

ABSTRACT

CIVIC EXPERIMENTS: TACTICS FOR PRAXIS

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Arriving through dialogue between urban planners and artists, a “knowledge claim” for contemporary artists forms the basis of a series of experimental projects undertaken since 2006 aimed at exploring the role of culture in sustainability. This document articulates the tacit, methodological, and cultural knowledge of artists, outside the dispositional language of “creativity.” A strategic examination of agency evolves, including “free agency” and “double agency”, as a reflection of the perceived relationship between creative autonomy and agency, especially in the public sphere. Working initially from Fry’s concept of *redirective practice*, and the imperative to redirect from within, “opting in” inverts the conventional mechanisms of activist art practice. This speculative transformation strategy generates a series of linked civic initiatives, including *The Embedded Artist Project*. I will describe the formulation of these projects, and the ways in which they make use of literature relevant to the discourses of (trans)disciplinarity and sustainability. I also describe a series of emergent “change tactics”, which are informed by ideas from contemporary art theory and practice as they pertain to sustainability, relationality, and social art practices. These tactics include transliteration, revaluation, performativity, and the use of multivalent intentions —tacit and explicit.

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Frances Whitehead 4.12.15

Situating Cultural Knowledge

Artists today are seeking greater social engagement, moving beyond entrenched roles circumscribed by the culture industry, towards the compelling issues of our time. Some are evolving knowledge based platforms for public practice, operating in the larger society to re-imagine *knowledge*, to create *new futures*.

We began our journey 15 years ago, encountering the charismatic theorist Tony Fry with his focus on the *semiosphere*ⁱ, the intangible realm of values and meanings. We understood this as a direct challenge to artists and the culture at large.

Our work since then has been driven by these **core questions** and a search for creative answers.

- *What is Sustainability?*
- *What is the role of Culture?*
- *What is the role of the Artist?*
- *Where is Agency to effect change?*

We came to articulate two interconnected **cultural hypotheses**, which form the basis for subsequent experiments:

- First, that sustainability is a *cultural* problem and requires a whole-system cultural framework that accounts for *intangibles* to succeed.
- Secondly, that artists' particular expertise can be of great value to trans-disciplinary teams due to largely unexamined skills that contemporary artists deploy.

In this way, a new model of cultural praxis has emerged: private questions led to strategies, strategies to initiatives, initiatives to engagements, widening out towards the public realm, the *civic experiment*.

Animating this *meta-project* is the rhetorical question, "[*What Do Artists Know?*](#)"ⁱⁱ which has over time become both method and message.

Although academia addresses art practice within research culture, questions of knowledge and innovation have a different order of urgency for the civic sector, including rust-belt American cities like Chicago, where we have found considerable appetite for new ideas.

The paradigm shift from industrial to post industrial, underway in the late 1990's catapulted urban discourse into a liminal zone of new possibility and urgency. Contested theories of sustainability were emerging from "design thinking" but not "arts thinking". Within this theory, a post-enlightenment, meta-typology of cultural practice, "artefacture"ⁱⁱⁱ, locates the environmental crisis firmly within artifice, in a non-hierarchical zone of cultural production, art, design, philosophy, science, *et al.*

This focus outside specialization challenges the significance of isolating purely symbolic strategies and has brought the symbolic back into conversation with the practical, offering the potential to "make art with purpose"^{iv}. The autonomy of individualistic art practice is augmented, not refuted, creating a space where meaning and purpose coexist, are equally valorized, offering expanded agency to artists and refocusing design practice on ethics and signification.

As an artist interested in art's relationship to both the built and natural world – this is a space full of possibility, capturing the imagination, where all disciplines collaboratively constitute an emergent "trans-disciplinary".

During this period, the art world has seen a contentious polemic concerning the movement known as *social practice*. Organized around Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*^v, parties argue the potential of blending the political, the social, and the aesthetic. This discourse is focused primarily on social justice, seeing ecological concerns as a dimension of the "social". Embracing event-based collective action,

critique, and resistance, the “social turn” continues to grow, even as it is challenged for its “largely symbolic commitment to politics”^{vi}.

As artists with a systemic view, we have inverted these conventional activist art strategies by “opting” IN not OUT –deferring at least temporarily, the question of “art”, which can limit our ability to re-conceive possibilities.

Here we follow the advice of American philosopher John Dewey, who exhorts:

*“in order to understand the meaning of an artistic product, we have **to forget them for a time**, to turn aside from them, and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as esthetic.”^{vii}*

Performing the Tropological Transdisciplinary

Through OPTing IN, we have learned to speak the languages of other disciplines, both nomenclature and attitude, reflecting multiple intents and values.

Cultural geographer Mrill Ingram has called this, the “diplomacy of art”^{viii}, 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 “generosity”^{ix} a joining in, dot connecting. This also disrupts “art.”

