

Innovative Strategies for Creative Platforms

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The Artist's Practice

The beginning of the discussion about the viability of artist residencies and their role in the larger arts ecology should start with a suggestion about what is underlying the artist practice. How does one look ahead to anticipate what it may be in all its forms; what will they need to develop their ideas and disseminate them; what tools will they need to be successful; and what partnerships can be encouraged and made room for to reflect the overwhelming desire on the part of the large creative community to connect and break free of the silos they have working in through inflexible notions of specialization?

It is difficult to project direct answers for these questions, as contemporary artist's practices are malleable and fluid, changing rapidly. So it is appropriate to talk about how contemporary artists think, and then act. And how organizations can learn from this and respond to the demands, opportunities and challenges of creativity.

Divergent Thinking

A fundamental characteristic of contemporary artists is their use of 'divergent thinking' as a cornerstone of creativity. Divergent thinking is the process of always re-thinking any question and refusing to accept at face value whatever proposition has stimulated the question. In contemporary artistic practice and behavior, divergent thinking is the trigger for creative innovation. The tendency to challenge the given question and thereby reshape the investigation at hand is characteristic of the pluralistic, decentralized practice of international contemporary arts, which simultaneously witnesses and foments change in the cultural paradigms to which societies adhere.

Contemporary artists are hard wired to challenge established cultural canons. Their creative skepticism might seem to be an unrelenting process of tearing down and building up; as soon as one set of assumptions are arrived at, creators quickly move to challenge them. Innovation cannot remain static, as creativity like knowledge is an infinite activity, as limitless as human potential. Entropy and denial of possibility becomes the enemy of

creativity to an artistic sensibility. The restlessness of an intellectually nomadic generation is a hallmark of contemporary arts and where possible of a tech-savvy generation increasingly conversant in networks of virtual communities.

When divergent thinking extends to every aspect of cultural and artistic production, it can generate enormously exciting yet unpredictable possibilities. However, the rate of change and acceptance of the fruits of divergent thinking is much slower in societies as a whole than among artists. The best ideas for improvements in the general quality of life proposed by artists and creative thinkers are confronted by political, religious, and social paradigms, which often do not budge, or change only at the cost of great resistance and even violence. While artists may upend a paradigm, the pace at which change is implemented is often quite slow.

An example of what I mean is the way artists (amongst others) have been proposing the renunciation of violence as a means of instilling order and rule through force, and instead propose the promotion of the positive benefits of artist networks as necessary and vital for the advancement of culture in different regions and social settings. These benefits would include respect for diverse cultural viewpoints and traditions and peaceful cooperation between nations. International contemporary artists (generations since the 1960s) sought to implement it by adding voices dedicated to gender, racial, class, and economic equity. In the United States, this is when the first vital collaborations with international artists began to take shape, often through feminist actions. Continuing with the example, the artist seeks to shift the historic pattern of war and violence by finding new ways to express, demonstrate and deliver positive, non-violent values. Artists are challenging market capitalism on the grounds that it is antithetical to their ideas and production, co-opting these ideas and goods and ultimately stifling creativity by applying commercial controls over the distribution and access of intellectual property. And in an equally profound sense, artists have been challenging cultural infrastructure in which artists do not have a leading voice in policy discussion and decision-making.

Recent Strategies for Creative Platforms

One of the relatively newer modes artists employ to develop creative platforms from which they may act is the artistic network or transnational artistic community. Many of these have emerged since the 1960's. Underlying this growth is an ethos that sees artistic practice as a means of developing deeper relationships with communities residing outside the community of artists. This represents a shift towards the group or community effort as a measure of artistic excellence or successful engagement, in which the individual is valued for their unique contributions but also function equally within a collaborative creative platform— particularly as regards changing realities of cooperation and the opportunities of international communication between artists. Globalization at its best must foster the participation of many new players from different regions, genders, ethnicities and classes. With the rise of the Internet and instantaneous communications, dominant cultures and power structures have accepted an agenda of pluralism and respect of difference that is removing the fear of the 'other'.

As soon as the term 'globalization' became established as part of our general vocabulary, artists began applied divergent thinking to the construct. One positive outcome has been the expansion and development of cultural exchange and creative communities and artistic networks as a direct response to the desire amongst artists to interact globally in an expansive creative forum with many new possibilities and ideas. So, in a profound shift for artists and contemporary culture, a rethinking of the delivery systems that support artistic practice has been going on with intensity since the 1960s. Recent generations are aggressively assessing artistic models of production and creation. If artists are proposing paradigm shifts that could alter entire communities and cultures, then they have to establish a true sense of community amongst themselves as the primary model.

How arts efforts are funded and practically supported has seen enormous change. Until the last century, support to the arts consisted principally of aristocratic and private bourgeois patronage. Arts and cultural offerings (education, exhibitions, festivals, artistic products, etc) have now become accessible to large numbers of people in ways never seen before. In affluent industrialized countries, the advent of government support for the arts, like public education, and has taken hold as some governments became more responsive to the needs of their citizens, recognizing that an educated society is a

valuable resource, rather than devoting resources to oppressing an uneducated one. Arts and culture have become one measure of the success and prestige of many social and state enterprises, and have received attendant support. We have seen this support ebb and flow and are also aware of the political ramifications behind public support of the arts.

