

The Art of Environmental Adult Education: Creative Responses to a Contemporary Ecological Imperative

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Abstract

In this article, I share the story of *The Positive Energy Quilts*, a collective environmental adult education art project on Vancouver Island, British Columbia that challenged the building of a power plant. I illustrate how this project creatively, poignantly, and stealthily drew out knowledge, and visual-counter narratives, challenged mainstream messages, and attracted media attention. This project provided an imaginative, intentional forum where power was both contested and exercised on the neo-liberal ecological landscape.

Keywords: Environmental adult education; quilts; arts; visual-counter narratives; women.

As we grow older, we should become not less radical but more so.

Margaret Lawrence, 1958

Drawing on the energy from Margaret Lawrence's words I feel obligated to begin by reflecting upon how I got to this place in this time; to reflect upon my now twenty years of accumulated national and international work in the field of adult education. Over the course of twenty years, I have facilitated community workshops, taught in academia, researched and written, mobilized and organized, and felt both joy and struggle. I came to the environmental theme not through choice, but rather through necessity. I was working for the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), focusing on adult literacy, and undertaking an undergraduate degree in English Literature at the University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, when the United Nations announced they would host their Conference on Environment and Development, colloquially known as The Earth Summit, in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The ICAE found itself, whether through proficiency or insouciance, tasked with organizing the grandest environmental education activity the world had yet to witness. Problematically for us, however, was the verity that although discourses of peace, feminism, poverty, class, and human rights sinuously dotted the landscape of adult education, the environment, except for certain scant notations in its literature, had been little entertained (Author, 1999). Upon hearing of our providence to surmount this 'minor' problem by organizing the Environmental Education event, my Brazilian colleague, Moema Viezzer, turned to me and stated emphatically: "You are the one amongst us attending the university so you must be the one to learn what we must know about the environment." Shuffling between misgivings around the university's ability to foster such learning and confidence in the process of adult education and learning, I switched my major to Environmental Studies and joined this conflicted environmental movement.

I also came to the arts and their creative purpose somewhat unintentionally, albeit also out of necessity. Although speaking of another time and another place, these words by Arundhati Roy at the 2003 World Social Forum in India capture the copiousness of the days leading up to and during the Earth Summit:

"Our strategy should be not only to confront the empire [neo-liberal capitalism] but to mock it . . . with our art . . . our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness, and our ability to tell our own stories; stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe."

They also reflect the national and global work a group of colleagues from Asia, South Pacific, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean and myself, undertook to coax into being an educational practice true to the vitality, promise, critical needs, and challenges articulated at Rio de Janeiro and by Roy. Indeed, we had little choice but to follow the advice of the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado: ‘to make the road by walking’, as we negotiated the treacherous curves of an environmental education movement focused solely on children and schools, and the ecological loose gravel of adult education noted above. What emerged over time was an admixture of theory and practice labelled environmental adult education. It responded to the world of adults, was politically oriented, but perhaps most importantly, placed a determined emphasis on the potential of the human aesthetic dimension to politicize and invigorate learning and action. We believed unleashing creativity through the arts was a potent means not only to make neo-liberal ideology explicit, but to rework it, rendering visible what was left unsaid and unseen by exerting a powerful influence, the imagination, upon problematic normative depictions of the world. Much to our delight, we found that we were not alone. That running parallel to our own work, were environmentally focused, arts-based activities, that were stunning in their creativity, skill, and scope. This article illustrates just one of these activities through a story of *The Positive Energy Quilts*, a project by a group of women on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. This story exemplifies an often ignored, but very powerful process of aesthetic and intentional community learning process, a critical, creative process of collective engagement that addressed one aspect of neo-liberal economic determinism and the local/global environmental change imperative dialectic.

Challenges for environmental adult education

It would be politically naïve to advise [children and youth] that the loss of work, income and self-realisation... constitutes a sacrifice that they ought to make in order to enable future generations to live in greater ‘harmony’ with their natural environment.

