Social Practice, Children and the Possibility of Friendship

By Darren O'Donnell
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The Cultural Turn in the City

From my research on the course's first paper, it appears that within the realm of cultural policy, the child is seen to be the beneficiary of ameliorative cultural activity intended primarily to empower, engage, fortify or otherwise improve (Baker 2008, Belfiore 2002, Creative City Network 2005). However, considering the heavy emphasis and rhetoric dedicated to the importance of the cultural industries in economic terms, there appears to be little provision in incorporating children and young people as economic actors, only as social beneficiaries. Making matters worse, is the fact that commitment to the arts in schools across Canada, the US and the UK has been dropping, with arts education increasingly relegated to the bottom tier, with parents having to fundraise to supply arts enrichment to their schools (People for Education 2008). It appears that the Ministry of Education didn't get the memo from the Ministry of Economic Development that we're now in a creative economy.

Ultimately, the onus for incorporating young people into the cultural fabric of the city may, in fact, rest on the arts and artists themselves. George Yudice in his 2003 *Expediency of Culture*, examines a 1997 report from the American National Endowment for the Arts which states that the arts must "translate the value of the arts into more general civic, social, and educational terms... No longer restricted solely to the sanctioned arenas of culture, the arts would be literally suffused throughout the civic structure" (Larson 1997 in Yudice 2003). This describes the recent and widespread cultural turn in city planning that has seen a concomitant social turn in the arts with artists "suffusing" themselves through civic structures, collaborating with schools to take

up the slack in the education system and creating projects with a multitude of the city's citizens.

The Social Turn in Art

The predominant form within this social turn has been variously called "relational aesthetics," "dialogical art," "littoral art," "new genre public art," with consensus seeming to be coalescing around the term "social practice." Charting the movement's progress through the 1990s, French curator and critic Nicholas Bourriaud, in his 1999 book *Relational Aesthetics*, describes the "possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), (that) points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art." The roots for this upheaval tracing, he claims, to a global generalization of the urban form and "extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena." The encounter becomes primary and being-together a central theme.

British critic and art historian Claire Bishop (2004) responded to Bourriaud with the criticism that, for the most part, the works that he had used as examples were, for all intents and purposes, parties in art galleries and, referencing Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's contention that democracy is fundamentally antagonistic, called for social practice art to roll up its sleeves and antagonize for the sake of a healthy civic sphere. Forming a third point in a social practice trinity is Grant Kester whose 2005 book *Conversation Pieces* comes at the question with an emphasis on an ethic borrowed from Habermas' communicative action, though acknowledging Habermas' well-known inability to recognize that subjects come to a discussion from vastly differing positions of power. Bishop, in a much-discussed exchange in the pages of ArtForum, the art world's

most prestigious publication, vociferously criticized Kester's preferred artworks as resembling social work, which, in the art world is 'fightin' words':

> "In the absence of a commitment to the aesthetic, Kester's position adds up to a familiar summary of the intellectual trends inaugurated by identity politics: respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties, and an inflexible mode of political correctness."

Kester's preferred artists, include the Austria collective Wochenklauser who, among other projects, have triggered a discussion amongst city officials and sex workers that yielded the development of a hostel and created an itinerary of activities for developmentally disable adults. This work only retains the moniker art because the artists say it's art and claim that "the formal-aesthetic discussion has run its course. Its myriad self-referential somersaults have become inflationary, and the worship of virtuosi has given way to other qualities. (Wochenklauser 2011)"

Bourriaud's roster, in contrast, includes such art world heavy weights like Liam Gillick and Rikrit Tiravanija, who are apt to collaborate with multinational corporations and international curators to create environments in which to simply spend some time, Tiravanija's most famously recreating his New York apartment in a German gallery and inviting people to drop by. Bishop, on the other hand, favours the controversial Santiago Sierra who produces a vast body of interventions, the titles often saying it all: *Homeless people paid the equivalent of a meal and one nights accommodation to stare blankly at a wall all day*, *Unemployed people sitting in boxes for 30 days paid minimum wage* and *Chechnian Refugees Who Cannot be Paid Remunerated to Sit Inside Boxes*.

