
Art works subterraneanly. It's never the striking, superficial cause and effect people would like to see. Art goes underground into people's dreams and surfaces months later in strange, unexpected actions. People bring a sort of instant-coffee expectation to art; they'd like the results to be immediate. It doesn't work that way. I like that image of art dropping down through the various layers of the individual's psyche, into dreams, stirring around there and then surfacing later in action.

- Athol Fugard

FIELD OF ACTION

Kathleen Bitetti and Todd Lester interviewed by Janeil Engelstad

Janeil Engelstad (JE): You both work across political, social and creative lines. How did you come to the place of combining these different disciplines?

Kathleen Bitetti (KB): As a student at University of Massachusetts at Boston (UMass) I simultaneously fell in love with art and with economics. The majority of my professors, in both art and economics, were advocates deeply involved with issues of social justice. UMass is the only truly urban university in Boston with the most diversified student population on all levels (economic, religious, racial, age, etc.). I learned just as much from my fellow students as I did in class. I double majored in art and economics with a concentration in public policy and was encouraged by both departments to focus my policy work on artist's issues and the art sector.

While I was in college, I was also running a university art gallery. This was during the first wave of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the U.S (the dying years) and also the same time that the culture wars were raging. Senator Jessie Helms and company were defunding the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and ending the NEA artist fellowships. For me, an artist addressing social justice issues, not actively participating in these issues was not an option. I had direct training and learned from some of the best activists there have ever been during those battles. As an artist, I started out as a photographer and was trained by the legendary photojournalist, Jerry Berndt. His

photojournalism work changed policy. In Boston, it changed how the homeless were treated.¹ I adhere to photojournalist ethics and standards when interacting on any level in my art practice. In public policy and socioeconomic research, there are also clear ethics. These ethics, along with my experiences as an activist, have informed and shaped my practice, which combines political, social and creative lines.

Todd Lester (TL): I grew up a white, gay kid in the rural south of the United States (Tennessee). An area that was, and is still, to varying degrees, steeped in a history of fraught race relations. I remember a time when my grandfather handed me a mimeograph of jokes about African Americans. I remember hearing these jokes told by family members and peers. At some point in my youth, when I was not 'out' with my sexual orientation (but certainly aware), I remember realizing that jokes about gay people were told in the same way as jokes about other minorities. It was at that moment that I realized that it was not ok to be racist. My young mind, with a nascent faculty of deduction, caught on to the fact that racism was a learned behavior and that if folks were wrong to stigmatize me for being gay then they were wrong about their perceptions of different races. So, at a very young age, my belief in and eventual work on civil rights, and global, human rights thereafter, began to take shape. These days, when people ask me why I do the work I do, the only authentic answer is to talk about my childhood, to talk about its difficulties

and the meaning that I extrapolated from those dark, youthful experiences.

Jump to 2003 when I started freeDimensional, an organization that helps activists-in-distress by providing safe haven in artist residencies around the world. freeDimensional works with the global arts community to identify and redistribute resources, and support meaningful relationships between art spaces and activists.²

It was only a year or so ago, however, during a conference presentation that I found myself stating that this work was, in part, a reaction to 9/11. Through this realization I understood how I can't always 'see' where my energy and intuition are coming from at the beginning of a project.

After years of serving as an administrator, working internationally on a range of advocacy issues and often in a support role to other artists, I realized that I was forging my own artistic practice. By understanding that organizational form is my preferred medium of art, it was then easier to break down the divide between art and administration. Now, I don't even make the distinction.

JE: Does the term Social Practice describe what you do?

KB: I do not use the words Social Practice for what I do. Nor, do I like the term. Social Practice has been created by the funding community, the art market, and the art elite, not by artists who engage with communities outside of these bubbles. These artists, before the terms 'Social

Practice' or 'socially engaged' were coined, were called 'community based artists'. They were not part of the elite art dialog, for the most part, until recently when this practice was "discovered."

