

Bohemian or Mammal? Mammalian Diving Reflex Speaks Back to the Creative City | IMAGI(NATION)S

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“Are cultural workers being asked to create a livable city, or a happening, overpriced hotspot for exurbanites and tourists, complete with glittering galleries and sparkling bars where artists’ multiples are sold at Holt Renfrew?”

- A Suicide Site Guide to the City (O'Donnell 2006, 136)

In 2002 Richard Florida's Creativity Index became the benchmark for urban development (Boudreau et al. 2009, 188). The following year, newly elected Toronto mayor David Miller announced the 10-year Culture Plan for the Creative City, with Creativity Index explicitly listed as an ongoing indicator of the metropolis' development both in social and, Florida would claim, economic terms (see Appendix A). This constituted a radical shift away from the neo-liberal austerity of Mike Harris' Ontario. However the Culture Plan, and Florida's work overall, has been criticized for its positioning of culture within a context of economic stimulus (and the consequent preference for spectacle over substance), its fast tracking of gentrification, and its “diversity without difference” (Levin and Solga. 2009, 38). The Social Acupuncture work of Mammalian Diving Reflex under Darren O'Donnell provides a critique of, and alternative to, the implementation of Toronto's Creative City policies.

The Creative City Framework

Richard Florida, currently the head of the Rotman School of Management's Martin Prosperity Institute in Toronto, built on the work of Robert Reich, Sharon Zukin and Jane Jacobs in theorizing that contemporary urban economic stimulus flows from a “creative class” whom, due to their mobility, can be attracted to a locale based on its Creativity Index (the large scale indexing of which is Florida's major contribution to this theory) (Rowe. 2009, 70). The Creative Class is comprised of the Super-Creative Core (those innovating consumer goods and commercial products), the Creative Professionals (knowledge workers), and Bohemians (professional artists, writers, and performers [Florida. 2002, 46] who find value in experience [195]).

Despite considerable criticism for Florida's theoretical framework (Pasquinelli 2006), social groupings (Markusen, 2006), and data analysis (Whyte, 2009), his ideas quickly found purchase with city governments the world over. Governments working under Florida's theory strive to create an environment conducive to drawing the Creative Class to their city through the Creativity Index, a measure of four factors: patents per capita, Creative Class workforce share, the Milken Institute's Tech Pole Index, and the Gay Index (the ratio of homosexuals to the general population) (Florida. 2002, 244).

In Toronto, the 2003 Culture Plan was the beginning of Florida's influence, which hit full stride with the release of the 2006 ‘Imagine a Toronto...’ report (Strategies for Creative Cities Project. 2006). Imagine a Toronto..., authored by Florida collaborator Meric Gertler, incorporated a deeper understanding of the Creative Class theory, shifting the focus away from large-scale architectural projects and onto the “street-level culture” prized by the Creative Class (Wilcox et al. 2005, 51). The 2003 report led to the establishment of Artsweek; the 2006 report, the Live With Culture campaign, along with major arts festivals including Nuit Blanche, Luminato, Humanitas, and Doors Open. On a deeper level, there was an articulation by the city government of the creative element of citizenship, and a call to the artistic community for extensive participation in the city strategy (Andrew. 2005, 132).

Weaknesses of the Framework

The policies have been seen to fall short, however, on a number of fronts important to the development of a city culture that recognizes class stratification and other entrenched social barriers, and that finds value in culture beyond economic stimulus.

The Culture Plan seeks to create an image[1] of the city as culturally vibrant and socially diverse, and yet that frequently manifests as the appropriation and redeployment of the experiences of low-income, marginal people, that is to say artists, minorities, and the economically underprivileged – among them, Florida's Bohemian subset (Levin and Solga. 2009, 37). The spectacle of Toronto's festivals puts the focus on the artist for a matter of hours, while on a day-

to-day basis the city allows gentrification to be put on the fast track through unrestrained high-end development in neighbourhoods made 'hip' through culture work (and subsequently cleansed of the economically vulnerable for the benefit of elite revelers [McLean. 2005, 157]). To point to one example, developers in the Queen Street West neighbourhood may or may not understand the irony of naming one of their elite developments the 'Bohemian Embassy', but the highly contested development could not be stopped despite powerful lobbying by local residents (Hume, 2007). While the 2006 report identified gentrification as a serious threat to culture workers, whose housing and workspace situations are made increasingly vulnerable, the city did nothing to realize the report's recommendation to create a mortgage investment fund to help ward off the inevitable rent increases. Meanwhile, locales outside the downtown, which are responsible for so much of Toronto's ethnic and economic diversity, are largely ignored (Micallef. 2005, 13). This clear bias towards further marginalization of vulnerable citizens has roots in Florida's writings. Florida is unable to articulate how Bohemians, the un-materialistic catalysts for economic stimulus, are integrated with his bourgeois Creative Class, aside from the hybrid 'Bobos' (artists who embrace a materialistic culture), or as street performers enchanting the Creatives with their craft (Florida. 2003, 260).

