

Enter Citizen Artist

Art and Public Policy Synthesis Essay

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The Citizen Artist, protagonist in our Arts and Public Policy course, embodies the broad intersection between art and policy. We've described him, asked what he can offer and wondered whether he is getting what he needs to thrive. This question is about more than personal satisfaction: the citizen artist is ideally suited for our rapidly changing world and his critical thinking, creativity, synthesizing approach and ability to imagine into reality are key ingredients for a healthy democracy. As Bill Bennett says, those who are competent manage but those who are creative lead. Prior to the course I suspected, and the readings and lectures have confirmed, that the dominant public policy approach is not particularly well suited for assessing or fostering creative civics; it has a real blind spot there. Perhaps the question needs to be inverted: rather than focusing mainly on the worthy goal of fostering the arts through policy, let's ask how the arts can inform better public policy—or, at least, how they can work better in tandem.

Artists actively engage their own experiential development—discovery, experimentation, synthesis, pursuit of excellence. They delight in process as much as result, and are therefore disciplined in developing their ideas and capacity through endless iterative and synthetic experimentations. They want to sharpen their skills so they can bring their creations to life. They also broaden their vision and have a high capacity for diversity (for it is their fuel) and they are therefore unhindered by the central dilemma of democracy: how to reconcile freedom and consensus. They do it all the time in their artwork. The America of our dreams where creativity, discipline and joy in work open a brighter future for all will need a population rich in these qualities.

Bill Ivey describes the creative life as resting on two pillars at the heart of the artist's approach. They need access to heritage—the work of previous generations that inspires, informs and challenges us, providing a sense of place, a foundation for future work and a connectedness

that keeps alienation from taking hold and becoming nihilism. Lewis Hyde describes a Freedom to Listen that matches that of Speech. Something so fundamental needs to be affordable and equitable, with stints to protect it from being fenced off.

In Ivey's formulation, Heritage is matched with the Individual Voice, which is the expression of uniqueness, opinion, thoughts, interpretation and aspiration. It is not an accident that these ingredients match those of free citizen engagement and it is fascinating that these creativity ingredients also work so well for building a happy life: success at work, strong family ties, connection to community, spiritual clarity and the overcoming of reasonable obstacles. Participating in a democracy, like living well, is a creative endeavor.

Art provides an arena where we can struggle safely and obtain hard-won fulfillment and it is a requirement for basic spiritual health but also for that of whole communities. I'll never forget a speech in which David Hickey suggested that Dylan Klebold had pulled the trigger in Columbine because he wondered how it would be—he could not envision it but in reality. Had he sufficient imaginative capacity, he could have figured it out. Hickey called this form of madness a crisis of creativity.

Artistic struggle and triumph is not a passive activity and the past century of both education and activism has erred by conflating arts consumption and arts participation. While the inspiration one receives as an audience member is part of a very virtuous cycle of creativity, it is not enough to go and simply witness great art; true spiritual growth resides in the making.

Consumerism fills the emotional/spiritual void where making ought to be by offering fulfillment through acquisitiveness that can, by design, never be sated. As a result, Americans consume more cultural products than ever before (movies, DVDs, television channels) but they're not making art themselves. It is a dark mirror of the cycle of creativity and it leads to a

closing off rather than an opening and brings bad social outcomes. Creative practice offers remedy, as when memorials and ceremonies respond to tragedy, but it can also be a vaccine.

Before our current consumerist age, art making and consumption were not as divorced as they are today. Households that could afford one had a piano and many people who could—and did—play it. The poorest of the poor, the slaves and sharecroppers who invented the music we now pay to hear on our devices sang while they toiled in the fields. The rich, rich heritage on which our culture is based is not only a series of recordings or pictures—it is a tradition of *doing* and *making* and this spirit must be recaptured.

