

Queer Community Performance in Canada Across Generations

To examine the impact of performance for marginalized groups within the queer community, we look at the work of two activist outreach organizations: The Queer Imaging and Riting Kollektive for Elders and Youth for A Change. Building on the work of Michael Warner - who argues that artistic representations can generate sites of resistance to normalizing accounts of what it is like to be queer- and Frigga Haug – who sees such cultural work as a form of production and a means to change individual consciousness – we offer two performances as case studies: “Memory in Two Voices” – a digital presentation about an old lesbian couple’s journey with dementia, and “The Queer Agenda” - a spoken word performance by a queer punk teen who speaks back to religious fundamentalism, both part of an collaborative intergenerational performance produced by the two groups. We will argue that each performance answers Patti Lather’s call for research that addresses and theorizes catalytic research for social change, since each resists and complicates persistent narratives of helplessness, victimhood, and frailty through classic and ironic acts of queer reclaiming.

Background

This paper builds on the work of two Metro Vancouver based grassroots queer activist organizations. The Queer Imaging & Riting Kollektive for Elders (QUIRK-E), works out of Britannia Community Services Centre and is facilitated by Dr. Claire Robson (adjunct faculty, Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, SFU) and PhD student Kelsey Blair (SFU). Youth 4 A Change work in Surrey and is facilitated by Dr. Jen Marchbank (Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, SFU) and Sylvia Traphan. The theoretical foundations from which this paper draws were first developed in relation to Quirk-e, and, as such, it is productive to detail the group’s

composition, identification, and mandate. Quirke is an ongoing arts-engaged collective composed, at the time of this research, of 26 individuals, all of who self-identified as old and all but one of who identified as LGBT and/or queer (one identified as asexual and queer). The group meets weekly for two hours. Members of the group make and showcase art in several forms, critique each other's work, and share ideas and resources about topics under investigation (in this instance, memory). Quirke's participants have debated identifications extensively over the ten-year lifetime of the group, without reaching a great deal of consensus. Some do not accept the term 'old' as meaningful, and others regard it as significant. Similar discussions have occurred around sexual identifications such as 'gay', 'trans', 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' and 'asexual.' The group's name (Quirk-e) and mission statement acknowledges the contested and complicated nature of old and queer identity, as it describes the group as "an unruly choir of discordant voices." That said, members do agree upon a mission - to make art that 'talks back' to stereotypical or essentializing narratives about being queer and old. Over the years, this art has included public presentations and readings, print anthologies, videos and visual images – offerings that have regularly drawn the attention of the local community and media.

Theorizations of Quirke's work draws from new theories of cognition, performance studies, and arts based education research. New theories of cognition suggest that consciousness is not pre-given and discrete, nor is it purely biologically or culturally determined. Rather, it exists fluidly through complex relations between the biological body and the human-built and more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). The authors believe that consciousness is a distributed cognitive network (Donald, 2001, p. 154), mediated and constructed through relationships between the biological brain, various technologies, and systems of culture (Johnson, 2004). These technologies, which Foucault (1988) has termed "technologies of the self," include what

Gee (1990) has called small 'd' discourse (such as dress, speech and writing), including self-expression through various forms of art. In this context, consciousness can be seen as both participating in acts of making and responding to art works and, at the same time, as being altered or transformed by them (Lewis, 2000).

The learning that occurs through the technologies of autobiographical art making include reflections and insights about systems of culture (Haug, 1992). We argue, with others, that collective writing practices can be a form of critical research (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Butt & Raymond, 1989; Butt, Raymond, McCue & Yamagishi, 1992; Haug, 1992) and that the examination of subjective memories is essential to understanding the objective structures in which they were developed (Cvetkovich, 2003; Haug (1992, p. 20). Haug (1992, p. 25) argues (and the authors agree) that when people engage in arts practices (both individually and together), with critical awareness, it becomes possible to *investigate* experiences, rather than just *tell about* or narrate them. Haug (ibid) calls these practices a kind of "detective work" that requires participants to become familiar with practical strategies for disrupting comfortable narratives and digging below their surfaces. Theorists in this area of research (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Butt & Raymond, 1989; Butt, Raymond, McCue & Yamagishi, 1992; Haug, 1992) have argued that this work is conducted most effectively in collective collaborations, in which participants can offer each other insights and challenge the clichés that often represent a form of evasion.

In 2015, Quirk-e partnered with Youth for A Change, a group of young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer youth (13-22) who want to make a difference in the lives of youth. Youth for A Change aims to educate, advocate, and create artistic products. The theories fundamental to Quirk-e were used to inform a collaborative project between the two groups: a

full-length theatre performance called *Intergen(d)erational*. *Intergen(d)erational* attempted to address a gap in the Metro Vancouver queer community in which many queer youth and elders exist in silos – a situation that is often lamented but difficult to remedy, especially given the popular narratives of pedophilia and the lack of queer space in which to meet (Kokkola, 2014). The piece was performed in Vancouver and Surrey in Spring 2015 and then remounted by invitation at New Westminster Pride in 2015.

