

Embedded Artists

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Artists Outside the Art World: The World in Quest of Artists

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The following Publication is a documentation of the “Embedded Artists Conference”, which took place at the Zurich University of the Arts in November 2018.

The aim of the conference was to answer questions related to the proposition that artistic work increasingly focuses on fields that lie beyond the traditional fields of artistic activity. The search for definitions for this shift in focus, which sees artists as producers of the new, as leading figures within social processes and as co-creators of an expanded concept of art, shaped the composition of the participants, the questions of the contributions, as well as the perspective on a possible implementation of the results of this discourse in the programs of arts universities.

The conference focused on the following questions:

The arts and every form of artistic practice as artwork or production methodology are sources for the development of new models of (cultural) leadership. How can a conceptual field be defined that is called “management through art” or “artistic management”?

Which artistic working methods can be transferred to the field of management?

Looking at artists who work in non-artistic terrains and non-artists who work in artistic domains: Which tools, qualities, competences and skills of artists find application outside the artistically occupied domains?

What are the connections between artists and society?

Which domains could use artistic methods to manage their problems and topics?

By pursuing these questions, we try to work towards the development of a new, sustainable training idea for artists, as well as to question, deconstruct and expand the discussion about the role model “artist”.

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Embedded Artist: Opting In

1.1

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 ⁽¹⁾ 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?* ⁽²⁾ (SEE PAGE 15 OF THIS PUBLICATION) (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.

1.1

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.



1.1

Frances Whitehead, *The 606*, Chicago, 2015. Opening day bike parade at the west end Observatory. Created from trail construction soils, the spiraling seasonal earthwork re-grounds audiences in their geographic and cultural reality. Photo: The Trust for Public Land.

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 Tania Bruguera frames it, *Arte Util (useful art)*.

1.1

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 Mrill

Ingram has called this, the “diplomacy of art”⁽³⁾, 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”⁽⁴⁾, a joining in, dot connecting. This also disrupts “art”.



What do Artists Know?

*Beyond a wide range of material practices, histories and techniques, concepts and theoretical frameworks, artists are trained to use a unique set of skills, process, and **methodologies**. These include:*

- ❑ Synthesizing diverse facts, goals, and references – making connections and speaking many “languages”. Artists are very “lateral” in their research and operations and have great intellectual and operational agility.
- ❑ Production of new knowledge as evidenced by the 100+ year history of innovation and originality as a *top criterion*
- ❑ Creative, in-process problem solving and ongoing processes, not all up-front creativity: responsivity.
- ❑ Artists compose *and* perform, initiate *and* carry-thru, design *and* execute. This creates a relatively tight “feedback loop” in their process.
- ❑ Pro-active not re-active practice: artists are trained to initiate, re-direct the brief, and consider their intentionality.
- ❑ Acute cognizance of individual responsibility for the meanings, ramifications and consequences of their work. (The down side of this is that artists are not always team-oriented or willing to compromise due to the high premium placed on individual responsibility and sole authorship.)
- ❑ Understanding of the language of cultural values and how they are embodied and represented – re-valuation and re-contextualization.
- ❑ Participation and maneuvering in non-compensation (social) economies, idea economies, and other intangible values (capital).
- ❑ Proficiency in evaluation and analysis along multiple-criteria -- qualitative lines, qualitative assessment. Many are skilled in pattern and system recognition, especially with asymmetrical data.
- ❑ Making explicit the implicit -- making visible the invisible.
- ❑ Artists do not think outside the box-- *there is no box*.

Frances Whitehead 2006 ©

Frances Whitehead, *What do Artists Know?* Knowledge claim document co-created with city planners, Cleveland, Ohio, 2004–2006.

Embedded Artist: Double Agent (Part 2)

1.2

EMBEDDED ARTIST + ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE

The structure of how the “artist” enters the non-art / civic setting can vary a great deal. These different structures may reflect assumptions about “art” and “art-making” and reflect contested ideas about the role of the artist in society and “socially engaged art”. These structures also reflect different ideas about what can be achieved by having an artist in government. Simply put, is the artist there to make “art”? Are they there to make “change”?

We might begin by recognizing that an “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 Mierle Ukeles as NYC Department of Sanitation Artist-in-Residence, where Ukeles is still active. These different approaches negotiate and model ideas about artistic integration and/or autonomy, and reflect different “theories of change”.

1.2

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. Marcus Young’s *Everyday Poems* for St. Paul, Minnesota may reflect this concept. In contrast, likened to the “embedded photographer” model of a journalist embedded in military units, the Embedded Artist is a conscious joining (*without becoming*), demonstrating the role of 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, due perhaps to the complexity of the projects undertaken, 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. 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 and aim to impact the everyday work of the government and policy, even while “art” may (*or may not*) be made.

LIKELY PARTNERS + PLACEMENTS

Outside arts discourse it is crucial to recognize which city departments and individuals are receptive to engagements with artists, and *why*. 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 offices of 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.

1.2 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. It will be interesting to see what cities undertaking shorter engagements can make happen.

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*⁽¹⁾ 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. It was not exactly “artist led” it was more collaborative and shared.

1.2

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



1.2

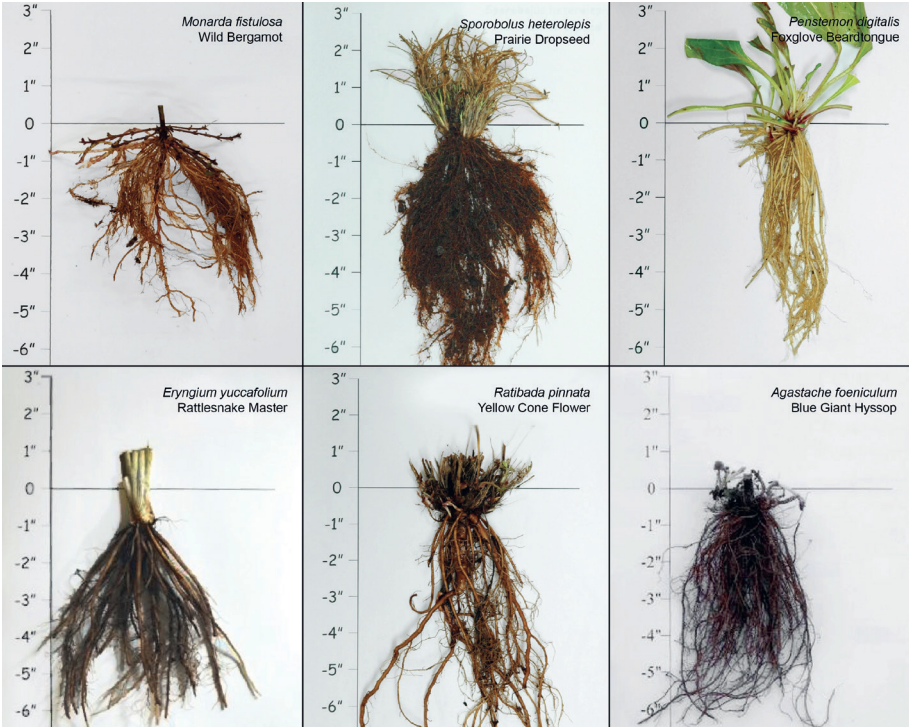
Frances Whitehead, *SLOW Cleanup Program—Civic Experiments in Phytoremediation*, 2010–2012. Greencorp horticulture trainees installing large woody species at the Slow Cleanup field trials site. Photo: Frances Whitehead + City of Chicago.



1.2

Frances Whitehead, *Slow Cleanup—Community Lab Garden*. Field trials for petroleum remediation test species, 2012. Photo: Frances Whitehead + City of Chicago.

1.2



Frances Whitehead, Root masses of native prairie forbs under investigation for petroleum remediation in the Slow Cleanup plant trials. Courtesy of Prairie Moon Nursery.

figurative thinking (*tropes*) into the multidisciplinary team model of civic projects produces what we have called elsewhere, the “tropological transdisciplinary” (2).

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”, or as Sacha Kagan would say, to “*play on the rules rather than in the rules*” (3) 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*.

