

The Art of Social Artistry

By Skye Burn

How does the practice of Social Artistry relate to what artists do? In her address to the United Nations Development Programme 5th Global Forum on Re-inventing Government (2003), Jean Houston claimed “the Social Artist is one who brings the focus, perspective, skill training, tireless dedication, and fresh vision of the artist to the social arena.” She described the qualities and characteristics of Social Artists and the four levels on which they operate: sensory/physical, psychological/historic, mythic/symbolic, and integral/unitive. How do the traits of Social Artists and the four levels correspond to the practice of art as it is experienced and described by artists?

I

In the broad scope of human affairs, historical epochs are defined by where humanity was focusing energy at the time and by changes in physical space, psycho-historic orientation, mythos and symbols, and overall movement. Thus, the Age of Conquest and Industrial Era represent periods of focused behaviors that eradicated indigenous cultures and created the industrial world, thereby transforming the sensory/physical space in which we live. Freeways and industrial farms now fill the space where buffalo once roamed. The Age of Enlightenment represents a time of massive psychological reorientation in the western world. Darwin’s discovery of evolution, the capstone of the Enlightenment, destroyed the coherence of the self-image (the image of God) that hitherto dominated, precipitated an identity crisis (not only are we children of God, we descended from apes), and polarized scientific and religious forces in the western psyche. On the mythic/symbolic level, the advent of the Nuclear Age is associated with atomic bombs; a detonation of human ingenuity that brought the end of the world into the realm of real possibility and sent waves of mythic resonance swelling beneath the turbulent sea change humanity has since been navigating. Finally, globalization and the emerging World Wide Web suggest movement on the integral/unitive level, as we collectively face the need to get our act together and humanity moves into a more integrated and unified state of being and consciousness.

Social Artists are trained to consider the four levels in approaching situations. Consider, for example, how Social Artists might analyze the situation in Israel and Palestine on the four levels. Sensory/physical components of the situation involve water, land, behaviors (bulldozing olive trees, car bombs), and barricades (checkpoints, fences) that texture the space in which people live. The psychological/historic components include a history of severe trauma and historical grievances that breed on-going distrust, defensiveness, and animosity. The mythic/symbolic components are the ancient stories that bolster the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths and identities and the symbolic monuments, places, and images that tie-into those stories, such as Jerusalem and what it symbolizes. The integral/unitive components constitute the common goal and common purpose that Muslims, Jews, and Christians express by virtue of their common humanity and monotheism, which have more bearing on the situation than is ordinarily taken into account. In assessing situations in different parts of the world and developing strategies for responding, Social Artists step back and ask what is happening on all four levels.

In creating works of art, artists also assess what is happening on the four levels. A painter, for example, will step back from a work in progress to assess how the work is “working” on the four levels:

Sensory/physical level

On the sensory/physical level the painter asks, is my handling of the medium serving the life of the work? Is the viewer distracted by evidence of faulty technique, unsuitable shading, or superfluous lines? Are any physical elements getting in the way of the work having the desired effect? Extending such concerns to the situation in the Middle East, Social Artists might ask how the ‘facts on the ground’ are impeding a culture of peace.

Psychological/historic level

On the psychological/historical level a painter asks what is instinct telling me? The practice of art involves the union of form and essence. *Art* stems from a root that means to join together. In producing works of art, artists join form and essence. They create tangible forms that capture, embody, and reveal intangible essences, as the spirit of the times may be captured in the form of a painting or song. In assessing works of art artists ask, does the created form truly embody the essence the work serves to reveal? Does the work “feel right”? Does any aspect of the work feel off or missing? If something feels off, what emotional or mental blocks, hang ups, or complexes may be impeding the embodiment of essence and keeping the work from coming alive? Extending these concepts to the Middle East Social Artists might ask what emotional blocks, mental paradigms or mindsets, or cultural complexes could be blocking the spirit of unity and its embodiment in the cultural manifestations—the forms of behavior, forms of communication, and objects—the people are producing?

