

Summary

I am fortunate to have a loving mother that has encouraged my optimistic belief that I can be part of creating a better world. She taught me not to define myself by my surroundings, or other people's assumptions about who I was or should be, but content of character. My hope came from belief in my dreams of being an installation/media artist and social entrepreneur - and the promise of freedom, peace and prosperity that I imagined came with dedication to the work and good citizenship. Despite my own experiences, or those shared with me, nothing could squelch my belief that there was a place for me, and everyone else, at *the table*. And it is this belief that has inspired the Art Based research series¹ that has inspired this writing. This whitepaper will sketchily illuminate the concepts relevant to the interest of those whose inquiries have inspired the writing of the document. The more enigmatic text documents emerging from the work require a different approach, but share a similar inspiration. The Project: Cultural Fusion Art as Philosophy.

Art Based research and A/r/tography are defined as art work undertaken as the context and process for exploring an idea, question, or situation. As such it embraces the tradition of Conceptual Process Art – where the journey is as important as the destination. Here civic engagement or social enterprise become ingredients in a work or a canvas for creating one. The Art series that is the Source for this paper is an innovation because it is a demonstration project to help chart the new territory of open systems and globalization. Previous work in A/r/tography has focused primarily on healthcare, education, sociology or technology research and practices. However the more tangible benefits of Arts Based approaches have been illusive and its intangible rewards under-valued. As Cultural Fusion Art as Philosophy pushes into new dimensions it builds on the foundation laid by several movements in Contemporary Art.

In terms of the history of Installation Art this paper discusses significant works combining Institutional Criticism and Conceptual & Process Art both fall within the Installation genre. And like the Fluxus artists, where the subject taking the action – making the inquiry that gives way to the artwork, is central and not less noteworthy than what is produced. The Fluxus movement in the 60's and 70's it combined various media, electronic and otherwise, to achieve its aims. Today it is IT and social media which offer ready inspiration. The primary benefit of art as the foundation is the ability to break free of knowledge silos and labels to develop more comprehensively collaborative and holistic multilateral solutions. Our challenges have become increasingly global in scope, regional in scale and more complex to interpret – new ways to satisfy the needs that civic engagement once addressed must be developed.

The rate of challenges facing communities is likely to continue to increase, and the world needs hope. But more than that, hope paired with right actions needs to be rewarded. The Arts and cultural endeavors provide fulfillment that advances efforts to cure many maladies.

More than rehashing statistics of how bad it is, the people need to be engaged in reconciling the past with the present to begin contemplating a better future. Individuals have to be able to imagine that tomorrow could be better than yesterday.

More than hope, we need to collectively explore what a “better” world means – experientially not merely intellectually. It is vital that a connection be made between the lives we live in the present and the history we set in motion to create with those choices. Our dreams of a “better world” are connected, just as our lives and desires up until now have manifested the world and history we now know.

This shared vision of hope for a “better world” needs to be understood and experienced at the personal, communal, and organizational levels to work as an intervention to the current downward spirals undermining the value of civic engagement. Cultural Fusion Art as Philosophy (cfAaP) is a mechanism advancing integrated experiences of social, technological and economic innovation.

The value to the world, the organizations and the individuals that help to realize this first art series is that the dream of a better world moves from a foggy distant future to become a clearly shared present. The course for a better history is charted for current as well as future generations.

Background

Social media and ICT (information communication technology) made the birth of Cultural Fusion possible. It was started in 2006 when Ronald Wopereis’ Theory of Attention caught the Attention of Yvette Dubel after he added her to his professional network on LinkedIn. Using online social networks and tools like Skype the grand plan for engaging the world in Cultural Fusion was conceived with Wopereis in the Netherlands and Dubel in the U.S. The question that got the ball rolling was “what can I do?” Cultural Fusion Art as Philosophy is an art movement and art series – an art series that contains art series as collaborations.

