

Sandra Mueller

Pearls of Wisdom — A Personal Account

Portraying a two-year, multi-partner collaboration with an internationally renowned social practice artist and an emboldened nonprofit celebrating its 20th anniversary as an activist art project is challenging. More challenging, however, is attempting to depict, the brave spirits of the women and children who participated, let alone account for the sheer ingenuity and hard work of the artist and the project team.

The artist was Kim Abeles, the non-profit was A Window Between Worlds (AWBW) and the community engagement project was “Pearls of Wisdom: End the Violence.” It was based on the powerful metaphor of pearls as treasures that form inside an oyster in response to a hurtful irritant.

The project included 70 workshops with survivors who spoke six languages, extensive media documentation (audio, video and photos), public programs, an online curriculum and blog, multiple exhibitions and a four-color catalogue. Women, children, pre-teens, advocates, and shelter leaders across California participated. By the project’s end, more than 800 unique spherical pearls and pearl discs, measuring three to six inches in diameter, were fully documented and displayed at the Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles during March 2011 in celebration of the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day.

The core premise was to share the “urgent wisdom” generated by women who moved away from domestic violence toward a safer community. Their “pearls” ranged from the practical (“Always keep spare keys”) to the poignantly truthful (“Real love can be felt in the heart, it cannot be pounded onto our bodies”) to the hopeful (“You will open your wings when you’re ready.”).

I served as project chair for the collaboration, co-wrote the James Irvine Foundation grant, attended most of the workshops, co-edited the catalogue and organized the public programming. Which meant there were many hats to wear and much to learn especially from both Cathy Salsler and Kim Abeles on producing a major social art project.

We began each workshop with Abeles showing images of her installations and artwork on issues from smog to AIDS. Participants saw how art can help instigate change and learned that their pearls would be part of forming a community vision to end domestic violence and inspire action.

Documentation was a key project element from the start. Participants often took the photos and videos of the artmaking process themselves with care taken to exclude faces to ensure their safety. They also learned to use plaster, pliers and rasps that tapped into the potency of sculptural tools and complemented Abeles’ belief in their strength — “These women are not survivors, but rather, they are champions in the athletic and spiritual sense.”

The audio text of their shared words of wisdom was transcribed by Abeles herself unless it required translation. Reading again and again the gut wrenching stories prompted Abeles to write this poem:

The irritant, the abuse, the assault slipped into my oyster, my home, my soul.

I could run or I could look to myself, to my stronger core. My story is worthwhile if it helps others avoid the traps and the violence.

I’m not sure how my stories may end violence, but I am willing to speak and be part of the chorus that sings to the masses,

I find a place for my story so that it does not become an impoverished chant, repeated over and over to silent ears. I will replace my pity, my role as victim with empowerment and guidance for all.

Like a doctor treating bones, I will mend my breaks with plaster and my scars will make me stronger.

I share my words, as I would wish with my younger self, if only someone had done this for me. I am not looking for comfort, I am looking for action!

This poem entitled “Pearl” along with selected images became a print for the exhibition and the catalogue. Along with her artist statement, it gives insight into Abeles’ intentions for the project. She declared: “I wanted to exhibit the pearls made by women, children and male advocates against domestic violence with such beauty that even the abusers would see the beauty.”

Delivering to that standard involved more steps than anticipated especially for the “Handbook for Living” section of the catalogue. We quickly gleaned that some participants created captivating artworks and others compelling words and the rare person did both. Eventually, we realized that the ‘common narrative’ permitted images of pearls created by one survivor to be echoed by the words of another. Honoring their creations also meant re-shooting the selected pearls to keep the light and backgrounds consistent.

Just as writing the original grant had set in motion planning for the workshops with 800 survivors, preparing the catalogue meant finally fleshing out what was meant by community engagement, as it’s a term much easier to use than to execute.

