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Critical learning experiences of Korean women at the Toronto Outdoor Art Fair

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Korean women's experiences at the Toronto Outdoor Art Fair [TOAF] demonstrate the significance of public spaces in supporting everyday learning and social integration for racialised communities. Using critical public pedagogy as a framework, the study examines the educational potential of public spaces to promote social justice and equity. Employing a phenomenological approach, the research involved observation and interviews with five Korean women in their 50s and 60s living in Toronto. This research investigates their views on TOAF, Canada's largest and longest-running outdoor art fair. The findings reveal that their engagement with TOAF facilitated dialogical, cultural, and social learning. The participants critically examined celebrity influence on artistic recognition and reflected on their cultural backgrounds, enhancing their appreciation of diverse art. The study emphasises the potential of public art events to foster informal learning, particularly for racialised individuals, by promoting personal growth and encouraging deeper engagement with societal and cultural issues.

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Public spaces; informal learning; social justice; equity; Korean women; community building

Background

The Toronto Outdoor Art Fair (TOAF) is a representational annual public art event held every summer at Nathan Phillips Square, next to Toronto City Hall. Established in 1961, TOAF has evolved into Canada's largest and longest-running outdoor art fair, providing a platform for over 350 contemporary visual artists (Toronto Outdoor Art Fair n.d.). The fair showcases a diverse range of artistic mediums, including painting, photography, sculpture, and mixed media. It attracts a broad audience, including art enthusiasts, collectors, and the general public, facilitating engagement with various forms of artistic expression. In addition to artist booths, the fair features interactive art installations, live performances, and art talks, creating an inclusive and dynamic cultural environment. Nathan Phillips Square, a key civic space known for its public gatherings, was opened in 1965 and has since become an important landmark in Toronto (City of Toronto n.d.). It hosts various events throughout the year, such as the Cavalcade of Lights, New Year's Eve celebrations, and weekly farmers' markets. As both a cultural hub and a space for learning, it enhances accessibility to art, promotes cultural appreciation, and supports both emerging and

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Figure 1. Toronto Outdoor Art Fair at Nathan Phillips Square. *Note*. Toronto Outdoor Art Fair at Nathan Phillips Square. Photo taken on July 132,024 by Lee.

established artists. TOAF at Nathan Phillips Square enhances accessibility to art, promotes cultural appreciation, and supports both emerging and established artists. TOAF is an ideal setting for this research as it embodies the values of accessibility, public engagement, and cultural diversity (see Figure 1). Its inclusive nature provides a unique opportunity to observe how public art events can function as educational and cultural spaces (Lee 2024). The diverse audience and wide range of artistic expressions at the fair allow for a comprehensive exploration of how different community members interact with and perceive public art. This setting is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics of equity and representation in public spaces (Lee 2024).

Embracing these values intended for the interest of publicness (Kim 2021), I invited a group of Korean women in their 50s and 60s residing in Toronto to the study. Connected via Facebook, these women have formed a community that supports their cultural and social integration. In this study, I, as a researcher, observed their dialogues and understood how such experiences can motivate further engagement with their local environment. Specifically, through visiting TOAF, I explored the potential of public spaces as learning environments and for cultural understanding (Ho, Lee, and Kim 2024).

Theoretical framework: critical public pedagogy

This study is grounded in the concept of critical public pedagogy, which explores the educational potential of public spaces and informal learning environments (Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick 2011). Critical public pedagogy is concerned with the ways in which public spaces, cultural events, and everyday experiences contribute to learning and social integration, while also examining power dynamics, social justice, and equity within these contexts (Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick 2011). It refers to the educational processes and learning opportunities that occur outside formal educational institutions, encompassing a wide range of activities, including cultural events, public art, social movements, and community interactions (Giroux 2003; Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick,

2011). Critical public pedagogy emphasises that learning can happen in diverse settings and through various forms of engagement, manifesting the importance of public spaces in fostering informal learning and challenging existing social structures (Giroux 2003; Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick 2011).

Public spaces, such as parks, museums, and art shows, are accessible environments where diverse communities can engage with cultural and educational activities. These spaces serve as sites for communal learning, where individuals from different backgrounds can come together to share experiences and knowledge (Ellsworth 2005). By engaging in public events, individuals can enhance their cultural awareness, build social connections, and foster a sense of belonging (Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick 2011). Critical public pedagogy specifically addresses how these interactions can also promote social justice and challenge inequities (Giroux 2003; Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick 2011).

