

# SESSION IV

## ARTS AND CULTURE FOR AN EQUITABLE CITY: ACCESS FOR ALL



*Often arts and culture are perceived as elitist and disconnected from less privileged communities such as new immigrants or those who live on the edges of affluence. However, culture can be central to the formation of identity for the same group of people.*

*What are the ways that creativity and cultural production become a key part of creating an equitable city? How might this manifest in different cultural contexts?*

### MODERATOR

**Carol Becker** — **New York City, USA**

Dean, School of the Arts

Columbia University

### PRESENTERS

**Stephen Hobbs** — **Johannesburg, South Africa**

Curator and Cultural Organizer

The Trinity Session

**Teddy Cruz** — **San Diego, California, USA**

Professor in Public Culture and Urbanism

University of California, San Diego



## CONTEXTUALISING ELITISM AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Carol Becker — New York City, USA



### What makes cultural institutions appear elite?

Institutions are thought to be elite or exclusive when there is a perception that only select groups have access to them. But art and culture are not inherently elite. They are interpreted through certain matrices such as, knowledge, proximity, accessibility, inclusivity, and intent. I will try to complicate these further in what follows.

### Anti-intellectualism in the United States

American society is a very utilitarian society. It therefore is difficult to defend the importance of art and culture in such an environment, even though they are central to the mission of democracy. In such a society, everything that is not directly functional or immediately comprehensible is quantified as elitist. Because US democracy, which is so essential to the country's sense of itself, is rooted in the lowest common denominator approach, which is to say that everything should be understandable to everyone at every moment, art and culture are often misunderstood. This attitude of easy accessibility to ideas breeds a tremendous anti-intellectualism in the United States, which presents a great problem for artists, thinkers, and writers who often work in metaphor and gesture.

Because there is no agreed upon tradition of the avant-garde or ‘experimentation’ in the arts in the United States (although of course such work has often originated in this country), people do not understand that a central component of the role of arts in society is to push boundaries, to be experimental, and to take on complicated social issues in innovative forms.

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Thus, since this is just not part of the general American conception of what art should be, it is difficult to explain how art actually functions and its importance to the dissemination of ideas. It is also difficult to explain that it is precisely because art is complex and not just entertainment that it is useful for the expression of the complexity of human thought.

And we also know that artwork and art forms, which are seen as cutting edge at one moment, end up as mainstream over time and increasingly, with digitization and social media, such transformation is accelerated. It seemed radical when montage was used in MTV and rock videos. It changed the way people saw and what was acceptable. Now this kind of assimilation of form happens overnight. We have to be very careful about labeling something elitist, since it may very soon become dominant in the popular imagination.

Recently, while in Rio de Janeiro, I went to the new Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR) where there was a photo exhibition of the history of Rio—large crowds attended. And, at the same time that this exhibition was up, there also was an avant-garde video installation in the adjacent space, by a woman performance artist in which there was nudity, killing of animals, and religious imagery—all conflated. Visitors were moving between these exhibitions very

fluidly, and I heard people say, “Oh, that’s very symbolic work.” No one seemed to be having a hard time with it at all. They understood that this performance was operating on a different level than the historical photographs straight ahead in the major exhibition. In this case, the MAR was trying to be accessible and welcoming to the entire city, without losing its contemporary mandate.

### **Accessibility**

There are spaces in this city that work hard to be accessible to their constituencies. The Bronx Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Queens Museum all make an enormous effort. They reach out to their complex (diverse) communities and these groups turn out for these institutions again and again, precisely because they are close to them physically and emotionally.

Galleries in Chelsea are a different matter. They aren’t particularly interested in anyone who is not capable of buying art. They make this clear and therefore these spaces often create an intimidating environment. You could be someone important in the art world —the chief curator at MOMA for example—and you might still sometimes feel uncomfortable walking into these spaces. There is an attitude here that can be detrimental to the arts, because often the artists showing in such contexts are actually making works that take on personal and social issues and need a more mass audience.

### **The Intent of Institutions**

I want to say something about growing up in Crown Heights: I grew up in Brooklyn where there is the Grand Army Plaza Library, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Botanical Gardens. This was an amazingly rich environment for me as a child. Many of the people in my building were ‘refugees’ from WWII. The building was predominantly Jewish. None of these people went to these public spaces. I should say, our parents didn’t go, but we, the

children, went. We used the Brooklyn Museum almost every day. On weekends, we took classes in which we drew African masks and Egyptian mummies. We dreamed of the period rooms and Colonial America. I don't remember anybody ever asking for, and I don't remember ever buying, tickets. I don't remember security guards. I don't remember any of those things, because these cultural institutions were our playground. They belonged to us—or so it seemed. Access to these institutions was essential to my own development.