Mythic/symbolic level

On the mythic/symbolic level, the artist is aware of being an instrument or agent in giving form to essence. As Piet Mondrian says, “The position of the artist is humble. He is essentially a channel” (cited in Cameron, 2002). In creating works of art artists respond to the essence being given form. The essence determines what form the work takes, as the meaning embodied in this sentence determined what words were selected and how they were put together. Objective factors that condition the work, such as the rules of grammar, are subsidiary to the essence and serve to ensure the form has integrity, is viable, and does justice to the content. Without grammatical integrity the meaning embodied in this paragraph would not come across. The purpose of the form is to reveal the essence, and a work that lacks integrity does not serve the purpose. In giving form to essence, an artist senses subjective pressure to create the form, which subsides and goes away entirely only when the essence is revealed in its true form through the artist’s agency. The true form is recognized by its *morphic resonance* (Sheldrake, 1988). A work of art that truly captures and embodies the essence resonates deeply with the archetypal substrate of the human psyche. In assessing works of art on the mythic/symbolic level artists ask, how is the work resonating?

Timeless works of art can transport us into another world. In assessing works of art on the mythic/symbolic level artists ask, does the work have the power to transport (or rapture) us into another world? Is the work timeless? Extending this concept to the Middle East the Social Artist might ask, what is the situation telling us vis-à-vis the timeless aspirations of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity?

Stepping back and assessing the situation in the Middle East on the mythic/symbolic level, Social Artists would take into account the religious element. Religions aspire to a common goal. The root of *religion*, like the root of *art*, means to re-link or join together. Religions aspire to the

union of heaven and earth (union of the essence and form realms in the world), the consciousness of being one with the Creator or All That Is, and the end of time or timeless state of being. Stepping back from the situation in the Middle East, Social Artists might observe the practice of Islam appears to center around the challenges of being an instrument or agent through whose auspices the (divine) essence is embodied and revealed in the world. The word *Islam* means surrender to God. Artists refer to the surrender as “letting-go and trusting the process”. Once again stepping back, Social Artists might observe the practice of Christianity appears to center around the discipline of being true to self, self being the (divine) essence embodied in the human form. And they might observe practice of Judaism appears to center around the discipline of ethics—the codes of conduct that ensure the world we create has integrity, is viable, and does justice to the (divine) essence the work serves to reveal. In assessing the situation in the Middle East Social Artists might ask; how can Muslims, Christians, and Jews consciously join forces in serving their common purpose and achieving their common goal? Today, it seems the three forces often work at cross-purposes and operate counter-productively.

Integral/unitive level

On the integral/unitive level artists ask, does the work “work”? Robert Kaupelis explains what artists mean by the phrase “it works” (1980, p. 39):

If you were to ask these artists what they mean, they would probably come up with such terms or phrases as: [the work is] composed; it has structure; it makes a statement; it’s unified; it’s well-organized; it’s harmonious throughout; it’s well-designed; there’s a total integration of parts; nothing is superfluous; everything holds together. ... In more detailed terms, what they mean is that the organization of a drawing creates an expressive form in which all of its parts, as well as the artist’s intentions, are related to one another and to the total form in a unique and distinctive way. Getting things to “work” is generally the result of years of study and practice until the means at the artist’s disposal in achieving his goals are blended into one thing—his intuition.

In assessing the situation in the Middle East on the integral/unitive level, Social Artists would ask what is working and what is not working? Overall, from an artistic perspective, the situation is not working. The situation clearly makes a statement; it cries out for resolution. However the situation is not harmonious. The spirit of unity is not embodied in the cultural manifestations. Everything is not holding together. The key figures are working against each other rather than working together. There is little evidence of integration. There is superfluity in the amount of time, energy, and resources being wasted in fear and conflict. The sense of pressure has built to explosive proportions, which suggests the people creating the situation are not interpreting the situation in a way that is conducive to resolving the tensions. Their intentions are unclear. It is unclear if they *want* to resolve the situation. In intervening on the integral/unitive level, Social Artists would seek to understand the forces intrinsic to the situation. What is moving humanity as a whole to create the situation? To what are the people intuitively responding? Can the situation be interpreted in a way that allows people to produce forms of behavior that embody and reveal the intangible essence of peace?

II

Houston cited three critical forces currently shaping the world: “1) the Re-patterning of Human Nature, 2) the Re-genesis of Human Society, and 3) the Breakdown of the Membrane”. She explained Social Artists are trained to “utilize these three forces as guiding principles.”