Project advisors Suzanne Lacy and Barbara T. Smith contributed essays to add historical context on the role of feminist artists in addressing domestic violence. Similarly, co-editor Suvan Geer’s “Lessons” essay placed AWBW in the tradition of non-profits founded by artists to sustain social change while I wrote the “Call to Participation” to drive future involvement. And, AWBW programs staff created a list of resources for the public — warning signs of abusive relationships, emergency contacts and action steps.

Both Kim Abeles and Cathy Salser contributed statements as well as descriptions of their art practices including a description of ongoing AWBW programs. Abeles also created a conceptual diagram that gave insight into how the many project stages related from workshops to funders, exhibitions to documentation. Suzanne Lacy said of their collaboration:

“As an artist, she [Cathy Salser] intuited that art could not only support healing of the women and their families, but it could serve a public education function. That is why an artist of the caliber of Kim Abeles wanted to work with Salser and why Salser welcomed the demanding methodologies of a Kim Abeles community project.”

The collaboration resulted in a stunning installation at the Korean Cultural Center of Los Angeles. Abeles created clusters of pearls — a wall of 600 pearl disks that ran the full span of the gallery interspersed with survivor’s words of wisdom as well as 200 spherical pearls each tied to one another, an apt metaphor for community along with a shelf of children’s pearls. A sculptured table with videos and large projections amplified the artmaking process, as did a participation table where visitors could create their own pearl of wisdom on parchment paper.

A “Public Conversation” featured museum director Suzanne Iskin, artist Nathalie Sanchez as well as Lacy, Smith, Abeles, Salser and myself. More than 1,000 individuals including 300 school children engaged with the exhibition or attended a related program.

It also resulted in invitations to travel the exhibition. The Skirball Cultural Center wanted “Pearls of Wisdom” as the companion show to their upcoming “Women Hold Up Half the Sky” exhibition that was inspired by the Kristof / Wu-Dunn book of similar title. Set to open in September 2011, Abeles created a custom installation for their public gallery space near the auditorium and visitor’s desk for Noah’s Ark children’s area. This meant that more than 300,000 people saw it during its 9-month exhibition run— an enviable figure for any exhibition.

“Pearls of Wisdom” was also featured in the 2012 “Breaking in Two: Provocative Visions of Motherhood” exhibition in Santa Monica, CA. The exhibition ran during the 2012 conference of the Women’s Caucus for Art in Los Angeles when Cathy Salser received a WCA President’s Award for Activist Art and Suzanne Lacy, a WCA Lifetime Achievement Award. It also generated an unexpected opportunity —which was a permanent installation in a newly completed headquarters of a nearby multi-national company.

On a personal note, both Abeles and myself had art included in the “Breaking in Two: Provocative Visions of Motherhood” exhibition with mine sited near the “Pearls” installation. I loved toggling between these two aspects of my own practice — one rooted in personal expression and another rooted in social commitment. It was also sweet in that the original synergy for connecting Kim Abeles with AWBW had come from our mutual involvement as community project advisors for the “Breaking in Two” as a film project.

The catalogue also had it’s own trajectory of generating community involvement. Copies were distributed to participating shelters, funders, advisory board members and key volunteers as well as women’s studies programs at universities and colleges throughout California.

As shared by one participant:

“We are all responsible for the good of the community. Neighbors should care for each other. Women should help each other and be welcoming to those who need our help.”

I continue to serve as a community engagement advisor to AWBW and their ongoing collaborations with social practice artists, several of which are cited in this volume — Cheryl Bookout’s video of a Barbara T. Smith performance and S.A. Bachman and Neda Moridpour’s wall projections. “Pearls of Wisdom” continues to travel and is featured online with a downloadable curriculum and blog at awbw.org.

Note: All quotations are excerpted from the exhibition catalog “Pearls of Wisdom: End the Violence, A Community Engagement Project” copyright 2011 by AWBW, Venice, CA.