Over the course of the last few years, Bourriaud seems to have left the discussion to Kester and Bishop who have take up positions on either end of an ethics-aesthetics duality, wherein the artist who anchors their work in ethically-based socially ameliorative goals is considered to be an instrumentalized dupe, with artists publically disavowing the appellation "community artist" (Hirschorn 2010), while, at the other end, critics hurl accusations of elitism at those who claim that doing good is simply not good enough (Kester 2006). Kester, who decidedly situates himself on the ethics side of the debate, traces the origin of the conflict back to the mid-nineteenth century where artistic autonomy was cleaved from aristocratic and bourgeois patronage and the avant-garde turned to a strategy of shock to disrupt the middle class, who were seen to be complicit with positivist science and market-based social relations. However, the ability to appreciate the incomprehensibility of an avant-gardist shock required an understanding of this difficult art, thereby relegating it to the world of those privileged enough to have the time to get the proper historical bearing (Kester 2005). Kim Charnely in *Dissensus and the Politics of Collaborative Practice* (2010) sidesteps this duality by pointing out that both Bishop and Kester assume a free space within the institutions of art, though, in truth, there is no such space, the entire world of art rife as it is with current and historical exclusions. Stephen Wright in a 2006 discussion with French philosopher Jacques Ranciere points out that within

> (an) economy which is increasingly based on the harnessing of what used to
> be art-specific competence – autonomy, creativity, inventiveness, which is
> exactly how post-Fordist capitalism functions – there is an increasing
> response from art and art-related practitioners who feel that they don't
> want art just to be completely ripped off, to attempt to re-inject their
> competence elsewhere in a substantively different way.

Though the economy, as Wright points out, now functions much like the art world and the art world is filled with entrepreneurs branding themselves 140 characters at a time, the social turn in the arts and the cultural turn in city planning are the logical result of the avant-garde's push throughout the 20th century to fuse art and life, locating culture at center stage, while at the same time stripping it of the force of cultural capital. Culture becomes free to generate value in its own right, thus

> "One can think of community-based artists working in poor neighborhoods that are poorly served by city services or that are racked by violence and racial conflict as "outsourcers" and suppliers of process that enhance the value of cities." (Yudice 2003)

In the discussion with Wright, Ranciere observes that this reinjection of artistic competence under the banner of something that is not-art, is still open to being perceived as art – still *is* art, regardless of the artists' hopes and aspirations. Bishop's concern, in the case of artists packing up their easels, taking their competence elsewhere and starting to act and think more like city planners, is how do you know anymore if what you're looking at is *good* art (Bishop 2006).

This displacement of critical categories away from notions of craftsmanship and virtuosity allows for an easier involvement of the nonartist, children and young people, particularly populations who may be marginal to the dominant culture and thus less conversant with the language and postures of art. Thomas Hirschorn's monument works stand out as complex engagements with art history, the art world, the locale and its inhabitant. Dedicated to the study of philosophers (Foucault,

Bataille and Spinoza), they are situated in public housing complexes and created collaboratively with the inhabitants. Hirschorn situates himself within the locale for an extended period of time and, in collaboration with the residents, builds a small but formidable entertainment complex entirely dedicated to his philosopher of choice and engages the residents of the surrounding apartment blocks to engage with the ideas of the philosopher. His engagement is at odds with a more community-based practice that would attempt to give the locals a chance to dialogue and express whatever they felt like expressing, the content collaboratively discovered (Kester 2004).

Criticisms of Hirschorn's work have tended to fixate on the power and benefit differential between the artist and his collaborators, with the complaint that the value that accrues to Hirschorn is considerable (Bishop 2006). The revelation of this fact, however, much like the uncovering of ideological structures (Yudice 2003), leaves only one of two options: to continue as ethically as possible or to stop. The calculation that then follows is: (regardless of the magnitude of Hirschorn's benefit) will the local collaborators benefit more from the project's cessation? In most cases, the answer is no, it's better that the event is occurring than if it were to disappear, since there is the understanding that no one is participating against his or her will and everyone is free to walk away at any time. The critics judge Hirschorn's benefit against an ethic that expects absolute equity, as if anything short of utopia should be abolished. Yudice examines San Diego's inSite Biennial, which engages the political, economic and social implications of the border between America and Mexico and notes that many of the socially based projects spin – like so much cotton - identity, difference, conflict and the other "ingredients" that make the contested space of the border the valuable thing in terms of productive artistic

content, into consumable commodities. Yudice writes: "What inSite calls for is to become a user, a collaborator who intervenes in order to have the labor expended (by the locals) recognized and compensated."