The Re-patterning of Human Nature

The re-patterning force is “pushing us to discover and utilize dormant or little used capacities and come to a more comprehensive understanding of our place and responsibilities in this world and time” (Houston).

Since the 1940s, humanity has discovered and utilized dormant capacities. The capacity to destroy the world with atomic bombs, the capacity to create new life forms through genetic engineering, the capacity to travel through space, the capacity to see what is happening in all parts of the world on television screens, and the capacity to communicate instantaneously by modem constitute God-like powers, which confer God-like responsibilities. As we collectively accept higher level creative responsibility, as we understand what it means to be one with the Creator, humanity is being called to develop the “focus, perspective, skill training, tireless dedication, and fresh vision” of the artist. Social Artists, among others, are responding to the call.

The Re-genesis of Society

“As the Self is re-patterned, the ways we relate to one another are necessarily shifting as well, toward the discovery of new styles of interpersonal connection and new ways of being in community, within a global society” (Houston).

Since the 1940s, human activities and relationships have changed. We have seen huge shifts in the ways people relate to one another and to the environment. Consequently, the systems we use to structure human activities and relationships—the economic system, governance system, political system, judicial system, education system, healthcare system, communication system, transportation system—need to be reworked to accommodate the new level of activity and new relationships. Transforming such systems without incurring a catastrophic collapse of the system is perhaps the most daunting task currently facing humanity.

The Breakdown of the Membrane

“In the places where our world truly operates interdependently, old barriers are slowly dissolving, along with the ancient fears that sustained them. ...What began in migrations and global economics is fast becoming a worldwide network of individuals and institutions quickened by the desire to create a new social paradigm, in which humanity and the Earth are each enhanced within the context of a collective destiny” (Houston).

Since the advent of chaos theory and whole systems thinking in the 1950s, humanity has become increasingly conscious that natural and human systems are self-organizing. In artistic terms, humanity is recognizing the *work has a life of its own*. We are becoming conscious the human ego does not control what manifests in the world. (Note: The world is not the earth. The world is everything on earth that shows evidence of human touch. In creating the world humanity works with the medium of nature—earth, matter, natural resources—as Michelangelo worked with the medium of marble in creating the Pieta.)

Recognizing that a work of art has a life of its own is a core principle of artistic practice, noted in literature and corroborated by The Flow Project artist inquiry (Flow Project, 2011). In *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go*, Shaun McNiff notes that artists recognize “the creative process is an intelligence that knows where it has to go” (1998, p. 31).

Trust in the process assumes that there is a force that moves within a group, an individual, or a situation that is distinctly ‘other’ and not subject to control. ‘It’ finds the

way through problems and complex interactions among people as well as through conflicting forces within ourselves.” (p. 24)

Artists trust the force that moves and they work with it in creating works of art. Their connection to the work is to that force as it moves within their bodies and the world body.

Historically humanity has sought to control what manifests in the world. We have sought to control nature and we have developed systems of governance to control human behavior. For humanity as a whole, controlling nature is tantamount to controlling the medium from which we create the world, and systems of governance are tantamount to self-control. For artists, controlling the medium entails finding the right balance. As Anne Bogart explains, “If the work is too controlled, it will feel constricted and lifeless. If there is too little control, it will be chaotic and hard to see and hear” the meaning (2007, p. 49).

Today, humanity has reached the stage in creating the world where it is necessary to let go and trust the process in order for the work to *come alive*. Collectively, we are experiencing terror and confusion in facing the need to let go. We fear if the powers that be stop trying to control how people behave and stop trying to control situations—for example, if the government collapses or we reduce government controls or regulations too much—everything will spin out of control and the world will devolve into anarchy. Humanity likes being “in control”. The prospect of people and events being “out of control” is threatening to the human ego. How can we let go without all hell breaking loose? Finding the right balance and dealing with the fear is perhaps the most pressing and primal challenge currently facing humanity.

III

Houston observed that Social Artists develop the following qualities and characteristics through their training:

Seekers of the New Cultural Story

Social Artists learn to “help members of the culture or organization to preserve the genius of their culture even as they help move it into the new story” (Houston).