(Stehr, 2001)

When we entered the environmental education world, we encountered a conceptual space based on a number of assumptions that helped us to clarify our own theory and practice. There is insufficient space in this chapter to elaborate on all of these assumptions, therefore, I have identified three of the most significant ones. The first was the assumption that audiences were children and schools. We argued that this was the height of folly and that it was politically naïve to ignore, or simply to leave to volunteers, non-educators, or chance, the critical learning and engagement needed by those who actually had, to varying degrees, political power and the knowledge of experience. We did not invite it nor did we necessarily take the blame but as adults, the environmental crisis was happening on our watch and the changes and sacrifices had to be ours to make. But I will never forget a time in the Philippines when the facilitators attempted a game created for children titled ‘The Web of Life’ with a group of women. The game was introduced and the women began to throw the ball of yarn around in a comical but predominantly, lacklustre way. When I could no longer help myself I asked if they had ‘learned’ anything from this exercise. One woman smiled at me and quietly stated:

“If you wanted to talk about life’s connections, you did not need this string. Have you ever watched what happens to a spider when you take the broom to her web? How she must begin again, re-spin her life? We know how we, and this community, are ‘webbed’ together. We have had to re-build our lives many times due to the ‘brooms’ of environmental destruction. We realise the links between what the world does and the poisoning of our water, our trees, our children, our lives.”

The second foundational principle of environmental education, this has remained constant over thirty years, is the centrality of the concept of behavioural modification, defined as a process aimed to “change and control...[people’s] actions” in order to assert the correct desired behaviour and thereby extinguish what is considered to be undesirable (Scott, 1998, p.101). On one hand, this ambition had echoes in our own work. As adult educators committed to social justice, our work focused on disrupting and transforming racist, sexist, and homophobic thought and practice. However, our

emphasis was always on the collective and we therefore were compelled to problematize and reconfigure ecological emphases on the individual.

Individual behavioural change seemed to all but ignore the powerful structures and systems at the heart of ecological destruction, choosing instead to chastise the individual for the growing list of environmental woes with a catalogue of 'to do' items. While we would never disagree with the collective potential of small, individual changes, we were wary of discourses of 'personal choice' such as, deciding to purchase only local, organic foods, just 'saying no' to air transport, and putting up signs to reject the thousands of propaganda flyers that litter Canadian doorsteps daily. Making these 'choices' is important but the discursive lens neglects issues of class and privilege, gender, and location, government chemical subsidies, and the prolific marketing machine that is the corporate world. Egelton (2004) succinctly sums up the major political challenge we face in his colourful proclamation on the predatory nature of capitalism:

"In its hunt for profit it will travel any distance, endure any hardship, shack up with the most obnoxious of companions, suffer the most abominable humiliations, tolerate the most tasteless wallpaper and cheerfully betray its next of kin...When it comes to consumers who wear turbans and those who do not, those who sport flamboyant crimson waistcoats and those who wear nothing but a loincloth, it is sublimely even-handed. It thrives on busting bounds and slaying sacred cows. Its desire is unslakeable and its space infinite. Its law is the flouting of all limits, which makes law indistinguishable from criminality. In its sublime ambition and extravagant transgressions, it makes its most shaggily anarchic critics look staid and suburban (p.19).

Environmental problems are in fact a direct outcome of this predatory capitalism, economic development, corporatization, and a market economy that buys, sells, and finds the cheapest methods possible with little regard for human or ecological well-being as so many believe (e.g., Foster, 2001; Speth, 2008; Stehr, 2001). Paying little mind to this commanding social, economic, and political force is to misunderstand its ability to undermine individual behaviour change. Our challenge was to be cognizant of the politics and develop an educational practice that could expand socio-ecological questions rather than reduce the answers, launch us into the skirmish rather than disentangle us from the menace, and cultivate an equally outrageous collective sense of power and ability to demand, control, and manoeuvre. We contextualized our environmental adult education work within the discursive framework of the politics of capitalism and aimed to make its normative ideology explicit and visible. Without ever losing sight of the individual, we moved our practice from the diminutive to the potent force and promise of the collective.

