

Reconsidering the Monongahela Conference:

By Tim Collins

Reading and re-reading the conference papers and notes, I have been asking myself, how do I respond to this initial investment in time? How might I encourage a dialogue?

Reading through the conference notes I was able to extract some initial ideas, but the challenge for me, I think is can this material be synthesized? I was immediately able to extract the following from the notes of the conference.

- Definitions of shared space
- Twenty goals, of change based practice
- Fifty-three methods; broken down into primary, critical and applied, and
- Eighteen tools; broken down into personal, social and material categories.

I've gone through a process of editing that began with this extraction, then an initial organization, then prioritization, and finally the development of a concept map. I will discuss the conference and the ensuing effort to review the materials, in the pages that follow.

PROCESS

The conference was intended to begin a discussion. What do we as ecologically and socially minded visual artists bring to an urban place that reveals, enables or initiates change? What do we do that compliments, critiques or extends the positions of our colleagues in the areas of urban planning, design or engineering? The question is what do we offer, that is different than say a social scientist trained in the analysis and distribution of social services; or an architect trained in the understanding and development of the built environment; an engineer that designs and maintains urban infrastructure; a landscape architect trained in the design of nature within the built environment; or an urban designer trained to work at the neighborhood scale with communities to shape the places they live in over time? Other questions that shadow this include what is our relationship to the pedagogy and program of our own discipline? And, at a more fundamental level is there any sense of common purpose that can overcome the modernist trope of the artist as a creative autonomous entity?

Rereading the Friday discussion I come away with two insightful comments to build upon, first Suzi Gablik reminded us that the primary tool that we all share is the discourse that we carry on amongst ourselves. It is through discussion that we all learn and grow, it is through discussion that we learn how to act, react and interact – we learn to process different emotional tones, different cultural tones and most of all we learn the limits of language. The second comment that I think was very important was Nicola Kirkham's identification of our own creativity as our primary common ground, and at the same time it is the very thing that divides us. We have all been trained to develop our own creative authenticity to such a level that it is how we

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define ourselves in the world. Our self-value and perception of ourselves as artists is not in our similarities, but in our own unique creative differences. Unique difference is the very foundation of the notion of copyright that validates modernist authorship.

DEFINITION

If our primary tool is discourse and our shared reality is creativity, how do we describe the space or place, the context where we focus our effort? In the Saturday Morning breakout sessions, the conference notes yielded the following shared (public) space definitions.

1. "A group using any space/place."
2. "To me, shared space includes all species."
3. "A shared space, cared for by diverse people."
4. "The creative commons, and creating commons."
5. "I think the idea of the commons is just an ideal of public space."
6. "We've banished that word public space. We talk about shared spaces."
7. "Anywhere outside the domestic space- anything outside the private space."
8. "I'm not sure that public space really exists any more – we have to redefine that."
9. "How to reoccupy space. How to occupy another space besides the domestic?"

"We've banished that word public space. We talk about shared spaces." Public space is in many ways a formal structural term, while shared space connotes a sense of the emotional and psychological challenges that face us when we move from a formal spatial framework to a spatial framework that is defined by relationships, interaction and discourse. I am personally inclined to ratify this banishment, as a condition of my own practice and accept the shared space alternative. I think the most important points of the shared space definition are 1. any group using, 2. shared space amongst species and 3. a site of care by diverse people. In these three primary points, we find human diversity, open access, a sense of collective care and the important note that shared place and space extends beyond human conception and possession. I would argue that this in some ways suggests a baseline concept, a condition for meaningful stewardship through inter-relationship. This was the first significant conclusion that I drew from the conference experience and documentation.

GOALS METHODS AND TOOLS

A goal is what you want to do, a method is how you do what you do and a tool is what you use to get it done. The question of goals, methods and tools was more controversial than expected. After the first day of presentations we broached the subject on Friday morning. The initial reaction to the idea of a common set of goals or a method was met with some indignation, some felt it was too early in the practice to label them, others felt the intent was faulty, fated to homogenize and undermine unique practices, others felt that specific conditions demanded different actions. And to be quite honest, I pushed hard on these questions, possibly setting up a

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reaction that was more emotional than intellectual. By Saturday, the resistance to the idea of a common ground had softened quite a bit, the discussion on Saturday led off with a series of specific questions intended to prepare us for the public meeting.

Based on your work:

How do we influence public places, what are the issues?

Are there simple evocative ideas for public discussion? and

How do we externalize creative authorship?

Beginning with a discussion of the issues, we'd learned about in the Mon Valley, Stephanie Flom then took us back to the idea of methods and tools, using the metaphor of a toolbox for our discussion. The initial toolbox brainstorming session was quite successful and informed the work that occurred in the conference breakout groups to follow. Working in smaller groups it was easier to have significant discussion about how we influence public space, what is public space, and methods of externalizing creative authorship through arts based public discourse. As we found some comfort and trust amongst ourselves, I think it was easier to move forward with some of these ideas. The prevalent ideas were to go into a mode of reception, or listening, and visioning. In the future I would like to come back to these ideas, because it seems to me that if we only listen we have given up the very value that we can contribute which is a sense of focused creative inquiry, and its visual, conceptual or performative documentation. The concept of visioning is also worth consideration, what is it? how do you do it? I can communicate this abstract concept but not directly reference the experience. As a result I think it is more important to communicate our creative focus, which is a concrete framework for our expertise. Finally, if we lose ourselves in listening can we help initiate collective creative expression? These are significant questions of balance between vision (authorship) and listening (service) that need some serious consideration in the future.

