Introduction

From 2006 to 2016, I undertook a series of epistemologically driven practice experiments under the aegis of the Embedded Artist Project, a concept I have engaged in urban design projects of varying scales in cities in the USA and South America. Embedded Artist projects aim to explore the role of culture in sustainability, and demonstrate how social, cultural, environmental, and economic values can inform a ‘net benefits’ model of development, generating a series of linked civic initiatives that model a whole-systems, place-based approach. As a geo-specific approach, the Embedded Artist strategy is anchored in bioregional thinking and localism, driven by a place-based ethos that aligns with and broadens the social, cultural, and quality-of-life aims of placemaking. Its epistemology questions what Mignolo (2010) terms ‘imperial knowledge’ and its separation of nature and culture moves this practice to ‘epistemic disobedience’ (ibid. p. 15), engaging with indigenous perspectives on the land such as the concept of ‘place-thought’ (Watts, 2013) and the rejoining (from a Western perspective) of epistemology and ontology, thinking and being. The first section of this chapter takes up the origin and implementation of the Embedded Artist Project platform chronologically, followed by a section on global project examples, and lessons learned. The third section reflects on its implications on current cultural discourse, artistic practice, and considerations of place and placemaking.

The Embedded Artist: Double Agent

The Embedded Artist Project began as a program with the City of Chicago, Department of Innovation, running 2008 to 2012. Artists were ‘embedded’ in municipal workgroups to bring new perspectives to the daily work of the city. Key to its formation was the insight that the intellectual and creative ‘free agency’ of artists is key to their ability to contribute to ‘possibility’; and that artists’ research and working methods can and must be allowed to operate within and alongside the highly structured multidisciplinary and consultative processes typical in public planning. The program was catalyzed by a ‘knowledge claim’ document entitled What do Artists Know? (Whitehead, 2006) which has proven useful as both method and message to elucidate the kinds of (tacit) skills artists deploy with place-based practices.
Sustainability + Agency

The Embedded Artist Project operates from the speculative proposition that un-sustainability is at core a cultural problem, emanating from systemic disconnects of Western epistemological specialization and habitus (Fry, 2007, p. 5, from Bourdieu). The aim of the Embedded Artist Project is to test the ‘cultural hypothesis’ that artists can contribute to a more sustainable world by joining the work of multidisciplinary teams and (re)integrating cultural perspectives into the formulation of civic projects. It asks: can art/artists contribute to a culturally informed, and reciprocal, trans-disciplinary method as other disciplines are challenging themselves to do?

OPTing IN: The Diplomacy of Art

In the Embedded Artist transdisciplinary framework there is no focus on artistic autonomy, nor do we operate solely within the symbolic economy of art practice. Long-held conventions around authorship are called into question, alongside ideas about art’s usefulness/uselessness and purpose/purposelessness, renegotiating the symbolic and the practical. As Janeil Englestad (n.d.) frames it, to ‘make art with purpose’; as Tania Bruguera (n.d.) frames it, ‘arte útil’ (useful art). Focused on reciprocity and structured around shared interests, ethics, and goals, we believe that one’s voice is amplified not diminished. The artist is embedded to be of service, and thus is content to defer, at least temporarily, the question of ‘art’ and any limits on possibility. The framework privileges integration, multi-valency, and the creation of new working models, not the maintaining of borders or old modalities. Conventional activist art strategies are therefore extended by this ‘opting in.’ Through this engagement we have learned to speak the languages of other disciplines, both nomenclature and attitude, reflecting multiple intents and values. Cultural geographer Ingram (2012) has called this the ‘diplomacy of art,’ a symbolic handshake, reaching outside art practice towards the work of others, to become value-added. This diplomacy sometimes disrupts these practices by operating within their sphere differently. Some would claim this as an act of ‘generosity’ (Purves, 2004), a joining in, dot connecting.

Embedding the Embedded Artist

The structure of how the artist enters the government setting will vary, and will reflect assumptions about ‘art,’ ‘art-making,’ and contested ideas about the role of the artist in society and ‘socially engaged art.’ Ideas differ concerning what can be achieved by having an artist in the government. Simply put: is the artist there to make ‘art’? Are they there to make ‘change’?

