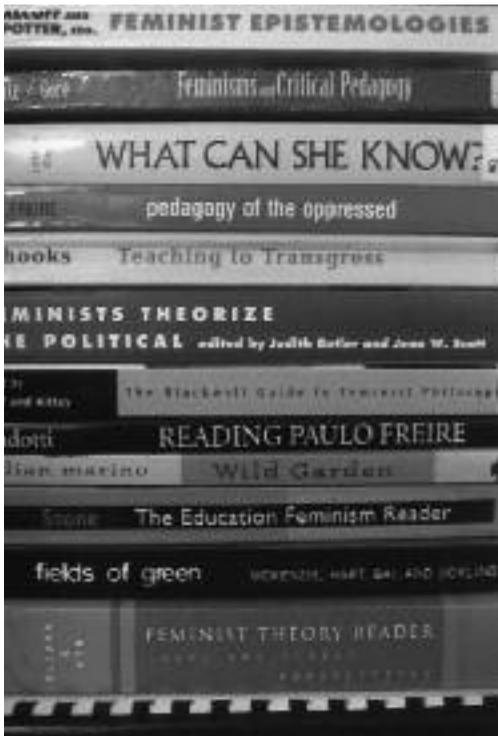


Figure Nine

Still photo from “This Time Around...,” a digital story by Laura Hartley, 2010 (Manifesta Part I)⁷

⁷ View *This Time Around...* here: <http://storycentre.wordpress.com/from-the-office/>

Yo Utano: Manifesto



PHOTOS COURTESY YO UTANO, 2007-2008.



PHOTOS COURTESY YO UTANO, 2007-2008.



PHOTOS COURTESY YO UTIANO, 2007-2008.



PHOTOS COURTESY YO UTIANO, 2007-2008.

“This is how I live”—It was one of the few times when I intensely thought about how I would live my life in terms of principles. After thinking about it, translating it into words, refining the words and writing them down, it’s practically impossible to forget.... Each of us read our own manifesto, but a line at a turn... which gave me a vision that each one of us had had such different journeys but met there and offered experiences to each other.... The CAP courses were more intensely emotional. A lot of personal stories were shared, and ah yes, feelings were very important. I understand [feeling] as a sort of understanding that is before being put into words. The understanding that you feel in your heart, like instinct? I think my heart (or anyone’s) knows more than I think. Those understandings are just waiting deep inside to be asked out.... This is how I thought when, for example, I took a course on qualitative research methods. Some of the theories seemed difficult and readings made me tired, but once I realized that those theories I had already in my heart, just hadn’t been given a chance to be translated into words, it got so much easier. But might the “feelings” also be prejudice embedded in the same heart...? The Practicum Seminar certainly trained me to be critical about my own “feelings.”

Figure Ten A-D

Yō Utano’s community placement was with CELOS (The Centre for Local Research into Public Space),⁸ based out of a park in downtown Toronto, where her artistic media were food and fire. Yō created a winter solstice event in another park nearby, where she engaged neighbors in cooking Japanese food over open fires, while a theatre show and impromptu drumming took place. Yō subsequently planted and tended a food-producing garden in that park.

⁸ CELOS is a small nonprofit corporation which works in parks and other public urban space primarily in Toronto. <http://www.celos.ca/wiki/wiki.php>

*Kari Pederson: This Action as Principles Enacted:
An Open “Conclusion”*



PHOTO: KARI PEDERSON

Figure Eleven

Photo: Kari Pederson, from Finding the Paper, Deciding to Fold. Photo on transparency, 2010.

To be a teacher is like working through the arts in community. My own evolving core principles of are to bear critical witness, to listen, to be fed and to feed, to respond in/to the moment. As I've reflected on students' insights and creative works through the process of assembling them here, what stands out in relief for me now is a link between working productively from feeling as a pedagogical strategy and offering a shared critical context for doing so that involves community, dialogical (inter)action and creative output.

I thank all CAP colleagues and students, and especially those students who answered my questions who contributed their creative work to this paper, and who continue to do incredible work. I also thank Melina Young and Deborah Barndt for feedback and suggestions.

WORKS CITED

- Barndt, Deborah, Ed., with VIVA! Project Partners. *VIVA! Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas*. Albany and Toronto: SUNY P and Between The Lines, 2011.
- Fernandez, Melanie. 'Foreword' in *no frame around it: Process and Outcome of the A Space Community Art Biennale One*. Toronto: A Space Gallery, 2001.
- Ford-Smith, Honor. 'Whose Community? Whose Art? The Politics of Reformulating Community Art' in *no frame around it: Process and Outcome of the A Space Community Art Biennale One*. Toronto: A Space Gallery, 2001.
- Gagnon, Monika Kin. 'Building Blocks: Anti-Racist Initiatives in the Arts' in *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture and Canadian Art*. Toronto: Arsenal Pulp P, 2000.
- Mau, Bruce. *Incomplete Manifesto for Growth*.
<http://www.brucemaudesign.com/4817/112450/work/incomplete-manifesto-for-growth> Last visited September 18, 2011.
- Roberts, Diane. 'The Lost Body, Recovering Memory: A Personal Legacy' in *Women and Environments International Magazine* 72/73 (Fall/Winter 2006): 25-27; and in *VIVA! Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas*, D. Barndt, Ed. Albany and Toronto: SUNY P and Between the Lines, 2011.