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Wild and banal: the value of the arts as commons

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to identify the value of the arts play in public spaces in replicating a contemporary commons.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is an exploratory investigation which uses a case study of cultural events in public parks – the Vancouver Parks Board’s fieldhouse residency program (2012-2015). The study uses content analysis of the social media sites created for these projects to identify how the sites and the cultural events were valued by stakeholders and participants.

Findings – The paper finds that, in combination, the park events and the social media discussion of them function as a form of the commons, in which new urban communities are formed or defined around specific common social interests.

Research limitations/implications – The paper finds that, in combination, the park events and the reflective engagement prompted by the social media discussion of them function as a form of the commons, in which new urban communities are formed or defined around specific common social interests.

Practical implications – It is anticipated that cultural programs will increasingly interact with common public places.

Social implications – The study supports the increased use of and recognition of public places as culturally significant.

Originality/value – The study aims to encourage the expansion of arts and cultural policy and programs to incorporate common public places.

Keywords Events management, Events, Arts in public spaces, Public parks, The commons, Vancouver Parks Board

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

By 7 p.m. on Saturday, October 25, 2014, rain has been falling steadily in Vancouver for over four hours. The streets are slick and black and pedestrians are sparse. One might imagine that the Mountain View Cemetery, south of Vancouver, is a desolate and lonely place on such a night, but the reality is quite different. The cemetery hosts an event to commemorate All Souls Eve. In the foyer, a welcoming clutch of volunteers serves tea and ginger biscuits. Over 200 guests of all ages are sheltered in the main hall, heads bent, sitting beside strangers at round tables where they decorate candle holders, chat and stop intermittently to listen to various small musical performances. Hunched into position at irregular intervals under the awnings of the building outdoors – amidst discarded prams, umbrellas and rubber boots – musicians play eerie notes on brass instruments. Composer and musician Mark Haney has arranged a commemorative art installation called “Eleven”,...
featuring the projected photographs of 11 local war veterans, each of whom is represented by one of the instruments.

Our public spaces are the locus for an ever-proliferating number of arts and cultural events, and a wider range of public spaces are involved in this trend. All Souls’ Eve at Mountain View Cemetery offers one relatively uncommon example: there are still not many opportunities for live public arts in cemeteries. But other examples are plentiful, including the use of parks, marketplaces, zoos, hospitals and public transport stations (Kwon, 1997, p. 92). In its 2003 Arts and Culture in Communities policy brief, the Urban Institute called sites such as these “indigenous venues of validation” because “the fact that the cultural activity happens there indicates [the site itself] is valued by the stewards of those places” (p. 73). Indeed, exhibiting or performing arts in common public places serves both to challenge or invigorate our existing understanding of the art forms, but also to provide new perspectives on those “indigenous venues”: the desolate cemetery becomes a place of warmth and welcome, the banal market a place to experience the sound of exquisite music, and a shabby, Victorian street can become landscape of extraordinary artwork. This use of transitory arts (performing arts and temporary exhibitions) in our everyday public spaces is a relatively recent phenomenon; public places were not the traditional focus of arts and cultural policy nor of performing and visual arts in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Instead, sculptures, and statues and the purpose-built arts centre or concert hall were common, and it was widely held by that the arts required special equipment and special architecture (see. Arts Council of Great Britain, 1945).

This paper examines the value bestowed upon the arts and culture as a contemporary form of the commons – a space in which common social, political or economic issues can be identified and considered. The transitory arts are to be encountered in our daily routine and public spaces, and in becoming at once both ubiquitous and quotidian, they now play a role as a commons. The paper captures the cultural value of everyday public spaces to the arts as commons, both in public policy and accounts of publicly supported artistic practices. It takes a program initiated by the Vancouver Parks Board (VPB) as a case study, examining how the initiative re-imagines the everyday space of the public park and gives rise to opportunities for public discussion of social issues. The VPB initiative placed artists as residents into Vancouver’s parks from 2012 to 2015, on the condition that they undertook 350 hours per year of community-engaged arts practice, and on the condition that the artists kept blogs of their activities.

