

Disrupting the Circle: Action through Art

THE RESEARCH

Disrupting the Circle: Action through Art started as a research project between West Central Women's Resource Centre (WCWRC) and Dr. Shauna McKinnon at the University of Winnipeg. The goal of the research was to better understand the experiences of women, Two-Spirit, trans-women and gender non-conforming people during the pandemic in relation to housing safety, homelessness and housing precarity. As well, we were curious how services and programs had been affected and how organizations can adapt to a post pandemic reality.

This project built on "Connecting the Circle: A gender-based strategy to end homelessness in Winnipeg" which WCWRC completed in 2019. The report highlights strategies for working with a gender-based analysis and recommendations for ending homelessness from this perspective. Ali and Claire worked as artists and researchers on this project as part of their course work for the Urban and Inner City Studies degrees at the University of Winnipeg.

We used art making in this research as a way to connect, to see each other as artists and find ways of disrupting more traditional research methods. An arts based approach to research allows for engagement of a combination of intellectual, emotional, and embodied knowledge and therefore generates more holistic findings.

We started this project in the fall of 2021, when the Covid-19 pandemic was in it's 18th month and little did we know, a new highly contagious variant, Omicron was on it's way. By December we had wrapped up the first session of the program right before another lock down and surge of cases. This postponed the second part of our project, slated for January until June of 2022.

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THE ART MAKING

When we were able, we met every week at WCWRC to facilitate a space where art was made and stories were told. We didn't come in with specific research questions, but rather, we let being in a creative space together and the art making guide where our conversations went. The themes ranged from personal to political and it was truly a pleasure to gripe, rage, cry and laugh together.

The space at WCWRC is welcoming and familiar to many who attended. It was described as feeling like 'home' and a safe space for many. We relied on this comfort of space to support our approach as guests, co-facilitators and collaborative artists. We shared how we identified as creative people and ways that we connected with this creativity in our daily lives.

Working with our hands, we filled the space with supplies that could be cut, glued, shaped, coloured, woven, and built. The process was fluid and responsive to the artists who came each day. We floated many conversations on the topics of pandemic realities, safety in our neighbourhoods, and relationships and occasionally we identified specific housing issues and experiences of home/house -lessness. We imagined what we want our communities to look like, feel like and reflect post pandemic.

The space during Action through Art was meant for building. Making, with our hands, the dreams that are so hard to live. So many obstacles and barriers exist and new ones seem to emerge weekly. More violence. Less support. Regressive policies and laws. We need spaces where we can dream, where we can ask new, difficult questions, but ultimately where we can create and share together.

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THE PEOPLE

Ali and Claire shared the role of co-facilitators and artist researchers for this project. They both come from arts back grounds and are currently finishing up degrees in Urban and Inner City Studies at the University of Winnipeg. For this project they brought together experiences in art making, community work and collaborative creation to work with the artists from WCWRC.


Each week Action through Art was open for drop in and attended by community members, volunteers and occasionally staff from the centre. Many artists came back week after week and built upon projects that were started in previously weeks.

Ali and Claire would like to extend a huge heartfelt THANK YOU to everyone who participated in the Action through Art program. We learned so much and want to thank you for trusting us as we built this project together. One of the biggest things we learned from this project was how important it is for community building to be able to dream together. Using our imaginations to focus beyond the struggles of day to day life gives us hope. All of the artists who sat with us and offered their creative selves to this project have the answers that we need for safe, beautiful and thriving communities. By looking, really looking, at the art work from this project we can see the future that we all dream of and deserve.

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MORE THANK YOUS!

We would sincerely like to thank Shauna MacKinnon, the University of Winnipeg and Lorie English at WCWRC for supporting this project. Thank you to all the Staff at WCWRC for access to the space, help with organizing and promoting the program and celebration event and for patiently answering all the questions we had. Thank you to everyone who made art with us and shared stories and laughter.

We are so thankful for this experience and look forward to seeing these hopes and dreams flourish in our communities. 

~Ali Robson and Claire Thérèse Friesen

MORE INFORMATION:

For more information about this project you can contact Shauna MacKinnon at st.mackinnon@uwinnipeg.ca