The capital moment for me in all of our discussions was Bill Ivey's comparison of big-time sporting events, which inspire kids to go participate and fine arts, which usually do not. It's a fascinating question as to why the one inspires active participation and the other does not. I will quickly observe that sports do not carry a stigma of failure, while the arts do—which is interesting because the arts have no losers but in sports only one side wins! Everyone knows though that sports are about effort more than outcome so failure usually begets more trying—as it should. Sports are similar to the arts in that they are safe proxies for the most difficult questions and some day I would someday like to explore the parallels and lessons in greater depth.

The main civic area where we collectively address our shortcomings on a massive scale is in the schools. They teach art and music and they do so in a very hands-on way but the attitude at the top is that the arts are more of a grace note than a central element or ingredient for successful living. As a result, when money gets tight (and it always does in our current economic model of perpetual crisis), the arts are first to the chopping block. Many have argued (Florida, Gardner, Wilson and others) that artists' imaginative and analytical approach is a basic survival skill

because the world our children will inherit does not exist yet; it is indeed beyond the reckoning of those teaching today. Creativity is on a plane with aptitude in math, science and social studies and it needs to be taken seriously—and funded.

I don't think the problem is lack of good intentions or effort though: many kids are making pinch pots and playing Sousaphones in the marching band but it is focused the wrong way. Instead of preparing a lifetime practice, those instruments and music stands are very likely to go into the closet and exit only via yard sale. Typical adults simply do not see themselves as artistic and too often regard the artists among them with bewilderment and infantilizing condescension. Of course they see it that way: they left the arts behind with their childhood and they're suspicious and and envious of those who did not.

Why does this happen? What stops the promising development that begins so well? After all, every kindergartener learns to think, analyze and be social through rhythmic clapping, finger paint, piles of blocks that Brancusi would envy and baskets full of musical instruments. O'Hare offers many answers and his bibliography could be a syllabus in itself but he places much of the blame on the highbrow arts establishment, both presenters and practitioners, for separating art from the public—and actually wanting it that way. Well-meaning gatekeepers, burdened by an inherent conflict have every incentive to suppress the number of artists and grow demand to protect their prestige and access to capital. The arts education system is a funnel that is *meant* to sort the serious from the less-so, with focus on mastery over cognitive process.

A child progresses through years of praise or failure to “get it right.” Soon adolescence transforms wide-eyed sense of possibility into squinty over-criticism (Gardner). Of course, the worst of that criticism is directed inward and artistic failure makes it easy to quit—just when more interesting but less healthy alternatives for exploration start to appear. It doesn't help that

the school's artistic offerings for adolescents can be downright unpleasant: marching with that Sousaphone in the baking sun is not something one will treasure or continue for one moment post obligation. This phase, in my view, requires serious rethinking.

But why stop with the children? The creative spark exists in everyone and although education might be our best intervention moment, it's a lifetime project—and adult opportunities for art making are much harder to come by. We've seen good engagement opportunities for the young and some for the elderly but what about the gigantic in-between time—when citizens are actually relevant and making difficult decisions?

As a result of these failings, the arts are respected by some, feared by many, ignored by most and practiced only by those who simply cannot resist the urge—they find a way in spite of it all. One of my college professors literally told me, with a sinister clichéd irony that I did not understand at the time, that one should only become an artist if one's heart will not permit anything else. What kind of message is that? Less well meaning gatekeepers, impresarios and their lawyers have other motives too: profit, prestige, turf. It cannot escape notice that the two areas where culture and law interact the most in our system (copyright and the tax code) are about protecting precisely these same elevated interests.

My only criticism with our course is that it did not explore the role of these gatekeepers in much depth, which seems like an obvious and rich vein. The visual art world one reads about in *the New York Times*, for example, has perhaps a thousand or so players of consequence. How could that phenomenon possibly be a good thing when we're talking about *the* element that separates *homo sapiens* from our predecessors? The closest thing to concrete remedy proposed—Ivey's cultural ministry—could just as easily exacerbate the false insider/outside dichotomy.

