



Note from the Editors

Tactics and dissonance: bending social relations towards justice, through art

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[1] The idea for this special issue arose out of meetings of the Arts-Centered, Community-Engaged Social Sciences Research ([A.C.C.E.S.S.](#)) Collaborative at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada. Beginning in 2013, a group of faculty and recent graduates began meeting on a regular basis to discuss how, why, under what conditions or with what caveats art enables new social relations. All of us attend to the politics of representation in our work; some of us had specifically analyzed or curated art exhibits; and, many of us also gravitated towards arts-informed practices in our research and teaching. Located in different departments and faculties, we came together to discuss the difference of performance, storytelling, and images in the production of social knowledges as compared to conventional scholarly text.

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[2] With contributions from [A.C.C.E.S.S.](#) members and beyond, this issue considers expectations, rationales, tensions, and risks embedded in efforts to use the arts to foster more just social relationships. It begins from the claim that the arts (or specific art forms, or artworks) have a particular capacity to facilitate just and ethical social relations. Such claims typically rest on ideas about identification - that art enables us to imagine our way into, and also to feel, something of another person's life, and that this experience is a basis for ethical engagement across social difference. This potential of art has been advocated as particularly valuable where it enables new affects and understandings between dominant social groups and subjects, experiences, or knowledges that historically have been marginalized, denigrated, silenced, or oppressed. Ethical engagement in this formulation incorporates Spinoza's definition of ethics - as generative action, contingent on the body being moved - and associations of the word ethical in everyday language with "right" or "just".

[3] Critics call this view into question along many lines: engagement with art about 'others' may indeed generate empathy, but it is an empathy often naive and apolitical (Emmons; Sontag), a feeling for an individual, isolated from historical context, and without social obligation (Boler). The idea that art or artists have some inherently ethical or justice-leaning impulse is repeatedly contradicted by the historical record (Belfiore & Bennett). In disability studies, for example, rather than enabling "diverse ways of

sensing, moving through, or otherwise being in and relating to the world,” art sometimes aims to reconstitute or transcend “broken” bodies and minds (Ignagni & Church, 628). In many contexts, broken and even murdered bodies disappear under a blanket of gorgeous art. This is evocatively conveyed by Marchinko in her contribution to this issue that foregrounds the multicultural “Rightfest” showcase of performers marking the opening of the new Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg (Canada) that took place in the autumn of 2014. A dancer in this showcase, Marchinko recounts being struck by the obscenity of the event: marking on the one hand Canada’s commitment to fundamental equality, while so easily forgetting to acknowledge historical and brutal gendered and racialized necropolitics.

[4] It is against routines of facile empathizing, mockery, or violent and affectively naturalized expulsion of the “different” and the “other” that the questions of form and viewer/viewed dynamics become crucial. What arts-informed pedagogical practices, Sinding et al. ask, can provoke new, more critically engaged forms of attending to under-recognized narratives, for example? What does it take, what is required, for a representation to crack open norms of viewing, knowing, or ignoring difference? For some, what is needed is to overwhelm the viewer with proofs of violence. This is, for example, the approach taken by Tracey-Mae Chambers in her series *Mine is but a tear in a river*. Mae-Chambers renders the misogynistic and racialized violence against Aboriginal women in Canada large, through 1,181 photos,

each marking a documented case of missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. Subtlety is not an option for Mae-Chambers. As she states: "I have heard words spoken about these women that feel like shards of glass underfoot. There is no way to walk safely or softly upon them." Volume and the explicit are strategies foregrounded elsewhere in this issue: in the mountain of examples of sacrificial and racialized wounds in the performance essay of Brooklyn-based Ian Deleón, in the weight and volume of sand that immobilizes Regina José Galindo in her performance piece, and in Morris Cafiero's series of large scale, supersaturated self-portraits, which, as Janice Hladki advances in her contribution "Fat Politics Photography," render Morris Cafiero's abundant body hypervisible, while simultaneously rendering hyper-visible normalized fatphobic norms of staring at, shaming, and expecting self-erasure of those whose bodies do not fit social ideals.

[5] Sonya DeLaat's approach is minimalist in contrast. De Laat adopts the approach Geoffrey Batchen described as "looking askance" to reference through images the lingering trauma and scars of the Rwandan genocide (as cited in De Laat). Here, the surface of the image is tense with what is known about the Rwandan landscape, but is not visible in the frame. Taking up a very different format and context of national imagining, Catherine Frost explores the way in which the neutralization of disruptive emotions unfolds through the "stone-faced" standards of passport photography. While the "disempathy" that results accords with broader aesthetics of bodily discipline

and biometric surveillance in the modern state, requirements to have citizens perform such exaggerated self-discipline in the name of control and legibility must backfire, suggests Frost. Images of the face that deny expression or humanity require inter-subjective filling in of what is not accessible in that image, and in this way actually forces, according to Frost, strategies for recognition beyond the passport, inciting rather than disabling moral imagination and a method for preserving political engagement beyond the reach of the state.

[6] What is clear in the articles in this issue is that how and what arts-informed practices will fuel transformative politics is far from predictable. So, for example, in "Lessons in Failing Well", Gardner describes her research team's intentions of developing a game with refugees to bridge understanding between more privileged and refugee communities, was productively displaced by the refugee youths' desire to engage with each others' experiences and provide support to one another instead. Torres, Sinding et al., and Gardner all emphasize that being open to the unpredictable impacts of art practices and the processes through which these might generate new social relations and knowledges is key. Cross-cutting this issue is evidence of the uneven, inherently ambiguous, and unpredictable nature of critical engagements with and through art. There is not one affect or mode of relating that is particularly positioned to disrupt rather than reiterate stigmatizing, offensive, or violence-facilitating ways of

seeing and consuming difference. It is the multiplicity of effects and affects we explore here.

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