In their phenomenological reflection, Ho, Lee, and Kim (2024) worked with six graffiti artists from around the world over ten months, exploring the types of learning that emerge from street art engagement, including activist, demonstrative, and experimental pedagogies with a focus on multicultural education. They argued that this categorisation of street art aligns with educational theories that value active, experimental, and participatory learning, supporting interaction in the construction of knowledge. The researchers suggested that by encouraging societal reflection, street art exemplifies the transformative potential of education. Their argument aligns with critical pedagogical approaches that enable individuals to question and transform their social conditions.

In this study, the TOAF was examined as a site of critical public pedagogy. The research focused on how Korean women in their 50s living in Toronto perceived and interpreted their experiences at the art show. By exploring their subjective experiences, the study aimed to understand how public spaces (e.g., art shows, public events) can support everyday learning and foster the social integration of racialised communities. Critical public pedagogy provides a framework for analysing how events facilitate informal learning and community engagement helping to identify the broader significance of the participants' experiences.

Literature review: public pedagogy through street art

Public pedagogy is a framework for understanding how learning occurred outside formal educational settings. The concept encompasses a wide range of activities, including cultural events, public art, social movements, and community interactions. Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick (2011) emphasised the educational potential of public spaces in fostering 'informal space of learning' (2) and social integration. Panmela Castro's work exemplifies the transformative potential of public pedagogy through street art, particularly in fostering critical awareness of the 'intersection of art and activism' (60) and addressing issues such as race, gender, and social justice (Madan 2023). As analysed by Madan (2023), Castro's initiatives, including #AfroGrafiteiras, leverage public spaces as sites of learning and activism, enabling marginalised voices – particularly Black women – to reclaim their visibility and challenge societal norms. Her murals and art installations function as educational tools that resist Eurocentric beauty standards and systemic violence, while creating dialogues around feminist issues. By integrating art and activism, Castro engages the public in critical reflection, turning city streets into platforms for social

transformation. This aligns with the broader discourse on public pedagogy, where learning occurs outside formal institutions, empowering communities through non-traditional, participatory modes of education (Madan 2023). Castro's art serves as a vehicle for social change, contributing significantly to the literature on the intersection of art, activism, and pedagogy.

Public art had long been recognised for its ability to engage communities and foster cultural integration. In Ulmer's (2017) study, the role of street art in Detroit's transformation into a 'creative city' is explored, emphasising how street art functions as both a tool for urban revitalisation and a form of resistance against social and spatial injustices, such as racial segregation, housing disparities, and gentrification. Using photographic cartography, Ulmer examined how street art engages with public space, conveying powerful messages about democracy, access, and the right to the city. This study directly connects to public pedagogy by showing how street art serves as an informal educational tool, fostering critical reflection and social awareness among the public. By occupying visible urban spaces, street art encourages everyday citizens to engage with complex social issues, making it a prime example of public pedagogy in action, where public spaces become sites of learning, dialogue, and transformation. These environments allow individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage with cultural and educational activities, enhancing their cultural awareness, building social connections, and fostering a sense of belonging.

In her study, Lee (2024) explored how public art and performances help Asian immigrants in Toronto understand and engage with public spaces and their community. The study involved seven participants of Asian descent, all of whom were born outside of Canada. Through a series of outdoor workshops conducted between February and May 2022, Lee examined how public spaces, such as parks and streets, served as platforms for collaborative conceptual artmaking, including projects such as Graffiti Cartography and Diasporic Walking Robot. Lee found that these public art practices fostered social learning and critical reflection on issues of equity, inclusion, and urban governance. Participants engaged with each other and the environment, which led to deeper insights into the socio-political dynamics of public spaces. The study demonstrated how public art can stimulate cultural dialogue within the diasporic community, allowing participants to express their identities, challenge inequities, and contribute to placemaking. The collaborative artmaking process also enhanced participants' personal growth, creativity, and understanding of how cultural identities shape interactions within urban spaces. This contributed to ongoing public pedagogy and fostered meaningful cultural exchange within the diasporic community.

Informal learning played a crucial role in the social integration of immigrant communities. Through informal educational activities, such as participating in cultural events and public art, individuals could acquire cultural knowledge and social skills essential for their integration into the broader society. For Korean women in their 50s and 60s living in Toronto, engaging with public art events can offer a valuable opportunity for informal learning. By participating in these cultural activities, they can develop a deeper understanding of their new cultural environment, build social networks, and enhance their sense of belonging in the community.