Today as I describe the formulation of recent projects, I will communicate in three distinct voices. This includes both the verbal and visual delivery of information, a durational *speech act*.

- You will find an exacting, descriptive, expository voice, especially used for technical details from other disciplines, as I perform these disciplines factually, faithfully
- You will hear a rhetorical, persuasive voice, a voice that makes claims, pronouncements, delivers statements of implication, signification, intention and aspiration. This is a crucial voice for the cultural for herein lies the debate concerning ideas, actions and their meanings
- You will also hear a poetic voice, a figurative, metaphoric voice sometimes spoken, sometimes purposefully withheld, sometimes represented visually but not paired with verbal equivalents. This is the voice of the *trope*, the double meaning, ambiguity, the voice of the cultural outside the paradigm of knowledge production, outside certainty

For whatever is said, something else is not said; something else is always meant.

This is the underlying logic of these projects even where it is not articulated. This *tropological transdisciplinary* forms the basis of the *Tactics for Praxis*.

Practicing in Public – (we know we don't know)

In each project that follows, there has been an explicit aim and outcome. But in each case, additional unforeseen outcomes have also arrived, which are carried on as a reflexive working method. We are *practicing in public—we know we don't know*.

From 2005- 2007 myself and another artist became deeply embedded in the planning process for a new trail and greenway in Cleveland Ohio that ran beside the historic steel mill. The *explicit outcome* was a systemic sustainability plan for the trail, and a process for including artists. This included an ambitious technical proposal to change the steel mill, saving co2 by granulating steel slag, piled up, barely used. This technical possibility grew from the recognition that the slag pile is *cultural heritage*, not waste, understanding it as *an underutilize asset available for revaluation*.

Here we did not invent a new technology. Rather, acting as *free agents* not paid consultants, we ignored the advice of the engineers, and did the research required to identify an available technology, maintaining autonomy even in collaboration – *artist as a new kind of problems solver*.

Over a two year period, the planners began to note things they perceived we artists knew, and why it was valuable, *unintentionally* producing a *Knowledge Claim* for artists. The document articulates the tacit and methodological knowledge deployed by contemporary artists. The most important claims are for a *radical lateral-ness*, and special *cultural literacies* that arise from being both producers and critics of culture. Additional important aspects deal with the ability to maneuver in multiple economies, transferring and transforming value.

With this Knowledge Claim, we were able to engage directly with Fry's well known "change strategy" *Redirective Practice*, which challenges each discipline to redirect *from within*.

"The ambition of redirective practice is to...gather a multiplicity of practices, including, but beyond, design, to start to redesign/redirect the structural and cultural condition that designs our mode of being-in-the-world..."
Redirection does not mean total rupture; rather it means, modifying, remaking or reframing..."^x

A systemic look at my own art and life revealed 3 sectors for redirection: *personal, pedagogical and professional* and produced three *redirective* projects. Almost immediately, intentions, means and methods began to transgress the borders circulating ideas across situations, generating more provocative projects, and unexpected agency. Eventually this *transliteration*, jumped the borders of art practice into architecture, and from there, into the civic arena.

Pedagogically, we *imported* our professional questions as participatory curriculum, creating the **Knowledge Lab**. We simultaneously *exported* pedagogy.

Next, **The Greenhouse Chicago** was initially conceived to redirect our private home/studio. However, during construction we became radicalized about the possibilities, and transformed the project – taking creative control away from the architect, adding features immoderately, testing the limits, turning it into a demonstration project, BOTH Architecture AND art. The studio moved from the site of production to the object produced –the studio became the art. *Duchamp in reverse*.

The other outcomes were more surprising *and harder to claim*.

Though not our intention, our commitment to the actualization of this encyclopedic project *challenged* architecture. The house became not only the *art*, but also the *classroom*, as architects and urbanists came in for tours, creating opportunities for dialogue and future engagement.

We were no longer redirecting from within, we had *OCCUPIED* architecture, performed architectural redirection, a *RUPTURE*, reversing and up-ending traditional hierarchies and roles. We were simultaneously solving problems *and creating them*.

Artists interested in these new modalities of practice use their disciplinary skills very strategically, deploying another type of knowledge known to the Greeks as *METIS*,

In "The Practice of Everyday Life*", de Certeau describes metis, as:

"knowledge that is immersed in practice" combining" flair, sagacity, foresight, intellectual flexibility, deception, resourcefulness, and diverse sorts of cleverness"^{xii}

In the professional realm complex work is now performed by multi-disciplinary teams. What happens when you add an artist into this system as professional transgressor? Important here is Sacha Kagan's, notion of "Double Entrepreneurship in Conventions." to "*play on the rules rather than in the rules*"^{xii}. Here the artist is a *double agent*, putting the transgressive dimension of contemporary art to practical use.