**Literature review**

The beginning of the movement to place the transitory arts in public spaces is arguably the 1960s, in which a shift occurred in both the arts and the funding bodies that subsidized them, from modernist notions of the arts as independent of their location to site-specific art determined by its environment, whether the purpose of the arts in such contexts was to assimilate into or challenge this environment (Kwon, 2002). Today, both arts practitioners and stakeholders in public arts practice regard greater engagement between the arts and the spaces in which they are situated as highly valuable. Describing the former, Kwon (1997), for example, notes that:

[...] a dominant drive of site-oriented practices today is the pursuit of a more intense engagement with the outside world and everyday life – a critique of culture that is inclusive of non-art spaces, non-art institutions, and non-art issues (blurring the
division between art and non-art, in fact). Concerned to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social, either in order to redress (in an activist sense) urgent social problems such as the ecological crisis, homelessness, AIDS, homophobia, racism, and sexism, or more generally in order to relativize art as one among many forms of cultural work, current manifestations of site specificity tend to treat aesthetic and art-historical concerns as secondary issues (p. 91).

Key to this greater engagement of the arts with the social world is a sense that the arts and the skills and sensibilities of artists are developed through their interactions with both spaces and people (Walwin, 2010, p. 11).

In its 2003 policy brief on Art and Culture in Communities, the US-based think-tank The Urban Institute identified that while evaluations of a society’s cultural well-being and prosperity generally involved an inventory of cultural assets, these “typically over-emphasize structures – mainstream cultural venues [...] They tend to ignore cultural activity that takes place outside of these venues in places ranging from parks and churches to businesses and community centers” (Rosario Jackson et al., 2003, p. 3). An illustration of this tendency is Hill Strategies’ Diversity and Arts Attendance by Canadians in 2010, which examined attendance specifically at art galleries, theatre performances, popular music performances, classical music performances and cultural festivals, but apparently neglected the “indigenous venues” the Urban Institute has long highlighted as people’s preferred locations for cultural activities: parks, shopping malls and school halls. In fact, in its 2005 report on a national survey in the USA, The Diversity of Cultural Participation, the Urban Institute found that parks and outdoor facilities were the second most commonly frequented category of venues for cultural participation, visited by 57 percent of survey respondents for such purposes. This was second to concert halls and theaters, visited by 60 percent of respondents (Ostrower, 2005, pp. 10-11). The Diversity of Cultural Participation suggested that “arts organizations seeking to target frequent attendees would do well to reach out to these nondedicated arts venues” (Ostrower, 2005, p. 12).

In their analysis of the transformative potential of cities, Susser and Tonnelat (2013) draw on Henri Lefebvre’s work on the politics of urban living to look at ways that people in cities create and recognize commonalities and bring together new communities of interest. They argue that such movements are best described with a theory of the commons. Once used to describe collectively owned land that sustained agriculture or natural resources for individual and collective use, the commons “manifests the belonging of its members through a sharing principle, which is neither private nor public,” and in which citizens are the primary stakeholders (Susser and Tonnelat, 2013, p. 107).

Susser and Tonnelat (2013) identify three contemporary iterations of the commons and a set of rights associated with each iteration. The first is a “right to urban everyday life”, apparent in the provision and use of public services such as schools, hospitals and transport services (p. 108). The second is “the right to simultaneity and encounters,” apparent in common public spaces such as streets and squares, train stations and public gardens, or “all forms of public space where urbanites can rub shoulders together” (pp. 108, 111). The third is “the right to creative activity,” evident in the work of artists in “mobilizing communities and redefining the conditions of perception of their social and spatial environment” (p. 108). While such ideas are a far cry from the purposes of the traditional commons, which were to provide resources for food and shelter, Susser and Tonnelat (2013) argue that these uses of public infrastructure when they occur together, “give us a glimpse of a city built on the
social needs of the population” (p. 116). The commons becomes a verb, “communing”, to describe the process by which people use such public infrastructure to come together across traditional class, gender and ethnic divisions and to assert their mutual interests (Susser and Tonnelat, 2013, p. 108).

Susser and Tonnelat’s notion of the commons bears some likeness to Hannah Arendt’s notion of the public sphere, which “brings people together to deliberate over issues of political, collective concern” (Breese, 2011, p. 139). But the difference between the commons and the public sphere is that the commons implies an awareness of and commitment and responsibility to the site itself, which is indeed a theme that becomes apparent in the examples of VPB projects discussed further in this paper. Since the late twentieth century, numerous examples of subcultural public spheres or indeed “counterpublics” have since been identified. These recognize the heterodoxy and pluralistic nature of the kinds of diverse political conversations that have come into being as a result of feminist and counter-cultural movements. Where such public spheres have been identified, they are seen to operate through complexity, ambiguity, and the active and embodied participation of citizens (Crossley and Roberts, 2004).