Bishop claims that Kester "seems perfectly content to allow that a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art" (Bishop 2006) However, what Bishop misses is that success on the level of social intervention occurs on a very open and complicated terrain where ethics and aesthetics can overlap, if not feed into each other, the ethical aspects fueling the aesthetic. Bishop's blind spot was revealed in her April 18, 2011 talk presented by the Power Plant, where she explained the challenges she experienced while doing ethnographic research on the participants in Hirschorn's monument pieces, her focus being primarily "what they got out of it." (Bishop, 2011) Her efforts were confounded however, when Hirschorn simply gave her a list of the names of the participants. Some had phone numbers, most didn't, some had moved, and all were difficult to locate. Bishop expressed dismay, throwing her arms up in the air and claimed that it was a ridiculously challenging task, unaware that she was revealing the locus of Hirshorn's rigour: the very difficult fact of working with these particular individuals, people who tend to occupy marginal situations. Bishop continued to wander down the wrong path, as she itemized the different ways the participants she did find responded to her question as to what they got out of it, a question never asked of "legitimate" collaborators. You don't ask The Edge what he gets out of working with Bono, you ask the Edge about the work that U2 makes together. While, it's true, Hirschorn and his collaborators occupy very different worlds, there still can be a fair expectation that the collaborators have something to say about their contributions and not just the effects of the work on their lives. It was Bishop who was steadfastly fixated on the ethical.

In another instance, Bishop again revealed that she's simply looking in the wrong place and need only apply new tests in new areas. Showing a slide featuring superstar philosopher Antonio Negri sitting on stage and reading an essay while group of Surinamese immigrant children ran around behind him, oblivious to the erudite proceedings, Bishop exclaimed in good-humored bafflement: "I couldn't understand what all of these people were doing together." In that moment, Bishop experiences the kind of response the artistic avant-guard is always looking for: the antagonism of her sensibilities at the hands of Hirschorn's unlikely social collage. Here we have a kind of confrontation that confounds arts' linguistic and behavioural codes because it also looks a lot like social work: it has a strong ethical component. The ethical component is, in fact, anchoring the very gesture, creating a shock, not at the expense of ethics but *because of it*. Viewed at from both ends of the ethics-aesthetics debate, it's possible to create situations that are beautiful because they are ethical and shocking because they are ethical, thus in turn aesthetic because they are ethical.

Social practice shifts the tests of artistic rigour if not on top of, then closer to actual situations themselves, the various populations representing themselves in a context that no longer remains under the sway of the art world's commonplace tests. It's wide open terrain, the moment of dazzle only being able to be located in the ethics, in the very foundation of art as political, at the exclusion or inclusion of populations of people, ideas and opinions. Is this going to change the world? Perhaps not, but it changes the moment and what is the world but a bunch of moments stacked together?

Changing the Game

Jonathan Neelands et al. (2006) examine the effects of Tony Blair's New Labour party's attempt to deploy a social-market cultural policy through the targeted funding of training programs for identity groups excluded from the cultural industries: visible minorities, low socio-economic status groups and those with disabilities. New Labour attempted to deal with economic and social disparity through cultural means by offering education in drama and dance to those otherwise excluded. Neelands points out that "the political ambition for cultural policy is to give each individual access to those standards of excellence and complexity that are historically associated with the middle and upper classes." The problem is that economic disadvantage is not the only barrier to participation, with cultural and social factors also contributing, thus it shouldn't be surprising to learn that after four years the composition of those accepted into training remained heavily white and able-bodied. The operating assumption behind New Labour's intervention was that artistic talent is an innate gift that is equitably distributed to all and only needs financial priming to trigger an outpouring, ignoring the fact that there are specific cultural-valuational structures that predetermine what is considered talent to begin with. Talent, in other words, is not culture-neutral, it is a agreed-upon set of norms that are socially conditioned aptitudes, commonly apprehended as "gifts."(Bordieu 1986 in Neelands). Therefore an intervention of an entirely different order is required; an intervention that displaces the tests for quality and rigour off the virtuosity that Austrian collective Wockenklauser is eager to abandon and toward a new, as yet to be agreed upon, set, some traces of which can be found in current trends in social practice. Hirschorn's incongruous mix of philosophers with immigrant children that left Bishop so baffled, can be seen as an example of a new example of rigour.