As Ivey himself points out, many of the federal institutions we do have are moving in the wrong direction. It is dismaying, to say the least, that Comcast is poised to control both content *and* conduit through a legally protected monopoly and even Karl Marx's writings are hidden behind a copyright/pay wall. In an era of runaway corporate rent-seeking, we cannot allow the basic food for the creative spirit to be rationed according to means. I do not want to sound overly negative, but we have to be realistic about the problem. There is more than a simple misunderstanding at work here. Reform is needed but the scale is more in the range of thought revolution—and it may be in opposition to strongly vested interests *inside* the art world.

How can we move the public away from suspicion, self-loathing and despair into a more positive framework? *The Gardens of Democracy* provides many ideas. It can be dismissed as utopian but that betrays a fundamental misreading: Liu and Hanauer are not describing an end-goal Nirvana, which would indeed be difficult to reach, but a *process*.

The system they describe lays the foundation for the social preconditions that fair and equitable democracy needs in order to thrive: trust, enlightened (and self-interested) altruism, shared commitment and long-range vision. It is self-reinforcing through positive contagion; it's holistic, strategic and massively decentralized. It is about creating conditions that will yield results we want rather than starting with an action and playing wack-a-mole with the myriad unforeseen consequences.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote that, "All men are created equal," it was not at all self-evident at the time but the Founder *willed it into being*. That new ethos changed the world and resulted in all the battles, governments and policies that followed. We need to start with a vision of how we want to live that is compelling and work backward from there. It's actually working *forward* because it digests past learnings without obsessing over them, yielding something better

rather than tweaking something that may be fundamentally flawed. As we pursue Happiness, we need to remember that it is itself a process, rather than a goal. I find interesting that it (happiness) can be measured—but as a success indicator in a way that proper soil pH is both a positive result and necessary condition.

Like other government agencies for other industries, the NEA can and does provide good systematic coordinated snap-shot research, contributing data for the policy process. I have serious doubts, however, as to whether the current Public Policy establishment is likely to use it in the best way—if at all. It approaches its work in a way that is debilitatingly negativistic, reactive, obsessed with numbers and geared toward redressing failures rather than creating success conditions.

The eight-fold path reads like the outline for a mechanic's handbook, where optimal condition is the rule and everything else is a deviation. Problems arise with definable solutions. If your machine breaks, find some likely replacement parts that fit, offer them to the customer with cost estimates and move on to the next. But organisms don't work that way and our society *is* an organic community as sure as our guts (or compost piles) are symbiotic non-linear communities. Human pathologies are not the result of malfunctioning switches but of subsurface and interlinking *forces*.

That exclusively left-brained approach flows all the way through the process so it unduly favors numerical analysis to the exclusion of other kinds of evidence. It seems like an economist—*any economist*—can derail a policy prescription by citing insufficient data or overabundant cost. But conclusive numerical data *cannot* exist because mathematics are only an approximation of reality. Other kinds of narrative should be permitted at the table as well.

The worst thing about the Policy approach, however, is that it is entirely reactive. It usually shuts off unless consensus around the likely solutions pre-exists the discussion. Of course if a group of rational and wise actors had a problem with an obvious solution, they would solve it and no new policy would be needed. But leading indicators are never sufficient to merit action because the public does not even perceive them, so problems get really bad—sometimes catastrophic—before they are even noticed, much less addressed. We cannot thrive by always being reactive.

That is where an artist can play a useful role. An artist observes, listens and studies, analyzes, makes surprising connections and imagines potentialities that do not yet exist—as Jefferson did. Our planning process needs those traits to be built in—preferably at the front end. Since (at least in theory) our government is a manifestation of, and accountable to, the people and their will, those qualities need to be more present in the people on the whole. Then our government will be wiser and more creative—it will be exactly as good as the population it serves.

It is true that a Public Policy can do more to support a lively and active arts scene; the more broad the impact the better. That will change the basic social conditions in which our social institutions operate. Better lives (and it is clear that the arts *do* improve lives) will lead to better citizenship. But we also have to ask how the Arts can foster better a better policy process. We've seen that artists can do a great job of selling other people's products and policies but they are also needed for policy R&D. Here, the arts could be input, not just outcome. That is the side of the discussion that fascinates me the most and that I would like to explore further.

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