Susser and Tonnelat’s three concepts of the commons are all potentially evident in transitory arts in public spaces. Situated in public spaces such as parks, cemeteries and railway stations, public arts are dependent on the existence of the public services identified in the first concept of the commons. Such public spaces also provide opportunities for encounter – the second concept of the commons, and they provide the opportunity for creative activity – the third concept. But there are additional similarities between the social theories described here and public or site-specific art. Like Susser and Tonnelat’s notion of “communing”, Kwon (1997) describes how site-specific art has increasingly come to mean that the work itself “no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process” and is increasingly conceived of and valued as an ephemeral event as opposed to, for example, a sculpture or mural, which were common in mid-twentieth century public art (p. 91; see also Lacy, 1995). Finally, it is the playful nature of public arts that facilitates the exploration of social issues, as discussed in relation to the case study below.

Arts in public spaces are often the subject of social and political contention, and this has long been the case. Courtney Pederson, for example, describes the way that Titled Arc, a public sculpture by Richard Serra that was installed in a plaza in lower Manhattan in 1981, was received with intense public and critical hostility. Pederson considers the reception of the sculpture to have been shaped by public anxieties about the city of New York at the time. In the wake of a financial crisis, in the midst of a drought and suffering from chaos caused by a public transport strike, New Yorkers saw: “The obstructive nature of the artwork, cutting through the plaza like a wall, and the evolving patina of its surface (rusting into an oxidized coating) would have exacerbated the sense of a city in decay” (Pederson, 2015, p. 7). With Titled Arc causing such profound offense to the very city in which it was situated, the General Services Administration – the agency that had commissioned it – was then forced to remove it (Pederson, 2015). However, what is different in case of the transitory arts described here is that the existence of the work in public spaces creates not just a challenge to its audience in relation to political or social issues but, as Susser and Tonnelat would suggest, and opportunity for dialogue and development. Wilkie (2012) describes a similar phenomenon when she talks about site-specific performance which, in a context of increased human mobility, “has the tools to enable a re-imagining of what it means to live in a mobile world” (p. 204).
**Objectives and methodology**

A familiar manifestation of the commons is the use of existing public spaces to house and exhibit transitory arts activities. To illustrate such use, the paper now returns us to Vancouver, on the west coast of Canada where, in 2011, the VPB began a pilot project in which it turned thirteen park facilities located in public parks across the city into artist studios. Local artists were selected through a competitive application process to hold three-year residencies in a park in exchange for community engagement through their arts projects. The facilities that were used as studios were actually “fieldhouses” – the small cottages originally built to house park caretakers in the nineteenth century. Of the 60 fieldhouses in Vancouver parks, 13 were adopted for the residencies for the period 2011-2104. While the projects are notable in themselves, the initiative itself is also a study in the increasingly ubiquitous and quotidian reach of the publicly funded arts. In my discussions with representatives of the VPB in October 2014, they expressed the aim that the program be extended into all of Vancouver’s parks. Their aim was twofold: to encourage celebratory events that were imbued with unique and locally inspired arts rather than the generic phenomenon of “jumping castles and hotdog stalls” (personal communication, October 2014); and second, to put the arts in the route of everyday park users: joggers, dog-walkers and commuters short-cutting through the park, parents taking their children to and from the playground.

A case study approach is taken to this study, in which the VPB provides a single case of the arts as a commons. A case study approach is appropriate because the study is exploratory, investigating the means by which arts in public spaces adopt the role of a commons, rather than testing an existing theory; because it seeks to examine causal mechanisms - the factors that lead to the arts become a space for the consideration of common social and political issues; and because the study seeks to provide thick description of these mechanisms and their effects (Gerring, 2007, ch. 3). The VPB program was selected as a typical case of a public arts program: it is a publicly supported arts program, for which the public agency (the Parks Board) held no agenda in terms of selecting arts projects that addressed specific social or political issues, but rather to explore a variety of unconventional uses of public parks. The successful artists in the VPB program were required to keep a blog of their residency activities. If, as is argued below, the arts projects performed the function of a commons, these blogs have the potential to extend that commons into the digital sphere, although as the examples below suggest, by far the main contributors to the blogs were the artists themselves and many of the blogs were used chiefly to promote events rather than to chart artistic or social developments that took place. Collectively, however, these posts also provide rich data about the aims and contributions of the VPB program in relation to how participatory artistic activity providing a “communing” function. The study used discourse analysis of the artists’ and stakeholders’ blog posts to investigate the ways in which the arts provided a function as commons. The researcher chose to focus on blog posts rather than interviewing artists or participants, again because of the exploratory nature of the study, in order to observe whether and how the parties involved identified the process of public art making as a form of “communing.”