With the project’s conceptual roots in a personal analysis of community development issues related to community health, new models for regional economic development, technological & social innovation, as well as civic engagement and value are all fundamental to the work. Since its beginning marked by a collaboration with NGO Art Studio in the Republic of Macedonia for the International Day of Peace Exhibition, thousands of people have been introduced to the work, its concepts, its benefits, and joined our online groups or Cultural Fusion Experience radio show - to become part of the team to make the dream reality.



Figure 1 Peace Day Exhibition Skopje, Republic of Macedonia



Figure 2 Director and students from NGO Art Studio Skopje, Republic of Macedonia

Media and institutional discussions about solutions and how such projects should be developed have not been adequately informed by the way peer to peer, "self referencing creativity" as an expression of creative freedom, and self organizing system infrastructures are taking shape. Each of these phenomenon has, as least in part, been powered by the fast pace of social media and the internet. It turns out the information superhighway is leading us somewhere.

"America throughout its history has been exceptionally civic-minded. However, we now see a public that is withdrawing from communal life, choosing to live alone and play alone. We are becoming mere observers of our collective destiny," said Robert D. Putnam, professor at Harvard University, founder of the Saguaro Seminar, and author of *Bowling Alone*. "A civic renaissance is a proven possibility and the future well-being of our nation depends on it."

In some ways the above quote reflects the disconnect between today's younger generations who don't see the virtual world as other, but an expansion of their offline lives. Learning to use new software and tools is second nature rather than a hassle. In contrast to others who look at this social evolution and see the glass half empty – overwhelmed by the abundant potential.

It is imperative that we develop an understanding of reality that integrates what we know. If we know objects are not solid but made up of lots of tiny particles, for example, at what point does this understanding get integrated into our general understanding and way of operating? When do we develop social systems that catch up with our science? Cultural Fusion proposes that the time is now and Art is the vehicle. This work, which the artist calls Source Art, is distinguished by its attention to potential and creating more than what is created and maintaining attention to the root source – not just what seems to blossom or fails to do so.

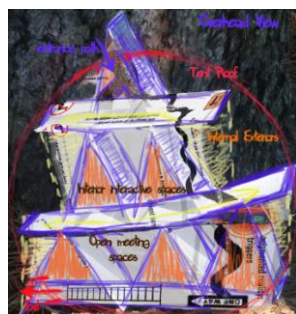
The House of Cards



A consistent fundamental root cause of many challenges emerges from the lack of value attributed to the individual and failure to understand qualitative attention. For example, often minimal, if any value, is attributed to the people who apply their most valuable assets: attention, support, experience and skills – to the organization that make it possible for its work to be carried out. Is this related to the lower voter turn outs reported by an increasing number of communities around the world?

Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University issued the report *Better Together*, calling for a nationwide campaign to redirect a downward spiral of civic apathy. Warning that the national stockpile of "social capital" – our reserve of personal bonds and fellowship – is seriously depleted. *Better Together* suggests that “cultural events must become community institutions and artistic leaders have a strong voice in community planning.” It goes on to encourage funding for community-based art, recommending artistic productions that address community problems to catalyze civic dialogue. However, what it doesn’t address is the role that the internet and social media are playing in redefining community, place, and connection.

In the Art Based research approach of interest in this project three tiers are addressed simultaneously by the various components of this artwork.



The problem at the personal level

Bureaucratic institutions and process do not support freedom or genuine diversity - diversity is typically of the most superficial nature - based on old world views of race rather than more contemporary

understanding of culture that emerges from an increasingly mixed (multiracial) population.

The need for cultivating personal growth is clear. It is as do-able as a byproduct of innovative systems while the cultivating of corruption and apathy that has come to be accepted as the norm for old systems. The results emerging from the masses of educated people begs the realization that education does not meet the needs for most people to cultivate an understanding and experience of themselves that is required for personal growth rooted in integrity and personal fulfillment. The subsequent degradation in the perceived value of civic engagement and social infrastructures has been the result of failures to innovate – grow internally. In contrast to materialism as the measure of success which creates the fertile soil for greed, exploitation, etc to flourish, attentive innovation is the key to alternatives that will restore social capital.

Little understanding of intangible assets and their value – alongside shortage of social capital has led to an inability to imagine a better world that one's creativity might be applied towards creating.