Case Studies

Intergen(d)erational was a cabaret style performance which featured several shorter works. Here, we offer two of the shorter works for consideration. The first work is “Memory in Two Voices” which was written by long-time lesbian partners Chris Morrissey and Bridget Coll. It was originally presented in Quirk-e as a poem about Bridget’s dementia diagnosis. The couple determined their own process for composing the poem – first, they requested that Britannia’s Senior’s Worker, Anne Jackson, interviewed them separately, asking them a series of questions they had devised. They then edited these separate responses and turned them into a poem in two voices, which they read aloud to the group. It is worth noting, in passing, that their determination to be ‘out’ about a matter popularly perceived as shameful can be described as queer, and their choice of form – a shared performative narrative, as essentially ‘theatrical.’ With a sense of urgency, given Bridget’s deteriorating health, Kelsey and Claire filmed Bridget and Chris reading the poem. The following summer Kelsey, Claire, Chris, and Bridget approached two SFU faculty members and dancers, Celeste Snowber and Kathryn Ricketts, to dance the poem. The dancing was filmed and then edited into a short film. In 2016, Bridget died, and the video was shown at her funeral.

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“The Queer Agenda” was written and performed by Syd Wolfe – a queer punk teen who was homeless for three years and was a grade 9 drop out because of homophobic bullying. Syd is part of Youth For A Change. “The Queer Agenda” speaks back to religious fundamentalism and was the closing number of the full-length performance.

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Discussion

Ann Cvetkovich has argued that performative spaces create examinable archives - spectacles that represent the experiences and feelings of those who've been marginalized, and Michael Warner believes that such archives help in the creation of counterpublics and sites of resistance. However, while these performance spaces are believed to be productive, the effects can be difficult to quantify or qualify. For instance, the *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* describes numerous public arts projects with a social justice agenda. However, it has little or nothing to say about methodological concerns such as validation and assessment. In “Issues of validity in openly ideological research: Between a rock and a soft place,” Patti Lather addresses this issue as she argues that we need rigorous methodology which addresses the issue of validation in art for social change. She introduces the term ‘catalytic validity’ to describe how we might measure the degree to which the research process re-orient, refocuses, and energizes participants. If the research has effected change, it can be said to be catalytically valid. We argue that these two pieces are examples of catalytic research.

Here's our thinking:

- ***Connection across generational silos***

The *Intergen(d)erational* performance attempted to address the issue of generational silos in the queer community. In the normal course of events, Syd and the members of Quirk-e would not be likely to even meet, given the generational divide between young and older queer folk. This project offered a third fictive space in which they talked about central issues. Significantly, Quirk-e reaction and discussion of Syd's piece raised several key issues and question discussed heatedly by the elders: – Why do youth look the way they do? Do youth really want to obliterate all heterosexuals? How can humour/satire be mobilized positively? Where is the line between censorship and potentially hateful speech?

- ***Impact on audience***

The two pieces had an impact upon their audiences. Just under 100 people saw the *Intergen(d)erational* show, and “Memory in Two Voices” has been screened at The Vancouver Parks’ Board Arts and Health Showcase, the Vancouver Public Library, and as part of AGEWELL, presented by Arts for Social Change. In the case of “Memory in Two Voices,” people typically approach the artists (if they are present) to open up discussion about dementia and memory loss.

- ***Impact on culture***

As the local media represent old and young queers positively, instead of as ‘at risk,’ public perceptions are opened up to new ways of seeing them.

- ***Agency - Artists saw themselves as warriors, not victims***

Each piece moves beyond what Cvetkovich has called “the hushed tones of trauma” – a kind of victim mentality. Rather than framing oppression as an individual trauma -

something that just happened to them - all artists show oppression to be systemic and cultural. Each artist gained in confidence and pride as a result of showing their work. Indeed, though the authors were concerned that Bridget might feel shamed and overwhelmed by public display of her cognitive decline, she was adamant about its inclusion in the show, as she believed that it would raise public awareness of the personal impact of dementia and that this would mean more if the audience witnessed its impact on her directly.

- ***Acts of queer ironic reclaiming***

Each piece speaks back to oppression in a classically queer way, by turning oppressive discourse on its head. Syd takes the religious right's paranoia about the subversive queer agenda and runs with it. Chris and Bridget use the poetic form to speak back to dominant discourses of shaming around memory loss as they actively process their journey with dementia.

- **Impact on future projects:**

As a result of the success of the project, the two groups collaborated again as part of a Council to Reduce Elder Abuse project managed by Dr. Gloria Gutman and facilitated by Kelsey Blair to create flyers and videos on elder abuse in the queer community.

These materials were distributed across the province of British Columbia, with showings in all five health regions.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that performance proved catalytic (Lather, 1989) for our participants in its creation of voice, agency, and insight. This is particularly important for members of the two

groups we consider, who may not have easy access to established communities and may not be recognizably ‘different,’ in that they may be able to ‘pass’ as white or straight. However, we are left with more questions than answers: How can we get specific about agency – unpick what actually happened? How can we measure the impact of the spectacles we make on our audiences? How can we keep track of the processes of making spectacles? Can we triangulate our observations through better documentation - interviews, artists’ journal and statements, focus groups, and a new approach to field notes? How can we find new ways to talk about our methodologies? Can these translate into existing academic systems – conferences and papers? We hope that these questions will generate productive conversation at the conference.

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