**Results and discussion**

The projects were led by individual artists or teams of artists, across a range of genres. At Falaise Park, composer Mark Haney used the fieldhouse as a practice and rehearsal studio for music ensembles and composition, and produced site-specific work for adults and
children. Visitors to the park were invited “into the processes of both performing and creating and, in the summer months, Sunset Sounds will fill the park with music on select Friday evenings.” At Strathcona Park, David Gowman, otherwise known variously as Oncle Hoonki or Mr Fire-Man, ran a “fabulous hornshop” from the fieldhouse - a venue for a series of workshops on making musical instruments from local timber collected, which were then used to make music to engage with park visitors. At Elm Park, artist Germaine Koh created League, an initiative that is clearly reminiscent of Susser and Tonnelat’s notion of the commons as the site for reworking social relations. League is described as “an open group that gathers to play invented games and sports as a practice of creative problem-solving;” participants “gather on the last Sunday of each month to improvise and strategize new ways of interacting” (League, 2014). At Hadden Park, Rebecca Bayer initiated a “map exchange,” in which artists and “specialized practitioners and community members” create a series of maps of the local area in a process that is “generative, inclusive and open-ended” (Tenfifteenmaple, 2014).

The artists taking part in the VPB initiative were required to address no specific theme or task in their activity, other than to include a community-engagement component to their work. The blogs vary dramatically in the way they were used. For several projects, they primarily served the function of promoting upcoming or completed events (e.g. the Contemporary Art Gallery at the Burrard Marina Park, the Tenfifteen maple project at Hadden Park, the Bird Project at the Queen Elizabeth Park) and were relatively static. Others (such as the Something Collective and Falaise Park Music) took the form of a journal, documenting the activities that took place at and away from the fieldhouses, and the artists’ review of these events. The blogs for which there was more frequent, self-reflective content feature more prominently in this discussion. An analysis of their blogs reveals several consistent themes: chiefly, belonging and homelessness, the urban environment, participation and collaboration. For some projects, these themes are explicit and intentional. Melanie Schambach’s project at Moberly Park Field House, for example, is that of a self-described “social artist.” Schambach addresses all three themes in her introduction to the project, stating that it “facilitates participatory painting processes that encourage participants to nurture their voices, open dialogue, and think critically on social issues relevant to their communities.” Her aim at Moberly Park was to “create new narratives of belonging, inclusion and health by cross-creating a series of participatory paintings weaving meanings and stories on communal physical spaces” (Schambach, 2014, Moberly Park).

**Homelessness and belonging**

While the issue of belonging is a core theme of Schambach’s project, for other VPB projects the theme of belonging or not belonging came up in advertently in the process of undertaking the project. For example, Gowman’s “Mr Fire-man” blog from Strathcona Park discusses the mild tensions caused by his occupation of public space at some length. At the height of summer, in June 2014, Gowman wrote that he was often approached by people in the park to ask if he was homeless, and that these visits were often followed by visits from park rangers who:

[...] exit their vehicle and saunter directly toward me with a look of mild authoritarian concern upon their faces, clearly obliged to complete a task, the nature of which is revealed by a now familiar first question: “So, are you sleeping on the porch?
I would propose a scenario that is surely preceding all of these authority figures and their “Are you homeless” inquiries. In this given park populated by cell phone owning citizenry, many will pass by my busy worksite on the way to the washrooms (attached to the same building). On any regular day at Strathcona Park prior to my residency, the people you would see on the porch were homeless, and commonly making a big mess (usually in the form of spread cardboard, food packaging, food waste, cigarette packaging and smashed glass). So now you have a new guy on the porch making another big mess (wood chips!), only now he is seven got the audacity to set up a table and invite friends over! The nerve. So what does the average citizen do in this given scenario? Why, call the authorities (Gowman, 2014).

Gowman’s account is written in a light-hearted style that suggests it is as much for the amusement of the reader as it is an expression of frustration. However, it indicates a contestation over rights to the park, apparent in the irony that Gowman himself, explicitly granted occupancy of the fieldhouse by the Parks Board, is challenged by “cell phone owning citizenry” who assume his own lack of belonging in contrast to their own right to the park and then, on the back of their misconception, demonstrate their willingness to take responsibility for the park by reporting him to the “authority figures.” Through its description of the encounter between the straitlaced citizenry and 30 park rangers on the one hand, and the artist whose persona is sometimes almost clownish, the blog calls to mind Gardiner’s argument that the public sphere operates at least as much through humor, play and the “inexhaustible metaphorical richness of living speech” (Gowman, 2004, p. 39) as through rational debate.