The problem at the community level

The need for community mental health intervention programs expresses itself daily. Intervention focuses on help before the crisis that expresses itself in violence is absent due to dismantling of the community mental health systems. Currently resources are devoted primarily to the result of crisis (crime, abuse, homelessness, etc) such as the enormous amount of funding committed, historically, to incarceration. Yet, re-entry programs to reduce recidivism in many communities are sorely absent.

Lack of attention to inclusion of the weakest or most vulnerable members of society is emphasized by need for understanding of the importance of self determination, the value of allowing individuals to have more say in how they contribute can increase the quality of what is contributed. The failure to see the value in those excluded beyond mere funding exploitation which has contributed to distrust and apathy (social capital deficit).

Despite the success of complementary currencies in other situations such as assistance for seniors in Japan, it has not gotten serious attention here at the national or international levels because most attention is invested in an economic model suffering from a severe social capital deficit. The risk to those with most at stake in the old systems is not likely to inspire solutions that address root causes highlighting opportunities for new paradigms.

The problem at the organizational level

Emphasis on gate keeping - cultivates a culture of exclusion - fosters discouragement among those from the groups labeled for exclusion (implicit or explicit).

Failure to grasp the value of supporting the willing - those willing to devote themselves to leading exploration of the BIG Challenges and questions. More attention is needed for new means of

engagement which appeal to paradigm shifters. For example, in the evolution of Cultural Fusion a number of foundations have declined to support the project because, as promising and interesting – undeniably innovative as it is, the model is untested. And yet, it has not been able to become a tested model because of challenges securing support for a pilot or demonstration project. No one engaged in these grant making organizations has been able to answer the question of how an innovation goes from untested model to bonafied solution with this illogical circular logic being diligently applied.

These kind of experiences, amplified by repetition also detract from rather than enhance the social capital of such organizations. Instead of hailing the wonders made possible by their support, innovators gather and swap stories of determination despite the lack of encouragement, funding and support.

One of the most significant challenges facing organizations at a massive scale is the failure to understand the true sources of value - in economies, businesses, and communities as intangible assets unique to specific individuals. This leads to the devaluing of individuals. The upside is that this will lead to new innovations; unfortunately, it may leave most organizations struggling to convince the public of their relevancy in the not so distant emerging future.

So how can this deficit in social capital be resolved?

Solution

ⁱⁱ“Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America found that art is a superb means of building social capital.

It is tempting to see the arts as peripheral to rebuilding community. After all, art exists for its own sake – valuable for what it is as much as for what it might do.

Beyond the individual effects, the arts allow for public celebration and exploration of the meaning of community.

The researchers have found that emotionally- dancing, playing music, and engaging in other artistic activities bring more joy than do many other leisure activities.

That joy in turn enhances our willingness to reach out and connect with others. At least one study has suggested that involvement in the arts, including as a spectator, can prolong your life.

In sum, cultural endeavors offer social capital effects direct and indirect, immediate and long lasting. The arts provide a powerful way to transcend the cultural and demographic boundaries that divide us and to find deeper connections.”

The overarching convergence of this project with the OSI focus is the promotion of **civil society and social inclusion** - peer to peer social networks and social media technology are poised to dramatically change the roles of traditional institutions in civil society. Cultural Fusion can help organizations

become engaged in this peer to peer phenomenon that is driving change.

This Art Based research project with its attention to the value of intangible assets (i.e. culture, integrity, creativity, attention, care/love, etc) **enlists a broad range of constituencies- artists, researchers, programmers, NGOs, grassroots leadership, concerned citizens, engaged organizations, and private sector** to develop more comprehensive solutions. The value of intangible assets is expressed through the move from scarcity to abundance. The Internet has changed the rules. Value is increased by sharing – the more something is shared the more valuable it becomes in contrast to historical ideas of value based on scarcity.



Art-based research can also be described as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience.