We might begin by recognizing that an ‘embedded’ or ‘placed’ artist differs from other kinds of city engagement strategies such as the Artist-in-Residence model, and the City Artist or Town Artist. In the Artist-in-Residence model, an artist might primarily reflect on the milieu around them but remain outside the principal tasks of the city workgroup, and instead maintain artistic autonomy to create artworks from, with, and about the city systems. Some cities are framing their artist engagements as City or Town Artist, which in some cases blends the two strategies, or perhaps leaves it to the artist to navigate and experiment. Each type of engagement has historical precedents, for example, Artist Placement Group (Tate, n.d.); David Harding (n.d) as Glenrothes Town Artist; Merle Ukeles as NYC Sanitation Department Artist-in-Residence (Kennedy, 2016) and each negotiates and models ideas about artistic integration and/or autonomy and reflects different theories of change.

In contrast, the Embedded Artist is a new kind of problem-solver, or sometimes problem-finder. Problem articulation and problem definition are key challenges in sustainability
Embedded Artist Project

planning and are areas where artists can be adept due to their criticality and lateral thinking. At their most basic, Embedded Artists seek to take a seat at the collective table; to work upstream from the domain where most art projects operate and aim to impact the everyday work of the government and policy, even while ‘art’ may (or may not) be made. Importantly, for Embedded Artists working on complex city projects, we have found that without the support and buy-in at the Commissioner level, it is hard for city staff to prioritize these collaborations, and less can happen.

It is crucial to recognize which city departments and individuals are receptive to engagements with artists, and why. Reaching into established networks can help identify imaginative partners willing to embrace these experiments, or whose departments face such challenges, and with such urgency, that they are open to new ideas and unorthodox methods. Oftentimes individuals may be locked into older modalities and highly prescriptive art genre definitions. Those charged with civic innovation or those who face intractable social problems and are hungry for new ideas are often the best prospects. In addition to receptivity, matching the expertise and interests of the artist to the ‘placement’ proves important to advance the mutual steep learning curves and allow for meaningful work. With its reciprocal framework, city workers and artists learn from each other, and duration is important to this process: a rule of thumb indicates that all placements should be for a minimum of two years, longer for big projects.

BOTH/AND Art: Double Agency

A corollary to the Embedded Artist is the concept of the ‘Embedded Artwork,’ manifesting the possibility that something can be understood both as art and as something else (remediation, community development, education, etc.) In one part of the artist’s multivalent role, they seek free agency; in another, it is understood that some of the transgressive and subversive strategies of artists have to remain unspoken or in some cases, be suspended in order to address urgency and cooperation. We recognize that our role is also intentionally disruptive, that we are present as change agents, for ‘redirective practice’ (Fry, 2007), or as Sacha Kagan (2007) would say, to ‘play on the rules rather than in the rules’ or ‘entrepreneurship in conventions.’ The melding of cultural logics and figurative tropes into the multidisciplinary team model of civic projects produces what we have called, elsewhere, the ‘tropological transdisciplinary’ (Whitehead, 2015).

But what of the rules of art? In what ways does Embedded Artist also redirect conventional art practice? These both/and projects, which form the core of this civic art practice, are not always legible to art worlds as ‘art,’ and the status of the projects are often contested. Here the strategic knowledge, or metis, of the artist turns on art itself. Using the double agency of this practice to redirect the ‘cultural quo,’ the Embedded Artist shuttles between worlds like a cross-pollinator, border-hopping, changing both sides in equal measure. Beyond the ‘free agency’ of arts thinking, beyond redirective practice, disruption, and change agency, the Embedded Artist is at core a double agent, working inside and outside conventions, inside and outside worlds, a double change agent.

Civic Experiments: Projects Undertaken as Embedded Artist

When culture is understood to denote the social production and transmission of values, meanings and purpose... and when it is recognized that the expression of social goals and aspirations is at the heart of the public planning process... the connection between culture and planning becomes clear.

(Hawkes, 2001, p. 1)
The following consecutive and generative Embedded Artist Projects explore the cultural dimension of sustainability and model new cultural strategies for creating change. While there are explicit aims and outcomes in each, additional unforeseen outcomes also arrived, which carry on to the next project.