Rimi Khan (2010) writes that critiques in the arts sector tend to focus on the instrumental uses of culture as a compromise, that culture as an autonomous sphere is eroded (Bishop 2006, Yudice 2003), without acknowledging that there can be a few things happening at once, things that are not either neoliberal instrumentalization on one hand and some utopian autonomy on the other. Kahn cites Gibson who "argues instead for a return to traditional community arts emphases on locally-based arts making' and 'participation', which have apparently been displaced by an official focus on innovation, industry-partnerships and cultural tourism." Again, these two areas do not have to be divided.

The aesthetic pole of the debate and the emphasis toward stepping up the intrinsic value of arts and culture, is caught in a tautology that opens it up to a resolved notion of instrumentality. Cited in Belfiore (2002), The Tate Gallery of North Liverpool's director states that culture is a successful regenerator (here he is talking about the role of art as economic regeneration but could well be talking about art's properties for other instruments of social policy: inclusion, civic participation etc) because it is an end in itself," which is like saying it works because it works. We therefore must consider regeneration, inclusion and participation as some of art and culture's intrinsic values and that to determine whether or not what we're looking at is good art or not, we have to take a look at a given artistic gesture's ability to ethically dazzle.

In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2003) offer some insights from their sociological study of the shifts in what they call 'the spirit of capitalism,' the underlying beliefs about what is good that support and justify an individual's participation in capitalism, an economic system they term 'absurd.' What

has occurred, they observe, is that from one phase of capitalism to another, there are displacements that occur in the tests that can be applied to apprehend justice. For example, the type of commercial capitalism that was dominant in the 1960s valued a life-long commitment made between employer and employee, a notion of spatial stability and a very distinct division between work and life. The shift into a networked system of capitalism that has seen the outsourcing of many of the jobs that had once contributed to the running of the firm, not only responded to the artistic critique of capitalism, a critique directed at quality of life, thus baffling detractors and leaving them defenseless, but ratcheted up exploitation, which, in the networked world, became exclusion. Boltanski and Chiapello's intention is a dispassionate description of the world of managers, but contained within this is a description of what are considered the attributes of the "great man," and the "little person," within the newer networked capitalism, contrasting these with the "great man" and "little person" in previous regimes: domestic, industrial or commercial. In this current networked world

> "the general equivalent - what the status of persons and things is measured by - is activity. But in contrast to what we observe in the industrial city, where activity merges with work and the active are quintessentially those who have stable, productive waged work, activity in the projective city surmounts the oppositions between work and non-work, the stable and the unstable, wage-earning class and non-wage-earning class, paid work and voluntary work, that which may be assessed in terms of productivity and that which, not being measurable, eludes calculable assessment."

This fact allows the complete incorporation of young people in the productive economy, but through the back and uncompensated door. A clear example is the tremendous amount of labour that young people are expending to give Facebook its incredible

valuation. While the interface introduced exciting innovations, it's most decidedly the photographs of friends and their constant virtual presence that keeps the kids coming back, the labour of which is not being monetarily compensated at all, even as Mark Zuckerberg's personal wealth skyrockets into the tens of billions (Forbes 2011). What is required are new tests of justice to identify where labour is, in fact, labour.

Jumping back to social practice art, what is needed now are new tests of beauty to identify where art is, in fact, art, traces of which can be found through a consideration of Boltanksi and Chiapello's notion of the projective city. Social practice by definition requires difference to become operative, the same way that painting requires different pigmentation. With no difference there is nothing to work with, nothing to shape or finesse. The projective city, thus named because of the tendency for work to unfold in a series of (hopefully) never-ending projects, features a situation where the difference between work and not-work has collapsed. This leaves children and young people as a particularly contradictory social subject, with ethical disavowals around their engagement in the working world contradicted by the fact that they are the engines of much of the culture industries, without accorded much opportunity to benefit, this exclusion amounting to exploitation.