The literature on public pedagogy, public art, and informal learning suggest the potential of public spaces to support everyday learning and social integration for

racialised communities. TOAF can serve as dynamic cultural environments that promote accessibility to art and cultural appreciation. They can offer opportunities for individuals to interact with various forms of artistic expression, which could enhance their understanding of different cultures and promote social cohesion (Kwon 2002). The inclusive nature of such events was vital for supporting the social integration of marginalised groups, as they provided a space for these communities to engage with the broader public and share their cultural narratives. By examining the experiences of Korean women at the TOAF, this study can contribute to the understanding of how public art events could function as sites for promoting cultural integration, social equity, and informal learning.

Methodology: phenomenological approach

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the learning experiences of Korean women in their 50s and 60s living in Toronto. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of their lived experiences, aiming to uncover the meanings they assign to specific phenomena (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022; Van Manen 2016). This approach is particularly suited for examining the participants' personal interpretations of their engagement with public spaces like the Toronto Outdoor Art Fair (TOAF). Phenomenology was chosen because it provides a robust framework for exploring the subjective meanings participants assign to their experiences. By integrating interviews, observation, and recorded dialogue, this approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of how Korean women engaged with TOAF as a public learning space. The methodology emphasises the significance of lived experience, making it well-suited for examining the intersections of culture, identity, and education in public art events.

The research participants consisted of five Korean women in Toronto, all connected through a Facebook community. They called each other by English names and preferred using those names in this research: Anna, Christine, Kate, Jen, and Jessica. Anna, 53 worked at a firm as a financial advisor. Christine, 62, was a language instructor at a community college. Kate, 53, was a new immigrant and a housewife. Jen, 51, operated a psycho-counselling service, and Jessica, 52, ran a tutoring business.

Within this larger Facebook group, smaller groups had formed that met in person to foster friendships and provide mutual support. This Facebook group was created to share vital information about living in Canada. The group members exchange timely information about housing, living, schooling, government updates, and laws. These women, in similar life situations, maintain a very productive network. They do more than just chat and exchange information; they actively support each other in times of need (e.g., helping with household tasks, tutoring each other's children, and providing rides). This group provides active support and tangible outcomes, going beyond mere friendship to form a robust support network (Park 2016).

As a Korean myself, it was easy to connect with the group. I reached out to Christine, one of the most active and supportive members, who was known for her timely, accurate, and considerate responses to posts. Her efforts to help Korean newcomers stood out, making her a natural point of contact for my research. Through a Facebook message, I introduced my study, explained its purpose, and asked if she might know anyone



Figure 2. Building rapports during the summer. *Note*. These pictures capture various gatherings and events that occurred during the rapport-building period from April 2024 to July 2024. The images depict a range of activities I was invited to, including a summer cottage retreat in Collingwood, sesame leaf harvesting at Mount Forest, casual get-togethers, and outdoor experiences such as visits to Wasaga Beach and nearby trails.

interested in participating. Christine responded warmly, and after our exchange, I arranged a meeting with the group at a local coffee shop. During this meeting, the members gladly agreed to participate, viewing it as a fun summer activity and an opportunity to explore events happening in Toronto. My shared cultural background enabled me to immerse myself in their community more effectively, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences and interactions. This positionality, while advantageous in building rapport, also required me to remain conscious of potential biases and approach the research with reflexivity and critical self-awareness (Berger 2015; Rose 1997).

In the months leading up to the TOAF, from late April 2024 to early July 2024, I spent time with participants before TOAF to build trust and understand their backgrounds. This pre-engagement period had three purposes: (1) establishing trust so participants could share their experiences openly (Berger 2015; Fine 1993), (2) learning about their cultural contexts to better understand their TOAF experiences, and (3) gathering their initial thoughts on public spaces, which helped me see how TOAF changed their views. This involved regular interactions, both online and in person, to gain a deeper understanding of their backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Over a ten-week period, I joined their group meetings 11 times, met with them in semi-group and full-group settings, and had individual meetings. The spaces were mostly individual houses and summer cottages, where I got to spend a day or a night with them (see Figure 2). This approach follows ethnographic practices that value spending extended time with participants to understand their lives (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). The trust built during this time made participants comfortable sharing honest thoughts during and after TOAF, which led to the meaningful conversations that became central to this study. This engagement allowed for the establishment of trust and the gathering of preliminary inputs into their perceptions of public spaces and community engagement (Fine 1993).

Data collection

Data collection involved a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and dialogue exchanges during TOAF visits. Data were collected in

Table 1. Summary of data collection activities.

