

Afterword: Empowering Arts, Animating Communities

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30 years ago, I was diagnosed with Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma cancer. I was soon treated with radiotherapy at a public hospital. The radiotherapy machine was so heavy that it was normally placed in the basement where there was no window. In those days the environment at the public hospital was terrible. The basement was dark and the dim lighting yellowish. The atmosphere of a gathering of cancer patients and their families was inevitably depressing. A middle-aged man was telling his wife that he would lose his eyesight after the treatment. A young boy, who was still a bit chubby, sat in sad silence. His face was outstandingly red, probably a reaction of his young skin to the radiation. It was like a cursed place where people were doomed to die. Going to the place for treatment regularly was physically and psychologically torturing. During those dark days, I made myself a promise: If I could get out of this place alive, I would definitely make some changes to places like that.

Thank goodness my treatment was successful, and the therapy ended in early 1992. I had not forgotten my promise. During the Easter holiday in 1994, I was engaged in a one-time project with a group of friends and students to paint murals at the cancer ward in the basement of the Prince Edward Hospital. It was intensive and exhausting to paint over 10 murals of refreshing and soothing landscapes within 4 days of holiday, but the result was most delightful and gratifying. The brightening of the basement with sunlight, blue sky and greeneries excited the staff, the patients, and visitors. Soon staff from other wards began requesting murals in their places. We

realized we could not stop there and immediately worked out another mural project at a children's ward, for it is always heartbreaking to the staff and the families to see children hospitalized, not to mention the feeling of the children separated from their families. The colourful murals not only brightened the ward but the cartoon figures we introduced also added a touch of delight to the children and their families and showed to them there were people who cared.

My professional career as artist and curator focuses mainly on modern and contemporary art, but I have always found the "art" I have been dealing with is too limiting and twisted, in comparison with the "art" that has long existed in human histories. My early encounter with anthropology reminded me that the human practice of the arts (maybe we should use the phrase "creative expressions" instead of "arts", as the concept of "arts" as we know today did not exist in most cultures) has much broader definitions and social functions and are tightly knitted with community lives. These various forms of creative expressions are essential for the survival of any individual and community.

The mural project gave me a concrete experience to vitrify my understanding of the meaning and functions of arts. Since the project at the Prince Edward Hospital, requests for similar projects at various hospitals have never stopped. I realized that there were certain forms of arts that were forgotten but were desperately needed. In 1994, with the help of many sympathetic partners, a non-profit community arts organization, Art in Hospital, was formed. It remains active today.

The concept of "art" or "fine arts" as we commonly use today was basically created in the West during the late 18th Century, since then the meaning and functions of creative expression have been gradually erased and twisted, until when "arts" have become something exclusively created by the specially trained and the talented and is mainly for the elites and the educated.

Community arts open up a lost chapter. They bring arts back to the community, revitalize the communal engagement, rebuild the meanings and functions of creative expression it once had. In modern society, many suffer from alienation, discrimination, and helplessness. What community arts can do is to animate individuals as well as communities, especially the marginal and underprivileged ones. The words "animation" and "empowerment" are commonly used in community arts. I like the former better as it suggests our objective is to animate, to arouse the power already existed within individuals and communities that are for some reasons this

power is ignored or suppressed. “Empowerment”, however, suggests some external forces given to a third party to give them power. This passivity is negative and somewhat humiliating. What we need to do is to empower the arts, whose potential power has been dramatically trimmed and sidetracked. While I have no objection to the elitist arts, at least we should show how far the arts could go and create art that meets other needs. We need to empower arts by rediscovering their lost possibilities, and to animate individuals and communities to bring back their own power and the “can-do” spirit that already existed inside.

In the last ten years, we have witnessed a drastic increase of community arts in Hong Kong. As a cultural management programme, we felt obligated to provide the knowledge and practical skills to meet the needs of this growing practice. Since 2014, the MACM programme at CUHK has been annually organizing a forum plus workshops around various topics in community arts. Opened to students as well as the public, the event is normally held on campus in March, when the largest art fair in Asia, the Art Basel Hong Kong, is held. Such scheduling is intentional. At a time when the city is dazzled by the glamour of the fine arts, we would like to remind people that other than fame, ego and money, arts could do much more.

In order to generate a better understanding of local and global theories and practices in community arts, we invited speakers and practitioners from all parts of the world. The event has not only attracted many local practitioners, but also visitors from Taiwan and the Mainland. The forum has been temporarily affected by COVID-19. Once the pandemic ends, the forum would come back. Meanwhile, we need to rely on the digital media. In addition to the *Community Arts Yellow Page* we set up several years ago and the on-line forum happened last year, this e-publication is our way to keep our work going.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the staff, the speakers and participants for their support over the years. A big thank particularly to Benny (co-editor), Fancy and Nocus, who have contributed a lot over the years to make the university a nurturing grounds of community arts in Hong Kong. Most of all to all the speakers, many of them have generously agreed to write for this book.

In the coming years, I trust that the programme, led by Benny and a team of devoted staff, can continue to contribute to turning art back to be an effective and meaningful instrument for the betterment of our community.