

Notes From Workshop #31: "Making Public Art For Civic Engagement"

May 2017

FROM THE WORKSHOP ANNOUNCEMENT:

What are the necessary conditions by which art in public places can contribute to – or even generate – civil engagement?

What kinds of interventions will ease communication among people, whether on the same or on different pages?

What are the respective roles of the public...the place...the artist in creating this kind of engagement?

*We invite you to join us in this energizing Workshop to help craft some real answers in real time. Co-designing and co-facilitating the Lab will be **Susan Israel, President and Founder, Climate Creatives & Energy Necklace Project.** Climate Creatives and Boston APP/Lab are teaming up to cross-pollinate our methods, to see what emerges – and to figure out what we can do together that we can't do separately.*

And, by the way, to expand the definition of "we."

Preventing civil engagement

- Lack of understanding
- Lack of curiosity
- Conflict aversion
- Fear of the unknown(s)/of the other(s)
- Self-involvement
- Assumptions
- Stereotyping
- Unfriendliness
- Apathy
- Blindspots
- Lack of awareness
- *To what extent has the private domain taken over the public commons as a setting for civil engagement?*

Allowing civil engagement

- Listening

- Animals
- Empathy
- Hard times
- Eye contact
- Good questions
- Inviting signs: "do this"
- Circles
- Proximity
- Storytelling
- Absurdity
- *What are some approaches to bridging physical space and cyberspace?*

What did the brainstorm produce?

1. Cocktail Soiree:

This idea comes from the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center's "[Salons at Stowe](#)" The purpose is to invite guests for a conversation about opposing views. Start with a 15 minute social time for guests to mingle and have casual conversation, add wine to allow guests to feel relaxed and drop inhibitions. (Keep to 15 minutes so the conversations remain introductory without encouraging people to identify their view.) Ask guests to have a seat anywhere. Each of the two speakers will have 10 minutes to present their views, then have a mediator ask the guests to share their thoughts. The intent is to have guests connect on a social level before discussing the issue, and these interactions may cause guests with opposing views to sit next to each other. Since they may have already had a cordial conversation, this will help guests to build a rapport and discuss the topic in a more civil manner.

2. Multifaceted sculpture:

Create a sculpture that changes as the viewer walks around the piece. (Example: From one angle the sculpture appears to be playing children, from another angle it reveals refugees drowning.) The intent is for the viewer to experience the change as they walk around the piece. This gives the viewer control of how quickly the difficult issue is revealed to them. And by giving the viewer that control, it also gives them time to process their feelings.

3. "The Other Side"

This is a 24/7 high quality video and audio "magic mirror" that connects two social spaces, one in a deep blue state and the other in a deep red state. The idea is to bridge public space and make this a shared space for public dialogue and interventions orchestrated by interested parties on both sides of the "divide" this is inspired by the [iCom project](#) by Stefan Agamanolis, a multipoint awareness and communication portal for connecting remote social spaces

4. "Different Facets"

This is a sculpture that allows you to see different views depending on what angle you are looking at it from. Emphasizes the idea of multiple perspectives, a physical manifestation of the oft-quoted Alan Kay phrase, "A change in perspective is worth 80 IQ points"

5. "Dinner Partisans"

Get people with different points of view together for dinner, have them share a meal, get together and meet each other in a social scene, and then have a moderator ask a difficult question to have people around a table work on a solution, little do people know that they have been seated with people of different political stripes at the same table, but once they have shared stories and a meal, they are more likely to come up with interesting solutions?

(From Ron Mallis: I thought of Luis Bunuel's movie "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" – a group of upper middle class people attempting—despite continual interruptions—to dine together.)