Phase	Date	Activities	Data Generated
Pre-TOAF Rapport-Building	April–July 102,024	11 group meetings, individual meetings, social activities	Field notes, conversation records, reflective journal
TOAF Visit	July 132,024	Participant observation, audio-recorded dialogues, photography	Audio recordings, field notes, photographs
Post-TOAF Interviews	July 15–20 2024	5 individual interviews, group discussion	Interview transcripts, discussion notes
Follow-Up	July 21–August 2024	Monitoring exchanges, subsequent gallery visits	Message records, observation notes

Note. This table outlines the chronological progression of data collection activities across four phases of the study.

three phases (see Table 1): (1) pre-TOAF conversations (April-10 July 2024), where I learned about participants' views on public spaces and art; (2) observations and dialogues at TOAF (13 July 2024), recorded through field notes and audio of conversations during the fair; and (3) post-TOAF interviews (July 15–20, 2024), where participants shared deeper reflections on their experiences.

Semi-structured interviews with five participants were conducted to elicit detailed accounts of their experiences and reflections. Throughout this paper, I specify when and how each piece of data was collected to make the process clear. These interviews allowed participants to share their thoughts and emotions in their own words while providing flexibility to explore deeper insights into their cultural and social interpretations (Creswell and Poth 2016; Moustakas 1994). In addition to the interviews, I engaged in participant observation by accompanying the women throughout their TOAF visits, documenting their interactions with art, artists, and other attendees. Informal dialogues that occurred during these visits were also recorded, capturing the spontaneous exchange of ideas and immediate reactions to the fair. These observational and conversational elements enriched the data by providing a fuller understanding of participants' lived experiences as they unfolded in real time.

For the post-visit to the TOAF, the participants were actively and organically engaged in conversations about the events, sharing their thoughts on how to plan their own show for the next year, and discussing other shows they could visit. The planning was both active and practical. These conversations were also included as part of the data, as they are crucial for understanding the impact of visiting the show (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995).

Data analysis: phenomenological analysis

To explore how the Korean women perceived and made sense of their experiences at TOAF and to understand the broader implications for public spaces as learning environments, this study employed phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of participants, providing a deep understanding of their perspectives and meanings (Moustakas 1994).

The initial step had to do with lifting preconceived notions or biases about the phenomena being studied, known as bracketing, ensuring that the analysis pays attention to the participants' experiences without the influence of the researcher's assumptions (Tufford and Newman 2010). The data, including field notes from

participant observations, interview transcripts, and reflective journals, were read and re-read to become intimately familiar with the participants' descriptions and narratives. This immersion helped me deal with the complexity of their experiences (Creswell 2013).

Significant statements and phrases that pertained directly to how participants perceived and interpreted their experiences were identified and coded. These codes reflect key aspects of their lived experiences, such as feelings of belonging, cultural engagement, and reflections on public art events (Van Manen 2016). The coded data were then organised into meaning units, which were clusters of related codes that together describe specific aspects of the participants' experiences (Creswell 2013). For instance, meaning units include 'personal resonance', 'cultural resonance', 'learning through artwork', and 'social justice in public spaces'. Textural descriptions, or what the participants experienced, were developed from the meaning units. These descriptions provide a detailed account of their experiences as they described them, identifying the nuances and richness of their perceptions (Van Manen 2016). Structural descriptions, or how the participants experienced what they did, were then constructed. This involved interpreting the context and conditions that influenced their experiences, such as the cultural setting of the art show and the dynamics of their social interactions (Van Manen 2016). The synthesis captured the core meanings and essential features of the phenomena, offering a holistic understanding of how the Korean women perceived and made sense of their engagement with TOAF (Moustakas 1994).

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study aims and their role in it. Written consent included permission for taking and publishing photographs, and participants could review and approve images before publication. To protect privacy, all photographs showing participants' faces have been obscured.

Measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants throughout the research process, including anonymising data and using pseudonyms in any publications or presentations of the research findings (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden 2000). For photographs taken at TOAF, any images showing public attendees have been edited to obscure faces.

Findings

The Korean women's engagement with TOAF demonstrated their proactive approach, starting with their preparation for the visit. A couple of days before the event, the group leader, Christine, reached out to me, expressing a desire to review art history and art genres to better understand and appreciate the exhibition. They wanted to be well-prepared to answer any questions that might arise during the visit. Their participation began with a strong commitment to making the most of the learning opportunity presented by the art show. In this findings section, I discuss how TOAF served as an effective tool for public pedagogy. I outline the participants' organic approaches to engagement, which included dialogical learning, cultural and social learning, as well as criticism and reflection on social imbalance. All of these forms of engagement took place

at TOAF, demonstrating the potential of public pedagogy (Ellsworth 2005; Lee 2024; Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick 2011).