Had I not had these experiences, coming as I did from an uneducated family where no one went to college, I would not have ended up as Vice President of the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. And how would I ever have become Dean of Columbia University School of the Arts? It just wouldn't have happened. The permission to be in these environments came from this early accessibility. So the accessibility and the proximity of these spaces to our homes—was essential. It gave us pride and a sense of belonging.

The National Museum of Mexican Art was the first museum of Mexican art in a neighborhood in Chicago. It is a real museum that can borrow work and can lend work, because it has climate control, security, and so forth. The MacArthur Foundation helped fund the Museum initially, which was very important. In Chicago, the many art worlds convened at exhibitions there, because the work was great and because there was a party at every opening. It brought art people from the north and south sides together with people from Pilsen, because it was right there in their neighborhood. No one had to feel intimidated. It was accessible, local, and also global.

### **Elitism is Relative**

I want to say something about opera. Growing up with Italian neighbors, I went to the opera and listened to opera many Saturday afternoons. We stood at the old Metropolitan Opera House for a dollar, in boxes high up but near the stage. I stood with the Italian men who came from the neighborhoods of New York City and these men brought roses—hidden in their coats.

The officials said: “Don’t throw roses. Don’t throw roses.” But, of course, at the end of the opera when the cast came to take a bow, the Italians would open up their coats and next to their bodies were long-stemmed, red roses that they threw onto the stage. It wasn’t until I went to college that I sat in a real seat and watched an opera. At that time I had a boyfriend whose parents had a subscription with orchestra seats.

This was so boring compared to standing with the Italians. I still like to stand at the opera, because you meet true aficionados. Eastern European culture is also very much part of my life. In Eastern Europe everybody goes to the opera. You see people arriving in their work clothes at the end of their workday. Why? Because it’s part of the culture and it’s affordable. When I lived in Chicago, I was on a research grant with Native American women. It was a grant to develop leadership in these amazing women leaders who ranged from ages 16 to 80. My job was to make all culture accessible to them—to take them wherever they wanted to go. But where did they want to go? That was my question to them. First of all, they wanted to go to the opera because they had never been to one. And then, they wanted to go to jazz clubs. So my role was to help them gain permission to attend. Going once with me, allowed them to feel that as leaders of their community, they could take others. So the concept of elitism, as it relates to art and culture, is not a fixed reality. It is relative, sociological, and always needs to be contextualized.



## JOHANNESBURG: ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTRADICTION

**Stephen Hobbs — Johannesburg, South Africa**



I live in Johannesburg and have done many online searches for desirable holiday destinations in South Africa. The most common feedback from travel sites is to avoid Johannesburg as much as possible, and only if necessary, to use it as a connection to other places—game reserves, sea side resorts, Cape Town, and so on. Johannesburg’s tourism offering, therefore has been pre-occupied with heritage development, creative place-making, urban design and public infrastructure, with the view to regenerate the former downtown area to match that of burgeoning Sandton City, north of Johannesburg, described as the richest square mile on the continent of Africa, its only other business competitor being Lagos.

### **Johannesburg: City in a Vacuum**

The stock exchange’s move from downtown Johannesburg to Sandton, in 1997, for example, symbolized the final death knell in the city’s economic decline. As with most ‘white flights,’ the vacuum created a typical slum condition in various parts of the city, and with that, numerous institutional failings. The Johannesburg Art Gallery, holding one of the most important European, modern, traditional, and contemporary African art collections on the continent, is doing well if it receives an annual visitor count of 50,000. Its surroundings today are typified by deteriorating art deco and modernist buildings; the surrounding architectural heritage is noticeable and now communicates the force of Africans reclaiming space and territory.

One’s choice as an artist/cultural producer to make meaning of this sustained engagement with social and spatial contradiction and inversion requires a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving the effects of segregated communities, still suffering the physical and psychological effects of the Group Areas Act during the Apartheid Era.

## The Market Theatre Gallery

In the context of South Africa's political resistance art movement during Apartheid, the stages and galleries of the Market Theatre complex in Newtown, offered a critical voice and important meeting place in the city, for activist artists and liberal audiences. And to this day the Market Theatre Precinct promotes and attracts similar values. During several years as a gallery curator, I saw how the building demonstrated its true power, its willingness to engage the street, the city, in a conversational process of creation and production. Having produced numerous exhibitions over a seven year period, my greatest lesson was the relationship between exhibition production relative to the places from which the content was researched and selected.



For a young fine artist, performing the role of gallery manager and curator, The Market Theatre became a window onto the world of the 'new' South Africa and particularly of a hyper-transformative Johannesburg.