A final pervasive discourse we encountered on our foray into the environmental milieu was a combination of awareness-raising and scientific proficiency. On the one hand, this helped to explain why adult education had not taken up the environment challenge. Whilst social issues are easily understood, science is an altogether different story and the environment was presented as a precarious narrative of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and unassailable expertise. But there were also concerns raised as we pondered the complexity of the unaware public and the prowess of science. Indeed, awareness-raising pivoted and continues today, on the notion of an uninformed public requiring "large numbers of fairly capable specialised technical personnel" (Wang, Zhu, Tang, He, Xu, Gao & Gu, 2010, p.83). The aim is therefore to provide reams of ecological facts, statistical, and scientific data to demonstrate the severity of the environmental crisis at hand. The argument is the more the public understands the science and the more information they have, the more likely they are, to return to the point above, to "change the behaviours required for long-term sustainability" (Stainstreet, 2008, p.9). Scientists, although the efficacy of findings such as those around climate change are hotly contested and oftentimes, politically motivated or manipulated, have provided invaluable information. Moreover, no one person can know everything and introducing new information is how we expand new understandings and make new connections. But Stehr (2009) reminds us "despite the broad scientific consensus about the reality of climate change...in the last two decades, for example, the world has inched no closer to a reduction in the growth of greenhouse gas

emissions” (p.70). Going further, Boden (2010) reminds us that any new idea, “in order to be [useful] must be it intelligible. No matter how different it is, we must be able to understand it in terms of what we knew before” (p.8). A litany of environmental woes decontextualized and unconnected from how people live in or understand the world can leave them feeling dazed, confused, and worse, utterly powerlessness. Indeed, a common response from exasperated adults in many workshops we facilitated was to question what they were meant to do with all the ‘conflicting’ environmental information offered by different groups.

Relying heavily on outside and scientific knowledge also dismisses or ignores people’s existing and diverse ecological knowledge, re-enforcing the idea that we can attribute different levels of status to knowledge, based on the rationale that some people have knowledge that is valuable while others do not. In other words, this creates an inimical positioning of privilege and precedence on one side and marginality and diminution on the other. For example, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) cite studies that suggest women have much less environmental knowledge than men. This, of course, begs a number of questions such as, What is this ‘knowledge?; How is this knowledge being judged or defined?; What is the standard being used? Does this mean men alone will change the status quo? Clearly this biased and indefensible position of superiority is easily refuted by studies demonstrating women’s profound ecological knowledge(s) of traditional seed production or medicinal plant cultivation and usage to name but two (i.e. MacGregor, 2006; Strathy, 2004). Through our work around the world, we came to recognize and appreciate the plethora of other knowledge displayed in each workshop or university classroom including experiential (through lived experience with poisoned water or traffic congestion), embodied (the manifestation of disease linked to chemical pollutants), and indigenous knowledge that spoke to us of “meanings beyond Western rationality; of agriculture and the supernatural; we know how to read the iconography of nature when the news hasn’t arrived yet; ecological understanding is not rooted in the intellect but in the desire to understand the process of life” (Cole, 2006). Indeed, just as subjectivity is multiple, positionally variable, and contingent, so too are knowledge positions and we often witnessed adults juxtaposing multiple understandings and ideas, argued from diverse subjective knowledge positions thereby laying waste to normative notions of adults as entrenched in one particular *Gestalt* (mind set). We grounded our environmental adult education, therefore, in the concept introduced by Paulo Freire as ‘concientización’ (1970) and expanded by feminists as the practice of consciousness-raising (e.g., Allen, 2000). We began not from a platform of ecological deficiency (or knowledge narrowly defined) but rather from a stand of “cognitive respect [for] all those who cannot claim the status of ‘experts’” as defined in our male-centred, rational world (Berger in Solway, 1997, p.108). Our spaces of ‘concientización’ drew on the circumference of existing experiences and ways of knowing, challenged hidden assumptions, encouraged diversity of opinion, and often sought to cultivate instability in order for learning to be truly transformative, it must encourage risk-taking (Eccleston, 2004). For us, ‘concientización’ also served as a springboard for subversive thought and this brings me to another critical type of knowledge: aesthetic, creative, and imaginative knowing.