There is a fundamental lack of understanding of the real substance of culture work in both Florida's work, and the actions of Toronto bureaucrats. As the Culture Plan incorporates Toronto's artists further into the city bureaucracy, there is an expectation that artists will be able to operate on bureaucratic terms, speaking economic language. Risk-management is the soul of government, while creative risk-taking is fundamental to the arts. As the government increasingly positions itself (along with its corporate sponsors) as the gatekeeper of the arts, expectations for risk-management on the part of the culture worker increase. The process of auditing by funding organizations grows denser and more demanding, lest bureaucrats continue to describe artists as their "own worst enemy", due to their inability to enumerate their direct economic contributions (Grundy and Boudreau, 358), and fully mitigate all risk associated with genuine creativity.

Furthermore, while public art does have an eerie propensity for claiming lives[2], the heavy police presence at events like Nuit Blanche sends a clear political message (in addition to the extended-last-call damage control). Public art, Malcolm Miles claims, "inevitably operates in the public realm and a lack of critical engagement with the construction of that realm leads by default to affirmation of the dominant ideology" (Miles. 1997, 52). The role of the corporate and governmental gatekeepers is a clear political statement of control – certain pre-approved social boundaries[3] will be alleviated for a set amount of time under strict surveillance.



Photograph of Nuit Blanche "NOIR" Light Installation by Neal Jennings, October 2009, Toronto, ON

There is a further lack of critical engagement – that of a dialogue following these events. "It is strange," remarks Nuit Blanche festival booster Joseph Banh, "that an event of this scale... is met with relative critical silence in its aftermath" (Banh 2009, 7). There is no part in the Creative City plan for facilitating that continuing dialogue, either in academic or public spheres, and as such it is largely comprised of uninspired encounters like this one:

On the streetcar ride home everyone was drunk and noisy. Someone shouted "DID ANYONE SEE ANYTHING GOOD?", to which the streetcar responded with a resounding "No!" So basically no one really cared about the art of Scotiabank Nuit Blanche – they just wanted to get drunk to the 4 am extended last call. Present company included (Sometimes I Write Stuff, 2009).

The declaration on the festival's website that "Toronto's playful overnight celebration of contemporary art takes over the streets for ONE NIGHT ONLY" (capitalization theirs) can be read as a scolding reprimand for those who might assume that playful celebration could be found any other night of the year.

The 'aesthetic of civic engagement' being developed, and 'interventions' performed, by Mammalian Diving Reflex,

under the creative momentum of community artist Darren O'Donnell, function as an effective critique of, and alternative to, the flawed conception and implementation of the Creative City framework.

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Although operating within that framework (by participating in *Nuit Blanche* and receiving funding from the Toronto Arts Council), O'Donnell is hardly the risk-free sort of partner bureaucrats might long for. "I like fighting with cops," he says, "occupying abandoned buildings and throwing cobblestones at Queen's Park" (O'Donnell, 2006, 11). His friends describe his frequently discussed sexual orientation as "creepy" (114). *Mammalian Diving Reflex* (MDR), though, creates interclass dialogue and empowers the economically vulnerable (as opposed to promoting gentrification), and conceptualizes the arts as having a capacity for political immediacy, the interrogation of power and the creation of social capital (as opposed to driving the economy). Their works are ongoing and cumulative, with a model of egalitarian pedagogy (as opposed to mediated spectacle). The wing of their organization dedicated to these results is known as 'Social Acupuncture' – an activist theatre ideology based on traditional acupuncture techniques with the body correlating to city populations and the needles to MDR's work. O'Donnell claims that Social Acupuncture, and especially its focus on generating dialogue, to be inspired by the 2003 blackout, asking, "if a collapse in power yielded unfettered public discourse, then could triggering unfettered public discourse do anything at all toward shifting the flows of patterns of power?" (O'Donnell, 2006, 51).

While Scotiabank and the City of Toronto are willfully obfuscatory in describing *Nuit Blanche* as an "all-night art thing", Social Acupuncture's main activities are well articulated – an intervention is a disruption of social norms, while an aesthetic of civic engagement "remains within the activity flows already occurring in a population...to let the learners do the leading" (34). These learners, more often than not, are children. O'Donnell has chosen to work extensively with children because they provide a direct line to inequity – through the diversity inherent in Toronto public schools, their lack of political and economic enfranchisement, and the way that social paranoia tends to organize around them. The Creative City plan reveals its bias of economic development over social capital through its relative exclusion of youth. "By injecting children into the Creative City," O'Donnell claims, "we can subvert the economic imperative" (O'Donnell, 2007, 2).