The stories we tell ourselves about the meaning of events, how we frame situations in our minds, determines how we respond to events and the outcomes. Actions based on faulty interpretations generally intensify problems and perpetuate misunderstandings. From an artistic perspective, Igor Stravinsky explains:

It is the conflict between these two principles—execution and interpretation—that is at the root of all the errors, all the sins, all the misunderstandings that interpose themselves between the musical work and the listener and prevent a faithful transmission of its message. (1970, p. 122)

Currently, the critical situations facing humanity (climate change, economic instability, poverty, violence, resource depletion, pollution) are intensifying rather than abating, which suggests a new interpretation of the core issues is needed. Social Artists are trained to help members of a culture change their framing story without losing the sense of connection, belonging, and identity engendered by their old stories.

Explorers of the Cultural Story: Social Artists “seek to discover the main stories, myths, legends, and teaching tales that underlie the culture in which we are working. Then we utilize

these myths and stories as the backdrop upon which to weave our work in human development” (Houston).

Social Artists work with the tapestry of connections and interwoven threads that comprise the fabric of society. People in troubled situations often have lost the thread of connection. They feel isolated, alienated, and antagonistic toward others. Furthermore, as the fabric of society is sized to fit the global community, people are feeling lost in the folds and stretched to embrace the diversity.

Traditional stories told around the hearth of community strengthened the sense of local connection, belonging, and identity. Today, we are inundated with news stories from around the world. How do we differentiate and integrate belonging, identity, and connections on the global level without losing our unique identity and cultural heritage? Social Artists use the power of traditional myths and stories to restore and strengthen the local sense of identity, belonging, and connection as people learn to identify with others of different cultural origins, become conscious of belonging to a global community, and connect through the global systems and infrastructures. Traditional myths and stories are sea anchors in the sea change of humanity’s emerging consciousness of being one with All That Is.

In practice artists respond to “the source of what is emerging, letting it come into being through” them (Senge, et al, 2004, p. 93). The works of the impressionists, cubists, and surrealists capture an emerging consciousness and changing orientation to reality in humanity as a whole, in the play of light and structural re-visioning. When artists are connected to the source of what is emerging and coming into being through humanity as a whole their works become original, universal, and timeless. Such works resonate because the originality and universality tap into and reveal what is in the communal soul and because the work replicates the timeless act of creation in a way the soul recognizes.

In working with the medium of community, Social Artists seek to connect community members with the source of what is emerging and coming into being through humanity. Incrementally, as individuals tap into and respond to that source, the community dynamic, of which they are part, shifts from the egoic mode of operations to the trans-egoic mode (Washburn, 1994). When a critical mass of individuals has shifted to the trans-egoic or artistic mode of operations, humanity as a whole will shift to the timeless state of being, the flow state, which artists refer to as being in the “zone” or “groove”. In organizational dynamics, the flow state is called “alignment” (Bodaken & Fritz, 2006; Jaworski, 1998; Senge et al, 2004). Alignment happens when members of a community are working with a sense of common purpose toward a common goal and their unique gifts have found their places of rightful belonging in the context of the communal work. By reconnecting people with the genius of their traditional myths and stories, Social Artists help people deal with the complex pressures, urgencies, and fears elicited by our collective shift to the timeless state of being or flow state.

Paradigm Pioneers

“As a paradigm pioneer, the Social Artist is able to see trends and the emergence of new patterns out of apparent chaos.”

The patterns of a family dynamic or community dynamic are visible in the aggregate. It is difficult for someone who is embedded in the dynamic to see the patterns. Social Artists develop what Carl Jung refers to as the “transcendent function” (1963/1977, par. 257); that is the capacity

to ‘rise above’ a situation and be both a witness and participant. In artistic terms, Social Artists are trained to step back and assess the community dynamic even while they actively participate in creating the dynamic. Like actors, Social Artists develop the skill to assess the performance while they are simultaneously fully engaged in the action on stage. In other words, Social Artists develop presence of mind or mindfulness.

Planetary Citizens: comfortable in many cultures

The Social Artist “is trained to move comfortably between cultures, capable of understanding and honoring another’s belief systems, cultural styles, tribal and national stories and rituals” (Houston).

Art is a universal language, spoken in diverse ways. Life is a universal experience approached in different ways. Each artist develops a unique style; each culture develops a unique approach. Igor Stravinsky explains “Style is the particular way a composer [artist] organizes his conceptions and speaks the language of his craft” (1970, p. 70). Social Artists are trained to understand, heed, and honor cultural differences.

New Pattern Providers

The Social Artist “acquires the tools to assist people to work in collaborative networks, moving beyond hierarchies and old power structures” (Houston).

Social Artists aim for the place where the community dynamic “works”; that is the place where the diverse interests represented in the community are integrated in a cohesive unity, the people are in healthy relationships, and the systems are in working order. Getting to that place requires moving beyond hierarchies and old power structures so that people form collaborative networks and act in the spirit of unity with a sense of common purpose, rather than working at cross-purposes in a fragmented way. The ultimate goal is a state of being. Robert Henri explains the object of art-making is not the product. “The object, which is back of every true work of art, is *the attainment of a state of being*, a state of high functioning, a more than ordinary moment of existence. (1923/1951, p. 159)

The patterns of an unhealthy or dysfunctional family or community dynamic are generally recognized. The dysfunctional dynamic—the state of being that does not “work”—is associated with symptoms of stress, anxiety, tension, pressure, volatility, acting out, nervousness, reactivity, violence, and defensiveness, all of which are present in the global community today. Social Artists work to provide patterns of a healthy and sustainable community dynamic.

Sharing the Joys of Lifelong Learning

The Social Artist presents “a model for a constantly learning society, consistently open to new ideas that can sustain and enrich an emerging planetary culture” (Houston).

Humanity as a whole is in transition. Social Artists, like everyone else in the global community, are feeling their way toward new horizons and learning as they go along. At times life presents difficult learning experiences. Social Artists are trained to stay open to the learning, rather than reacting defensively. They learn to welcome what life teaches us with humility and as much grace as they can muster. They work through fears and the encrustations of world-weary attitudes that interfere with life being a cause for celebration. They learn that life teaches us in mysterious ways and teachers come in different guises. Through their attitude and receptivity, Social Artists model an openness others can learn from.

Evoking Laughter and Life-advancement

The Social Artist “knows when to be a humorist, fool, a comedian. He or she can break out of the usual projections and expectations” (Houston).

Artists speak of “creating space for the work”. Creating space for the work not only means taking the time and making the space in one’s life for art-making; it also entails the peculiar rituals artists use to clear the air, attune themselves, and ready their instruments so the work can flow through them. For example, the moment of silence before a performance begins or the ritual of an orchestra tuning instruments (The Flow Project, 2011).

Laughter is a way of clearing the air and creating the space for people to work together. Laughter is disarming and equalizing, when it is not at another’s expense. Social Artists learn to use humor to evoke familiarity and soften hard attitudes. They tickle the funny bone because the funny bone is connected to the bones we pick with one another and fight over. If we can laugh together we can let go of hard feelings and our communal work can advance.

New Kind of Healer

The Social Artist realizes, “We live in a world that is ripe for healing, and this is ultimately what motivates the Social Artists to take initiatives” (Houston).

Etymologically, the word to *heal* means to make whole. In effect, the conditions that allow for healing and wholeness in the social sphere are the same conditions that are in effect when a work of art “works”. Social Artists endeavor to bring the human community and the systems that structure and support human activities and relationships to the place where they work. Social Artists are like art therapists working on the level of the collective psyche.

Contemplative Creator

The Social Artist is “called to explore the mystery of the interface between engagement with external realities and embrace of the inner journey” (Houston).

Artists work on the threshold where forms come into being. Artists usher new forms into being. On the inner side of the threshold is the essence realm, which artists relate to subjectively. On the external side is the form realm, which artists relate to objectively. The essence realm is timeless, whereas the form realm is subject to the test of time. Internally, artists experience subtle (and not so subtle) pressures emanating from the essence that seeks to be given form and revealed to the world through their agency. Externally, artists experience evolutionary pressures. Only fitting forms survive the test of time.