TL: While I'm aware of the narrative of Social Practice and readily synthesize its use to describe art in contexts that pre-date its use, I don't count myself as a 'social practitioner'. I agree with Kathy and tend to push back on that framework. And to the degree that narratives can either be a step toward outright commodification and deleterious to the longer-held, common, shared understandings in a field of work, I include this push back as a meta layer to my own work.

JE: What are the conditions that you hope to bring about by engaging community through your work?

TL: Recently, I launched a project, Lanchonete, which invites 32 guest artists from around the world and different parts of Brazil into a 5-year site-specific artist residency in the center of São Paulo. Throughout São Paulo, the lanchonete (or lunch counter) is one of the few places where people from different economic classes share middle ground. In the older part of the city, the lanchonete typically has an open front (rather than a door) that is porous and easy to enter or pass through. These ubiquitous lunch counters and their longstanding tradition present an alternative to the homogenizing effect of gentrification on public space. As the major cities of the world move from limited to contested space (for a variety of reasons, including rural to urban migration, immigration, forced mobility, etc.) and

because institutions, groups and people with the most agency and means get priority access to prime real estate, a question that must be asked is: Can diverse neighborhoods persist and survive near epicenters of capital? Lanchonete asks that question in a different way: *If artists are empowered to innovate on a large enough scale to interrupt the status quo, what would that look like?*³

KB: For me, the question is what are the ethics that guide your artistic practice and, by extension, your life? This is an essential question

for those who are creating public art and working with communities. On a basic level, I hope to bring people together via my artistic practice. To help create a space for conversation, learning and reflection, both in the individual and within the community, when appropriate. Sometimes not doing an ‘art project’ might be the best thing to do for the community. Instead you join the community’s advocates or the community organization’s advisory board. Doing what is best for the community should be the main motivation for this work.



A typical lanchonete in São Paulo's Centro Zone, photograph, Pedro Marques

JE: What conditions or considerations should be established to create equal cultural exchanges or collaborative partnerships between artists and communities?

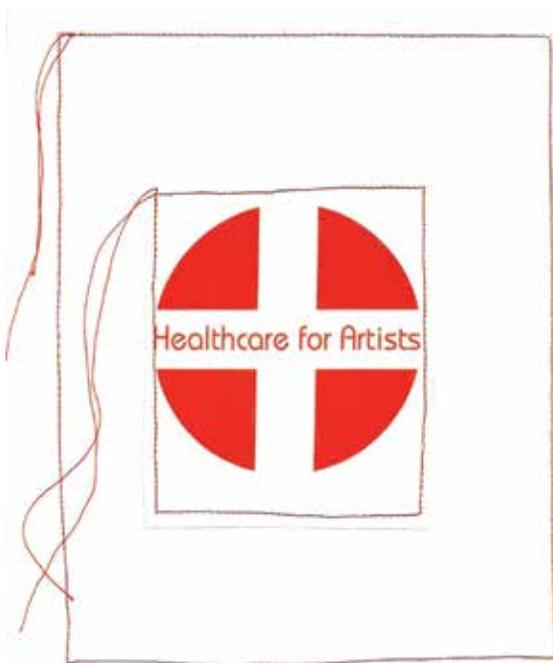
KB: Both the artist and the community should look at their motivations for doing a project or work. All those engaging in this work should come from a place of wanting to learn from and to engage fairly with each other. As artists, we should not think that we are bringing art or culture to anyone or to any community, rather I think the goal is to help create a “space” for people to share and learn from each other, to work together and hopefully create long-term friendships, working relationships and community. When working with

communities, artists should not put themselves in, or be put in, situations that they are not trained for. Artists are not social workers, for example, and they should not be asked to act as social workers. Nor should they think that they could act on behalf of trained social workers.