Dialogical learning

One of the most significant forms of learning observed during the pre-visit outdoor art show was dialogical learning. Participants engaged in in-depth discussions about the fairness of artistic recognition, particularly in the context of Korean celebrities who leverage their fame to sell art. This happened before visiting the show. For example, one participant, Kate, asked:

> What do you think about the Korean celebrities (living in South Korea) who have no art background but sold lots of artwork due to their fame? I see some of their artworks are not good enough to be sold so expensively. Am I not right? Are they even artists? Do you see them as artists? (Kate, Pre-TOAF Group Discussion, July 10, 2024)

I responded by explaining that while I am not too sure how artists are defined in South Korea, in Ontario, Canada, CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens) determines who qualifies as an artist. I outlined the three categories they consider: artists who have art degrees, those recognised through juried art shows, and those who have held exhibitions, earned profits, and been referred by other CARFAC artists. These conversations led to the perceived disparities between fame-driven art sales and the actual quality and credentials of the artists. This dialogue facilitated critical thinking about the criteria for acknowledgement as an artist and the broader implications of celebrity influence on art valuation.

The topic organically inspired the participants into two further discussions. The first was practical from the perspective of immigrants, and the second was more related to art. The participants expressed a significant interest in whether being acknowledged as an artist by CARFAC could help foreigners acquire immigration visas. This was particularly relevant as some had recently obtained immigration status. The question of residency status was always in the background of their minds, influencing their thoughts and conversations. This interest reflects their fixation on securing resident visas and the artistic recognition in that process. Unfortunately, there was no clear conclusion as no one had a definitive answer. However, this discussion manifested the cultural importance and impact of immigration status on their lives and aspirations.

Another conversation was about how Van Gogh was not famous during his lifetime but earned fame after his death, compared to how Picasso earned his fame during his lifetime. This led to a connection with a South Korean singer and celebrity to further align the discussion.

> Jessica: Van Gogh was not famous during his time, and someone else took the fortune after he died. But Picasso was famous during his lifetime. How much they sell art has nothing to do with being a good artist.

> Kate: You know Jo Young Nam (a South Korean singer)? He made good art and sold his pieces for millions of Korean won. However, his assistants revealed that they actually created the art, not Jo Young Nam. Despite this, Jo Young Nam still claimed it was his art. He said the art sold so high because of Jo Young Nam's name. If it was just his assistant, it wouldn't have sold for

as much. The assistant sued him, and the court ruled that Jo Young Nam must distribute more money to the assistant.

The conversations among the women reflected critical public pedagogy by examining how fame and societal perceptions influence the recognition and valuation of art. They questioned the validity of celebrity-driven art sales and explored the criteria for being acknowledged as an artist in different cultural contexts. Discussions about the CARFAC in defining an artist, and the potential impact of this recognition on immigration status, suggested the intersection of art, identity, and societal structures. This discourse allowed the women to critically engage with issues of authenticity, merit, and the influence of fame on artistic value. Further, their comparison of Van Gogh and Picasso's posthumous and contemporaneous fame, respectively, alongside the controversy surrounding Jo Young Nam's art, demonstrated the complexities of artistic recognition. These conversations emphasised the participants' awareness of how market dynamics and celebrity status can overshadow genuine artistic talent and effort.

From the perspective of these women, critical public pedagogy emerged through their active questioning of the systemic and cultural factors that shape the art world. By reflecting on these issues while viewing the artworks, they demonstrated how public art can serve as a catalyst for critical discussions on broader societal values, including the ethics of art production, the role of artists, and the impact of fame (Giroux 2004). These dialogues also illuminated the participants' concerns about equity, access, and the recognition of diverse voices in the art community (Hooks 1995).

Cultural and social learning

Another prominent learning outcome was cultural and social learning. The art show visit prompted participants to reflect on their cultural backgrounds and how these influence their perceptions of art. The participants faced challenges engaging with public art that invited interaction (see Figure 3). Due to language barriers and a lack of clear signage explaining how to participate, they did not initially realise that certain installations were interactive. Anna expressed confusion, saying, 'I thought this area was for kids. It's somewhat embarrassing (as an adult to participate)' (Anna, Field Observation at TOAF, 13 July 2024). This comment reflects a cultural distinction in South Korea where play is often associated with children.

I asked them, 'Why do you feel embarrassed for participating? Why do you think these activities are more relevant for kids?' The following conversation occurred during the TOAF.

Anna: In South Korea, adults pursue more quiet and calm activities, like drinking coffee and chatting while seated. If you go to Hongdae (a Korean city known as a playground for young adults), you will barely see older people. The mix of generations is very rare there. There are not many events that all ages can enjoy. You have heard of 'No Kid Zones'. There are so many of them in South Korea. It's because adults want quiet time instead of jumping and running like kids.