Aesthetic, creative, and imaginative knowing

In a situation where the miserable reality can be changed only through radical political praxis, the concern with aesthetics demands justification. It would be senseless to deny the element of despair inherent in this concern.

(Herbert Marcuse, 1939)

Of all knowledge, aesthetic, creative, and imaginative knowledge, the art of knowing, is the most undervalued. Some argue atom bombs and tar-sand oil extraction (i.e. Science) entailed high degrees of creativity and imagination and therefore, these terms were too problematic and contested to be of value. For others, the arts and the aesthetic are nugatory, irrelevant to the rational learning required for contemporary problems and thereby banished to an ontological homelessness in an outburst of contempt (Felshin, 1995; Greene, 1995; Shakotko and Walter, 1999). Further, Boden (2010) perpetuates the unrelenting hierarchy of ‘art’ and ‘craft’: “the crafts aren’t dependent on highly imaginative combinational creativity, nor driven by increasingly adventurous exploratory creativity,

nor sporadically progressed by transformational creativity – as fine art is” (p.4). But these do not stand without challenge.

To my mind Foucault (1970) provides a thought-provoking challenge to the limitations of Cartesian, scientific rationality and knowledge assumptions when he wrote:

“...out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage [in Borges], all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our [western rational] thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the plans with which we are accustomed to take the wild profusion of existing things, and continued long afterwards to disturb and threaten... This passage quotes ‘a certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that “animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor; (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.’ In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing that we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that...is demonstrated...is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that* (emphasis his, p. xv).”

His use of ‘our’ notwithstanding – for whom in fact is ‘we’? – Foucault identifies a system of classifying, ordering, and understanding the world that makes radically different connections, that go well beyond the restrictions of contemporary rationalist, monolithic lenses that threaten to control the parameters of what can be thought and known. I, and a great many other feminists, challenge that atom bombs and their like are conceived within a rationalist, masculinist, capitalist framework of dominance and the maximization of profit and therefore, stand irreconcilably apart from feminist, activist art, social, and ecological framings of the creative and the imaginative (Author, 2009; Manicom & Walters, 2012; Mullins, 2003). As to Boden’s diminution of craft, I shall shatter that fragile façade in my example of the *Positive Energy Quilts*.

To paraphrase a point made in a talk by Canadian poet Nourbese-Philip, the arts are not the insignificant site of struggle many presume them to be, but their power often lies in masking that very fact. Of all our *cognitive* capacities imaginative and creative thought through aesthetic cultural engagement are the ones that permit us to give the most credence to alternative realities (Greene, 1995). The arts are simultaneously cognitive and affective (e.g., Branagan, 2005; Author, 2012; Lipson Lawrence, 2005; Vaugeois, 2009). In the service of social and ecological justice, they are embodied practices emerging from lived experiences as much as they are intellectual tools of ecological interrogation and socio-political learning. Yet they are also irrational and fun and in the struggle against neo-liberal environmental deterioration, we need their vivacity and irreverence. This brings me to my story of the *Positive Energy Quilts*. I begin with the context.

The context

Vancouver Island is considered ripe for economic growth and development with its British Isles moderate climate, temperate rainforest, sandy beaches, wilderness parks, year-round fishing, surfing and diving and golf and picturesque mountain vistas, villages, and coves. Indeed, it has become a magnet for people from across Canada and around the world. With doors thrown wide-open to unfettered development by the current neo-conservative government of the province, many ‘jump onto the bandwagon’. Private developers find fertile ground to profit from the influx of new homebuyers and create elaborate plans for new subdivisions, for example, that sprawl across the landscape, eating up the green space.