**“My greatest lesson was the relationship between exhibition production relative to the places from which the content was researched and selected.”**

During this time, Johannesburg's two Art Biennials came, and went just as quickly, losing out on a critical opportunity for constructive dialogue between mega exhibition-event and municipal co-operation, with a subsequent disinvestment crippling any hope for similar in the future.

Despite the gap in international mega exhibition projects as experienced in the '90s, South Africa's commercial art market is flourishing internationally, from Art Basel/Miami to Frieze and London. Locally the trend around gallery strips in Johannesburg and Cape Town is established and expanding.

### **Artists as Consultants**

The failings of the big international exhibitions in the '90s to convert artistic practice to cultural capital for urban change prompted a conscious strategy in the early 2000s for artists to engage directly with city managers and their cultural policies.

The Trinity Session, founded in 2000, identified a role for a curator-facilitator for city art programs linked to urban regeneration and urban infrastructure developments, supported by the 1% for public art policy, linked to all urban upgrade projects.

The City of Johannesburg has led the way, perhaps on the continent, for the interface between art and public space (at least in terms of sheer output in the past twelve years). On the other hand, the precinct-by-precinct development model of much of the city's urban design schemes often reduces the potential for extended community participation and continuity for communities after completion of works.

The Trinity Session's approach has been to capitalize on the momentum of city commissions, with a view to cohering a broader network of 'community' based artists, who in time cross pollinate skills and experiences through lengthy workshop-based commissioning processes—such that the public art outcome—often a significant piece of sculpture—is also a networked, up-skilled group of practitioners, more empowered to enter into a formal art market economy.

## The Art Object as a Vehicle

In recent years, city regeneration projects have extended to varying outlying townships, from Soweto to Diepsloot. The priority of the city to produce medium to large-scale commemorative objects in space is too often in contradiction with the desires of those on the ground, impacted directly by the effects of a public environment upgrade. The workshop method of procurement when linked in a site-specific way generates particular and local narratives, rooted in history, memory, politics, and specific events. The role of local language systems relative to the site offer up radical alternatives to city expectations.

A case in point was the commemoration for Archbishop Desmond Tutu, planned for the pavement outside his residence in Vilakazi Street, Orlando West, Soweto. While the city's preference was for a life-size commemorative bronze statue, the family preference was for a less representational, more symbolic solution. The propensity for the recycling of semi-precious materials, hacksawed from the public domain, is all the more reason to depart from the traditionalist mode of commemorating public persona's in bronze, with a view to new material and narrative solutions for creative communication in public space.



## ARCHITECTURE AS A RECONFIGURATION OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Teddy Cruz — San Diego, California, USA



I would like to contribute with some issues in my own practice as an architect and an urban researcher at the border. In the context of my own field in architecture, at times I get into trouble because I suggest in many debates that the future of the city today depends less on building and more on the reconfigurations of socio-economic relations.

Sometimes I wonder, not particularly in terms of architecture but in arts and culture, what might be the role of arts and culture today in the intervening of this reconfiguration, or reorganization of the political itself. In that sense, earlier we talked about how important it is to measure impact. I am glad that somebody mentioned that instead of measurement the appropriate term would be evaluation. How do we construct a new brief, a new process, and a new set of questions, a new set of provocations that can reorganize those institutional protocols.

I have mentioned many times that the best ideas in term of urban transformations today exist in the gap between institutions and communities in the context of the urban asymmetry. That is the crisis today—socio-economic inequalities.

The best ideas that address these issues of origin do not come from centers of economic power in abundance. Can anybody explain what has been advanced with the explosion of urbanization in the UAE and China in terms of issues of socio-economic inequality in civic imagination?

## **Where do ideas for socio-economic reform come from?**

The best ideas come from the sectors of marginalization and conflict and, in fact, from geographies of conflict where the very nature of that urgency or those issues of concern prompt communities to move from the neutrality of culture and from the neutrality of institutions that address these issues to the very specificities of rights, cultural rights.

That's the reason my work is located in heart of San Diego, California, at the border between the two cities Tijuana and San Diego—a geography of conflict itself. Polarization of wealth and poverty happens in many places in the world. In this region it is really dramatized. Very often we can find some of wealthiest real estate at the edges of San Diego barely twenty minutes away from some of the poorest settlements in the Latin Americas in Tijuana. This radical proximity of wealth and poverty and of inequality has prompted me to reorganize my own practice and procedures as an artist and as an architect. In fact, disillusion with the powerlessness of my own field (architecture) and institutions is revealed when one faces the fundamental problems of urbanization head-on.