**Slow Cleanup, Chicago**

Working as Embedded Artist with the Chicago Department of Environment (2009–2012), we developed ‘Slow Cleanup,’ a net benefits model for Chicago’s 400-plus abandoned gasoline stations. We deployed Hawkes’ Four Pillar (2001) social, cultural, economic, environmental model, and that of the Slow Food movement, as a schema for a new approach to brownfields redevelopment. Paired with Chicago’s top brownfields expert, by a visionary Commissioner, we focused on phyto- or plant-based remediation to reimagine and repurpose the landscape, revaluing these degraded properties. The program was constructed as a series of interim approaches that model time in relation to investments, benefits, and complexity. We also evolved an in situ soil prep method for keeping all soils on site, repurposing a road-building tool. Students from four communities of practice: art, soil science, horticulture, STEM learners – have been involved in the project. The purely disciplinary ambition to critically extend the sculptural genre of the ‘earthwork’ or to engage wholesale in ‘social practice’ or ‘placemaking’ remained unspoken. ‘Slow Cleanup’ was not artist-led, but multivalent and deeply collaborative. I believe that many city workers learned things from working with artists, but it is unclear how they understand these insights. Unfortunately, there was no formal assessment of the program. On our end, we learned that there are many constraints that dampen the energies of the even most creative staffers, and that there is a world of difference between career civil servants and elected officials and ‘politicians.’

**Lessons Learned**

- correct placement of artist’s expertise is crucial
- high-level support is required
- plan on a two-year placement minimum, longer for some projects
- open-ended questions work better than prescribed outcome execution
- examine differences between ‘practices’ and ‘policies’
- time is an underutilized asset in low development areas
- community involvement is key for a sustainable program
- volatility of political cycles hinders long-term thinking

**Diaspore, Lima**

We were introduced to the City of Lima, Peru in 2009 through Centro Internacional de la Papa (CIP), which holds over 4,000 varieties of Andean potatoes, the cultural heritage of 10,000 years of hybridization by indigenous growers, and which underpins this multifaceted project that operates as a political and poetic gesture, and also as a knowledge experiment. Out of conversation with the CIP Director, concerning the cultural nature of food, the Four Pillar model (ibid.), and how these ideas might enrich the new urban agriculture program underway in Lima, we assembled a team of Chicagoan artists, designers, and preservationists to provide creative support to the City of Lima in their efforts to integrate architectural conservation in the historic center.
Embedded Artist Project

and food security planning. A crumbling but magnificent UNESCO World Heritage Site built around 1500, the historic center of Lima now houses the urban poor, mirrored at the city edge by informal settlements of a growing population. These populations have inadequate nutrition and food security and are also threatened by diminishing glacier-fed water supplies, and a lack of public open space (most open space is private, in courtyards.) We became aware that all food security programs in Lima must be evaluated against the underlying pragmatic dilemma of sustaining a city that is in the wrong place – a perpetual colonial legacy – an unsustainable settlement pattern. Still we sought integrative solutions to enhance democratic participation, food security, and heritage conservation.

During our work in Lima, a hex pattern emerged as a motif for many of these investigations, moving from a metaphor for participation at City Hall, the Civic Hive, to a space-saving spatial configuration for roof gardens, to a motif for a mobile orchard, reversing the private courtyard and the spatial interiority (Plöger, 2007) of the city. While formal tropes such as the hex shape allowed us to navigate between the symbolic and the practical, everyone understood that urban agriculture in Lima was a short-term proposition, raising as many questions as it answered. Our work in Lima ended in 2012 when the Mayor supporting the initiative was recalled by more conservative political forces. However, this umbrella concept has gone on to inspire other food-based conversations, including with rural collaborators in the Irish countryside. In this way, the ‘Diaspore’ project is extended through reciprocity to all sites where food production and cultural production are intertwined.