Instead of convening traditional events and meetings, this public art series takes a more imaginative approach integrating the broad scope of issues and ideas relevant to the piece. Radical Inclusion leads the way so the communities to participate will be self selecting (using social networks like Facebook) and the approach will support self organization using social media resources like Twitter. Taking inspiration from BarCamps (attendee led conferences) weaving meet-ups, Rehearsal Flash Mobs, community service and planning sessions together as part of an event tapestry that is the Cultural Fusion Art as Philosophy Tourⁱⁱⁱ.

The open public component actually helps support a more intimate interactive exhibition event that expresses the work's interest in new models of regional economic development where social media and the web have redefined the experience of community. This kind of work in A/r/tographic approaches can benefit from support from organizations like the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation), Small Business Innovation Research – National Science Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts to provide the necessary institutional bridges.

Unlike the typical projects supported that operates within narrow confines of industries and academic disciplines, this work can help make sense of chaos. In Art we learn that chaos is only a matter of perspective and positioning. These kind of Art Based Models reward entering the unknown and minimize the risk of doing so.

Combining these powerful and cost effective self help interventions to be applied more broadly stands

to have a significant impact on the communities that are engaged, as well as the related bodies of knowledge.

Instead of a traditional white paper summarizing lessons learned and results of the project, that document will be develop a documentary, explore the experience of the work in the context of “text art” and deliver as an interactive component in the installation featured in the Closing Ceremony of the Tour. The intention is that the information will be more intellectually accessible and receive wider exposure. And the context for this “closing exhibition” will be another “Happening” advancing Art Based research in regional economic development as new collaborative formed around this project live on to create freelance or contract engagement hubs. In places where opportunities are scarce or unemployment high this will be a major development.

Conclusion

"Cultural Fusion Art as Philosophy is a new-inclusive paradigm to facilitate (or support) people to follow their own creativity & inspiration, with an expanded artist business model & community resources, including research."

By exploring the process of social evolution and solution development, this project stands to chart significant territory in art based research application and methodology. Because this project approach emphasizes conversational and artistic information gathering/sharing it is a strategic move to increase inclusion both in the functionality of new technology but also the way in which it evolves to further support this social inclusion and positive shifts in civil society.

One of the key deliverables of the project is a virtual "living lab" (while starting with a web based version to create a simulation/planning space, the vision is to have multiple Green sites on the ground as the project evolves) that can be the foundation for continuing to advance understanding of the **impact of new technologies on citizen access to information and justice**. The "living lab" is a multidimensional global resource aggregator and research studio that unites the diverse components of the project and creates a cohesive context for analyzing experiences/information.

Our project advances development of sustainable strategies to support the emerging bodies of public knowledge that is not coming from and is being shared outside of traditional institutions.

This space of peer driven innovation is known as the *commons sector* is a new and significant sector of value-creation that with increased broadband and wireless access stands to usher in a quantum leap with regard to social inclusion and innovation from the bottom up. Furthermore it is a leap that our existing civil society infrastructures are not equipped to address from a philosophical or structural standpoint. Cultural Fusion can help institutions such as OSI, NSF, and NEA lead the way forward as communities increasingly struggle to wrap their minds around the change that is happening.

Consider for example that by the time the governments passed laws on email spam, new technology

had found “work arounds” and new systems to deliver advertising messages directly to desktops. The same has held true for the entertainment industry in its attempt to pass laws and create barriers to file sharing. The fundamentals of old ways of thinking/operating have proven ineffective despite the money spent, and yet the numbers of people using these new (mostly free) technologies to share files is increasing.

By the same token, despite study after study showing intervention and prevention are more efficient - our systems are hardwired to focus on problems. Further exacerbating the situation, each system emerges from its own knowledge silo with resources galvanized to delineate and defend its intellectual territory. Meanwhile the world is moving toward increasing freedom, transparency and inclusion. The evolution of civil society must acknowledge these realities and art provides a path to engage all key stakeholders in a fashion likely to increase the peace while also bringing together several tough issues to be explored collectively.

ⁱ <http://comfusion.pbworks.com/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.bettertogether.org/pdfs/Arts.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.sponsorpark.com/sponsorships/sponsorship-proposal/4106/cultural-fusion-art-as-philosophy-tour/>