Art as an Agent for Social Change

Áron Pető[1]

Introduction

This volume deals with the relationship between the arts and social change. Considering this, all those who are interested in exploring the arts and social relations can find relevant and gap-filling literature. Each of the studies contains research that can help the application of the arts to initiate social change. Among its topics are, for example, trauma processing, various minority problems, and even sexual abuse. These topics are present in all societies, therefore, this series of studies can provide practical guidance. The idea for the book was inspired by a two-day symposium held in Montreal in 2018. The theme of the symposium was Art as a Tool for Social Change, which focused on several questions. The exploration of these questions gave rise to the birth of this volume. The volume, edited by Mreiwed, Carter and Mitchell, is divided into three major sections and twenty-four chapters, and aims to show how the triad of art, teaching and research can be linked to social change through the essays of forty-two authors, both individual and co-authored. The chapters are organised around the themes of community, collaboration and teaching. The authors are of American, Canadian, Norwegian, Indian, Hong Kong and South African descent, providing snapshots from around the world. This ethnic richness also reflects a critique of white dominance, Euro-Christian and heteropatriarchal ideas. The main aim of the essays, however, is to demonstrate, through a specific example, the provocative and educative side of art and its capacity to reinterpret subjectivity.

The editors of this volume are academics from Canadian universities and have a broad research repertoire. Among their topics are teacher identity, the use of art, the prevention of sexual violence in African and Asian countries, and children's rights. The authors of the essays are academics, doctoral candidates, researchers and practicing artists, with a very wide range of research interests, as reflected in the diversity of the essays.

Editors use the term *snapshot* to describe the chapters because each contribution offers a brief, concentrated look at one specific example of how the arts can support social change. Many of the authors work with visual or arts-based methods, so the idea of a snapshot captures the immediacy, focus, and fragment-like quality of their approaches. The term also aligns with broader research traditions that use short, evocative forms—such as vignettes or portraits—to present insights without attempting to cover an entire field. Rather than providing comprehensive studies, the chapters function as small, self-contained moments of inquiry. Taken together, these concise pieces create a cumulative effect: the individual glimpses form a larger, more powerful picture of how artistic practices can contribute to transformation. In this sense, the snapshot becomes both a methodological choice and a way to show how many small acts of art-based engagement can collectively point toward social change. The main ideas of the chapters are briefly presented below.

Review

The first major chapter is organized around the theme of society and community, so it is important that we clarify the concept of community. In their interpretation, the different meet in an inclusive way, respecting each

[1] Faculty of Music, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary; petoaron@gmail.com

other's identities and forming a circle of trust, thus giving each other a sense of security. The eight papers in this chapter present one aspect of the relationship between art and social change. The order of the studies follows an exciting arc. Moving from the interpretation of artwork to their practical application, the essays demonstrate the healing and community-building power of the arts and the nurturing power of community. The applications identified in the essays are not primarily from the field of pedagogy. There are examples of the use of the arts in the socialization of immigrants, in improving communication between doctors and nurses, in collective trauma management (for example Art Hive model, reader's theatre) and in dealing with family history. Of course, the field of teaching is also addressed, with teacher training on collective hope and an empathic approach to classroom acceptance (based on Green's concepts). Studies approach the potential for development from the perspective of museums, theatres and the arts as a whole. And how does the relationship between community and the arts play out? The community can support self-development through community learning, for example in a space that can be described as sacred (a museum). The development of communities in the classroom is greatly facilitated by the incorporation of the arts into teaching practice, and develops teachers' child vision, empathy and self-awareness. The development of a relationship between immigrants and indigenous people can also be an objective through learning about the cultures of different ethnic groups in a community arts activity. The possibilities offered by theatre (improvisation, parallels with specific historical events) can help to process communal and individual traumas by supporting the collective and can also provide an excellent opportunity to develop social capital, resilience and different coping strategies, as well as to support the confrontation of individual and collective anxiety (based on empowerment theory). A photo exhibition is a great opportunity for students to show their own ideas on a given topic (in this case, hope) and for others to relate to them, strengthening the power of the community to build a better, more hopeful future. In addition, the potential of photography can be seen in a broad social context, helping to confront the familial and micro-social past implicated in the dispossession of indigenous peoples. Together with the introductory study, these eight essays show the great potential of using the arts in everyday life.