Although the city claims a similar interest in diversity, O'Donnell provides a contrast to the "buffet-style diversity", ethnic and otherwise, manifested in events like Toronto's various food festivals. Rather than a calculated tokenism, MDR has developed strategies for deeply engaging with a diverse set of people, exploiting the diversity of schools (Ballroom Dancing, Haircuts by Children), community centres (The Floating Curator, Beach Balls41+All), public transit (Back of the Bus), random pedestrian encounters (The Talking Creature), as well as developing personal profiles of individual lives (Q&A, Diplomatic Immunities).

Although children are disempowered by the state (through their institutionalization, their lack of political enfranchisement, and restrictions on their mobility and purchasing power), much of their disempowerment is due to constructed social roles that, once subverted, lead to a critical engagement with overarching power structures. MDR's *Ask a Teenager* and *Haircuts by Children* require their adult participants to question where they place their trust – in terms of opinions and personal appearance – and why. The children, in turn, have the rare experience of being trusted, with stakes as high as an adult's vanity. It is this component of risk which is suppressed by the bureaucratization of the arts, and which O'Donnell actively courts. He points to the example of the comments section of an online *Globe & Mail* article (regarding the Supreme Court's rulings on the Sikh kirpan in schools) to show how an honest, democratic dialectical model can, and should, reveal ugliness, a truth risk-managed out of tokenistic diversity (O'Donnell, 2006, 22).

It is this dialogue, so downplayed by the Creative City plan, which is the lynchpin of *Mammalian Diving Reflex*'s work. At *Beach Balls 41+All*, wherein MDR sent out a call for participants to inflate 400 floating toys, filling up the Scadding Court pool for 100 day-camp kids, a deliberate encounter was created between MDR's volunteers and the swimming children. The larger exercise of this piece was to position the artist as conduit for an activity that could be engaged in "with or without criticality" (83) while still producing recognizable, positive results through the literal dialogue fostered by the encounter between two groups with little interaction on an average day. Further unconventional dialogue was created in *The Walking Talking Creature*, in which a class of Parkdale Collegiate students roamed the streets with O'Donnell, anarchically interviewing people. The students constantly turned the conversation political, seeking to interrogate or affirm perceptions of their neighbourhood. When SARS created a climate of fear in the summer of 2003, MDR organized *Spin the Bottle*, a simple, adolescent style makeout party, to counteract the fear of physical contact, a dialogue in what O'Donnell calls "talking with fewer syllables" (68).

In addition to the learners-leading pedagogical model and the fostering of dialogue, MDR provides an alternative to

spectacle by creating work that is cumulative and in conversation with itself. Through the staging of works in multiple contexts, MDR builds a body of experience that lends itself to analysis beyond a single event. Home Tours, in which a group of volunteers knocks on doors in a neighbourhood, asking for an impromptu tour of an individual's home, has been mounted in Calgary, Ottawa, Toronto and Lahore, Pakistan. Haircuts by Children has been mounted in ten cities on three different continents. Diplomatic Immunities is a piece constructed from various other Social Acupuncture modules (the Talking Creature, Home Tours, Q&A, etc.), importing their modes into performance as a semi-scripted debriefing of participants' experiences and findings. This deep, multi-layered, cumulative dialogue is an example of the analysis and discourse painfully absent from the spectacles of the Creative City framework.

Conclusion

Toronto continues to look to its artistic community as the driver for its economic prosperity, but misconceptions about the role of the culture worker (stemming from Florida's work and bureaucratic culture), have led to the creation of a framework which undermines the fundamental principle of creativity – risk. This results in a lack of genuine diversity – both economic and ethnic, while promoting gentrification. The de-valuation of culture work is evident in the lack of dialogue and analysis following the arts festivals meant to create an image of Toronto as a 'Creative City'. The work of Mammalian Diving Reflex speaks back to the Creative City framework. It explores alternative modes of culture production by addressing issues of power, pedagogy, dialogue, and risk in a cumulative artistic model.

Appendix A

Recommendation 63 of the Culture Plan for a Creative City; Measurements of Success.

1. Per capita investment in culture, comparing Toronto with selected other cities;
2. Funds leveraged by increased City investment in arts and culture grants;
3. The number of culture sector jobs in Toronto;
4. The impact of the culture sector in Toronto on GDP;
5. Toronto's ranking on the Creativity Index developed by Richard Florida, as compared with other major North American cities;
6. The number of and attendance at City-funded culture events;
7. The number of and attendance at City-funded cultural programs for youth;
8. The number of new arts organizations funded;
9. The number of designated and listed heritage properties;
10. The number of location permits issued for film and television productions; and,
11. The number of visitors to Toronto.

(City of Toronto 2003, 44)

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Notes

- [1] The importance of international image, as opposed to civic substance, can be seen in the Culture Plan's tourism indicator (Appendix A).
- [2] Two women died when Martin Agis' inflatable Dreamscape V drifted away in 2006 (Stokes 2006), while a man and a woman were killed, on separate continents, by Christo's Umbrellas (Hall 1991)
- [3] Not least of which is the economically lucrative, but socially questionable, alcohol.