The combined use of the fieldhouse in the park and Gowman’s blog act as a commons, capturing broader tensions in Vancouver over homelessness. Internationally, issues of homelessness and belonging are hallmarks of twenty-first century public concern, extending from the well-being of local homeless people in cities to the problem of statelessness and migration restrictions in relation to asylum-seekers. However, homelessness in Vancouver is considered a critical social issue: the rate of homelessness is steadily increasing despite city and provincial government efforts to address it. Furthermore, parks are important locations for homeless people because they provide both temporary accommodation and a forum for social interaction. The focus on homelessness in Gowman’s account of his Strathcona Park interactions is an example of a nascent reworking of community that Susser and Tonnelat (2013) describe, built around issues of pertinence to local people. Questions of homelessness and belonging are far from unique to this particular project; they are arguably themes in many if not most community-based arts projects which by definition assert and challenge the boundaries of the community they represent.

However, Gowman’s Strathcona Park project is interesting precisely because homelessness was not a specific theme of the pipe-making music project, but an issue that grew in the process of making it. It is, therefore, an example of how the VPB initiative effectively created a commons through the combined physical space of the park and virtual space of Gowman’s blog. It is also an illustration of Williams’ point that culture is found in active processes of interaction and creation, rather than its products.

*Participation and collaboration*

A second theme of the VPB projects is that of social connectedness. Here, the VPB initiative is as much an example of Susser and Tonnelat’s (2013) second identified commons – the use
of public spaces to experience “simultaneity and encounters” (p. 108) – as it is related to their third – the specific use of the arts as commons. As an example of the theme of social connectedness, in the “home stretch” of his residency at Falaise Park, Mark Haney “started taking stock of how the experience has changed me as an artist”:

All along I’ve been aware that this whole experience is a two-way street; I hope I’ve had an effect on the park and some of the young people I’ve worked with over the last two years, but I’ve also been open to letting the residency have an effect on me [...] There’s one very important change that has happened over this time. When I started this residency, and relaunched Little Chamber Music at the same time, it was as one person. I was officially a solo artist when the field house residencies began, and Little Chamber was pretty much just me. Over the course of the residency, I realized that everything I do is really a collaboration at the end of the day, and I lost interest in working alone. I’ve become very comfortable with the fact that I do my strongest work when I have like-minded collaborators and co-conspirators to work with. My favourite ideas on any project are inevitably the ones I didn’t think of (Haney, 2014).

Haney’s blog post signals the transformative impact that the VPB initiative had on his artistic work and, like Gowman’s post about his apparent homelessness, it indicates that this theme emerged in the process of the art-making. In contrast, for other projects it was a pre-determined aim; Schambach’s “Re-Invent” project at Moberly Park, for example, set out to provide “an open space for social artists to nurture their art practices by exploring participatory art processes, building capacity through skills exchanges, and creating in collaboration” (Schambach, 2014). Other project blogs also suggest that the arts created a commons amongst different people. David Gowman, for example, provided a caption to a photograph of a performance involving his wooden instruments: “At this level of intimacy, the audience blurs with the performers” (Gowman, 2014). In this respect, the VPB program encouraged a growing movement amongst artists who may not have considered themselves public artists before but who “have been exploring new ways of working which challenge traditional boundaries and confront the complex relationship between artist, environment and spectator” (Walwin, 2010, p. 11). As Walwin (2010) notes, for these artists, “contributions from members of the public have become an integral and influencing factor within their practice” (p. 11).

**The urban environment**

By far the most prevalent theme in the VPB artist in residents’ blogs is the theme of the urban environment. Almost all of the participating projects involved some kind of interaction with the resources of the park in which they were located. At the Slocan Park fieldhouse, Still Moon Arts Society ran an “Ecology Arts and Music salon” to celebrate the Renfrew Ravine and waterway, which lie in an adjoining park, and also collected “Still Creek Stories” from the past and current residents of the surrounding area about the area itself (Still Moon Arts, 2013). At Queen Elizabeth Park, the Bird Project produced “socially engaged art that raises awareness about issues concerning local and migratory birds as part of the City of Vancouver’s Bird Friendly Strategy.” The artists invited community members on guided walks through the neighbourhood to identify birds and their habitats, and conducted art workshops to promote a greater understanding of the local ecology,
encouraging and awareness of “non-human uses of the city” (Garbe and Raiche-Savoie, 2013). At McBride Park, LocoMoto Art ran seed-saving and organic gardening workshops, as well as a sound workshop to re-create the once vibrant but now absent sounds of animal species that formerly occupied the space.