Thus through *metis*, artists and other cultural border hoppers, are a kind of irreverent cross pollinator, punching holes in disciplinary walls. Operating both inside and outside art, both inside and outside civic and public structures, a kind of *double change agency*.

Again leveraging the *Knowledge Claim* we launched the last of the *redirective* projects, the ***Embedded Artist Project***. Sponsored by Chicago's Department of Innovation, the program ran between 2008- 2012. Here artists are embedded in city workgroups to bring new perspectives to the daily work of the city.

Civic Experiments– (praxis)

SLOW Cleanup - Sites of Public Learning

Working as *Embedded Artist* with the Chicago Department of Environment, we developed ***Slow Cleanup***, a *net benefits* model for Chicago's 400+ abandoned gasoline stations, the legacy of American automobile culture. A very informed Commissioner of Environment embraced the proposal to use Hawkes' 4 Pillar^{xiii} model as a schema for a new approach to brownfields, using phyto or plant based remediation.

Modeled on the Slow Food movement, the program rejects the "*Fast Cheap Easy*" paradigm of conventional "dig and dump" cleanup. Technically, petroleum remediation is performed by soil microbes attracted to phenols, sugars, exuded by some plant roots but not others. Surprisingly, very few plants have been tested including the prairie forbs native to Chicago. Additional plant remediators would allow the re-imagining of the post-carbon landscape, and the revaluing of these degraded properties.

The program is constructed as a series of *interim* approaches that model time in relation to investments, benefits, and complexity. We also evolved an *in situ* soil prep method for keeping all soils on site, repurposing a road-building tool.

A typical corner site hosts the field trials for the program and was designed for legibility and function. Students from 4 *communities of practice* have been involved in the project, paralleling the 4 Pillars. Working with soil scientist Dr. A.P. Schwab^{xiv}, we have identified 12 new species of native ornamental petroleum remediators. Schwab has worked contractually like an artist, which is to say, *for free*.

Here you see the site being prepared and planted.

Because the Commissioner was very adventurous, the explicit aims of the project largely matched my intentions:

- Extend the plant palette and create more value (s) through remediation
- Conduct "Civic Experiments" as public research, involve many learners, create capacity

The purely disciplinary ambition to critically extend the sculptural genre of the "earthwork" remained tacit.

DIASPORE /dī'ə-spôr'/

In botany, a seed or spore, plus any additional elements that assist dispersal.

The pan-Atlantic exchange of plants and people that began in 1533 with the European encounter with the Peruvian potato is extended through reciprocity to all sites where food production and cultural production are intertwined.

We were introduced to the City of Lima, Peru through *CIP*, the [Centro Internacional de la Papa](#), which holds over 4000 varieties of Andean potatoes, the cultural heritage of ten thousand years of hybridization by indigenous growers. I had been in conversation with the Director concerning the cultural nature of food ways and the 4th Pillar model, and how these ideas might enrich the new urban agriculture program underway in Lima with which she was involved.

We assembled a team of Chicago artists, designers and preservationists to provide creative support to the City of Lima in their efforts to integrate architectural conservation for the historic center and food planning.

A crumbling but magnificent UNESCO world heritage site built around 1500, the center now houses the urban poor, who also have inadequate nutrition and food security. Similar to other quickly urbanized areas in South America, the city edge is extended by informal settlements of a growing population.

Lima has a host of challenges beyond population:

- Due to the prevalence of the Spanish-style courtyard house, most of the open space is interior and private not public
- The diminishing glacier-fed water supply, visible in the dry beds of local rivers, also creates a challenge for this desert city. Slowly we became aware that all programs in Lima must be evaluated against the underlying pragmatic dilemma of sustaining a city that is in the wrong place –a perpetual colonial legacy –an unsustainable settlement pattern
- Lastly, many of the adobe brick Spanish colonial buildings are mere shells with no extant interior. *These are remarkably common*

These contradictory conditions informed our strategies in Lima as we sought ***symbolic and practical*** solutions to enhance democratic participation, food security and heritage conservation.

The hex pattern emerged as a motif for many of these investigations, moving from:

- a metaphor for participation at City Hall, *the Civic Hive*
- to a space saving spatial configuration for roof gardens
- to a motif for a mobile orchard, reversing the private courtyard and the spatial interiority^{xv} of the city

Everyone understood that urban agriculture in Lima was a short term proposition, raising as many questions as it answered.

THE 606

Returning to Chicago, since 2012, I have been the *Lead Artist* on the Design Team for a 3-mile long rail adaptation project, The 606, which will open in a few weeks. The 606 is a civic experiment in every way, a public/private partnership with great ambitions. For me the project has also been an opportunity to actualize the ideas that we had been developing at a more speculative scale.