Embedded Artist as Epistemic Disobedience

1.3

From 2006 to 2016, I undertook a series of epistemologically driven practice experiments under the concept of Embedded Artist (*EA*). These engagements are described in the previous texts, *Embedded Artist: Opting In* and *Embedded Artist: Double Agent*⁽¹⁾ (2015) and have been further theorized in other papers including one delivered at ZHdK in Fall 2018. These civic engagements were driven by environmental concerns and situated primarily in a North American post-industrial context, informed by a western knowledge model with its familiar disciplinary divisions. These post-enlightenment experiments were a response to these specializations, and the subsequent disconnects and systemic problems that have evolved under that episteme known collectively as “wicked problems”⁽²⁾. They were experiments in “knowledge production”; in “knowing how to know”⁽³⁾. These experiments also have implications for Wickert’s thesis⁽⁴⁾ regarding “artistic leadership”. In the “professional” western context, it is imperative to conceptualize artistic practice as the enactment of meta-typologies of practice, and thus to consciously model new typologies for the future.

1.3

However, since writing the 2015 texts, I have been involved in two contexts that both extend and challenge these strategies. These new sites and communities include the highly disturbed urban landscape of Gary, Indiana, where I have worked since 2016 with a largely African American community on a civic fruit growing initiative, Fruit Futures Initiative Gary (*FFIG*). More recently, I have been working within the semi-rural agricultural “hinterlands” (*Kei Uta*) of Kuku, Horowhenua, Aotearoa (*New Zealand*) where I have been “embedded” with an indigenous Maori community. Here I have been invited to work with a group of artists, designers and community members, the Kei Uta Collective, seeking to explore how the mātāuranga Maori (Maori knowledge or episteme) might link to other knowledge systems, in order to envision climate adaptation strategies for this longstanding, Maori coastal community⁽⁵⁾.

These new situations have allowed and required me to see Embedded Artist in a broader way; a more geo-political proposition beyond working with municipalities and multi-disciplinary team-based civic projects. What is now clear is that the Embedded Artist is practicing what Walter Mignolo calls *Epistemic Disobedience*⁽⁶⁾.

EMBEDDED ARTIST UNEMBEDDED-CO-CREATIVITY

As success with the Embedded Artist model grew, so did the reality that this is a professionalized model, a “top down” practice best suited to large-scale endeavors. In response to this condition, we moved our studio practice to the extreme post-industrial region of Gary, Indiana, just south of the Chicago metropolitan area to work in a different way.

Gary is dominated by steel production. Like all company towns, this unsustainable economy has faltered under globalization and automation, leaving behind: population loss, environmental devastation, rampant suburbanization, and institutionalized racism. Although we are in touch with people in city government—*what remains of it*, we are working most directly with a handful of long term Gary residents, “bottom up”. This EA model replaces “expertise” with “co-creativity”.

1.3 Lisa Grocott⁽⁷⁾ has written about the importance of the transferability of knowledge, and what happens if we can transfer in a divergent and speculative manner rather than a convergent and directive manner. While Grocott’s open-ended transferability creates greater uncertainty, it may also create “possibility” and agency. Thus, in Gary, we asked a new set of questions regarding knowledge: Could we transfer the knowledge already captured by previous EA placements? And could we transfer the “agency” held within that knowledge in order to build capacity in the community? This is the Embedded Artist *Un-embedded, a new kind of civic engagement*, deployed through divergence and uncertainty; “deep hanging out”.

The Gary Projects (*FFIG*) also pose questions about time and scale which impede our understanding of other “natures”, ongoing but invisible, and uncounted by the western mind. Recognizing the larger bioregional ecology, FFIG cultures a pan-animistic worldview, offers non-anthroponormative regional futures, de-growth and post-development possibilities, micro-industrialization, and (just) transition economics. FFIG and the liminal spaces of post-urban Gary are a monument to the failure of specialization, and em-

body critiques of both western “rationality” and also capitalism, opening space for Afro-futurism, deep localism, poetry, participation, “tactical magic” and a “pluriverse” of wonder.

ARTIST EMBEDDED IN KAUPAPA MAORI (OR NOT)

This critique of western rationality as part of the western episteme, links directly to the dynamic, bi-cultural context emerging in Aotearoa/New Zealand which is actively indigenizing (*de-colonizing*) art, research and the discussion about knowledge⁽⁸⁾.