I realize I have Boltanski and Chiapello doing double duty, both to fill out new ways of conceiving of tests of beauty and to justify the inclusion of children and young people as a subjects particularly well-suited as collaborative partners in a comprehensive social practice both supplied by the ever-present and necessary presence of children and young people, their disenfranchisement and their utter centrality to forms of cultural capitalism, in an ethical consideration that can yield aesthetic shifts that have direct bearing on the composition and quality of the city. However different these aims may

seem, they overlap in the fact that they are describing shifts in regimes of apprehension, in how things are understood, the understanding of social relations as art in many ways concurrent and identical to the understanding of much of children's activities as work.

The Changing City as Material

From the perspective of social practice, the process of gentrification offers abundant material. Zukin (1987) describers gentrification as a "a radical break with suburbia, a movement away from child-centered households toward the social diversity and aesthetic promiscuity of city life," with the most relevant processes at work being a regional and metropolitan deindustrialization and "concentration of professional and technical jobs and cultural markets in the urban core." While residents' associations sometimes mobilize to fight "developers", they really confront the whole set of economic and social processes that underlie "development."

Ley (2003) and Bain (2003) point to social processes that prompt the artist to look for cheap rents in marginal areas to protect a sense of authenticity as well as access areas to make noise and a mess without attracting too much attention. The gentrifiers and developers move into this terrain once it has been secured and made attractive by the artist, and the subsequent rents eventually drive the artist and other neighbors out.

However Cameron (2005) refers to this type of gentrification as Second Wave, and distinguishes it from Third Wave, gentrification driven by pubic policy and tied to the rhetoric of creative cities and the engine of the creative industries. "Third wave gentrification evolved into a vehicle for transforming whole areas into landscaped complexes that are a comprehensive, class inflected urban remake. A heavy emphasis is

placed on recreation, consumption, production and pleasure, with the potential for art and culture as a tool for wide-scale urban renaissance."

It is within this landscape that opportunities exist for social practice interventions particular aimed at the resident children in the families at risk of displacement, the situation not having to be seen as so dire. Formoso at al (2010) acknowledge that there are significant threats to the wellbeing of children in a gentrifying neighborhood, but that it's possible to identify potential benefits for the low-income families through improved institutional resources, collective socialization, reciprocated exchange and intergenerational closure: friendships between adults and children.

Since the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have been engaged with more seriously, their opinions sought and the recognition of their various cultures and unique ways of being in the world, caught as they are between a view that accords them a certain amount of autonomy and a view that regards childhood as a time to be cherished and protected from the realities of life (Johanson). Public space, in particular, generates an abundance of irrational anxiety, the facts around child safety depicting a world that is very safe, British author Warwick Cairns offering the cheeky the statistic that if you actually wanted your child abducted, you'd have to leave the kid alone on the street for 600,000 years before it happened (Cairns 2008). Researchers tend to examine the effects this irrational fear has on only the child's physical health (Fotel 2004, Harden 2000), neglecting to also take into account a notion of their social health. This overlooking of the social also occurs when children are brought into the city planning process, with attention paid primarily toward registering their opinions with regard to the built form and possibilities for safe physical activity and easy and comfortable command of the space (Riggio 2002, Tonucci 2001). Notions of social comfort are

engaged but only insofar as they affect the child's command of the space as their space and not to indentify possible vectors of potential community

The ameliorative effects of arts programs on youth have been repeatedly establish with varying degrees of certainty (Baker 2008, Belfiore 2002, Creative City Network 2005), no one seeming to claim that the arts do harm. What has not been studied, however, are the effects of a long-term engagement with children and young people in a gentrifying area characterized by relatively extreme social difference, the material upon which social practice art depends. Artistic interventions into gentrifying neighborhoods characterized by Third Wave gentrification, a gentrification based on the production of culture and therefore prone to an openness to social mixing, may have a higher chance of success, with the possibility of actually yielding new, positive and productive social ontologies that are aesthetically satisfying in their adherence to a beautiful ethic of justice.