Christine: I see your point, but I have a different perspective. In Korea, adults often avoid fun activities to ensure children have enough opportunities, given the limited availability. When

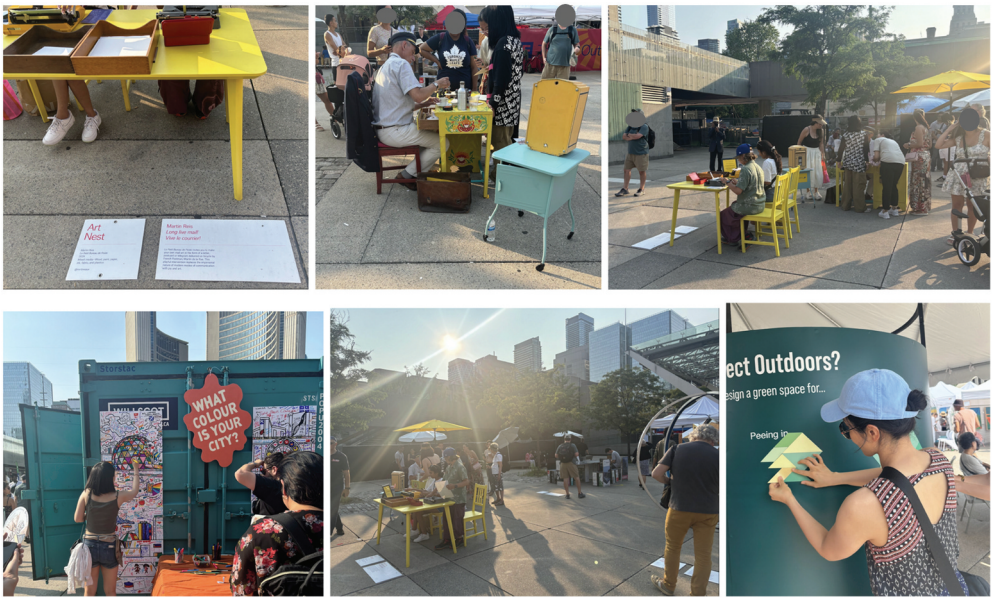


Figure 3. Various stations at TOAF. *Note*. At TOAF, interactive stations were set up where visitors had the opportunity to engage directly with the artwork. This hands-on interaction fostered a deeper connection between the audience and the art, turning spectators into active participants in the artistic experience. The photograph, taken by the author on July 13, 2024, captures one of these stations in action.

> adults join in, it can be seen as taking away from the kids. South Korea is a small country with limited resources for everyone. If adults participate in these activities, they might be viewed as selfish. However, in Canada, there's a different attitude. Adults are encouraged to engage in public events without any negative judgement, making it more inclusive for all ages.
>
> Jen: There is no mix of generations playing together in South Korea, and there is no space that promotes accessibility for vulnerable populations. The 'No Kid Zone' is very problematic. Many people, especially young mothers, dislike this exclusivity as it makes child-rearing more challenging in Korea. It should be banned. If this were in Canada, the stores would be fined seriously for promoting exclusivity.

Their dialogues often led them to reflect on South Korea as their home country, critically discuss its issues, and make comparisons with Canada. This happened continuously while they were walking through the art booths, looking at the artists' work, and reflecting on the artwork, which often referenced the issues and societal movements in South Korea. The conversation below took place when they looked at one of the art booths at the event.

> Jen: Are these photographs real or Photoshopped?
>
> Christine: (read the artist's statement and responded) These are real animals positioned in human houses in Toronto for the photoshoot, and they may have been artistically refined afterwards.
>
> Jen: I see the animals in this photograph as so timid. They seem scared and out of place. I can't get it off my mind. This is not art, this is animal cruelty. [. . .] In South Korea, many people are

passionate about animal welfare. Unlike the old days, there is a rapid movement against animal abuse, with young people volunteering to fight for animal rights. And we have always needed that.

Kate: I cannot believe that taking photos of wild animals indoors can be acceptable in Canada. Isn't this illegal? Where did the artist hire all these wild animals? And how did she carry them inside a house in Toronto? I heard that we cannot even touch wild animals as it is prohibited. And we cannot remove nature from nature. Wouldn't we be fined or something? It's not just one animal. She borrowed all these different wild animals and photographed them in a house in Toronto?

Christine: You're so right. I hope this is not true. The judges should not have selected this art at this public art exhibition. Promoting animal cruelty? And illegality?