1.3 In our Spring (their summer) 2019, I was “embedded” at the Tukorehe Marae, a traditional spiritual and community center, in a cross-cultural *wananga*, an intensive forum and collaborative process based in Kaupapa Maori, a holistic Maori methodological approach to research. As part of the Deep South Science Challenge-Vision Maturanga Programme⁽⁹⁾, the aim is to “ground science in culture, and to communicate complex knowledge and data through art and design strategies”⁽¹⁰⁾. Key features of this approach include the use of *hiko*, walking together on the land, as an embodied, kinesthetic form of learning that is simultaneously an act of political demonstration and solidarity. Daily *hui* meetings and active *korero* discussions complement the introduction to core, integrative, Maori concepts such as *whakapapa*—the genealogical linkage of people and their connections to all things.

The *tiro a-Maori ki tona ake ao or Te Ao Maori*, the Maori worldview, sees knowledge as shared, passed down, ancestral, accumulative; not “produced”, not industrial or instrumental—it is a value proposition. Mignolo⁽¹¹⁾ refers to “knowledge making” rather than “knowledge production” to acknowledge the shared authorship and ancestral processes that inform indigenous “knowing”.

Maturanga Maori, the Maori knowledge model is integrative, and like other indigenous perspectives, contrasts with the western view that dis-integrates the world into disconnected disciplines. Here nature and culture are not separated, and nature is also not







Frances Whitehead, *Fruit Futures, Community Lab Orchard*, Gary, Indiana, 2017. Planting day with members of the Orchard Collaborative and community members. Video stills from documentary film: Rava Films for A Blade of Grass Foundation.



1.3

Frances Whitehead + Kei Uta Collective, *Hikoi 2019: Walking + Talking 1*, GPS track and GIS mapping—digital inkjet print on rag paper. Dimensions: 20in×30in.

conceptualized as the place conveniently lacking humans, ready for western colonization. This worldview does not embrace the fashionable “anthropocene” concept, as this concept reflects the underlying western assumption which universalizes the “human” as responsible agent in the climate crisis, when it is, in reality, a product of western thought and action (12). It is also crucial to recognize that the Maori indigenous worldview suffered under colonialism, and is undergoing a process of reclamation and revitalization; a process that is simultaneously cultural, political and epistemological (13).

To be “embedded” within this bi-cultural knowledge experiment is to reflect on these underlying epistemological differences regarding knowledge making and its meanings, requiring the Embedded Artist to be an epistemic “diplomat” as Stengers would say, to “turn contradiction (*either/or*) ... into a contrast (and, and)” (14).

EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE

What began as a disruption of disciplinary boundaries within the western professional system of expertise has grown into a reassessment of the epistemology that underpins this entire system. More than mere institutional critique, or disruptive innovation, this view of knowledge and of belonging challenges not only the western system of thought but also its metaphysics. Can you be “embedded” within an integrative worldview where all elements are already linked; where there is no inside/outside? The inter-epistemic and inter-cultural initiative underway in Kuku, Horowhenua is a site for exploring these questions.

Interestingly, the view that nature and culture are not separate connects the Maori perspective to land use policy in Indiana. Inside post-urban Gary, vacant land, including fragments of native landscape, do not legally qualify as “natural”. Through this inconsistent land use policy, “nature” and “ecology” are not available to Gary’s largely African American residents, supporting racial inequality in the area.

Embedded Artist started as a change strategy, motivated by seeking to operate somewhere else: upstream or downstream, or inside, outside or *be-side*, some perceived boundary or limitation so that we can know (*or understand*) something else. Clearly the making of knowledge and the contestation between different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing are not neutral propositions. Perhaps the Embedded Artist is useful for reconnecting *ecologies of practice*⁽¹⁵⁾ and also as a method for broader geo-political aims; the decolonization of knowledge through *Epistemic Disobedience*.

1.3

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Smith notes: “We must recognise the radical disruptions that had to take place amongst Maori and wider society of Aotearoa New Zealand during the political rights era of the 1970s, the development of Treaty of Waitangi jurisprudence to today, and how Maori had to overcome deficits for iwi and hapu, and for them reclaim and revitalize their indigenous worldviews or ways of being for now, and into the future.” 14 Stengers, Isabelle, <i>Ecology of practices and technology of belonging</i>, Thursday 23 June 2005, reference http://www.imbroglia.be/site/spip.php?article43, retrieved 3.8.2019. 15 ibid.
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