Like artists, Social Artists work on the liminal threshold between the essence and form realms, between the spiritual realm and manifest form realm and between the soul of humanity and the world body. Humanity is currently feeling pressure, in pressurized situations such as the Middle East and in time pressure—the urgent sense that we are running out of time and need to act fast to avert a disastrous collapse. Social Artists understand the pressure is a natural part of the creative process in which we are collectively engaged. The suspense or pressure is intensifying because the drama of history is nearing the climax. Social Artists work to relieve the pressure by helping people come to the place where their cultural creations capture and embody the essence that is seeking to be revealed in the world through our individual and communal agency.

Social Artists operate with the understanding that every person is a fractal of the whole. The trepidations and aspirations of humanity reside as fractals in the individual soul. Social Artists

access what is in the communal soul through discerning what lies within their own souls, and they understand what it takes to bring our collective behavior patterns into alignment with the source of what is emerging by understanding what it takes to bring their personal behavior patterns into alignment. They discern what is universal through contemplating their own particularity and they apply what they learn in the social realm.

IV

In conclusion, Social Artistry corresponds to the practice of art in profound and compelling ways. However, in one crucial area the correspondence is too vague for Social Artistry to be considered an art form. The art-making process occurs within the context of a work of art. A painter creates a painting of a particular subject. A choreographer creates a dance performance on a particular theme. It is a bit unclear what Social Artistry is creating.

In her presentation at the Global Forum, Houston indicated Social Artists are working to create an integral culture and develop human capacities. “The hallmark of this integral culture is an intention to integrate, to consciously bridge differences, connect people, celebrate diversity, harmonize effects, and discover common ground” and, in so doing, offer “hope in a world facing deep ecological, social, and spiritual crisis”.

Creating an integral culture and developing human capacities is important work, but it is not a work of art. Creating an integral culture is like a choreographer saying “I am going to create a dance performance that hangs together and works as a whole.” What is the work about? What is the story line? How does the work offer hope? Developing human capacities is like a drama coach saying “I am teaching people to act.” What is the purpose? What is the context within which their actions are meaningful?

From my perspective, and I count myself a Social Artist, the field of Social Artistry needs to be clear about the work. Further, how we define the work needs to hold true on the four levels. On the sensory/physical level, the work has to be tangible and representational, not too abstract. On the psychological/historical level, the work has to provide a context within which the tensions, conflicts, resistances, and pressures humanity is experiencing in the social realm make sense and are logical. On the mythic/symbolic level, the work has to resonate with humanity’s religious understandings. On the integral/unitive level, the work has to hang together. It has to reveal how all humanity’s unique gifts and strivings make sense within the context of the whole, through the entire time of the work’s evolution until now and beyond.

In closing, I offer the context of three works of art to which Social Artistry is contributing. The first is the World. As a work of art, the World serves to embody and reveal the essence of what it means to be human. Social Artists help in that embodiment and revelation. The second work is humanity’s mental picture of reality, commonly called The Big Picture. In developing The Big Picture, humanity’s goal is to get to the place where we can see and picture clearly how all parts of Creation fit together and work as a unified whole. Social Artists help humanity get to the place where The Big Picture truly captures, embodies, and reveals the sense of life. The third work is the development of consciousness or humanity’s sensitivity to the medium and sensitivity to the work. Social Artists help humanity to become more conscious of the creative process in which we are collectively engaged.

Ultimately, Social Artists understand that in order to produce a healthy sustainable dynamic in the global community the workings of the whole must provide for the health and well-being of

the constituents. Christopher Alexander explains “A work of art has life more or less to the extent that *every* single one of its component parts and spaces is whole, well-shaped and positive” (2002, p. 173). At the same time, the actions of each part must support the thriving of the whole, as each cell in a body serves the whole body. The life of the whole depends on the parts working together. “All systems in the world gain their life... from the cooperation and interaction of the living centers they contain... [and the] mutual helping creates life in the whole” (p. 134).

Social Artistry training therefore focuses on both the individual and the collective. Social Artistry training teaches individuals to respond to their personal entelechy and stay true to self whatever they are called or moved to do. Regarding the collective, Social Artists receive training in systems theory, archetypal field theory, human development theory, psychology, leadership theory and practice, and how to analyze situations on the four levels. In each focus area, Social Artists convey what they learn to the people with whom they work and they apply what they learn in the communities in which they work.

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