After a while, the conversation ended, and these women stood in front of the artworks and expressed their concern about the wild animals depicted in the photographs (see Figure 4). The conversation among the women centred around a photography exhibit featuring wild animals in domestic settings, sparking a debate on the ethics and legality of such artwork. Jen expressed concern over the animals' well-being, viewing the photographs as depicting scared and out-of-place creatures, equating the art to animal cruelty. She mentioned the growing movement against animal abuse in South Korea, particularly among the youth. Kate questioned the legality of the photoshoot, doubting how the artist managed to use and transport wild animals within Toronto, and whether it violated animal protection laws. Christine shared the hope that the situation was not as it appeared and criticised the judges for promoting potential animal cruelty and illegal activities by selecting such artwork for a public exhibition.

This discussion reflected critical public pedagogy by showcasing how these women engaged with public art to question and critique societal values, legal boundaries, and ethical considerations, particularly regarding animal rights and welfare. By critically examining the ethics behind the artwork and its implications, they used public art as a space to raise awareness and challenge societal norms (Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick 2011). This type of engagement fosters a deeper understanding of social justice issues, encouraging reflective dialogue on broader societal concerns (Ellsworth 2005; Giroux 2004).

Motivation for open conversation

What astonished me as a researcher and educator was how active the communication became, centred around art – something that had never occurred before. After the visit, there were numerous exchanges of their artworks and discussions about their plans for future gallery visits through instant messaging systems. Furthermore, following the TOAF visit, they explored contemporary art galleries and events in Toronto and Hamilton.

Interestingly, I was unaware that they engaged in art-making, as this had not been mentioned during the pre-interview. When I inquired about why they had not brought it up, they explained that it was simply a hobby, so they did not consider it something worth discussing – they did not feel they were at a level to speak about it publicly.

Researcher (me): Kate, I noticed that during our earlier conversations, you didn't mention that you were making art. I'm curious, why didn't you bring that up?



Figure 4. Participants reading artist statements and photographing artwork. *Note*. Participants were reading the artist statements to better understand the pieces and taking photographs for documentation. The image, taken by the author on July 132,024, captures this activity.

> Kate: Oh, well, I just never really thought it was important. Art is just something I do for fun, like a hobby. I didn't think it was something worth talking about.
>
> Researcher (me): I see. Do you feel like your artwork is more personal, or is there another reason why you hesitated to share?
>
> Kate: I guess I just don't feel like I'm at the level where it matters, you know? Like, I'm not an artist, so I didn't think anyone would care or want to know. It feels like what I'm doing isn't something people would take seriously.
>
> Researcher (me): That's interesting. Do you think your experience at the TOAF changed that for you in any way?
>
> Kate: Yeah, actually, it did! Seeing all those artists and their work made me realise that art doesn't have to be 'perfect' or professional. It's more about expression. After TOAF, I started thinking maybe I could share my work or at least be more open about it.

Kate's experience demonstrates how public spaces can facilitate informal learning (Lefebvre 1991; Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick 2011). She shifts from viewing her art as a personal hobby to recognising it as something worth sharing and discussing. This suggests that public art spaces can validate personal creative expression, encouraging individuals to reframe their understanding of their own abilities (Goldbard 2006; Knight 2008). This initiative motivated them to participate in similar events the following year. They even formed their own art workshops immediately after the TOAF visit and are currently in the process of registering a charity to promote art education within the community (Gude 2004; Kwon 2002).

On a more practical level, Christine mentioned she would look into creating a charity for art workshops, as this experience turned out to be motivating for the participants. Inspired by the show, they were eager to create and submit their artwork as a group.

This study shows the experiences at the TOAF as a public space has a potential to support everyday learning and social integration for racialised communities. By engaging with the art show, participants were able to critically analyse the cultural and racial dynamics present in the art world, thereby deepening their understanding of broader societal issues. TOAF educated the participants about various social justice issues and provided a platform for dialogue and reflection.

Discussion

The engagement of Korean women in their 50s at the Toronto Outdoor Art Fair (TOAF) provides a conceptual understanding of how public spaces can support everyday learning and social integration for racialised communities (Lefebvre 1991; Lee 2024). The in-depth discussions during the visit manifest the significance of dialogical learning, where participants critically examined artistic recognition and the influence of celebrity culture (Freire 1970). For instance, the debate about Korean celebrities selling artwork due to their fame versus genuine artistic merit fostered critical thinking about the criteria for artistic acknowledgement and the broader implications of celebrity influence on art valuation (Debord 1994). These dialogues facilitated a deeper understanding of authenticity and merit in the art world (Bourdieu 1993).

