

KAC in Conversation: Interview with Tracey Guptill

KAC in Conversation, a community engagement and dialogue series from the Kingston Arts Council is exploring the practice of *Creative Placemaking - art, space, and community*. As part of the program, the KAC is shining a spotlight on local community members whose work and practice is connected to the theme of the *KAC in Conversation* program. Read more about the program [here](#). Below is a conversation with local artist Tracey Guptill.

Tracey is a Kingston-based artist and educator. She co-created *Anybody Can be Pussy Riot* with Rebecca Benson for the Storefront Festival this past summer. She is a member of the Kingston Stilts, anARC Theatre and a local movement collective. Tracey also teaches French at the Mulberry Waldorf School integrating an arts-based approach. Lately, she has been working on local film projects, including Leigh Ann Bellamy's *Ryan Underwater* and Jay Middaugh's *Live in Kingston*, which will premiere at the Kingston Film Festival in March.

“Creative placemaking” is a fairly new term, used to describe the relationship between community development and the arts – how does your work relate to arts-based placemaking and community building?

My work is especially related to community building. The last show I worked on was called *Anybody Can be Pussy Riot*. Rebecca Benson and I created a cabaret-style show that brought together performers who share a drive to fight patriarchy. At each show we also invited two different members of Kingston's feminist community on stage. These feminists were interviewed by our Pussy Riot characters. The energy and support for this work in Kingston was extraordinary, the show not only brought together artists and activists, but spoke clearly about issues of great importance to wide audiences. I believe our reach was thanks to the humour and creativity of our approach.

I'm also interested in how art and performance can be used as a method of inquiry and knowledge creation, which can be very useful for municipal planners seeking to learn more about our communities and its values. For example, my master's thesis in environmental studies made use of the tools of the theatre - such as the art of play, the spark of creation, and the consistent coming together in often vulnerable ways—to build community and to explore questions of agency within the global context of climate change. I did this work with mostly non-actors who expressed great benefit from working on this project; they had more hope about the world even though we'd explored some fairly disheartening trends in terms of the environment. By bringing the arts to non-identified artists I noticed that this work can expand a person's sense of what is possible both for

themselves and for society. Artistic practices open people up in beautiful ways, inspire their thinking, and can serve to both question and affirm their values.

I was part of co-founding a stilt-walking troupe, (that the KAC actually helped to catalyze by funding a free Learn to Stilt Workshop during the Skeleton Park Arts Festival!). This troupe now serves to animate public spaces with pop-ups - at the Farmer's Market for example - and Community events such as the Pride Parade in 2016. This troupe is helping to bring a sense of spectacle and flair to Kingston's identity.

How can artists drive change and growth in Kingston and what kind of support/opportunities do they need in order to do so?

Artists have always contributed to social change through their sensibilities, in developing these sensibilities in others and by presenting thoughtful works. Artists bring us the beauty they have discovered and can heighten our appreciation for both the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Artists can also be drivers of social change and the growth of human potential by working within their communities directing and dreaming up creative projects and by helping non-identified artists develop their skills. An area that I'm interested in exploring and that I think has a lot of potential, is bringing artists into our planning and municipal decision-making processes as facilitators and engagement coordinators. I dream of a three-year artist in residency program with the City of Kingston; wouldn't that be something? Artists need avenues to apply their skills, and support so their lives are less unpredictable, or so they don't use up their energy simply paying the bills. Let's explore how we can employ artists in unconventional ways!

Of course artists also generate growth through tourism and contributing to a sense that Kingston is a great place to live and visit. By having municipal support for festivals like the Kick and Push Festival and the Storefront Festival - that animated vacant spaces downtown - we ensure that the city and artists are working on common goals. More artist-run spaces would help provide sustained opportunities for employment and for collaboration while embedding the work in community.

This KAC in Conversation events, are bringing in speakers from cities outside of Kingston, to shed insight into their experiences in creative place-making. Outside of Kingston, do you have any favourite examples of “creative places”—communities that have been shaped by creativity?

This past summer in New Glasgow, P.E.I. along a historically important river there was a journey for audiences that culminated with a community supper. The

River Clyde Pageant was a collaboration of over 60 volunteers coordinated and directed by two theatre-makers. The show involved many first-time performers: there were stilt-walkers, visual artists, musicians, and a choir! They all came together to tell an enchanting story about the river while also drawing attention to environmental concerns specific to that river. This type of work in the landscape that is about a very specific place and its living creatures, with the people of that community involved in the creation of the piece, is a favourite of mine. I'd love to do something like that here! The UK company 'Wild Works' has been creating shows like this for many years. I had the opportunity to learn from one of their directors, Sue Hill. Their model, however, involves visiting other communities. They make themselves at home in a place and for several months they learn, look and listen in order to create spectacular shows that include the community, the features of the land, and the audience.

In your opinion, what is a potential challenge that arts-focused place-makers may face in Kingston?

Making a living wage is a concern that I have - as well as accessing rehearsal and working spaces that aren't cost-prohibitive or that require pricey insurance. In some ways there are so many opportunities it's really about being creative and finding solutions. Hopefully we find that organizations and governments are open to working with artists—even though the style of working is so different. Sustaining working partnerships is key but it's easy to get caught up in other goals and think the art project is superfluous. Oftentimes indicators to measure success are required and I think that people need to be more comfortable with the fuzzy concepts involved in place-making to ensure that the art and the process don't become utilitarian and lose their authenticity.

KAC in Conversation is made possible with support from the [Ontario Arts Council - Conseil des arts de l'Ontario](#).

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SAVE THE DATE: KAC in Conversation presents a creative placemaking workshop with [Crazy Dames](#) on 4 March 2017 at the Tett Centre for Creativity and Learning.