An example of this is the American post World War II effort to promote its arts (in particular, the school of abstract expressionism) as a ‘triumph’ of American values and political prestige. This effort was led by the Museum of Modern Art, linked to the Rockefeller family and foundation, and the US federal government. The result was an upsurge in the emergence of not for profit foundations coupled with government financial resources supporting the export of US based arts overseas. The US National Endowment for the Arts was established, validating the notion that arts and culture is a measure of national pride and cultural importance. Economic growth has yielded tax revenues allowing governments to deliver arts and culture and afford arts education (the starting point for creative thinking) on a large scale. Expanding financial portfolios have increased the worth of foundation’s endowments, allowing for an upsurge in direct support to artists through fellowships and grants for projects.

We all know this scenario has now changed with the advent of a worldwide financial rupture. While much current arts education is poorly funded the fact that it even exists is important. Middle and upper middle class cultures have emerged with new wealth, and are still supporting the emergence of a large international market for artistic goods and services in all disciplines. Artists themselves have developed numerous earned income strategies to support their efforts at virtually every level of community. Patronage and support of the arts is a conglomeration of options, different from region to region.

Artists Actions as a Reaction to Cultural Power Structures

By the mid-1960s, the European and North American art establishment—its major museums and galleries—did not reflect the ethnic and gender diversity contained in their general populace. This establishment (museums, symphonies, galleries, theaters, etc) largely ignored the decade's social, political, and cultural ferment. In response, marginalized artists created an oppositional network of organizations, exhibit spaces, and cooperative galleries that both paralleled and challenged the status quo. This alternative

art movement flourished for more than three decades, repositioning contemporary art making in Europe and North America, where artists became keenly aware of issues such as center and periphery or the imbalances of the post-colonial cultural landscape. Concurrent with Western feminist research, artists began to open the doors of inclusion for an international critical forum that included new players, new practices, and new tools for the production of creative projects.

The movement for change was taking place at the same time in other regions, particularly Asia, while reflecting the specificity of each. Since the 1990s, networks and connecting points have been established. One example, founded by artist/activist Ong Keng Sen, is the Arts Network Asia (ANA) is a group of independent artists, cultural workers and arts activists primarily from Southeast Asia that encourages and supports regional artistic collaboration as well as develops managerial and administrative skills within Asia. Arts Network Asia is motivated by the philosophy of meaningful collaboration, distinguished by mutual respect, initiated in Asia and carried out together with Asian artists; it is thus a forum for Asia's expression and its relationship to the rest of the world. It recognizes the cultural diversity and pluralisms of Asia, and looks at the continuum that is Asia, from tradition to contemporary urban life.

Another new network emerged in 2005, the Intra Asia Network, an open source platform for culture organizations. Its mission is to facilitate artistic mobility of Asia's cultural producers, practitioners, and creative people, through the development, promotion and empowerment of culture exchange projects. It also has the shared higher vision of using Asian culture as a medium for a balanced social development.

These kinds of efforts characterize the contact point between the practice of public art and cultural discourse, which is being defined anew. Alternative 'spaces' whether physical or nomadic, produce debate and open discussion, often within repressive political systems. Through such alternative art spaces, artists are seeking to build networks of overarching cooperation, in order to achieve a 'political' effect and spread horizontal exchange between the practice of art and local cultures. Artist networks and creative communities are chipping away at problems uncovered and/or exacerbated by globalization: dominant languages reflecting the legacy of colonialism; the structure of intellectual and cultural centers versus assigned peripheries; the hegemonic position of

Europe/North America towards notions of the ‘other’; urban versus rural sensibilities or contemporary versus folkloric practices; acknowledgement of difference and decentralized constructs as equally viable creative efforts unmediated by a hierarchal canon of homogenized globalization or managed multiculturalism. Illustrating how artists themselves are extending their practices to build sustainable and connective global structures.ⁱ

Three examples of progressive residency programs and creative platforms in the United States

There are three examples of projects that have been established with the past five years, and exemplify the most positive and proactive responses to direct support for artists, with innovative strategies that stress positive community engagement and in effect develop new creative platforms for artists.

Creative Fusion

The first is a new a residency program for international artists in Cleveland, Ohio. Unlike many residency programs that exist within the walls of one institution, this program is spread throughout many organizations in the greater Cleveland community.

Creative Fusion is an urban-based artist residency initiative of the Cleveland Foundation, the United States’ oldest community foundation. It provides support for local cultural institutions to host international artists who have been awarded residencies through the Creative Fusion program’s selection process. This award includes a three-month residency in Cleveland, which provides the visiting artist-Fellow with opportunities to undertake innovative work in his/her discipline while making strong connections and exchanges with local artists, diverse young persons and with the greater Cleveland community.