桑德拉·穆勒

去揣摩和一位知名的社会运动艺术家去共同筹办一个多方资金、两年准备的非营利组织20年周年庆及社会运动艺术创作研讨会是极度困难的。甚至说去描想参与活动的女性和孩童们勇敢的精神、纯粹的独创性及努力。

这位艺术家的名字是金·白杨、这个非营利组织是名字是世界之窗(AWBW)、而这个社区参与研讨会的名字是“智慧之珠:阻决暴力”。着个名字里的珍珠是源取自於牡蛎壳里的珍珠宝藏，以及采取珍珠时所产生的伤痛。

研讨会包含了70个不同的工作营，集结了六个不同语言的家暴生还者，完整地媒体转播(音频、录像、照片)、公共项目、在线课程、博客、多种展览及彩色目录。参与者有女人、小孩、青少年、倡导者还有全加洲收容所的领导者们。当研讨会结束後，有超过八百个不同的圆壮珍珠、珍珠盘，大大小小地从三英寸到六英寸，我们在洛杉矶韩国文化中心完整地展示和记录这个活动。此展览举行於2011年的3月以庆祝国际女性节的百年庆典。

此研讨会的重点前提是去分享女性逃离家暴走向安全社区的个选择中“紧急应变的智慧”。她们分享的“智慧之珠”包含一些实际的经验，例如：“永远都要准备被钥”；一个心酸的真相：“真爱是动心，而不是动手”；一直到她们心中的希望：“当你的心准备好时，就是起飞的时刻”。

我身为项目主席，主要承办合作项目，联合申请詹姆斯欧文基金会奖助金，并参加大部分的研讨会，还有共同编辑目录和组织公共编程。这份工字表示我许多不同地身份要担当，也有很多要学的。尤其是有两位重要的艺术家凯西·邵瑟和金·白杨一起制作着个重要的艺术案。

在每个研讨会的一开始，白杨会展示她艺术装置的照片，各式的内容有从烟雾到爱滋病。参与者可以意识到艺术激起改变，同时也学习到她们所制作的珍珠可以帮助树立一个鼓励终结家暴的社会。

从一开始，记录的资料就是研讨会重要的一环。参与者都小心翼翼地自己将艺术制作的过程用手机或影片记录下来，以确保自己的安全。白杨更加钦佩於她们学会了如何使用石膏、钳子和锉刀，并且发掘了雕刻器具影藏的潜力。“这些女人不是受害生还者而是运动和精神力的冠军”。

她们分享所有的故事都由白杨转化为文字，除了需要翻译的语言。一遍又一遍阅读这些惊心动魄的故事使白杨写下了这首诗：

刺痛、虐待、突击，刺进了我牡蛎的壳，我的家，我的灵魂。

我曾可以逃脱，我曾可看清我的核心，看近我那坚强的心。如我可以帮助他人以回避暴力的陷阱，那我的故事也值得了。

我不确定我的故事能如何去结束暴力，但我愿意站出来告诉大家，对大众齐唱。

我找到这份故事的所属之地，所以这故事不会沦为贫穷的咏叹词，一次又一次地对矇默之耳诉说。我替所有的人寻找力量提供方向，以取代我的哀伤，以及被害者的身份。

就像是医生对待断骨般，我会用石膏补救，而我的伤疤将会使我更加强壮。

分享我的故事，就像是对年轻的自己说：如果有谁敢这样对我，我要的是采取的应该是行动而不是寻求安慰。

这首诗的名字是“珍珠”，这首诗与精选照片做成展览宣传打印及目录。和她的艺术理念一起阅读时，观众会更了解阿布拉斯办展的意图。她声明说：“我希望这展览的珍珠们是由女人小孩及男性倡导者的手制作以打击家庭暴力。如此的美甚至连施暴者都可以感受到。”

在目录中”生存手则“这一部分需要更多程序才能够达到标准。我们很快就发现到一部份的参与者能够制作美丽的艺术作品，但其他人写出吸引人的文字；很少人能同时参与艺术品制作及写作。到最後我们终於了解到一个被害者制作的珍珠与另一个人的文字能互相呼应并产生一个“平常的陈述”。以同样的光及背景重新拍摄这些珍珠是一种重新表扬他们创作的表现。