The art show prompted significant cultural and social learning as well. Participants reflected on their cultural backgrounds and how these influence their perceptions of art (Hooks 1995). Despite initial challenges such as language barriers and cultural distinctions regarding adult participation in interactive art, the experience allowed them to appreciate diverse artistic expressions (Hall 1997). Discussions about the differences in public activities for adults between South Korea and Canada suggest cultural distinctions and fostered a broader appreciation for inclusive public spaces (O'Neill 2007).

The critique of the show for its inclusivity and representation issues emphasised the importance of public art in promoting social critique (Fraser 2014). The findings of this study have significant implications for critical public pedagogy. Public art exhibitions have the potential to facilitate critical dialogue and cultural reflection. By providing opportunities for participants to engage in meaningful discussions and reflect on their cultural contexts, public art shows can promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives (Gude 2004). Lastly, public art exhibitions can serve as powerful tools for raising awareness about social justice issues. The critique of social imbalance and representation at the art show suggests that engaging with these issues can help participants develop a more nuanced understanding of cultural and racial dynamics, contributing to a more just and equitable society (Freire 1970).

The Toronto Outdoor Art Fair at Nathan Phillips Square demonstrated the potential of public art as a form of critical public pedagogy. It educated participants about various social justice issues and provided a platform for dialogue and reflection (Goldbard 2006). The exhibition not only broadened their understanding of art but also deepened their awareness of social justice themes, highlighting the dual educational impact of public art shows in promoting cultural understanding and social equity (Kwon 2002).

Limitations and future research

This study has limitations. First, with only five Korean women participants, the findings may not apply to other immigrant or racialised communities. While phenomenological research focuses on depth rather than numbers, future studies could include more participants from different cultural backgrounds, ages, and immigration experiences to see if similar learning happens.

Second, this study looked at one art event in Toronto. Public art fairs in other cities or countries might work differently based on local culture, politics, and social conditions, which could shape how people experience them.

Third, being Korean myself helped me connect with participants and understand their perspectives, but it may have also influenced how I collected and interpreted data. My shared background gave me access to deeper conversations, but I had to stay aware of not imposing my own views onto their experiences (Berger 2015; Rose 1997). Future research with researchers from different backgrounds could offer new perspectives.

Fourth, spending ten weeks building rapport before TOAF may have changed how participants experienced the fair. Our conversations about art beforehand might have made them think more critically than they would have naturally, which could affect how authentic their responses were.

Finally, while this study looked at participants' experiences during and right after TOAF in July 2024, they kept going. The group continued making art and participated in three public exhibitions: *Art of Joy* at Small Arms Inspection Building in Mississauga (August 2025), *Resistant Fibres* at Âjagemô Exhibition Space in Ottawa as part of a national fibre arts project (October 2025), and *Threaded Devotion* at Boynton Art House in Richmond Hill (January 2026). These activities show that their TOAF experience led to continued engagement with public art and deeper connections to the local arts community. Still, a longer study tracking these developments could help us better understand how public art events affect cultural participation over time.

Future research could continue exploring how diaspora experiences emerge and develop through public art engagement. Following participants over time could show how their shared cultural backgrounds and migration experiences inform their artistic practice and community building. Research with event organisers, artists, and community members could help us understand how to design public spaces that better support diaspora communities. Studies tracking how initial public art experiences develop into ongoing creative practices and community connections could build stronger evidence for public art as a tool for critical public pedagogy and social integration.

Conclusion

This paper examines the critical learning experiences of five Korean women in their 50s and 60s at the Toronto Outdoor Art Fair (TOAF), with a one-day visit to the fair in July 2024. The research began in April 2024 to build rapport with the participants through regular meetings before the event. The study explores how public spaces can foster informal learning and promote social integration for racialised communities. It employed

a phenomenological approach, utilising participant observation and interviews to explore how these women interacted with and experienced TOAF. By focusing on their reflections on public art, cultural learning, and social justice, the research reveals how public art events can serve as platforms for dialogical learning, fostering critical discussions about celebrity influence, artistic merit, and how public spaces can support equity and inclusivity.

The findings emphasise the significance of public art exhibitions in supporting social equity and informal learning. The women critically engaged with themes of representation and inclusivity, reflecting on the limited presence of diverse racial groups, including Indigenous art, at the event. Their dialogues also demonstrated how public spaces can facilitate cultural exchange and offer a platform for marginalised communities to express and reflect on their identities. This study illustrates the importance of ensuring that public art spaces are accessible and inclusive, positioning them as powerful tools in critical public pedagogy that can enrich both educational and cultural experiences in art education.

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