With an increase in population comes an increase in energy needs and the opportunity for expansion. The once fully public-owned utility British Columbia Hydro (BC Hydro) is actively developing stronger partnerships with energy corporations in the United States to expand power generation. One plan, and the platform from which our story springs, was to construct a natural gas-

burning power plant at Duke Point at Nanaimo, Vancouver Island. There are, as one would expect, contesting views around this source of energy. On their website, the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA) argues “natural gas has the potential to play a significant role in a carbon-constrained energy future as a relatively low-carbon fuel source.” The Suzuki Foundation counters that although natural gas has some advantages over other energy sources, relying on natural gas is still problematic. Gas-fired plants do emit sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides that contribute to acid rain and ground level ozone, both of which can damage forests and agricultural crops.

B.C. Hydro’s idea was to include a new pipeline that would carry natural gas from Sumas, Washington to a new gas-fired power plant proposed for a sensitive ecological location. The purpose of the power plant would have been to generate surplus electrical power that could be sold to the United States while creating some jobs for an area that was in need of new employment strategies, given the major downturn in many traditional areas such as, mining and forestry. The basic rationale, as quoted on the website of the Nanaimo Citizens Organizing Committee (NCOC) in 2003 was that “with growing North American demand, especially for natural gas used in power plants, [we must] support continental energy security.” However, on the other side, the perceived socio-environmental risks associated with the proposed Duke Point Power Project (DPPP) ignited a fire under many citizens not only on Vancouver Island, but the smaller islands just offshore as well. Almost immediately, a diverse coalition of environmentalists, activists, artists, and a variety of others began a series of organized, non-violent oppositional activities to the plant (Mace, 2005).

Before construction could begin, and as this is a crown corporation, the government mandated hearings and public meetings. These, however, were problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, developers disseminated artistic renderings, often idealized computer graphics, which did not tell the whole story of its environmental impact. The reams of data and information produced by B.C. Hydro focused on the economic benefits and pending blackouts and brownouts the Island would experience without the project. This polarized somewhat a community in need of jobs on the one hand, but also, particularly environmentally conscious on the other. Secondly, while these public meetings purported to give voice to the community they were seen merely as a façade of consultation since many felt the decision to develop had already been made and the corporation was simply going through mandated motions since this is so often the case in Canada. Thirdly, and related to the above, the inequitable power dynamics that surrounded this plant and the public information gatherings discouraged and silenced adversaries. Although there are many reasons for this, a key factor is that the correct and most important information and knowledge about the project was seen to lie with the corporation, rather than the people who made up the community. In other words, the process was simply a cloud of information that emanated largely from the corporation and the government as rhetoric that obscured their agenda and power and acted solely “as a steam-release device for the general public” (Saul cited in Branagan, 2005, p. 37).

The story

In response to the proposed power plant, approximately four hundred people attended a public meeting sponsored by the Nanaimo Citizens Organizing Committee to discuss ways to intervene, to develop strategies for opposition, including a more informed public. Fabric artist Kristin Miller attended this meeting because, as she noted, “this power plant thing was in my front yard.” During the meeting, Kristen agreed to join the Canvassing Committee and engage in outreach and educational work. Since Kristin had never before in her life been involved in anything political, she spent the first part of the meeting wondering how she could get out of this when suddenly an idea struck her which would involve her skill in fabric craft, creating something that would be a form of protest and voice. She argued to the group that women were used to tackling problems with a needle and thread so it was a logical thing to make quilts. She explained the quilts could be a medium through which a community could express its thoughts and feelings about the proposed plant. “And they all just looked at me like I was crazy - at first.”

