

THE MEMORY PROJECT: *Critical Collective Memory Work with LGBTQ Seniors*

CLAIRE ELIZABETH ROBSON

THIS ARTICLE PROVIDES both context and analysis for one exemplar of artistic healing practice – a memory box made by a participant in a project conducted as part of my federally funded postdoctoral research in the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University. My two-year project (the Memory Project) engaged LGBTQ elders living in the Grandview Woodlands area of Vancouver’s East Side in collaborative critical arts practices.¹ I envisioned that these practices might expand and complicate assumptions about age and sexual identity and lend voice and agency to queer seniors, who are often overlooked in our society. I built upon the work of many artists, activists, and researchers who have explored the potential of critical arts practices as a means to generate social change and construct strong communities.

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND TIMELINE

In year one of the project, the elders investigated individual memories through memoir writing, graphic imaging, and digital videos. In year two, they explored the notion of collective memory. At the end of the first year, participants constructed individual memory boxes, which were displayed as a collection in Vancouver city community centres. Their purpose was to display insights into memory as it is experienced in the queer community. In this article, I discuss one of the memory boxes produced in this project (https://bcstudies.com/digital_stories/hidden/).

¹ Claire Robson, C., and D. Sumara. In memory of all the broken ones: catalytic validity through critical arts research for social change,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, 5 (2016): 617–39.

COLLECTIVE ARTMAKING

On the whole, both artmaking and memory have been seen as individual pursuits. However, contemporary theorists, practising artists, and a burgeoning global community arts movement have all challenged the supremacy of high art.² Cultural theorists have suggested that, in a cultural democracy, alternative narratives and first-hand accounts give voice to “the people who made and experienced history,” especially those who have been marginalized.³ Other commentators have noted that, since our lives are lived at that place where the private and the public meet, making art about our life experiences offers insight into abstract social systems such as class, family, religion, gender, and sexuality.⁴ For many years, activists of various kinds have used art to generate critical understanding and social change. Examples include Paulo Freire’s theatre of the oppressed and Frigga Haug’s consciousness-raising language schools – work taken up more recently by feminist scholars such as Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon.⁵ In the public domain, community arts projects are on the rise, even at a time when funding for the arts is tight.⁶

MEMORY

Contemporary cognitive scientists tell us that consciousness is networked and distributed.⁷ By the same token, memories are fluid, embodied, discursive, and relational rather than discrete items situated in the brain.⁸ Proust’s famous madeleine cake provides a good example of how sensory experiences such as taste can transport us back in time. Memory is negotiated not only through the body but also through the more-than-human world, through our artifacts and language – itself a

² Morna McDermott, “Outlaw Arts-Based Educational Research,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 7, 1 (2010): 6–14.

³ Paul Thompson with Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

⁴ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2004); Frigga Haug, *Beyond Female Masochism: Memory Work and Politics* (London: Verso, 1992); Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon, eds., *Doing Collective Biography* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2006).

⁶ McDermott, “Outlaw.”

⁷ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More Than Human World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996); Merlin Donald, *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (New York: Norton, 2001); Steven Johnson, *Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

⁸ Martin Conway, “Remembering: A Process and a State,” in *Science of Memory: Concepts*, ed. Henry L. Roediger, Yairin Dudai, and Susan M. Fitzpatrick, 237–43 (Oxford University Press, 2007).

form of technology and a site of competing discourses. For these reasons, I expected that writing and making art with others would be a useful way to support memory by strengthening social networks, and also that it would provide a way to explore the socio-political conditions within which it was developed. It is worth noting that as individuals who have lived through times of great social change where LGBTQ rights are concerned, my research participants had experienced radical shifts in cultural structures and attitudes and thus had particularly complex and rich experiences to consider.⁹

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

In 2012, I received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to conduct a study with LGBTQ elders. I came to this project wearing several hats. The first was as an academic. A recent graduate of the doctoral program at the University of British Columbia (where I had studied the potential of collective arts practices as a means of achieving social change), I was interested in the intersections between art, health, and social justice – interests I was able to pursue in my postdoctoral work at Simon Fraser University. The second was as a practising memoirist convinced of the potential of the genre as a way to generate insight. The third was as a lesbian elder, and the fourth was as a community artist working within the Arts and Health Project, managed by the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation. This latter program was founded upon the premise that arts engagements support the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical health of elders.¹⁰ I thus brought the following commitments and expectations to the project:

When conducted collaboratively, art can promote both robust communities and support individual cognitive, physical, social, and emotional health.

Making art with others can generate insight into the cultural systems within which they were developed and support social change.

Old people are a resource. They need *to do*, and to be active, rather than be *done for*.

⁹ Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Elise Chenier, “Hidden from Historians: Preserving Lesbian Oral History in Canada,” *Archivaria* 68 (Fall 2009): 247–70.

¹⁰ Gene D. Cohen, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants were part of an ongoing arts collective, which I had facilitated for several years. After the usual ethics procedures were completed, participants contributed to a focus group to discuss their perceptions of memory. I then led them in workshops in which we discussed and wrote about their memories and life experiences for three months. After this, they were each invited to design and construct a memory box – a three-dimensional representation of a “slice of memory.”

The constraints offered for the project were few – the box should be made from a regular-sized shoe box, one plane of which should be painted white and include a single word encapsulating the box’s core theme. I also stressed that the box should be conceptual in nature rather than a receptacle for memorabilia. In this way, participants were steered away from traditional notions of the memory box as a way to preserve and display archival material. Six of the twenty-eight participants were interviewed for one hour three times over the course of the two-year project, including the artist whose work is considered in this report. Twenty-two boxes were completed and exhibited in three community centres in Vancouver.

DATA: JUDY’S MEMORY BOX

The box presented here as a practice exemplar was created by Judy Fletcher, whose real name is used at her request and who has been consulted during the writing of this article. Judy has survived several forms of abuse and has been diagnosed as suffering from borderline personality disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Though she is well read, intelligent, funny, and artistically talented, Judy is also self-deprecating, extremely shy, wary of conflict, and feels highly exposed in group situations. At the time she created the memory box, she had attended the arts workshops regularly but rarely spoke during our discussions and was hesitant about showing her work to others.

At first, Judy saw the challenge of making the box as “just another thing that [she] couldn’t do,”¹¹ and she contemplated just paying lip service to the project. But after a while she decided to work with one of her core issues – a sense of invisibility in the world. She put it this way: “I realized that feeling ‘invisible’ in the world had been a constant in my life. Maybe I could make that the ‘theme’ of the box.”¹² Quite quickly,

¹¹ Fletcher, *My Shoebox*, unpublished journal entry (May 2013).

¹² *Ibid.*

the box became a third, or liminal, space within which Judy worked through a difficult memory at her own pace and on her own terms.

DISCUSSION

Judy's box is a powerful exemplar of the power of collaborative artmaking, particularly when it is attached to social justice work. I have presented it at many conferences and community events, such as Aging with Pride (Vancouver 2014), and it has a strong impact on its audience. For instance, it is not unusual for people to leave the room or session, or to ask to talk about the feelings it aroused in them. Researcher Maggie MacLure talks about "data with a glow."¹³ Such data resist analysis because they are compelling and invite us in, but it's hard to say why. I argue here that Judy's memory box provides a good example of this kind of data. My purpose in this background text is to attempt the difficult work of its analysis.

The idea of an eventual audience is part of the group's mandate in all its work since this is an activist collective and part of its mission is to generate social change. This had been Judy's strong intention since the piece's inception. She wanted her box to speak for "all the broken ones," as the memorial plaque tells us. In a piece of writing about the box, she says: "Children are abused by their mother and/or their father every day everywhere. But the secrecy is not accidental; there are rules: don't see, don't hear, don't tell anyone!"¹⁴ In making the box, Judy made a deliberate choice to be open about something that had been kept secret for years, a memory she did not even retrieve until she was in her twenties. She says: "I struggled with whether or not to use my family's actual photographs, especially those of my mother and father. Should I? Dare I show the face of a child abuser? (Both of my parents have been deceased for many decades.) But I needed to. I can see now that, even though I was never conscious of a memory of that beating, that event and several other traumas had a tremendous influence on what kind of a life I would have ... how I would relate to people and what kind of mental illnesses I would have to cope with. So the photographs are real. And I now know that I had to take possession of that memory, to take it away from those who kept the secret."¹⁵

¹³ Maggie MacLure, "Researching without Representation? Language and Materiality in *Post-Qualitative Methodology*," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 26, 6 (2013): 658–67, 661.

¹⁴ Fletcher, *My Shoebox*, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

One of the striking things about Judy's box is that she never actually describes the incident in question, and this, too, was a deliberate artistic choice. Judy put it this way: "I want it to be more of a universal thing ... a memorial for all of the little kids who got hurt in their own home but nobody saw it or talked about it."¹⁶

In many ways, Judy's process in making her box was solitary. She did not consult with the author or the other group facilitator, or other group members, at any point during the process; quite the reverse, she was rather secretive about what she was planning, to the extent that no one saw the box until it was finally done. However, I would still argue that the collective group process was very important.

Judy gives a great deal of credit to the group support she received during the project. Even though she didn't share her artistic process, she felt that the fact that she was working alongside others was important: "I would not have thought of doing this on my own and probably would not have stuck with it if I did."¹⁷ As she turned over the idea of the box in her mind, she was emboldened to continue with it as "it started to sound less crazy as [she] heard other people saying what they [were] going to do."¹⁸ Perhaps one of the lessons here is that the benefits of collective artmaking are not always immediately obvious. Working alongside others can have benefits that might be difficult to quantify but nonetheless important in terms of support, confidence, and a sense of belonging to a robust community of practice.

Perhaps most important, Judy's work on this project had an impact on her relationship with the group. Her box had a profound effect on those who saw it, as Judy herself noted: "I did not realize how much stored-up emotion I was putting into the box until I showed [it] to someone."¹⁹ She was one of the first to finish her box, and others in the group were much inspired by it. The box became a reference point for our work, and it set a high bar. Indeed, after she finished her own box, Judy became a consultant to others in the group as she gave them both conceptual and practical advice.

Instead of being framed as a victim in this project, and *done for*, Judy became more able to see herself as a leader and role model, capable of speaking up and changing societal assumptions. Rather than "blending in" and feeling invisible, she stood out as she reclaimed her memory and, with it, her sense of agency and self-determination. As the collection

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Fletcher, interview transcript, 4.

¹⁸ Fletcher, *My Shoebox*, 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

of memory boxes showed in various community settings, Judy's box had a particularly powerful impact upon viewers, who, for example, often singled it out for comment in their feedback forms. In this way, she had indeed spoken for all the broken ones in terms of raising public awareness of child abuse. Art serves many functions. It can be decorative, aesthetically pleasing, recreational, and individually expressive. While I do not challenge these contentions, I also believe that Judy's powerful art demonstrates that, when it is conducted collaboratively and with a social agenda, art can be an effective catalyst for individual healing and social change.