就像在当初陈写补助金申请後，陆续促发了八百人规模的工作营；而在撰写目录的过程中，我们终於得以阐释什麼是真正的”社区参与“，因为社区参与是一件说时容易做时难的事情。

合作主编苏凡·格尔的论文”课题“将世界之窗(AWBW)纳入艺术家设立之非营利社会进步组织，而我的论文”呼吁参与“则希望带领更多的人重视此议题。在活动的最後，世界之窗的工作人员们提供了一份社会资源的名单、暴力性关系的告示牌、紧急联络人与紧急救难步骤。

金·白杨和凯西·邵瑟两人都提供了一些说明以介绍她们的艺术工作内容。其中包含世界之窗的还在进行的一些项目。白杨也同时制作了一个概念图，给观众一些内部的资讯，看他们在许多程序中从工作营到出资者，展览到记录都是息息相关的。苏珊·拉齐这样形容他们的合作：

“身为一个艺术家，她（苏珊·拉齐）指出艺术不只是能替家暴生还者与家属提供疗伤的机会，但也能教育社会大众。这就是为什麼一个像金·白杨这样的一位艺术家愿意与邵瑟工作，而邵瑟又为什麼愿意接受金·白杨为社区运动提出的这些刁难要求。”

在洛杉矶的韩国文化中心的合作案，最後的成果是惊美的艺术装置。白杨制作了成组的珍珠盘 - 一整面墙布满了六百个珍珠盘夹并附上家暴受害者的文字和慧语，两百个相连的球形珍珠。还有一个架子专放小朋友制作的珍珠，以此象徵团结。在一个雕刻过的桌子上播放着制作珍珠的过程。并给参与者使用另一张桌子，让他们用羊毛纸创作自己的珍珠。

“与公众对话”里特别介绍美术馆馆长苏珊·伊斯肯，艺术家纳塔莉·桑切斯，当然还有拉齐、史密斯、白杨，邵瑟和我自己，一千多位参与者其中还包括三百名学童来欣赏整个展览。

除此之外我们还收到一些巡回展的邀请函。斯科伯尔文化中心希望“智慧之珠”作为日後”女人撑起半边天“的副展，这个展览和克里斯托夫/吴丹的书是有相连的名称。”女人撑起半边天“将於2011年9月开放。白杨替附近的公共礼堂画廊空间还有诺亚方舟的孩子展区旁的游客服务台特地客制了一组装置作品。表示在这九个月内将有超过三十万人的流量，人数之多令人羡慕。

智慧之珠在2012年加州圣莫尼卡的”破两半：母亲挑衅愿景“展中被选入合展。在2012年洛杉矶美国女性艺术协会的会议期间，凯西·邵瑟获得美国女性艺术协会会长颁发的荣耀奖项，苏珊娜·拉齐则获得美国女性艺术协会的终生成就奖。同时这也引发一个偶发的机会让智慧之珠得以在附近的一家新落成的国际公司总部作为常设展。

在我的私人笔记中记录着我和白杨都把自己的艺术品加入於”破两半“的展览内，其中我的展品放於靠近珍珠装置的地方。我的作品一部分根植於自己的私人经验，另一部份则根植於社会承诺。我很喜欢我的作品在这两者之间交换。原本只是请白杨、邵瑟为顾问把”破两半“制作成一个电影企划的事情竟然发展成跟世界之窗的共同合作案。

目录也安排制为与社区参与导向性质。将目录分发至安置所、资助者、顾问会成员及主要的自愿者，当然还有许多加州大学的女性研究中心。

以下是一位参与者的话：

” 每一个人都对社区的进步有所责任，
邻居应该互相照应，
女人们应该互相帮助，
而我们应该为需要帮助的人张开双手。 “

这个企划仍然在进行中，您可以在网路上下载展览相关的表格、博客，网址为 awbw.org。

注：所有的资要来源都是取自於”智慧之珠：阻决暴力，一个社区共同合作企划案“
智慧财产2011世界之窗，威尼斯，加州