

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Capitalism Works For Me! True/False, roving intervention created by Steve Lambert, 2012.

Social / Justice / Practice: Exploring the Role of Artists in Creating a More Just and Social Public

By Lori Lobenstine

As a long-time activist and co-founder of the Boston-based Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI), Lori Lobenstine discusses making meaning and creating change in the public sphere through the integration of social justice strategies with art, design thinking, and social practice. Offering several examples from DS4SI's own work, such as the Grill Project and Public Kitchen, as well as other domestic and international examples, she describes the creation of an energetic, new, third space—one where activists and artists come together with a shared understanding of the powerful possibilities for creative social interventions that can shift “small-c culture” and create change at the scale of the public. The paper applies a theoretical framework to understand how artists’ use of “productive fictions,” “elegant gestures,” humor, and surprise can interrupt social norms, helping people imagine new solutions to complex social problems. In this integrated work, Lobenstine and DS4SI promote “small-d democracy,” in which people can exercise their interest in and ability to impact the parameters of daily life through art and design.

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INTRODUCTION

There are a growing number of instances where social justice and the art of social practice are coming together. It's interesting, then, to analyze *how* they do this: sometimes as two acquaintances who don't even notice each other across a crowded room, and other times as if they are long-lost friends, immediately embracing and setting off together. And perhaps, to tell the whole story, there are times when they come together like two strangers on a blind date, recommended to each other by mutual friends, but skeptical and quick to ask for the check and move on.



As a co-founder of the Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI), I came into the relationship from the social justice side. My co-founder, Kenneth Bailey, and I came with all the urgency of being a part of communities facing “wicked problems”—problems we define broadly as messy, complex, and circular in ways that defied straightforward solutions. Problems like youth violence, food injustice, displacement, etc. We were working with populations hard hit by such problems, and they were often struggling to address them without the insights or language for complex solutions based on systems thinking, design thinking, and advanced leadership development. (Elements of design thinking that are particularly relevant here include an emphasis on problem setting, divergent thinking, ideation, and nonlinear thinking.) We needed a way to help communities and activists “get” wicked problem solving and systems thinking intuitively, rather than analytically or rationally. We also needed a way to scale up solutions to a public level, to be able to create changes in ways that shook up how an entire population thought of an issue, rather than just those most impacted by it.

That's when we turned to artists. We realized the thinking and insights of form, gesture, and the relational aspects of the art world could begin to get at wicked problems in second-order ways. We started to play with social practice and social interventions and to work with artists whose perspective and skill sets could help cultivate a new kind of problem solving. As we've bridged the worlds of art and social justice, we've felt all the tensions of living in the liminal space between the two. We've certainly had that feeling of the awkward first date between activists and artists!

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This paper is our contribution to the relationship between social justice and the art of social practice and expresses our hopes for how a social / justice / practice can move us toward a more just and truly social public. We highlight the value of elegant gestures and productive fictions, of understanding how people and communities make meaning, and of believing in approaches that might look more like the Cat in the Hat than a policy paper or museum exhibit.

WHY ARTISTS? MAKING MEANING AND CREATING CHANGE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

At DS4SI, we believe that culture is the policy of the irrational. This is useful to explain to activists—who are primarily bound by strong beliefs in rationality—as well as to artists, who are frequently more adept at the irrational and less confident with policy conversations. When we begin to look at how frequently humans make irrational decisions, we begin to understand the power of culture. It's there when youth in Boston risk their lives to escalate violence as demanded by unspoken rules of conduct, and it's there when Congress shuts down the government in a colossal *us versus them* pissing contest. In this second case, we are reminded that while we tend to approach democracy with a frame of rationality, the many hurtful effects of the unneeded shutdowns force us to look in new directions. President Obama's belief in rational argument did not help any more than if he had worn a Cat in the Hat costume and called John Boehner and Harry Reid Thing 1 and Thing 2. In this situation we are reminded of Jurgen Habermas and his belief that evidence and rational thought yield only agreed-upon solutions. To create real change, we need to move beyond the rational and agreed upon.

Artists and Small-c Culture

What is “small-c culture,” how does it relate to social change and why do we feel artists are so important to impacting it? At DS4SI, we make a distinction between “Capital-C Culture,” which includes ethnicities, traditions, practices, and all that come with them, and small-c culture, which is less grounded in deep history and more about local popular everyday culture. One could think of Capital-C Culture as having the strong deep roots of a large redwood tree, while small-c culture is more akin to jewelweed, with shallow roots but rapid expansion due to a dynamic seed-popping system. Capital-C Culture might explain what your family eats on holidays (not to mention what holidays you celebrate, if any), while small-c culture might dictate where your neighborhood goes to eat on Friday nights.