The first grounding of this maneouver would involve an artistic deployment of Miguel Abensour's notion of friendship, as cited by Sudbury based theatre director Laurie McGauley (2006), who calls friendship "one of the most sublimated and rational human connections, the least likely to inspire romantic idealism," since it "instills a connection in separation, or a tie that knots us together, while preserving the separation between members of a community." An artistic social practice based on generating friendship between adults and children from differing socioeconomic situations - that of the artist who chooses deprivation and the immigrant family who finds themselves struggling as newcomers – has enough of the aesthetic surprise required of those, like Bishop, who require critical antagonism as part of their art, while at the same time addressing city building and neighborhood fortifying requirements by starting to restock depleted ideals

about neighbourliness and the clichéd but rarely seriously engaged notion that it takes a village to raise a child.

Boltanki and Chiapello, again, provide some ideas of what fairness could look like in their identification of mobility as networked capitalism's key weak spot in terms of a renew of the artistic critique, a critique that attacks aspects of our current situation, which, shrouded in an effective deployment of ideology, appear to be good things. Mobility, the necessity for mobility and the glamour of mobility in our networked world could very well serve as this aspect that, once criticized could, through various reforms, manage to distribute resources in a slightly more equitable manner. Boltanski and Chiapello point out that

> "mobility and instability are very important elements in the stuff a person is made of, and constitute a condition of access to high status… A (networked) world is haunted by a very acute tension between the proximate and the remote, the local and the global. And this tension weighs particularly upon great men, since they embody the truth of this world. To acquire high status in this world, it is advisable to move around incessantly, in order to cultivate new links. And it is preferable to move around in person (to attend the conference, to make contact with one's business partner, etc.).

A long-term commitment of friendship to a cohort of children as a social practice artwork that is highly publicized, comprehensively theorized and designed to share connections, take up the youth in the artistic practices and share some of the mobility that must accrue to today's successful artist could

provide a model for neighborhood cohesion that would have connections to other locales, while remaining utterly committed to the youth and families at home.

Possible Proposal for Possible Research

Performance company Mammalian Diving Reflex has been collaborating with the children of Parkdale, Toronto since 2005 on over twelve projects and have established connections that can, now that this particular cohort are in their mid-teens, be considered friendships. The stated intention is to foster a relationship with the youth and, eventually, cede the company to them, leaving it for them to run. It's a long-term goal, with mid-term aspirations being connecting the youth within the cultural circuits and channels that Mammalian has some command over, with the quantitative goal being simply to get the youth jobs within the creative industries. How many youth get employed, how much they make and how long they remain dedicated to the pursuit will be among the evaluative markers we will employ as well as attempting to identify qualitative effects of the intervention on the youth, their families, the community and the company. The intention is to invert the typical trajectory of charity and rather than hook the youth's fortunes to the fate of the company, we have every intention of hooking the fate of the company to the fortunes of the kids.

Conclusion

The confluence of artistic social practice and urban planning practice offers opportunities for small scale testing of utopian impulses which, because of modesty in scope and duration, can be examined for efficacy and, if productive,

expanded. From the perspective of the art world, necessarily mobilized for it's various cultural resources and aura of status, the interventions would require the requisite dazzle factor, which does not preclude an ethical engagement – on the contrary, it's through a surprising application of ethics that an aesthetic is generated. Collaborations with children, subjects who occupy a deeply contradictory position in our society characterized by a desire to respect their autonomy while protecting them from harm (Johanson 2010), have a strong potential to reveal exciting, generous and ameliorative social ontologies that can manifest notions of community that have been relegated to the realm of a dusty nostalgia. Examining networked capitalism for weakness to critique reveals mobility as an imperative that is vulnerable to deconstruction, the immobility of children standing in contrast, while opening the possibility for viewing a commitment to young people as an ethical disavowal of mobility and, in turn, an affirmation of the local, where encounters can trigger friendship and a community not based on particular identities but only on the quality of time spent in the same place, at the same time.

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