TL: ‘Artistic witnessing’ is a term I use when referring to the normal rhythm and frequency of a creative person involving his or herself in a community or social issue. Getting to know, building trust, and eventually, synthesizing information for fellow community members via his or her process and art form. If the creative person is an outsider, the decorum of entering the community (or asking permission to join) is essential to the utility of the work. When she or he frames this interaction as art, that framing constructs an ad-hoc community. Thereby, the spotlight of the project invariably shines on a subset of a larger community, one that the artist feels is deserving of engagement. Therein is the responsibility.

JE: What needs, whether they be political, social, and/or environmental, do you see that artists are particularly attuned to address?

KB: One of the key needs is to change the socio and economic status of artists of all disciplines. Arts leaders, arts administrators or anyone else for that matter who says that they represent the arts should not be given the power to speak for practicing artists. Artists should be involved with all levels of policy making, not just art policy. Artists’ issues intersect all sectors of public policy whether that is health care, labor force,



Healthcare for Artists

intellectual property issues, tax policy, issues connected to self-employment, etc. Artists are experts in how these issues intersect with arts and culture and they can use this expertise to help shape and change policy.

There is an assumption among many in the artist community that policy makers will not listen to their concerns or ideas. Early in my policy career, in a 1994 report to Congress, I talked about the dual labor market structure in the art world, which often shapes artist's assumptions about their potential impact on policy: "Even though artists are the creative energy supporting the culture industry, they are poorly paid and must supply their incomes by supplementary jobs. Often times, these jobs do not provide health care coverage. In essence, there is a dual labor market structure in the art world that profits from poorly paid artists."⁴ Non-artists dominate the "high wage" sector of the art world while the "low wage" sector is reserved for artists. It is critical that artists are treated fairly and are compensated for their work. Many artists are expected to work for free or at a pittance. Any community or entity engaging with artists should follow a fair trade model. They should also become active in work that ensures that artists are treated fairly in society and in the policy arena. Artists should be at the policy table, and a part of the teams that address the issues that impact individuals, communities and society as a whole.⁵

TL: While it won't be a panacea, we're developing something called the Arts-Policy Nexus at the World Policy Institute that seeks to address the very issue that Kathy brings up. The Institute is

a 50-year-old entity cut from the same cloth as mainstream think tanks around the world. With a little research I realized that in earlier decades art had always played a role in the Institute's public face and discourse, yet it had become almost invisible (I've been affiliated with the World Policy Institute since 2004, now serving as a Senior Fellow). In negotiation with its President, I proposed something called the Arts-Policy Nexus, a crosscutting initiative that touches the Institute's five main themes – water, media and conflict, security, economy, and migration. This new initiative aims at providing new models for supporting socially engaged artists. The work of many photographers, visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, poets and writers deals with many of the same challenges that keep policymakers up at night. At the same time, policymakers and opinion leaders have access to the formal channels that can turn ideas and movements into lasting change in institutions and societies. Creative input can help them to humanize their ideas and prescriptions, and connect with a broader public. Despite the obvious benefits that collaboration can bring, there is not enough of a two-way dialogue between socially engaged artists and policymakers. Policymakers often dismiss what artists have to say because it is not the formal language of diplomats and lawmakers, and because quantitative or social science evaluation models do not easily convey the impact of artists' work. We are identifying and piloting ways to connect these groups in order to create wider audiences and engage more people in pushing for changes in individual behavior and public policy on crucial issues to our collective future.