Twelve artists are in residence annually, each hosted by a local cultural institution during two three-month residency periods, which take place in Spring (March-June) and Fall (August-November). The program is focused on artists from non-western European countries who can bring a contemporary view of their culture through their art making process to the greater Cleveland community. Artistic excellence, the desire to be part of

an engaged residency program with a focus on working with young persons and dialoguing and creative exchange with local artists will be key criteria for selection. Creative Fusion has the dual purpose of providing opportunities for international artists to have fulfilling Fellowship experiences in an urban setting in the US, and to provide the greater Cleveland community the opportunity to benefit from meaningful contact with the creative artist's work, culture and global perspectives. To that end the host organization is required to partner with others in the community and structure opportunities for the artist to meet and engage with members of the community outside of their own organization. Contact with local artists and youth (K-12 and college students) are of particular interest to the Foundation.

Artists are recruited, vetted and nominated by an international panel of nominators. Artist selection takes place 12 months prior to the residency period start, providing the host and artist time to plan the residency activities.

Artspace

A second example is Artspace, whose work developing and building artist housing and studios has resulted in a network throughout the United States of dozens of building housing over 3000 artists of numerous disciplines. Going forward with the mission of providing housing, they are now looking at services that build skill and internal administrative structures for artists to own and maintain. Recognizing that connecting this constituency of 3000 artists with new technologies could develop an enormously sophisticated creative platform for the sharing of content and ideas. And it self organizes a powerful constituency of artists who can have influence on cultural policy within the United States

Artspace's mission is to create, foster, and preserve affordable space for artists and arts organizations. It pursues this mission through development projects, asset management activities, consulting services, and community-building activities that serve artists and arts organizations of all disciplines, cultures, and economic circumstances. By creating this space, Artspace supports the continued professional growth of artists, and enhances the cultural and economic vitality of the surrounding communities. Finding and retaining

affordable live/work space is an age-old problem for artists, painters, sculptors, dancers, and others who require an abundance of well-lit space in which to work. Many artists gravitate to old warehouses and other industrial buildings, but their very presence in an industrial neighborhood often acts as a catalyst, setting in motion a process of gentrification that drives rents up and forces the artists out.

Established to serve as an advocate for artists' space needs, Artspace effectively fulfilled that mission for nearly a decade. By the mid-1980s, however, it was clear that the problem required a more proactive approach, and Artspace made the leap from advocate to developer. Since then, the scope of Artspace's activities has grown dramatically. Artspace is now America's leading nonprofit real estate developer for the arts. In the last few years, Artspace has further expanded its mission to incorporate the planning and development of performing arts center, other arts facilities, and entire arts districts throughout the country.

Green building and sustainable development are at the very core of Artspace's mission to create, foster and preserve affordable space for artists and arts organization. Green building is a whole building and systems approach to design and construction. It employs building techniques that minimize environmental impacts and reduce the energy consumption of buildings while contributing to the health and productivity of its occupants.

LAND (Los Angeles Nomadic Division)

A third example is LAND, an innovative strategy, which dramatically posits a creative platform for visual, performance and new media artists. It does not reside in one white cubed gallery, but instead moves around the city of Los Angeles, often presenting works in atypical spaces that engage a much wider population than the arts community. This expansiveness, and effort at inclusion, represents a model for creative platforms that leaps ahead of conventional models of presenting artist ideas and work. As a presenting platform, LAND is ahead of the curve.

LAND is a non-profit art organization founded in 2009 by LAND Director/Curator Shamim M. Momin, former Contemporary Curator at the Whitney Museum of American

Art, and Christine Y. Kim, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). LAND is a public art initiative committed to curating site- and situation-specific contemporary art projects, in Los Angeles and beyond. LAND supports dynamic and unconventional artistic practices using a tripartite approach:

Commissioning public projects of site- and situation-specific works with national and international contemporary artists. Collaborating with a variety of institutions and organizations, such as universities, museums, and theaters as well as other types of spaces, industries, and entities. Offering additional programs such as performances, workshops, residencies, discussions, and publications. LAND is an ongoing endeavor with three primary types of annual programming: LAND 1.0 projects are large-scale, multi-artist, multi-site exhibitions and single-site group exhibitions, LAND 2.0 projects feature a new commission by a single mid-career or established artist, and LAND 3.0 projects feature new work by lesser known or emerging artists.

A special project effort, reflecting the rejection of presenting artists work in a permanent setting is Nomadic Nights, is an ongoing, salon-style event, in roaming locations throughout Los Angeles, that reflects the diverse ways in which contemporary artists engage and present visual culture. As a departure from conventional formats, Nomadic Nights invites artists to present work, performances, and ideas that comprise the constellation of influences informing the overall creative practice.

Frame Rate is another program, a series with an eye toward film, video, and the moving image in general. Frame Rate is a means to further explore the work of the exhibiting artists, the exhibitions thematic, and how the two relate.

These are but three examples of the new work and ideas taking place in the United States with organizations that are flexible and nimble, embracing artist practice and community engagement in ways that lead towards sustainable creative platforms which in turn support sustainable artist's practices that are a reflection of the call to action by the Tokyo Res Artis conference.