Over fifty people immediately contacted Kristen to say they wanted to work on the quilt project. Many had never quilted before; others had never been politically active. But what they all had in common was a desire to connect with the visual protest. A core group of fifteen women artists and activists was struck who disseminated squares of fabric to elder-care facilities, artists, community organizations, schools, and to a number of other venues in Nanaimo and on Gabriola Island. No guidelines were given for what could or should go onto the quilt other than the suggestion that people make images or write words that expressed their feelings and reactions to the proposed power plant. There was an assumption, as Kristin remarked, “that [you] were meant to show opposition to the plant and so if you were in favour you maybe did not get what we were talking about!” Within a relatively short period, over forty squares were returned. Some of the squares were created by individuals; others were created by a group. However, all were colourful and heart-felt, ranging from very traditional quilt patterns to strong, political statements/images.

The core group of fifteen women came together to arrange and rearrange the squares until they finally reached consensus on the layouts of the various quilts and then the sewing began. In order to make a stronger educational connection, the women decided to engage in what they referred to as ‘quilting in public’. They began by quilting outside an arts shop and café on Gabriola Island. They also quilted in public at a rally opposing the gas plant and beside the local TV studio in Nanaimo to gain media attention. Following this, the group decided to do something even more controversial and set up their quilting operation on the sidewalk outside the building where B.C. Hydro was holding a public information session in Nanaimo.. Numerous curious passers-by stopped to chat with the women about what they were doing, and discussed the issue. But here, as Kristin remarked, “was the first time the police noticed us.” Together, the women and the police discussed the legality of quilting in public, and you will be delighted to know that quilting in public is in fact legal in Canada, unless it is attempted on an aeroplane and then, of course, the needles would be confiscated as weapons of mass destruction, but I digress.

Once the quilts were completely finished, they were taken for display at the Interveners’ Table of the Environmental Assessment Hearings in Nanaimo about the gas pipeline that would be linked to the plant. However, upon their arrival, the administration at the site said they were “too political” and they were not allowed to be placed on display. So the women moved them to an active community centre nearby. The quilters then again tried to take the quilts into the Utilities Commission Hearings but were asked to leave, again for the same reason. So the group stood with their quilts outside on the sidewalk and again drew the attention of people walking by and those leaving the hearings. The quilts were worn like cloaks at many other public events such as a protest march with hundreds of others who followed a brass band up the hill to Nanaimo City Hall. The quilters slipped into the Council chambers and hung the quilts on the walls.

Some people who made the squares took a softer approach, stitching windmills, shrimp, and scallops, or solar panels to identify various aspects of the environment that would be harmed or to draw attention to alternate energy forms. Others connected economic gain with environmental plundering such as, the image of a stream of satiny water disappearing down the throat of a coin purse accompanied by the moniker [www.stupidity.com]. In the same vein, another square read “What a bleak future, if we plan with a short-sighted vision of wealth and a barracuda mindset.” Still other participants in the quilting activity showed a deep understanding of the polluting and toxic components of the plant. For example, the image of a red devil in the shape of oil gushing forth, (This is, in fact, a case of ‘poetic license’ to which I return shortly) was surrounded by the words ammonia, carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, and particulates.

Other squares carried much bolder, political statements that challenged government positions and discourses on the gas plant. However, they truly introduced some comic relief. For example, one image was a caricature of Uncle Sam (an iconic image of the government of the United States) roasting the world over a vivid orange flame. Another was the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag with the maple leaf from the Canadian flag, replacing one star and the words “No, eh” being added. Shaw

and Martin (2005) remind us of the critical, subversively illuminating capacity of humour to speak truth to power. Humour, through art, does not simply make ideology explicit, but reworks it through a punitive and creative irony that taps into the energy of irrationality. In other words, humour “does not dismiss a subject, but rather, opens that subject for discussion...It can be a shortcut, an eye-opener...to get to the truth of the matter. The best humour allows...for joy... and a new way of looking at a very old world” (Barreca cited in Roy, 2004, p.61).

