Kathleen Keys’ Plazabilities for Art Education: Community as Participant, Collaborator and Curator: A Critical Review

Dana Fragomeni

In 2008 Dana Fragomeni graduated from the University of Toronto with an Honours Bachelor of Arts, having successfully completed a double major in History and English as well as a minor in Religion. Currently, Dana Fragomeni is a first year student in the Master of Museum Studies program at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information. As an active historian and researcher, Dana also works part-time at the Royal Ontario Museum as an Exhibition Researcher in the Department of Anthropology. In collaboration with curators Justin Jennings and Ami Brownstone, Dana Fragomeni is helping design an exhibition as well as a publication to celebrate the ROM’s one hundredth birthday in 2014.
danafragomeni@yahoo.ca

Kathleen Keys is an assistant professor of art education and the coordinator for the undergraduate and graduate Art Education programs at Boise State University. Keys’ published research has appeared in two National Art Education Association (NAEA) anthologies, Histories of Community-Based Art Education, and Community Connections: Intergeneration Links in Art Education, as well as in The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education (Draper, 2008). Published in The Journal Of Social Theory In Art Education in 2007, Keys’ article “Plazabilities for Art Education: Community as Participant, Collaborator and Curator” applies a plaza metaphor and theories of “plazabilities” to the contemporary work of three “other” art educators in order to recognize, explore and articulate a nuanced perception for art education grounded in community teaching. Examining the work of David Best’s 2005 Hayes Green Project Temple, Harrell Fletcher’s 2004 Whitney Biennial Exhibition and Ron Chew’s 2001 exhibition, If Tired Hands Could Talk: Stories of Asian Pacific American Garment Workers, this article posits a unique theory for improved community
collaboration in education, exploring the myriad ways educators of all kinds can develop and create pedagogy that promotes social interaction and cohesion and encourages communal participation (Keys, 2007). The following critical analysis will begin with a concise summary of Keys’ article and her approach to the topic, followed by a brief critique of its merits and shortcomings. It will end with a brief examination of three other contemporary cultural institutions that have implemented Key’s theory of “plazability” in the world of museum education today.

“Plazabilities for Art Education: Community as Participant, Collaborator & Curator” applies a plaza metaphor to the work of three art educators in order to articulate a nuanced perception for art education grounded in community pedagogy (Keys, 2007). Couched within a historical-rhetorical methodological approach, Keys (2007) begins with a brief examination of the historical nature of the “public square”, emphasising the ways in which the rise of capitalist, secular, urban culture in the mid to late twentieth century has eroded the “once prevalent and extremely diverse multiplicity of contact points by which people entered into social relations with the city” (p. 100). According to Keys, one of the ways in which art education can stimulate community involvement and spark social awareness is by recreating and re-capturing the plaza or public sphere. “The provision of shared open spaces, pedestrian walkways and other gathering places (such as plazas) play a strong role in once again strengthening the cultivation of a ‘living community’” (Keys, 2007, p. 101). Moreover, Keys (2007) argues that the field of art education can work in many ways towards building “plazabilities” simply by stepping out of the classroom setting and inviting others into the realms of teaching and learning, “to reclaim and create new literal and metaphorical plazas where social interaction, the building of a community, a return to social dependence may start to take shape” (p. 102). Keys’ article closes with a brief yet detailed examination of three specific contemporary art exhibitions, all of which have implemented theories of plazabilities in one way or another and in turn illustrate the real-life applicability of her theory. The intent of Keys’ article is to unearth some of the reasons as to why art education has failed to embrace, reverse and/or subvert otherwise traditional power relations in art teaching, learning and viewing. In keeping with the historical-rhetorical approach, throughout Keys’ article there are a number of provocative rhetorical questions or postulates that serve to guide the reader through her thesis. Namely, that when art education – both in theory and in practice – incorporates and generates a “free, unencumbered and aesthetically intriguing place that expands possibilities, builds community and uses art for social change” (Keys, 2007, p. 112-3) communities, art teachers and scholars alike have the opportunity to develop and create art education that promotes social interaction and cohesion, encourages communally created exhibitions and projects and provides a platform for the development and expansion of cultural
identity in the face of social injustice (Keys, 2007).

From a critical standpoint, *Plazabilities for Art Education: Community as Participant, Collaborator & Curator* is a technically sound article that underscores some of the important concerns in the world of art education. Of particular merit is Keys’ ability to cite real-life contemporary art exhibitions that effectively provide examples for the ways in which plazabilities can be implemented by different types of art educators within divergent community settings. Moreover, Keys’ use of a historical-rhetorical approach not only assists the reader in understanding historically why and how the use of plazabilities can broaden the didactic power of art education, but it also helps the reader – through the continual invoking of rhetorical questions – to reflect on the virtues of her thesis; while simultaneously pushing them onwards as the argument unfolds. However, the results would have been more convincing if Keys was able to connect her examples with her thesis in a stronger fashion. After each of the three examples, Keys redundantly employs the same phrase: “….achieves plazability by focusing its energies on possibilities rather than limitations” (Keys, 2007 p. 103, 107 and 109). Keys’ conclusions are strong enough; the repetition of this seemingly “rehearsed” phrase takes away from the strength of her argument and examples, making them seem unnatural, simply selected deductively to suit her thesis. Nonetheless, this article is engaging, evocative and unique in its presentation of a theory of plazabilities that depicts real-life ways to create community involvement and civic inclusion in the world of art education.

The three examples presented within Keys’ article underscore many of the ideas and approaches that are at work throughout the world in cultural institutions to date. For example, the 1996 project *Oh Canada!* featured at the Art Gallery of Ontario brought a variety of different programme and outreach initiatives together (Tooby, 2006, p. 139). In line with David Best’s *Hayes Green Project Temple*, this endeavour not only gave different Canadian communities the opportunity to create their own idea of what “My Canada” includes, but the project was also influential in underscoring the importance that social awareness can play in art education and visions of cultural heritage. Similarly, in 2003, *The National Museums and Galleries of Wales* created a project called *Tir Cuffriddin/On Common Ground*, exhibited in the National Museum & Gallery in Cardiff (Tooby, 2006, p. 143). Much like the work of Harrell Fletcher and Ron Chew, *Tir Cuffriddin/On Common Ground* was successful in increasing community heritage and culture, in developing education directed by and for the community and ultimately in communicating oral and folk histories that fostered civic involvement and social awareness. A final example is Daniel Libeskind’s *Michael Lee-Chin Crystall* (erected 2007) at Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum. “Through the use of intersecting, corridor-like galleries, complicating trajectories, dead-ends and inaccessible voids, the design… [makes] the galleries an active path’ which insists on its visitors’ cognitive and physical labours” (Basu &
MacDonald, 2007, p. 15). Overall, Kathleen Keys’ *Plazabilities for Art Education: Community as Participant, Collaborator & Curator* is an effective and persuasive article that not only posits a unique theory and mandate for improved community collaboration in art education, but an article that tackles many of the educational issues and debates that play key roles in the cultural institutions of the world today.
References