For some projects, the environment of the park appeared to be integral to their conception. Several projects used the physical park resources to create art pieces: at MacLean Park, Sharon Kallis and Todd DeVries used green waste, particularly invasive plant species, in an urban weaving art project, while David Gowman used wood collected from Strathcona park trees to create his musical instruments. Issues of environmental appreciation, understanding of urban ecological systems and the impact of environmental destruction are obviously key social concerns of the early twenty-first century, and there is a high probability that the VPB initiative attracted artists who had a pre-existing interest in urban environment themes. For other projects, growing familiarity with the fieldhouse itself inspired an interest in investigating the local environment. At the Burrard Fieldhouse, for example, Raymond Boisjoly described his motivation for enlisting artist Nathan Crompton to present a talk at the fieldhouse. Boisjoly described how:

I was interested in talking with him specifically about the article that he co-authored [...] about the Kitsilano Reserve which is immediately proximate to this studio – because it had come up a few times, so I was just really anxious to think about the necessity to think through that process. The studio being given by the City of Vancouver to arts groups, and individuals, and institutions like the CAG – it seems like a good means not simply to activate the space but also to come to understand something too – that there’s a more complex history behind the fact that these field houses have fallen out of use, and it seems like an interesting thing to talk about (Boisjoly, 2014).

In one sense, the theme of the urban environment is closely associated with the VPB’s initiative as a commons, because it signals the importance of the sites themselves in facilitating the conversations that emerged from the arts projects. In this sense, the parks are also genuinely “indigenous venues” as the Urban Institute used the term, indicating the value placed on sites themselves.

However, in comparison to the other two themes discussed here, this theme is surprisingly less indicative of the commons as a “work in progress.” In the two sections above, the extended quotes from Gowman and Haney, respectively, signal that a theme evolved, and that theme challenged aspects of themselves as artists in relation to the project. So, Gowman’s misidentification as homeless and his consequent frustration raised questions about belonging and responsibility to the Strathcona Park, and Haney’s community-based work gave him an insight into the benefits of collaboration for his own practice. In contrast, where the project blogs include information about the projects’ engagement with the local environment, the posts are not reflective but simply report or celebrate the project events. So, the Urban Weavers at MacLean Park describe the invasive nature of English Ivy and its potential as weaving material, while a guided tour by the Bird Project at Queen Elizabeth Park identified the hazards for birds within a one-block radius of the park. But these examples suggest a more linear and less dynamic relationship between the artists and the process of art-making, as though the outcomes have to some extent been pre-determined at the commencement of the project.
Conclusion
The combined effect of the 13 VPB artist-in-residencies in park fieldhouses was to make the arts ubiquitous across central Vancouver, to locate them in the common and freely publicly accessible spaces of the parks and to make the arts a quotidian experience for Vancouver residents, through which they could come together to contribute to artistic representations and blog discussions of social issues. A significant contribution that the VPB initiative makes to reworking the everyday is in the use of common park resources – invasive weeds, wood from trees, bird calls and topographic features - in the creation of art projects. In this way, the VPB initiative is both rooted in and a celebration of the apparently banal features of the spaces in which it is located. The VPB initiative is an example of the provision and then playing out of a commons, consisting both of the physical space of the fieldhouse in the park and the media of the blogs that recorded the projects, to influence the everyday lives of Vancouver’s residents.

This paper has sought to highlight the value of common public spaces to a now-prevalent belief that the arts play an important role in our everyday life. It has shown that this belief is evident in public policy and programs. It has argued that the “everyday arts” are an example of a contemporary commons fitting to the transformative potential of our cities. The community-based arts in parks program described here gives rise to new conversations and relationships. In a passage that may well have described the VPB projects, Raymond Williams (1989) wrote: “The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land” (p. 4). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate, the prevalence of the everyday in public cultural policy suggests that the VPB project is not unique but is representative of many arts programs across many cities around the world which seek to increase the ubiquity of the arts and the opportunity they offer to collectively work on the issues that confront us.

References

Further reading

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