Lessons learned

• artists/designers do not have to operate in a framework of scarcity
• artists and institutions can redistribute their strategic thinking capacity to unlikely partners
• solve more than one problem at a time
• involving students enlarges capacity but limits follow-through
• volatility of political cycle hinders implementation of ideas (again)

The 606, Chicago

From 2012 to 2016 I was the Lead Artist on the Design Team for a 3-mile-long rail adaptation project, ‘The 606,’ which opened to the public in June 2015. ‘The 606’ is a civic experiment in every way, a public–private partnership with great ambitions, and for me, an opportunity to actualize the ideas that we had been developing at a more speculative scale. The private partner, The Trust for Public Land, established public engagement as the ethos of the project. Working rhetorically with the values of participation and engagement, the arts became the organizational framework for the project, shifting the multidisciplinary team structure towards the more collaborative (but in this case, more contested) transdisciplinary model. Tacitly, we transformed the Four Pillars into a set of cultural values – expression, participation, innovation, and sustainability – shifting the focus from cultural heritage to cultural futures.

‘The 606’ has been called ‘arguably the most ambitious experiment in placemaking ever undertaken’ (Hart, 2014), and prominently features a climate monitoring artwork revealing how large bodies of water like Lake Michigan affect local temperature patterns. Based on a climatological study of the site, a planted line of 453 native, flowering trees, Amelanchier × grandiflora (Apple serviceberry) runs its full length, propositionally forming an embedded artwork, a landscape intervention, achievable only by proclaiming it ‘art.’ Modeled after the Japanese cherry blossom festival, the five-day bloom spread of this flowering line makes legible Chicago’s famous
Lake Effect in Spring and Fall, and a living data visualization in time and space. As a form of speculative artistic activism, ‘Environmental Sentinel’ explores the potential of the cherry blossom festival to be replicated elsewhere. Is it a ‘transferable model’? Will this work in Chicago with native plants? Can beauty be catalytic and educational? While a participatory observation program links academic and citizen scientists, most encounters will be informal, by regular trail users who engage this slow spectacle in other ways. This synthetic approach blends new participatory art practices, climatology, and the expressive potential of public infrastructure to create what we are calling ‘pink infrastructure.’

Lessons learned

- public infrastructure projects require artists who can think at the scale of the city
- artists must be supported by the client to have any effect
- artists’ scope of work and compensation must be adequate to keep up with the team
- art world aspirations linked to economic development may be at odds with community-driven arts programs and at odds with anti-gentrification sentiments
- there are multiple artworlds and multiple rulebooks
- artists can help navigate social issues with new social practice skills and this requires a level of trust and political courage on behalf of the commissioner who must accept risk
- due to the short-term political cycle, it is difficult to bring long term ideas to public projects

Disobedience Beyond Disruption: Linking Embedded Artist Project To Social Justice + Place

Since 2015, I have been involved in two contexts that both extend and challenge Embedded Artist Project strategies and reveal the complexities of thinking about place and placemaking in the Western and non-Western context. It is to this emerging discourse that this chapter now turns, focusing on two projects: Fruit Futures Initiative Gary (FFIG) – a civic fruit-growing initiative and community orchard undertaken with a largely African American community, in Gary, Indiana – and engagement with the Kei Uta Collective – artists, designers, and community members operating within the semi-rural agricultural ‘hinterlands’ (Kei Uta) of Kuku, Horowhenua, Aotearoa (New Zealand.) The latter is seeking to explore how the mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge or episteme) might link to other knowledge systems, in order to envision climate adaptation strategies for this longstanding, Māori coastal community (Smith, 2019). These new situations have allowed and required me to see Embedded Artist in a broader way; a more geo-political proposition beyond working with municipalities and multidisciplinary team-based civic projects.

Embedded Artist UnEmbedded: Co-creativity

As success with the Embedded Artist model grew, so did the reality that this is a ‘top-down’ practice best suited to large-scale endeavors; in response to this, and to practice at a more intimate scale, we moved our studio to Gary, Indiana. Here, while in contact with city government (what remains of it), we are working most directly with a handful of long-term Gary residents, ‘bottom-up,’ replacing expertise with ‘co-creativity.’ Lisa Grocott (2005, p. 10) has written about the importance of transferring knowledge in a divergent and speculative manner rather than a convergent and directive manner. While this model may create uncer-
tainty, it may also create ‘possibility’ and agency. Thus, in Gary, we asked a new set of questions regarding knowledge: could we transfer the knowledge already captured by previous Embedded Artist placements? And could we transfer the ‘agency’ held within that knowledge in order to build capacity in the community? This is the Embedded Artist unembedded, a new kind of transfer engagement, deployed through divergence and uncertainty; through ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998).

