



THE EMBEDDED ARTIST: DOUBLE AGENT

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BACKGROUND

The Embedded Artist Project (EAP) ran as a formal program with the City of Chicago from 2008-2012. The program was based on the experiments from an informal engagement between myself and the Cuyahoga County Planning office in Cleveland, Ohio from 2004-2006. Here a conversation about the contributions of artists to sustainability planning for the region ran parallel to the work on a new [trail and greenway project](#) under discussion. These linked processes produced documents and strategies that were later deployed in the Chicago program. Chief among them was the insight that the intellectual and creative “free agency” of artists is key to their ability to contribute to “possibility”. Their varied research and working methods can and must be allowed to operate within and alongside the highly structured multidisciplinary and consultative processes typical in public planning. A “knowledge claim” document entitled [What do Artists Know?](#) (2006) emerged organically from this conversation and has proven useful as both method and message for the kinds of (tacit) skills artists deploy with engaged and embedded practices.

SUSTAINABILITY + AGENCY

This experimental program enacts the speculative proposition that un-sustainability is at core a cultural problem, and that it can be located in specialization—that the systemic disconnects are created by our current disciplinary model and habits of mind (as developed for example by Fry from Bourdieu.) The aim of the EAP is to test this strategy, test the “cultural hypothesis” that artists can contribute to a more sustainable world by joining the work of multidisciplinary teams and (re)integrating cultural perspectives into the formulation of civic projects. Can art/artists contribute to a culturally informed *trans-disciplinary* method as other disciplines are challenged themselves to do? This experiment can also be understood as a performing of E.O. Wilson’s *Consilience*: the jumping together of knowledge, a critique of practice based in enlightenment knowledge models.

Although we made a rhetorical point of claiming knowledge not just creativity, we entered the engagement understanding that we would most certainly learn from each other, and expected a reciprocity that was for the most part openly met. The apparent tradeoffs between artistic autonomy and increased agency did not prove to be the critical dynamic. Reflecting the inherently collaborative formulation and execution of these ideas and programs, I typically employ the pronoun “we” unless I am referring to a unique individual experience.

OPTING IN : THE DIPLOMACY OF ART

In this trans-disciplinary framework there is no focus on artistic autonomy –those opportunities continue to exist elsewhere. Nor do we work solely within the symbolic economy of art practice. Although Embedded Artist was not conceived primarily to challenge authorship or autonomy specifically, long-held conventions are called into question nonetheless, along with ideas about art’s usefulness and uselessness, purpose and purposelessness. Here there is a renegotiation between the symbolic and the practical, or as Janeil Englestad frames it, to *Make Art with Purpose* or as Tanya Bruguera frames it, *Arte Util (useful art)*.

We are also not concerned about instrumentalization. Clearly the urgency of climate change demands our participation, but this is not the only factor. We have learned that in a good multi-disciplinary collaboration, structured around shared interests, ethics, and goals, one’s voice is amplified not diminished. As an experiment in reciprocity, we are there to be of service and thus are content to defer, at least temporarily, the question of “art” which can limit the ability to re-conceive possibilities. The idea is integration and multi-valency, and the creation of new working models; not the maintaining of borders or old modalities.

Conventional activist art strategies are therefore extended by this “opting IN”. Through this engagement we have learned to speak the languages of other disciplines, both nomenclature and attitude, reflecting

multiple intents and values. Cultural geographer Mill Ingram has called this, the “diplomacy of art”ⁱ, a symbolic handshake, reaching outside art practice towards the work of others, to become value-added. This diplomacy sometimes disrupts these practices by operating within their sphere differently. Some would claim this as an act of “generosity,”ⁱⁱ a joining in, dot connecting. This also disrupts “art.”

EMBEDDED ARTIST + ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE:

At its most basic, Embedded Artists seek to take a seat at the collective table; to work upstream from the domain where most art projects operate. The embedded or “placed” artist differs from other kinds of city engagement strategies such as the Artist-in-Residence model, and the City Artist or Town Artist. Each type of engagement has art historical precedents including the work of the Artist Placement Group (APG), David Harding, Glasgow Town Artist, and Merle Ukeles as NYC Sanitation Department Artist-in-Residence. These different approaches negotiate and model ideas about artistic integration and/or autonomy, among other factors.

In the Artist-in-Residence model, an artist might primarily reflect on the milieu around them but remain outside the principle tasks of the city workgroup, and instead maintain artistic autonomy to create artworks from, with, and about the city systems. Likened to the “embedded photographer” model of a journalist embedded in military units, the EAP was a conscious joining (without becoming), demonstrating the public artist as a new kind of problem solver, or sometimes problem finder. The challenge of problem articulation and problem definition is a key challenge to sustainability planning and an area where artists can be quite adept due to their criticality and lateral thinking. Some cities are framing their artist engagements as City or Town Artist, which in some cases blends the two strategies, or perhaps leaves it to the artist to navigate and experiment. However, we have found that without the support and buy-in at the Commissioner level, it is hard for city staff to prioritize these collaborations in relationship to their other duties and less can happen.