Returning to the issue of poetic license noted above, one group created a square with the image of a factory spewing thick grey-black smoke. At first, the core group of quilters attempted to argue with them because they knew B.C. Hydro had said only white steam would be emitted. It is important to note here that in the world of activism, as many of you know there is always the issue of getting the environmental facts correct if one wishes to be taken seriously by those in the ‘know’. However, the group that produced the square argued that the smoke was grey because it represented dirt. They believed that what was coming out of the stacks would still be polluting, and they did “not want to breathe it, even if [we] can't see it.” Through much debate, the group came to see

the grey-black smoke as symbolic of the pollutants, trace elements, and particulates that B.C. Hydro admits will be emitted in the steam. The sooty-coloured black smoke may also symbolize the quilters’ own feelings about an industrial plant in their backyards, or even dismay at the global climatic effects of burning fossil fuel to produce electricity.

Power and potential

Moore Lappe (2009) asks the question, What keeps us creating in a world that often violates our deepest values in a downward spiral towards climate chaos? Although The Positive Energy Quilts Project was only one of a number of protests and outreach actions against the plant, it was an important player in helping to turn the tides against the project. And there are a number of things that made it powerful.

Corporations and governments alike have the resources, the time, and the human-power to mobilize the data and information required to launch a full-scale assault on communities that do not have such resources at their disposal. Moreover, they can quickly organize public consultations and produce drawings, glossy pamphlets, and charts and disseminate these far and wide. They are produced often under the guise of helping people to make ‘the right’ decision but their aim is often to seduce and to coerce. Something seldom called for is the knowledge of so called ordinary people – what they know, think, and feel about the issues in ways that are truly expressive. Recognizing, tapping into and validating people’s ecological knowledge is a foundation of environmental adult education and was a foundation of this project. People were asked through symbol, colour, imagery, and text to speak out and to share their knowledge that ranged from understandings of the toxic by-products of the plant to the larger political situation.

By using the process they did, the quilters were able to engage the public in two very important ways. The first was to reach out, through the squares of fabric, to people around the community who had deep concerns about the proposed power plant but they were not necessarily the type, or at the age, such as seniors in care facilities, to participate in rallies or attend public hearings. Just because people are not or cannot be active in the more traditional ways, does not mean they should be excluded. In fact, they were very much present, their issues and concerns were very visibly stitched into the mosaic of the quilts. Picking up on this stitch so to speak, by quilting in public in so many diverse locations, the quilters were able to engage many other people in the process. Kristen Miller in particular, believed perhaps it was the soft, gentle approach as well as the beauty and colour of the quilts that drew people in and then they gradually began to get the message that a serious concern was being addressed:

“One man came up, who was almost in tears, said, “How can I find out about this?” He...was struck by the art and he hadn’t known anything about what we were protesting. And it didn’t matter what else was going on in the street, this man had to talk to me. He said, “I don’t even

know which questions to ask...And he was really feeling devastated in himself, so we had quite a good conversation.”

One thing that will always be certain, where there is art there will be censorship. It is interesting to note in the story that it seems to be totally acceptable to invite community members to a public hearing to voice their concerns, but it does not appear to be acceptable to have a concrete visual of those concerns hanging on a wall at the public hearing. After all, it was the quilts that were tossed out of the public forum, not the audience. As Griffiths (1993, p.30) suggests, the arts are understood to be “far more than mere self-expression or decorative pastime”. The counter-images projected on these quilts that combined beauty and politics, facts, and feelings raised red flags needing to be stamped out because they were so “vigorously effective” (p.31). The arts are attention-grabbers and attention is something that can be useful to social-movement actors aiming to get their point of view out to the larger public. The quilting in public activity and the quilts themselves attracted hundreds of passers-by who stopped to enquire, listen, and discuss the issues. Some professed they had not heard what was going on, and were pleased to listen to what the women had to say. In addition, the arts are a darling of the media. The women were photographed and interviewed often, something that would not have happened to the same degree had they simply sat outside the hearings handing out protest leaflets. It was the quilts, these soft, innocent, yet subversive and highly political objects that drew the media into the quilts’ messages.