### **Failure of Institutions**

Today the main hurdles are as follows:

- 1) The incapacity of institutions to question the very politics and economics of unfettered urban growth today. The socio-economic inequalities continue to really define the urban asymmetry that is central to today's urban crisis;
- 2) The incapacity of institutions to absorb and deformalize informal densities and economies within the global city;
- 3) The incapacity to rethink urban policy; and finally,
- 4) The erosion of the civic imagination.

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So my practice has been centered in marginalized neighborhoods—on both sides of the border—trying to understand as an architect and urban researcher the very tactics of adaptation of resilience and retrofitting in many of these communities across these formidable barrios invested in trying to build up strategies of survival.

The impact of immigration and the transformation of the American neighborhood has been a fundamental topic in my research, obviously, serving to expand my mode of practice. Instead of designing buildings, I might probably be designing the conditions within which these strategies can be interpreted and facilitated, to enable them to trickle upwards in the transformation of land use policy and of exclusionary zoning.

### **Rethinking the Role of the Informal**

I have been interested in the socio-economic contingencies of communities of practice, the role of the informal in this case not as an aesthetic category, as we do in institutions of art sometimes, but in fact, as a praxis. The informal as a set of practices are embedded in these geographies of conflict.

Somebody has to interpret and mediate these types of knowledge in order to reimagine urban policy today and I am thinking this as more and more artists are interested in not necessarily focusing on the product or the object and more in the intervention between interface of things.

I found that in this dynamic that these processes of alteration of the city by informal urbanization, by immigrant communities we can find there embedded a very different notion of citizenship. It has less to do with having the papers that belong to a private globe, but in fact a citizenship as a creative act that reorganizes institutional protocol. Those, in fact, produce a kind of economic production and political production. The function of that emerges from here to reimagine most of governance and so on.

So, I am interested in a kind of practice of mediation and facilitation. Because I believe that the crisis today pertains also to the crisis of knowledge transference from the bottom up to the top down and back.

### **Creation of a New Political Language**

It is in that process of interpretation, facilitation of invisible alterations and transformations of space of the political, of governance, of social relations in these environments, where we begin to also create a new political language. One pragmatic issue for me has been the rethinking of urban density through observation of these processes. Density for the institution is just an ‘amount of things’ per area. In this marginal immigrant neighborhood densities are conceived as an ‘amount of cultural exchanges per area’ or an ‘amount of socio-economic exchanges per area.’

In that sense, I am thinking that more than political art, I think we must speak about art as a way of constructing the political itself as embedded in these new interfaces with the drama of everyday realities. I also want to suggest that these processes of engagement of the marginalized neighborhoods brought me, in fact, to participate within governments in my city of San Diego. Out of this border research I was asked to lead with informal political theories, what used to be called the ‘incubator for civic imagination’ inside the mayor’s office. It is now called the ‘Civic Innovations Lab.’ We have been trying to suggest that innovation is not about the product but about the process itself.

We have now been able to enter into the city government to carve out space for collaboration and creativity. How to intervene into new forms of collaborative government? This space, the civic innovations lab, begins to open up new types of civic convenience. No process can begin without a new type of civic engagement across sectors.

**“Art is not a decorative thing. It is a cognitive tool to read complexity, to inspire new participatory pedagogical models, to inject into public space education.”**

Finally, a lot of inspiration for these kinds of ideas comes from Latin America. The governments began with the idea that a new kind of citizenship can be generated through a civic engagement and participation model.

## KEY ISSUES AND QUESTIONS RAISED IN DISCUSSION

### **Architecture is not just about designing buildings.**

The role of art, architecture, and communities must be redefined, that is, become inclusive rather than exclusive when architects talk about buildings as discrete interventions. In fact the libraries and parks exist in relation with a variety of agencies that enable the interfaces with the community, institutions, philanthropy, and community. Architecture is not just about designing buildings but a coproduction between community and the governing institutions. What about housing? What happens when there is gentrification? How do these spaces connect with the vibrancy of the center? It would require the creation of new types of citizenships and civic engagement models where democracy works at various levels. Units need to be embedded in socio-cultural infrastructural programming thus allowing infrastructure to achieve another scale.

## **Making the process of making art on a huge scale a political act.**

There is a need to define the role of art and its institutional context. What is the risk of institutionalizing what is ‘unsettling?’ That is, the unknown, or the alternative knowledge that does not exist? The importance of letting in that is, inclusion of the community in forming their own cultural boundaries and institutions. Not the merely symbolic inclusion that many institutions practice.

The word institution does not always mean a building. It is alright for institutions to die, but it needs to be examined why they die, because does it mean that they have stopped playing a role? What does it mean for the community in which the institution exists? What is their role in the making and sustaining of the institution or the death of the same?