LIKELY PARTNERS + PLACEMENTS

Outside arts discourse it is crucial to recognize which city departments and individuals are receptive to engagements with artists. Reaching into established networks can help identify imaginative partners willing to embrace these experiments, or whose departments face such challenges and such urgency that they are open to new ideas and unorthodox methods. We continue to find receptivity in departments of planning, environment, transportation, housing and technology; sometimes greater than the receptivity in cultural affairs or among public art officials who are oftentimes locked into older modalities and highly prescriptive genre definitions. Those charged with civic innovation or those who face intractable social problems and are hungry for new ideas are often the best prospects, as was the case in Chicago when we began. Some of your best partners may not be motivated by the same factors or find value in the same aspects as what brings artists forward. This has the potential to broaden the program and develop potentials that the initiators did not envision.

In addition to receptivity, matching the expertise and interests of the artist to the “placement” is also important. There will be a steep learning curve on both ends and having some shared background will allow for meaningful work. While we in the arts might choose to focus on what city workers will learn from artists, the reality is that we learn from each other, and therefore duration is also important. Our rule of thumb is that all placements should be for a minimum of two years, longer for big projects.

STRUCTURE: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

While Embedded Artist with the City of Chicago, I was placed first with Land Use Planning working on the 2040 Food Plan and subsequently with the Department of Environment working on brownfields. From the artist perspective, the first placement was less successful because the structure, process and outcome were predetermined and there was no opportunity for re-direction. In the second placement, a visionary commissioner structured the placement in a much more open-ended way. Teamed with the City’s top brownfields expert, we were charged to consider a series of conditions and questions, after which we would collaboratively make a proposal directly to the Commissioner. In this case, we were able to bring new questions to the typical literature review, and propose a new culturally based soil remediation program. The multifunctional social and environmental program known as [Slow Cleanup](#) was conceived and launched. Here both collaboration and free agency were encouraged, harnessing the lateral thinking of artists towards our collective goals. We were thus able to help shape a program that reflected our individual intentions.

Over the three years of working in the Department of Environment we had to move from theory into practice, and the idea of sculpting the civic space became real (civic art practice). I believe that many city workers learned things from working with artists but it is unclear how they understand these insights. Unfortunately there was no formal assessment done of the program. On our end, we learned that there are many constraints that dampen the energies of the even most creative staffers, and that there is a world of difference between career civil servants and elected officials and “politicians”.

BOTH /AND ART : DOUBLE AGENCY

A corollary to the embedded artist is the concept of the “embedded artwork”. Here we explore multi-valency of voice, expertise and “type”, and the possibility that something can be understood as BOTH art AND also as something else (remediation, community development, education, etc) The melding of cultural logics and figurative thinking (tropes) into the multidisciplinary team model of civic projects produces what we have called elsewhere, the “tropological transdisciplinary.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So while we explicitly enacted a critical multi-valency, and openly sought free agency, we also understood that some of the transgressive and subversive strategies of artists had to remain unspoken or in some cases, be suspended in order to address urgency and cooperation. In true trickster fashion, we recognize that our role is also intentionally disruptive, that we are present as change agents, for “redirective practice^{iv}”, or as Sacha Kagan would say, to “*play on the rules rather than in the rules*”^v or “*entrepreneurship in conventions*”.

But what of the rules of art? In what ways does Embedded Artist also re-direct conventional art practice? These BOTH/AND art projects, which form the core of this *civic art practice* are not always legible to art worlds as art, and the status of the projects are often contested. Here the strategic knowledge (metis) of the artist turns on art itself. Using the double agency of this practice to redirect the “cultural quo”, Kagan’s “*double entrepreneurship in conventions*”, the embedded artist shuttles between worlds like a cross pollinator, border hopping, changing both sides in equal measure.

Beyond the “free agency” of arts thinking, beyond re-directive practice, disruption and change agency, the Embedded Artist is at core a *double agent*, working inside and outside conventions, inside and outside worlds, a *double change agent*.

ⁱ Ingram, Mrill, *The Diplomacy of Art: what ecological artists offer environmental politics*, Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society, London, August 31 - September 2, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Purves, Ted (Ed.) *What We Want Is Free: Generosity And Exchange In Recent Art* (SUNY Series in Postmodern Culture), 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ Whitehead, Frances. *Civic Experiments: Tactics for Praxs*, [Plenary Keynote](#), EU Cost Action: Investigating Cultural Sustainability Conference, Helsinki, Finland, May 2015.

^{iv} Tony Fry, *Redirective Practice, An Elaboration*, <http://www.desphilosophy.com>, Volume 1:2007

^v Kagan, Sacha. *Art effectuating social change: Double Entrepreneurship in Conventions*. P. 4, retrieved 4.5.15 http://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/PERSONALPAGES/Fakultaet_1/Kagan_Sacha/files/version_2.0_article_ent3.pdf