The second part of the volume presents eight studies on the potential for collaboration between art and the promotion of social change. Contemplating oneself during a walk (mindful walking, Long's theory of walking as a reflective practice) seems natural, but once photographs are taken, the whole activity takes on a different context. The moments brought into focus by the camera can give the viewer an insight into the creator's momentary state. Photography can become a tool for presenting reality, which can change a school student's approach to shaping the future. A series of photographs of the reality of Syrian refugees brought collaboration and future-building, as the young people met artists, discussed current issues and created artwork to conclude the project (based on Green's ideas on the development of critical and imaginative thinking). Young people's willingness to act can be reflected in specific issues (queer world, non-binary self-definition, rape, harassment) but understanding the artwork produced (in this case films) can be hindered by inadequate mediation and viewers. However, engaging with audiences allows content produced by young people to be brought to a wide audience in the most understandable way, thus bringing about social change on often taboo subjects. Collaboration can also take place in the world of education. Filmmaking is an example of how a professor, and a student can work together (based on Appreciative Inquiry framework) in a way that both are open to learning from the other, and this collaboration has an impact on the students they teach together. The most significant result is that the collaboration has revealed learning models that have been abandoned or are in decline in university teaching. Social change can be understood in this context. In many cases, the artist may be making a political statement when taking to the stage. Following this approach, every performance - for example, a collaborative choreographic work - contains both pedagogical and poetic elements, and can thus promote, through its provocative content, a collective thinking that can lead to social change. Choreographic elements are also present in circus arts, which can even play a role in developing the self-esteem of vulnerable groups - a social change in itself, and also opens up avenues that were previously hidden from participants through trusting cooperation and community building. In addition, good practices that require intuition, such as meditative drawing, which promotes self-acceptance, or documenting a sense of place, which also contributes to the development of one's sense of home, can be introduced. Sharing these with a wider audience can all contribute to social change. The arc of the studies in this section can be understood as a framework, with the first and last studies each presenting an artistic action that seems solitary, while in between there are activities that move more people.

The third part of the volume focuses specifically on teaching and pedagogy in eight studies. The first two studies are linked, showing the theoretical and practical implementation of the same method based on polyvocal professional learning and poetic autoethnographic descriptions. They emphasize that the research of artistic

activity deserves more attention than the product of the activity, as it questions the relationship between theory and experience and allows us to examine how artistic activities are manifested for social change and in our personal and professional lives. The essay, in the form of a letter, is an exploration of sexual harassment and violence (for example based on rape culture concept), in which various artwork was produced through student collaboration. Social change can be initiated in small ways through the students who participated in the elaboration of the theme, as they have gained a new approach to the issue of sexual harassment and violence. Finding one's own voice can also lead to self-acceptance, recognition of norms and stereotypes, and the breaking down of patterns. This can be done through critical analysis of films, which can then be used to create their own stories, fictional narratives, expressing individuals' ideas about the world. Education has a major responsibility to provide students, especially those from non-Euro-Christian backgrounds or those who question the heteropatriarchal idea, with the support at the systemic level that will enable them to develop their talents to the fullest. The pedagogy of presence provides a space for reflection, relaxation and letting go of burdens, as the pursuit of artistic activities has a positive impact on health, and the use of social support helps to create self-identity, control and a sense of purpose. In the field of pedagogy, a quote from the last study illustrates the potential of the arts: '*Teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students*' (Hooks, 1994:15 In: Wager and Goessling, 2021:260). The studies in this section have specifically sought to present good practice in which the healing, community-building and social change-inducing role of the arts is demonstrated in different contexts.

Conclusions

The chapters introduce exciting conceptual frameworks and methods that are not very common in Hungary. They challenge researchers to think deeply and in complex ways, while striving to apply abstract artistic activities to social change. The volume is an excellent starting point for art researchers interested in new research methods, but it is also an exciting source of collaborative good practices for educational researchers, which – if integrated into Hungarian teacher education – could bring about change, at least within the teaching community. The projects featured in the volume provide opportunities that, on the one hand, broaden students' perspectives (for example through photomontages or intergenerational filmmaking), and on the other hand, introduce teachers to extracurricular possibilities (such as involving local communities), while offering ways to discuss sensitive topics appropriately. Although these are valuable opportunities, they are also shaped by institutional and pedagogical constraints, and certain areas may not be fully adaptable to the domestic context (for instance, topics related to queer identity may face regulatory or institutional limitations). The volume also presents new approaches for active artists, which can make their own performances and creative work more reflective and thus initiate change in other parts of society. The studies are essentially descriptions of good practice rather than descriptions of large-scale empirical research, but they also present well-applicable opportunities that, when implemented with the right professionals, can result in small-scale social changes.