As we think about creating social change, we recognize that complex social behaviors are embedded in—and informed by—both Capital-C and small-c cultures. For example, working with youth to unpack social violence among young people in Boston, we saw elements of Capital-C Culture, such as race and ethnicity, in youths' understanding of racial pride (and prejudice), as well as masculinity. We also saw small-c culture in their embodiment of masculinity: If a young man was “grilled” (given a steady, hard glare) by another young man, small-c culture mandated an escalating response. After interviewing over 60 youth who almost unanimously told us we could never change the power and ritual of the grill, we decided to invite them to join us in trying.

The Grill Project

When we work with artists we gain access to a way of seeing and playing with culture—working in the realm of the symbolic and understanding how people, communities, and cultures use symbols to make collective meaning. Understanding this aspect of social life makes it possible to work within it as a point of leverage for social change. The grill caught our attention because it was an entry point, a less explored angle with potential to interrupt social violence. It could function as what we call “the symbol and the thing,” a simple gesture that operated on both the symbolic level (epitomizing a system where violence could start over nothing more than “he looked at me wrong”) and also as a literal act that we could point to, play with, and make strange. To do so, we engaged our Artist-in-Residence at the time, Judith Leemann.



Boston youth posing with the “life-size Polaroid” as part of DS4SI’s Grill Project, 2009.

Once we hired a set of 15 young people, we had Leemann lead sessions on analogical thinking as a way to get them in a frame from which to imagine. She led the interns through in-studio sessions working with notions of metaphor and performance to aid them in articulating both the dynamics at play within the grill and the dynamics at play in effective interventions. Having an artist in the room treating the performance of the grill as just another form to be investigated revealed new lines of possible engagement. Wonderful and difficult questions came up as the young people prepared to shape these investigations into something they could bring to the public.

We used both humor and surprise to surreptitiously interfere with the grill’s power to demand hostility.

In the end, we used both humor and surprise to surreptitiously interfere with the grill’s power to demand hostility. At a barbecue with 70 teens, the interns facilitated a grill game that demanded participants not smile when grilled. Though the

players had probably never had the urge to smile when grilled, suddenly it was almost irresistible. For their second intervention, they went out into the streets of their neighborhoods and asked teens to give them their “best grill,” as they posed holding a life-size Polaroid frame. We left participants to make their own sense of the point being made, wondering if perhaps the next time they were grilled their hostility might get sidetracked admiring a good grill or just thinking of our strange intervention. This openness to interpretation was quite difficult for our youth activists to understand at first. We, as activists, are used to drilling our point home. Leemann helped us understand that offering a moral to the story actually deflates the power of intervention.

Case Study: Dancing Toward Change after Hurricane Irene



Londonderry, VT, is a small New England town, population under 2,000. When thinking about “small-c culture” you could point to its self-image as a small town where neighbors help each other out, where things still feel old-timey, and where folks pride themselves on being as tough as the winters that snow them in each year. Under the surface, however, there is a growing divide between the old-timers, many of whom are sixth and seventh generation Vermonters, and the transplants who are moving up from southern New England, New York City, and beyond. The rift is underscored by the class divide between these two

groups, with many old-timers worrying that the wealthier newcomers are changing the nature of their town. In 2011, change came even faster as Hurricane Irene flooded the West River that flows through the heart of the town, surging over the dam and roads and causing extensive damage to private and town property. Two years later, residents were still wrestling with their own losses, as well as hard decisions about the town itself.

How to get beyond the conundrum of change versus no-change? How to capture a community’s “small-c culture” and point to its potential in a variety of solutions? Marlboro College’s Center for Creative Solutions offered to help, holding a six-day in-town workshop called “*After the Flood: Regenerative Design, Renewal, Resilience.*” The workshop included residents, students, artists, engineers, landscapers, administrators, historians, and planners. One of the lead artists, Liz Lerman, a renowned choreographer, dancer, and educator, engaged the participants in dialogue about the flood. Having them rotate positions of inquiry, story-telling, and observation, Lerman asked them to capture the gestures that people used while describing the power of water. She then led the group in a choreographed dance built out of their own gestures. “It was a way of finding new and deeper ways to LISTEN to one another,” said resident George Mora. After listening to each other with less fear of their differences—and dancing together!—old-timers and newcomers were able to re-identify as a town of people who looked out for each other. In Mora’s words, “We decided we had enough people with enough skills and talents that in the moment we can pull together very quickly to deal with issues.”