FFIG also poses questions about time and scale, which impede our understanding of other ‘natures,’ ongoing but invisible and uncounted by the Western mind. Recognizing the larger bioregional ecology, FFIG cultures a pan-animistic worldview, offers non-anthroponormative regional futures, and alternative economic possibilities. FFIG and the liminal spaces of post-urban Gary are a monument to the failure of specialization, and embody critiques of Western ‘rationality,’ opening space for Afro-futurism, deep localism, poetry, participation, ‘tactical magic,’ and a ‘pluriverse’ of wonder.

Artist Embedded in Kaupapa Māori (or not)

This critique of Western rationality and the split between nature and culture, as part of the Western episteme, links directly to the dynamic, bi-cultural context emerging in Aotearoa/New Zealand which is actively indigenizing (de-colonizing) art, research, and the discussion about knowledge and place (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017).

In early 2019, I was ‘embedded’ at the Tukorehe Marae, a traditional spiritual and community center, in a cross-cultural wānanga, an intensive forum and collaborative process based in Kaupapa Māori, a holistic Māori methodological approach to research. As part of the ‘Deep South Science Challenge-Vision Mātauranga Programme,’ the wānanga aim is to ‘ground science in culture, and to communicate complex knowledge and data through art and design strategies’ (Deep South Challenge, n.d.). Key features of this approach include the use of hīkoi, walking together on the land, as an embodied, kinesthetic form of learning that is simultaneously an act of political demonstration and solidarity. Daily hui meetings and active korero discussions complement the introduction to core, integrative, Māori concepts such as whakapapa – the genealogical linkage of people and their connections to all things. The tīo ā-Māori ki tōna ake ao or Tē Ao Māori, the Māori worldview, sees knowledge as shared, passed down, ancestral, accumulative; not ‘produced’, not industrial or instrumental – it is a value proposition. Mignolo (2010, p. 15) refers to ‘knowledge making’ rather than ‘knowledge production’ to acknowledge the shared authorship and ancestral processes that inform indigenous ‘knowing.’

Mātauranga Māori, the Māori knowledge model, is integrative, and like other indigenous perspectives, contrasts with the Western view that dis-integrates the world into disconnected disciplines. Here nature and culture are not separated, and nature is also not conceptualized as the place conveniently lacking humans, ready for Western colonization. This worldview does not embrace the Anthropocene concept as this concept reflects the underlying Western assumption which universalizes the ‘human’ as responsible agent in the climate crisis, when it is a product of Western thought and action (Todd, 2015). It is also crucial to recognize that the Māori indigenous worldview suffered under colonialism and is undergoing a process of reclamation and revitalization – a process that is simultaneously cultural, political, and epistemological. To be ‘embedded’ within this bi-cultural knowledge experiment is to reflect on these underlying epistemological differences regarding knowledge-making and its meanings, to wade into contested territorial and historical narratives, requiring the Embedded Artist to be an epistemic ‘diplomat’ as Stengers (2005) would say, to ‘turn contradiction (either/or) … into a contrast (and, and),’ similar to the ‘both/and art’ mentioned earlier. Can you be ‘embedded’ within an integrative
worldview where all elements are already linked; where there is no inside/outside? The inter-
epistemic and inter-cultural initiative underway in Kuku, Horowhenua is a site for exploring
these questions.

**Place-Thought + Epistemic Disobedience**

Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never sepa-
rated because they never could or can be separated.

(Watts, 2013, p. 21)

The view that nature and culture are not separate connects the Māori perspective to land-
use practices and policies in Gary, Indiana. Gary is dominated by steel production and, like all
company towns, this unsustainable economy has faltered under globalization and automation,
leaving behind population loss, environmental devastation, rampant suburbanization, and insti-
tutionalized racism. Vacant land, including fragments of native landscape, does not legally qualify
as ‘natural’ in land use and tax code. Here ‘nature’ exists only in the largely white suburban
counties that surround Gary. Through this inconsistent public policy, ‘nature’ and ‘ecology’ are
not available to Gary’s largely African American residents, an example of the widespread racial
inequality in the area. Gary’s history as an industrial center also obscures its prime geologic loca-
tion; Gary sits within the moderate microclimate of Lake Michigan and directly on a seabed of
ancient sand deposits, providing the perfect drainage required for excellent fruit-growing. The
available (vacant) land in Gary clearly messages new possible futures for the region – the land
speaks for itself, if we can only bring ourselves to listen.