The private partner, *The Trust for Public Land* established *public engagement* as the ethos of the project. Working rhetorically with the values of *participation and engagement*, the arts became the organizational framework for the project, shifting the multidisciplinary team structure towards the more collaborative (but more contested) trans-disciplinary model. Sustainable “best practices” were used throughout the project, but there was no time for a philosophic discussion concerning cultural aims. Tacitly we transformed the 4 Pillars into a set of *cultural values*, shifting the focus from *cultural heritage* to *cultural futures*.

There are many features along the 3-mile project, including an observatory at the west end, and a multi-functional skate park/ performance venue at the east end. However, my main interest is a planted line that runs the full length, forming what came to be called, an *embedded artwork*, a landscape intervention, achievable only by proclaiming it “art”.

Environmental Sentinel is a climate monitoring artwork, a planted line of 453 native, flowering trees *Amelanchier x grandiflora* (Apple Serviceberry). The five-day bloom spread of this flowering line will visualize Chicago’s famous *Lake Effect* in spring and fall. The proposal was based on a climatological study, which reveals how large bodies of water like Lake Michigan affect local temperature patterns.

Modeled after the Japanese cherry blossom festival whose transient blooming has attracted audiences for centuries, this phenologic spectacle will become living *data visualization* in time and space. Phenology from the Greek- *to come into view* -- Is the practice of observing natural events like bloom time, which is undergoing a revival because living indicators provide integrated data, and can tell us more about climate

than isolated instrumentation. Japanese court records of exact bloom-date extend back 1200 years, producing the oldest and most important phenologic data set worldwide. Unlike contemporary approaches, this data set was generated culturally –by the appreciation of beauty – its was not generated by science, nor by social responsibility.

As a form of speculative artistic activism, the project explores the potential of the cherry blossom festival to be replicated elsewhere. *Is it a “transferable model”? Will this work in Chicago with native plants? Can beauty be catalytic and educational?*

A participatory observation program links academic and citizen scientists, deliberately “*sensing the anthropocene*”^{xvi}, but most encounters will be informal, by regular trail users who engage this *Slow Spectacle* in other ways. This synthetic approach blends new participatory art practices, climatology, and the expressive potential of public infrastructure to create what we are calling, *a bit provocatively “pink infrastructure.”*^{xvii}

Tactics For Praxis

Today we have looked at several models of sustainability, the strategy of Opting IN, and several tactics for new cultural praxis:

- **Transliteration** –the moving of parts across sectoral borders
- **Re-valuation** –the identification of underutilized assets
- **Performativity** –The adoption of the means of other professions for: translation, redirection, diplomacy, solidarity – value added
- **And the use of multivalent intentions-** to deploy the ambiguity of the cultural voice to open space for new questions

Here the important dynamics are not binary between say, *autonomy and agency*, but rather *transactional, free agency* and *double agency*.

Each of these tactics contains some degree of **transgression**. Even when diplomatic, *change agents* don't always play by the rules.

And lastly, there is much to learn about the relation of the *symbolic to the practical*: the useful, the purposeful, the utilitarian and the instrumentalized, as art and culture re-negotiate their relationship to other forms of knowledge towards sustainability.

Thank you.

End
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ⁱ Fry attributes this model to himself, in combination with Ezio Manzini and Felix Guittarri, confirmed in email 4.11.2010

ⁱⁱ Whitehead, Frances. 2006. Available in original from at <http://www.embeddedartistproject.com/whatdoartistsknow.html>, 4.1.15

ⁱⁱⁱ Dilnot, Clive. *Solidarity Through Artefacture?* From “The Fear of Acknowledging Making” drafted c.1989, unpublished.

^{iv} MAP with Janeil Englestad, derived in conversation with FW

^v Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presse Du Reel, Franc; Les Presses Du Reel edition (January 1, 1998)

^{vi} Ben Davis, Book Review of Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 116 pp., Continuum, 2006. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/books/davis/davis8-17-06.asp> Retrieved 3.31.15

^{vii} Dewey, John. 1934, *Art as Experience*, reprinted in 1989, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*. vol. 10. Boydston, J. (ed.), Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

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

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

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

^{xi} de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984, page 81-2

^{xii} Sacha Kagan. 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

^{xiii} Hawkes, Jon. *The fourth pillar of sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning*, Cultural Development Network, Victoria, 2001

^{xiv} <http://soilcrop.tamu.edu/staff/schwab-paul/>

^{xv} ^{xv} Jörg Plöger, "Lima -City of Cages" *European Journal of Geography*, (2005)

^{xvi} Dixon, Deborah. Email correspondence, November 6, 2014. Professor of Geography, School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, Scotland

^{xvii} References and redirects the well known ecological urbanism concept of turning "grey infrastructure" into "green infrastructure."