Artists and Small-d Democracy

When we speak about “small-d democracy,” we are speaking of civil society and people’s interest in and ability to impact the parameters of daily life. This includes informal mechanisms that allow or even encourage citizens to see themselves as part of a larger community and society. A vibrant small-d democracy includes chances for people to share opinions and

information with others, socialize in public, take leadership on issues, help others, weigh in on important decisions impacting their communities, and so forth.

When communities were smaller, formal and informal mechanisms for engaging in civil society were more connected and immediate. Upkeep of public commons was often done as a community, and a public official was frequently someone individuals knew and had history with. As we think about the conundrum of a fractured civil society and a massive population, we come to the disconnect between citizens and their more distant neighbors, as well as between people and the formal structures of government. With this disconnect has come a distancing from public life and small-d democracy. In fact, the public's very idea of itself has changed.

To think about changing notions of the public, we naturally turn to artists. We are interested in doing and seeing art in public as a way of pointing to and enhancing public spaces, but even more so to point out that the public itself is still a work in progress, and to embody possibilities that don't yet exist. In a society more and more in love with the private, we think artists can shift how the public sees itself. Currently, things that are considered *public* are seen as inferior and meant for inferior others. Public school, public hospitals, public housing—in these cases *public* is used to clarify the divide between those things and the “better” private schools, hospitals, and homes. We can contrast this to the many critical public infrastructures that serve people across class and race that are *not* commonly referred to as *public*; note how our streets, water in our sinks and toilets, music on our airwaves, and police in our neighborhoods are not regularly referred to as *public* streets, *public* water, *public* music, or *public* police. Our nine-day Public Kitchen installation is one way DS4SI has worked with artists to engage a community in imagining new possibilities for the public sphere and small-d democracy. It played on two concepts we've learned from artists and love: “productive fiction” and “making the strange familiar.”

Public Kitchen

We felt that in a society on a reckless pace to privatize itself, it would be interesting to explore going in the opposite direction: creating a productive fiction that would help people imagine how a new public infrastructure could enrich their daily lives. We commissioned three artists—Alex Hage and Nerissa Cooney from Golden Arrows art and design cooperative and Nadine Nelson of Global Local Gourmet—to help us create this new infrastructure: the Public Kitchen.

The Public Kitchen was an intervention aimed at social and food justice. Inspired by the family kitchen as a gathering place, the Public Kitchen turned a storefront in Upham's Corner, a diverse Boston neighborhood, into a lively hub where residents could feast, learn, share, imagine, unite, and claim public space. Over 500 community members joined us as the Public Kitchen launched a week of fresh food, cooking classes and competitions, a mobile outdoor kitchen, food-inspired art, and much more.

Tellingly, one of the biggest confusions about the Public Kitchen was that it was (or should be) a soup kitchen. In the low-income community it was located in, there was still a sense that something calling itself *public* must be for those others who needed free food. We kept bumping into that all too familiar notion that the public isn't *us*—it's some *them over there*. We had to keep referencing a *public* library to spread the understanding that something could be

public, free, and truly benefit everybody.



Public Kitchen, Upham's Corner, Boston

Another interesting element of the Public Kitchen was what it took to serve food in public. It turns out that food is now seen as more of a public health hazard than as a core element of public life. Our humble mobile kitchens had to be licensed by a city office (which involved using personal connections, lying to say we weren't cooking at all—just heating food up—and paying a fee). Inspired by this maze of effort, we created a “People's Permit,” a large poster that

asked residents to sign it to symbolize their own authority to permit us (or not) to cook in their neighborhood. We also used it as a chance to talk with people about what authority they could give themselves and each other to cook together in public. We have a hunch that small-d democracy could benefit from a lot more of this kind of authority—not to mention cooking—in neighborhoods around the country.

Artists Working at the Scale of the Public

We believe that art—and particularly social practice—can improve civic culture. By civic culture we mean a given place's shared ideas about public and civic life. Art can bring people together across differences, build conviviality in public, and shift perceptions at the scale of a neighborhood, a town, or a city. We are just beginning to see the possibilities for this, as people tend to believe that a place's civic culture is set in stone. People can't imagine a Boston without crazy sports fans or a Nashville where people are cold and distant. The same is true for civic life: we tend to believe we are stuck with our current truth. Well, Antanas Mockus showed us that may not be the case.

Case Study: Mockus and the Mimes

When thinking about the impact that art and social practice can have on a place or a population, it's hard not to think of Antanas Mockus' work in Bogota. It makes one of the best cases for art in the building of civil society.

A philosophy professor and president of the National University of Columbia, Antanas Mockus was elected to be the mayor of Bogota in the late 1990s and again in the early 2000s. He is perhaps best known outside of Columbia as the mayor who hired 420 mimes to replace his traffic cops. When Mockus talks about the impetus for this intervention in the city, he talks about his desire to build a sense of trust in the power of collective agreements across a population. He wanted to give the people of Bogota an example of how following set laws could actually benefit individuals and the city at large. He and his artist colleagues thought to take on traffic because it impacts pretty much all of the people who live in the city—drivers, bikers, and pedestrians alike.

First Mockus asked the traffic cops if they thought anything could be done to improve how people were currently driving, which according to him was in desperate need of improvement. Traffic cops were convinced that the existing situation with traffic was set in stone and that nothing could change it. Next Antanas went to talk with artists. They weren't sure that anything could be done, but they were open to experimenting. For Mockus this was a huge point. The willingness to experiment with altering the current state of civic culture via traffic habits made an opportunity and an opening. And he was willing to work with that.

Mockus fired his traffic cops and gave artists their jobs. If the police weren't willing to consider that a new civic culture was possible, it was likely that they were part of the problem. Mockus would work with those who were open to change. And that's what led to artists performing at intersections in the city streets, instead of normal traffic cops. With humor, novelty, and lightness, the system of street mimes as traffic facilitators invited people into another way of being in traffic, which for Mockus was asking for another way of being in public and being together. In game-design terms, the mime system created a magic circle—a set of conditions that people wanted to participate in. The traffic mimes didn't have the punitive power of the traffic cops—they could only make fun of drivers behaving badly. Through this they were able to create another kind of horizontal accountability, one that ultimately started the shift in Bogota's larger civic culture.

Mockus and the mimes he deployed used art to shift something as fundamental as citizenry's relationship to the rules of law. Another powerful example of the power of art to shift a population occurred with the AIDS Quilt and Names Project, originally conceived of by young AIDS activist Cleve Jones in the mid-80s. What began as a small gesture meant to commemorate and make human the many people who died from AIDS, the AIDS Memorial



"Traffic mime" in action as part of Mayor Antanas Mockus' civil society intervention in the mid-1990s.

Quilt—now at almost 50,000 panels—became a symbol of love and connection to thousands of families and friends across the country and beyond. More recently, Steve Lambert used an interactive art installation to address another strangely unspeakable element of our daily lives—capitalism.

Case Study: Capitalism—Works for Me!”

Aware that capitalism deeply impacts our lives and yet is rarely spoken of directly, artist Steve Lambert sought to create an invitation that would engage both large-scale populations and intimate conversations about capitalism. Using the iconography of the neon sign, Lambert invited folks to simply vote true or false to the sign’s cheery statement: “Capitalism works for me!” In doing so, he created a spectacle that worked as both an attractor to engage the public and a simple invitation to weigh in—not on the merits of capitalism writ large, but on their own experience of it. As he described his intention at the Creative Time Summit in 2012, it “gives us room to imagine something else [because it] transforms the thing that is largely unquestioned into a question.”



Capitalism Works For Me! True/False, roving intervention created by Steve Lambert, 2012.

SHARING THE TOOLS AND CREATING THE CONDITIONS TO IMAGINE

At DS4SI, we want to think about social justice and social practice in such a way that populations most impacted by social *in*justice are empowered to create their own solutions. In this way, effective social practice requires “the democratization of the relationship between creative practitioner and community and a sharing of ‘expert’ and ‘lay’ knowledge,” as the artists at SpiritStore in Limerick, Ireland, put it. If our work in public moves people to understand that the *public* means *us*, then it should also move folks to believe they have the capacity to solve “wicked” social problems, including the ones that hit them the hardest. This means intentionally finding ways to share design tools that help folks imagine new solutions.

Action Lab and Freedom Inc.’s Night Garden

In 2012, DS4SI led its first Action Lab for a conference called Roots and Remedies, held in New Orleans. (Sponsored by The Praxis Project, Roots and Remedies brought together hundreds of social justice activists from around the country.) An Action Lab is a space where participants get a hands-on chance to learn about and generate cultural tactics that support their organizing strategies. It includes both linear and nonlinear design tools to help participants design social interventions and creative actions, including learning from what artists have taught us about

exploring cultural context, choosing relevant cultural symbols, and generating ideas that build on these symbols to create powerful social interventions.

A set of activists from Freedom Inc. in Madison, WI, joined us and used the Lab to dig into what would be a powerful way to support some of their youth in flipping the powerlessness and shame they felt as survivors of incest, sexual assault and domestic violence. By using both linear and nonlinear design tools, they came upon the symbol of a local plant that grows in darkness. To amplify this symbol, they began to design an intervention in which the youth would plant and tend a “night garden,” gaining confidence and leadership as they realized their own power to grow and flourish, even in challenging circumstances. When we saw the staff from Freedom Inc. at Roots and Remedies 2 a year later, Executive Director Kabzuag Vaj gave us an update: “In the spring of 2014, ‘Flowers that bloom at night’ will be planted to launch a city-wide campaign to end sexual and domestic violence against children/teens of color and LGBTQI children and youth. Flowers *can* bloom at night, shining a light on the power of children and youth survivors of incest, sexual assault and domestic violence to thrive against all odds.”



Staff from Freedom Inc. pose in front of the Action Lab design wall at *Roots and Remedies Conference 2012*.



Close up of Freedom Inc.'s symbol for their night garden, as imagined at DS4SI's Action Lab, *Roots and Remedies Conference 2012*.

Case Study: Information Design Translates Policy Speak



Es Tu Dinero, Decides Tu, project of Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP). Photo: CUP web site

Policy speak is frequently hard to understand, even for the well-initiated. For those who aren't, it reads like a foreign language; if English is a second language, the challenges can multiply. In order for regular people to participate in the policy decisions that affect their lives, art and design can function as a useful translator and mediator. New York City-based Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) uses graphic and information design to assist residents in deciphering policy decisions and in having a say in them. Advocacy and organizing groups get in touch with CUP around an issue that they want their members and populations to better understand. CUP researches that issue and, with a designer,

develops a poster or short pamphlet on the issue in order to make it more accessible. CUP's Making Policy Public poster series is well-known and serves as a clear example of how this can work. Using it, residents have been able to fight back against housing policies that could have left them displaced or harmed.

Another example is "Es Tu Dinero, Decides Tu." CUP developed "Es Tu Dinero" to address the questions and fears many Spanish-speaking immigrants have about mainstream banking. When advocates brought it to their attention that many immigrants used check-cashing businesses as their only system for safe financial transactions, CUP partnered with artists to create a tool that would, in their words, "dispel some of the myths about financial services and give immigrants the tools to make choices that expand their financial opportunities." Es Tu Dinero shared information about a variety of viable alternatives to check-cashing businesses. Without taking sides, Es Tu Dinero helped give people a chance to make better-informed decisions about handling their money. Design helped make that possible.

CONCLUSION

As we continue to think about the implications of social / justice / practice, we find our perspective influenced by DS4SI's location in the liminal spaces between the often quite separate worlds of art and social change. As we design and test social interventions with and on behalf of marginalized populations, controversies, and ways of life, we feel a new community growing. We feel an energetic, new, third space, one with activists who instantly understand the powerful possibilities for strange interventions in public spaces and with artists who are seeking meaningful ways to engage their instincts and skills around symbolism, making meaning, and shifting small-c culture. The community is small but growing quickly, and as it

does it will hit its own bumps—coming to terms with the tensions of race, class, and gender privilege, with different ideas about urgency and impact, and even with who gets to be considered an artist. How we take on those challenges, how we find “new and deeper ways to LISTEN to one another,” as Londonderry’s George Mora put it, will determine a lot. To us, a more just and social public will only come through cracking the normal rules of engagement. Whether artists and activists are taking on the “grill” or the culture of traffic, whether we’re cooking in public or dancing with the “power of water,” social / justice / practice must move populations to be in different relationships with each other and with the status quo. We are the Cat in the Hat, asking activists, artists, and everyday people to be comfortable with the messiness it will take to change our lives.



Lori Lobenstine grew up in a family of community and union organizers, and decided early on that working with youth was her passion and her route to creating change. She has been a youthworker for the past 20 years, in settings as diverse as classrooms, basketball courts, museums, and foreign countries. Most recently she cofounded the Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI), a creativity lab for folks of all ages doing social justice work. Prior to that, she was the Director of Teen Programs for Girls Incorporated of Holyoke (MA), where she co-authored a chapter in *All About the Girl: Culture, Politics and Identity* (Editor, Harris; Routledge, 2004) with the mother and daughter research team that wowed an academic conference in

London. As a life-long activist, she is inspired by the vision that new design tools and a greater design awareness will bring new energy and creativity to the social justice field. Lori is also the impresario of femalesneakerfiend.com, a thriving online and off-line community of female sneaker customizers, collectors, designers and connoisseurs and author of *Girls Got Kicks* (Levellers Press, 2011).

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