Stories are what we use to grab things, to hold onto them. Wherever the quilts were put on display, people were asked to ‘read’ the messages they contained. The quilts told a story of a community: a past, a present, and a future. The images and stories reconceptualized, deconstructed and undermined the ‘promise’ of development and created new conceptual and analytical spaces of community landscape and life. In addition, the power plant officials were extremely confident with their charts and graphs, so convincing were their arguments and stories of employment or the prevention of blackouts, and so logical that it was virtually impossible for people to fight back using solely the same tactic. As Kristen Miller noted “We had strong feelings, but they were not necessarily logical, and the facts, other than those pre-packaged by the power companies, were surprisingly hard to find. I could not argue at their level, but I could say what I thought through my quilt square and encourage others to do the same.”

Conclusions

With an enriched understanding of the nature of the imagination... arts can be seen as [not] needing to be above or beyond politics in order to retain their creative character.

(Amy Mullin, 2003)

The Positive Energy Quilts Project is one of many creative activities in Canada and worldwide illustrative of the potential of the arts as an instrument of environmental adult education, of creative subversion, of public intervention and of engagement that confronts, includes, mobilizes, educates, and challenges for a better world. The quilts provided a vehicle, a presence of the knowledge and concerns of many, who perhaps would not otherwise be able or be willing to participate in traditional forms of political struggle. Further, by quilting in public in diverse locations, the quilters further engaged the community and here is the most substantive challenge to Boden’s narrow view of craft, I noted earlier.

Perron (1998) argues “textile practices being treated with disregard for so long that it is almost inconceivable...to acknowledge them as discursive formations from which meaning can emerge” (1998, p.124). Indeed, quilts, as alluded to above, are associated with comfort, warmth, security, familiarity, and mindless domesticity. This project blurs this conventional thinking. While the shape and construction suggest one thing, the narrative images tell a very different story as it juxtaposes the conventional with the unconventional (the critical stories), thereby providing an opportunity to

perceive something on and of an object that was otherwise not part of its ordinary experience. And therein lies another source of power. Through the seemingly gentle and comforting activity of quilting in public, (mind you, BC Hydro was not fooled by this aura domesticity for a minute), passers-by were drawn to the women and absorbed in iconographic discussion and debate and provided the springboard for the litany of toxins to come into view.

The future quality of the environment depends upon people's ability to use their creativity and imagination, their sense of social responsibility, and their ecological knowledge to address and work through environmental problems and take political action. I recognize that not all community actions defeat corporate environmental onslaughts nor are all arts projects as highly educational and powerful as this project. But under the glare of a highly politicized public, determined to shut down the power, the government intervened and BC Hydro cancelled the proposal abruptly.

Fundamentally, a more expressive pedagogy of citizenship is about opening citizens up to significant learning, and the role of the educator is to create the conditions in which such a process can germinate and grow (Shaw and Martin, 2005). Maxine Greene expresses this idea well: 'All depends upon a breaking free, a leap and then a question ... the educative task is to create situations in which [learners] are moved to *begin* to ask, in all the tones of voice there are, "why"?' (Greene, 1995, p. 6). One of our contributions as environmental adult educators is to remind the world of the potential of the human aesthetic dimension to boost radical democratic education and action, as well as of the power, but also of course the challenge, of combining art and adult education as a means to both contest and exercise power within the neo-liberal landscape. Combining art and adult education can be a decisive means to render visible, recast, challenge, reconceptualize, and expand the parameters of dissonance and public engagement and political action. Indeed, let us never forget how "a defiant imagination...defies the constraints of expectation and the everyday...because the imagination – liberated by engagement in cultural expression – is necessary to the achievement of all we hope for as a society...Imaginative responses are humanity's greatest glory" (Wyman, 2004, p.10).

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