With the goal of bringing diverse voices to the policy table and providing a fertile, unique arena for solidifying common goals between traditionally disconnected camps, the Arts-Policy Nexus will provide a suite of services and networking opportunities to artists, policy makers, journalists, and funders working collaboratively in the very intersectional space we've been discussing. This will result in more effective policymaking and communication of policy needs and goals, as well as a collaborative model for social change in which artists and policymakers share equal footing.⁶

health care reform debate spearheaded by Hillary Clinton. The team acknowledged that artists are "a unique constituency with unique needs" and its long-term goal was "to help make health care in Boston, one of the top medical centers in the country with one of the highest concentrations of hospitals and medical facilities, accessible and affordable for the artists who live and work in the city." <http://www.kathleenbitetti.com/Pages/CongressReport.html>)

⁵ Collaborative projects that Bitetti considers a part of her artistic practice include: Artists Under the Dome (Massachusetts is the only state in the Country that has a designated day where artists can go to the State House to discuss their needs and the issues that impact their lives) www.artistsunderthedome.org; www.healthcareforartists.org; and the Massachusetts Artists Leaders Coalition (<http://artistsunderthedome.org/malc>)

⁶ To learn more, see <http://www.worldpolicy.org/projects/arts-policy>

¹ An in-depth interview with Jerry Berndt can be found on the United Nations of Photography website at: <http://unitednationsofphotography.com/2012/10/23/jerry-berndt/>

² During the last eight years freeDimensional came to the aid of approximately 300 artists doing work, which benefitted their communities at the expense of their livelihoods, safety and free expression. While creative expression is a common component to many social movements, artists (when they find themselves in danger due to their ideas and modes of community engagement) often do not benefit from the protective services and resources that professional activists can often access through their social networks and information channels. Artists don't always see themselves as activists, and thus may not have immediate access to activist resources when emergency conditions confront them.

³ To learn more about Lanchonete visit: www.lanchonete.org

⁴ Artists Health Care Task Force, A Report to Congress Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, Artists Foundation Boston Health Care for the Homeless, July 1994 p18. (Bitetti was a co-founder of the Artists Health Care Task Force, formed in Boston in 1993, which was comprised of the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, the Artists Foundation and Boston Health Care for the Homeless. The Task Force submitted a report to Congress in July 1994 of its findings and recommendations to better inform the then national

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Artful Administrator, Todd Lester's blog has a list of resources: <http://artfuladministrator.wordpress.com/resources>

The Association of American Cultures: <http://taac.com>

August Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed: <http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org/en/index.php?useFlash=0>

The Global Arts Corps works with theatre artists who either once looked down the barrel of a gun at each other or, as children of conflict, still deal with memories not yet healed. The Arts are used to stimulate and encourage conflict resolution, by using theatre performances as catalysts for dialogue: www.globalartscorps.org

Grant Kester, Professor of Art History and Director of the University Art Gallery in the Visual Arts department at the University of California, San Diego - one of the leading figures in the emerging critical dialogue around "relational" or "dialogical" art practices: www.grantkester.net

Peacebuilding in the Arts at Brandeis University has valuable online resources and an excellent documentary film, *Acting Together on the World Stage*: <http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/index.html>

Photojournalists, for the most part, adhere to standards when interacting on any level. A framework to start from: https://nppa.org/code_of_ethics

In public policy there are clear ethics in that practice and in socio-economic research, as a whole: <http://www.respectproject.org/ethics/guidelines.php>

Gene Sharp, an expert on social change movements, <http://www.aeinstein.org/organizationsa4f8.html>, and the documentary film about his life and work, *How to Start a Revolution*

BOOKS

Art and Upheaval: Artists on the World's Frontlines, William Cleveland, 2008

The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America, Stephen Steinberg, 2001 (third edition)

Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship, Claire Bishop, 2012

The New Gatekeepers: Emerging Challenges to Free Expression to the Arts, 2004

Creatives Communities: Art Works in Economic Development, Michael Rushton, 2013

The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2009

The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture, Theodor W. Adorno, 2001

Stewards of the Sacred, Lawrence E. Sullivan and Alison Edwards 2004

Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts, Richard Bolton, 1992

Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress and the Place of Visual Artists in America, Michael Brenson, 2001

Displays of Power, Steven C. Dublin, 1999

What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art, Ted Purvis, 2004

Education for Socially Engaged Art, Pablo Helguera, 2011