North American Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts, describes the
indigenous concept of ‘Place-Thought’ and its challenge to Western attitudes. Place-Thought
is based upon ‘the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans
derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts’ (ibid.). The transposing of Indigenous
cosmologies through a Eurocentric, Western purview, make a distinction between place and
thought, where ‘The result of this distinction is a colonized interpretation of both place and
thought, where land is simply dirt and thought is only possessed by humans.’

The division between ‘knowing’ (epistemology) and ‘being’ (ontology) is inherent
in much of Euro-Western world views. These theoretical frameworks guide many
Western beliefs of creation and agency, viewing indigenous histories and worldviews as
mythical stories, or as an ‘alternative’ way to perceive and understand the world, rather
than as real events that actually occurred.

(Ibid, p. 22)

The projects in Gary and Aotearoa, furthermore, also challenge simplistic thinking about ‘place-
making,’ as places already exist historically and cosmologically. More broadly, the challenge to
the separation of nature and culture, ontology and epistemology lands us squarely in the domain
of de–colonial theorist Mignolo and the concept of ‘Epistemic Disobediene.’ Mignolo pro-
poses a purposeful ‘de-linking’ with the Western knowledge model and mindset and likens this
delinking to the intentional resistance of ‘civil disobedience’:

Epistemic disobedience is necessary to take civil disobedience (Gandhi, Martin Luther
King) to its point of non-return. Civil disobedience, within modern Western episte-
mosology … could only lead to reforms, not to transformations. For this simple reason,
the task of de-colonial thinking and the enactment of the de-colonial option in the 21st century starts from epistemic de-linking: from acts of epistemic disobedience.

(2010, p. 15)

Mignolo proposes that this is accomplished through de-linking with the institutions of Western modernity, which are based on a monocultural and exploitative mindset, and with their silences, specializations, and disciplines. In this way Mignolo parallels much of the thinking that informs the Embedded Artist Project platform around the limitations of the Western knowledge model and the necessity of integrative, whole-systems approaches that ‘reconnect to the realities of place’ (Wilhelm, 2012).

Conclusion

In We Have Never Been Modern, Bruno Latour (1993, p. 56) explores the multiple fallacies of the dis-integrative binary thinking that Watts and Mignolo address, calling it out as ‘The Great Divide.’ In these recent Embedded Artist Projects these deeper epistemological ‘divides’ also cleave around strategies of ‘place’ but these issues have not as yet received much attention. What questions lay buried here for those of us working with place-based responses to climate change, and in what ways are these questions relevant to the approaches to community development we know as ‘placemaking’? It is too simplistic (and too binary) to say that these approaches are antithetical? Currently they are operating within different discourses and, perhaps, at different scales and time frames. Further, the connections between ‘place-making’ and ‘place-thought’, between the discourses of indigeneity and the Anthropocene, and other emerging imperatives, must be brought together (critically) with ideas about creative ‘placemaking.’ The Embedded Artist Project started as a change strategy, motivated by seeking to operate somewhere else: upstream or downstream, or inside, outside or be-side, some perceived boundary or limitation so that we can know (or understand) something else. Clearly the making of knowledge, and perhaps the ‘making of place’, are not neutral propositions. What began as a disruption of disciplinary boundaries within the Western professional system of expertise has grown into a reassessment of the philosophy that underpins this entire system. More than mere institutional critique or disruptive innovation, this view of knowledge, of agency, of being, and of place, challenges not only the Western system of thought but also its metaphysics. Perhaps the Embedded Artist is a rule-breaking epistemic disobedient, as well as a lateral thinking double-agent, useful for reconnecting ecologies of practice (Stengers, 2005), expanding imaginaries and possibilities. For the twenty-first century, the Embedded Artist Project may also become a platform for broader geo-political aims, the decolonization of knowledge, justice, land, and place, through epistemic disobedience and place-based strategies.

References


Frances Whitehead


Further reading in this volume

Chapter 1: Introduction: what really matters – moving placemaking into a new epoch
Cara Courage
Chapter 4: A future of creative placemaking
Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita