



WORK IN PROGRESS **COMMUNITY ARTIST** **AS WORKER**

BY **LEAH HOUSTON**

This paper is based on a talk I gave as part of a Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts panel in 2012. Work In Progress was “a forum that critically engaged the intersections between collaborative artistic practices, class, and working conditions for community engaged artists.” The panel was moderated by Florencia Berinstein and Anna Camilleri. Work in Progress featured myself as well as Mahlikah Awe:ri, Greg Frankson, and Amelia Jimenez.

I'd like to focus my part of the conversation on two main and somewhat interconnected tensions that I face in my own work. I'm going to be using primarily my work at MABELLEarts and specifically our ongoing *Park of Many Paths* project as a tangible example to draw from as I attempt to tease out two particular tensions I've been thinking about for a long time now, which seem to be more acute or more pronounced in this particular moment in the story of Toronto.

Many of you have a lot of experience working in a community context, and many of you are interested in expanding your knowledge of the practice. You are not alone! Over the past ten years we've seen a marked increase both in interest and in practice. Programs like York University's Community Arts Practice are offering post-secondary training for artists and others interested in the practice. Companies like Jumblies Theatre have mentored countless artists (including me!) through the Jumblies Studio—their ongoing training and mentorship program. Public funders and private foundations have increasingly supported artists and arts organizations as effective catalysts for positive change. Across the board, our poorly funded arts councils have seen community-engaged practices, as well as culturally specific forms that have community-engagement in their bones, as ideal conduits for their own mandates related to reach and accessibility of arts in Canada.

Many of us doing this work find ourselves drawn to contexts where we can use our artistic abilities and training to help fill some kind of gap. Shelters, drop-in centers, and neglected neighbourhoods are all places where I have worked and where many of my colleagues are currently working. I don't know anyone working with wealthy bankers in Rosedale (though that could be a really interesting project!).

Some of us already live in or were raised in poor neighbourhoods. Some of us have spent time in shelters and drop-in centers in times of need, and some of us have come to Canada from another place and know firsthand what it takes to make a new home in this country. Some of us do not have this experience.

In all cases, the needs of the people and places we choose to work with can be overwhelming. Working in contexts where people are struggling with the realities of economic disparity is multifaceted. Where I work, in a high-density Toronto Community Housing tower in central Etobicoke, residents face a variety of challenges. Many are new to Canada and struggling to access settlement services while acclimatizing themselves and their families to a new cultural context. Many came to this country with skills they are unable to employ here. Many are elderly or disabled and have problems with mobility and therefore access to food and care. Many live in grossly neglected spaces and are unable to get the maintenance assistance they need. Many have apartments infested with bed bugs—something that has become an epidemic in this city. Some have faced unimaginable traumas that have left their minds in confusion and distress.

Working as an artist interested in building relationships with people of all ages who are living at Mabelle means that I am looking into the face of these and many other problems every day. As the relationships grow and develop over time, the problems people face become even more central, and the very notion of creating art in this context can begin to seem impossible or at least ridiculous—a useless Band-Aid on a gaping wound.

But here's the thing. Even more than a listening ear, a helping hand, or a passive platform for communities to voice their many concerns, I believe we must remain artists, with unique points of view, practices, and perspectives. I believe we must continue to do the work that artists do—to seek excellence, challenge our audience, present new ideas, and encourage others to see things in new ways. We must continue to create work that invites people to remember who they are and to imagine who they could be. Anything less means we no longer believe in the power of art, that we are willing to work primarily as underpaid social workers, child minders, maintenance crews, and janitors.

I believe that art can change the world. And not just because art can make a person feel better or pass the time or teach new skills or decrease social isolation or help diverse people get to know one another and become friends—though these are all good reasons—but also and perhaps most importantly because I still believe that art has the power to touch our lives and bring us together beyond almost any other form of communication or knowledge system. Art can inform who we are both individually and collectively. Art can push us to see ourselves and each other in new ways. This is my job—to collaborate with artists and community members to create work that in its beauty, relevance, and clear vision says something important about the place where we are, the world that we live in, and the people we live alongside.

I'm not saying this is easy or that the problems don't ever take precedence or take over. I'm not saying that my job doesn't involve listening to a problem, making some calls, or doing some advocacy, caring for a child, fixing a bench, or mopping a floor, because it often does. What I am trying to say is that if I give over the art part, something of incredible value is lost. In fact, I believe that to let go of my own role as an artist, and with it my own artistic inclinations and perspective, is to break a vital covenant with the people I serve. It is to do my job poorly.

Which brings me to the second tension I want to explore. For the past five years, our work at Mabelle has focused primarily on the transformation and reclamation of a small park in the centre of the neighbourhood. It has been a passion and interest of mine and of the artists I've worked with to engage community members of all ages in a full-scale reimagining of what an urban park can be. Together we have created mosaics and concrete pavers, removed decaying fences, worked with a landscape architect to design and plant a native-plant garden, built shelters, and experimented with outdoor cooking. We've also attempted to learn to be in our park in new ways by creating ceremonies, celebrations, and community gatherings that are infused with the stories, cultural traditions, and concerns of many people who live on Mabelle Avenue. For the past four years we've worked with Mabelle residents (and in particular a group of women passionate about cooking) to offer weekly Iftar (fast-breaking) celebrations as part of the holy month of Ramadan.

During Ramadan, it's traditional for families to come together and enjoy a big meal each night after the sun has set. After the meal, many venture out into the marketplace to connect with neighbours and enjoy the many street foods offered by local merchants. Then MABELLEarts general manager, Miriam Ahmed, thought it would be fun for us to embody this tradition in Mabelle Park, and we've been doing it ever since. Each Friday, Muslims and non-Muslims living on Mabelle Avenue come together to enjoy foods traditional to the Iftar fast-breaking cooked over an open fire. Over the years we've developed some traditions of our own, including our annual telling of ghost stories around the fire. I've often thought that if I ever wrote a memoir of my community arts experiences, I'd have to call it *Ghost Stories for Ramadan*.

A Park of Many Paths has also been a project full of tensions and contradictions as we (a very small arts organization) attempt to make up the shortfall for a crumbling and inadequate bureaucracy—in this case Toronto Community Housing. The then unnamed park (which we now proudly call Mabelle Park) was once a neglected piece of land, known as “the quarantined zone” by residents living outside the Mabelle neighbourhood. Mabelle residents were taking the blame for Toronto Community Housing's inability to maintain the land—and were often seen as careless litterers and vandals by the surrounding wealthy and well-maintained enclaves. The truth is that every public space requires ongoing maintenance (garbage collection, grass cutting, tree care, etc.), and this park was receiving none.

By working with residents, while partnering with Toronto Community Housing and the Mabelle neighbourhood's city councillor, we've seen Mabelle Park transformed into a vital community hub. A troubling side effect of these successes is that by doing this work, MABELLEarts has, in many ways, stepped in to make up for a failing and reduced public sector. This is something I'm seeing a lot as I continue to make connections with similar organizations, artists, and community groups—many are finding ways to foot the bill for what has historically been covered by our tax dollars. And all levels of government are finding ways for them to do it too.

The artists or others at the helm of these highly successful and innovative projects often earn significantly less and enjoy less security than their public sector colleagues. While the city's budget shrinks, Torontonians continue to long for (and develop) projects that repair and enliven neglected public spaces, bring poorly paid artists into classrooms with little or no arts-based curriculum, and put artists and others at the centre of extremely difficult neighbourhood problems. Many of these projects are succeeding where bureaucracies have failed.

This tension has left me with a number of questions: What does this all mean when we consider the future of Toronto and the bureaucracies that run our city? How do these realities impact the growth of the field (community-engaged arts) and the

people who work hard to make art in a community context? What should our role as artists and community organizers be in terms of addressing issues related to our own economic justice and sustainability? How do we best respond to bureaucracies that on the one hand look to us to do what they can't and on the other impede our work with "red tape"?

This I do know for sure: the continued transformation and ongoing rediscovery of Mabelle Park has changed the Mabelle neighbourhood and the lives of many (including myself) for the better. I know that communities need to step in and act when their bureaucracies fail them, if only to feel how empowering it is to make a change for the better. There is no need to live with what's broken when we can work together to fix it, beautify it, and make it ours.

This work has helped many to see their lives, stories, hopes, and perspectives imbedded in the landscape of the city—often for the first time. It is in this way that our cities become home.



Leah Houston has been cultivating a dynamic, multi-disciplinary community-based arts practice for almost 15 years, incorporating public art, installation and performance with public space transformation, working with people of all ages and backgrounds. Leah has created and produced many community arts events and led a number of artists to create new work that tells the ordinary, extraordinary stories of our lives. Her most consuming project to date has been the ongoing collaborative transformation of the Mabelle Park, a once-neglected green space in the heart of the Mabelle neighbourhood with over 1000 residents and 60 artists at MABELLEarts. As MABELLEarts grows, Leah is increasingly invited to travel to diverse communities including Ontario's Muskoka Region and Dhaka Bangladesh. She is a graduate of York University's Environmental Studies Department and holds an M.A from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her Masters thesis focused on the promise of feminism and community arts in the context of "bad" neighbourhoods.