The notes and memories from Saturday morning, are amongst the most productive from the conference. The documentation allowed Reiko, Noel, Priya and I to pull out a series of statements on goals, methods and tools, which can be found in the following appendix. Below you will find a concept diagram that I edited in three steps from the collective mass of ideas.

A CONCEPT MAP

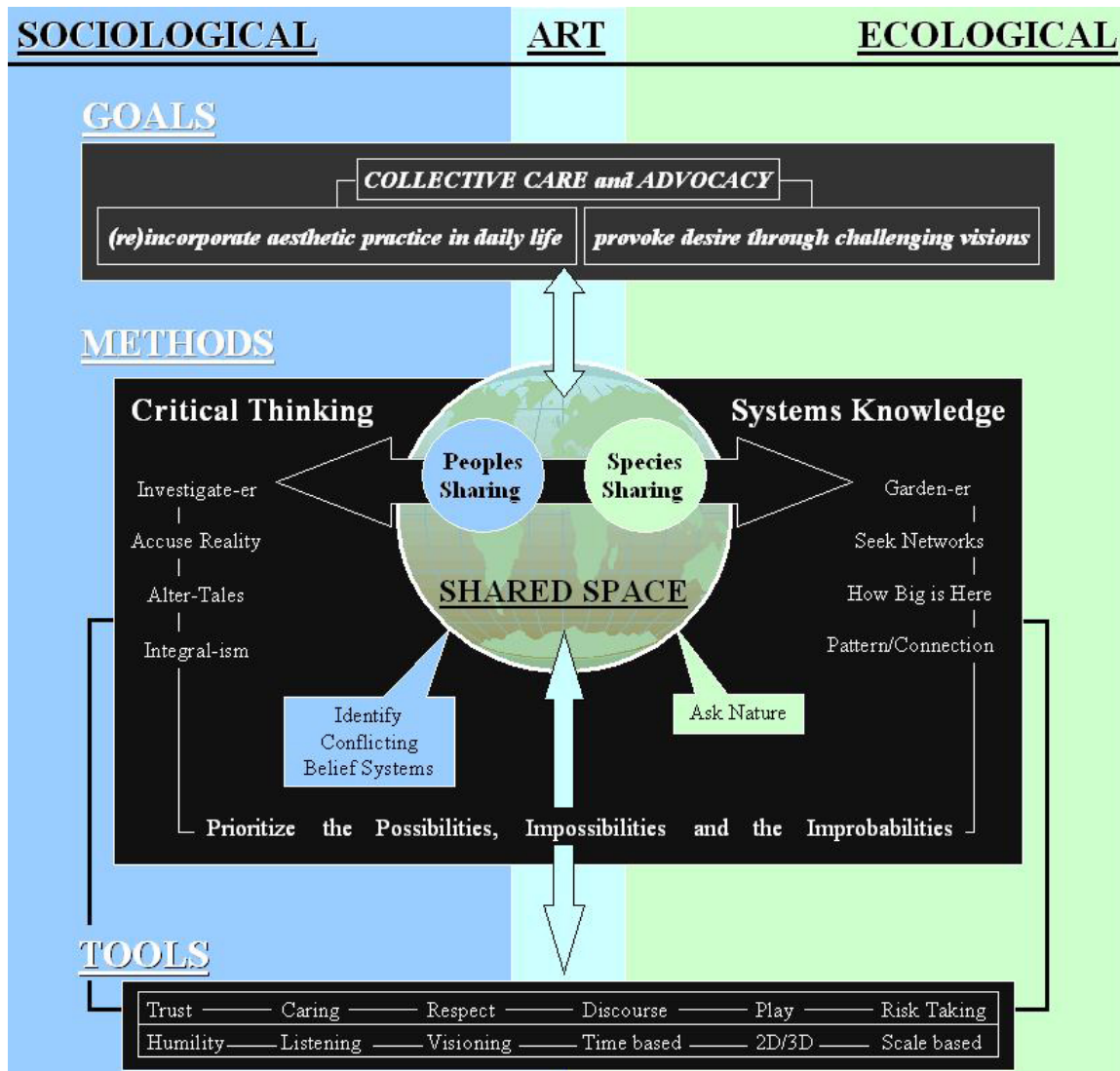
- The framework - is art as an interdisciplinary nexus in relationship to the areas of society and ecology. With a focus on Shared Space that is occupied by both people and other species.
- Our goals - are to initiate collective care and advocacy; to incorporate aesthetic practice in all areas of life; and a desire, or a passion for the intellectual stimulation of new visions. This is what we do.

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- Our methods - can be framed in terms of critical thinking; as investigate-ers, prepared to accuse reality (after Marcuse) to create alter-tales (after Haraway) and to promote integralism (after Wilbur). We seek to identify conflicting and conflicted belief systems. This is the theoretical side of how we do things.
- Another set of methods stem from systems knowledge; as garden-ers we ask nature first, we seek networks, we try to understand the questions of scale, and the relationships between pattern and connection. Ultimately we are seeking out possibilities, impossibilities and improbabilities. I would argue that this is the instrumental method that allows the artists unorthodox approach to open doors and minds. This is the practical side of how we do things.
- Finally, there is a set of conceptual and material tools that we use: trust, caring, respect, discourse, play and risk are a basic framework for any meaningful discursive relationship. Humility, listening and visioning are the tools of an externalized creativity. While Time based, 2D/3D, and scale based tools provide us with the means for material manipulation.

CONCEPT MAP

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CONCLUSION

Let me first provide a little background about how we work within the 3 Rivers 2nd Nature project team. We have spent the last seven years, developing specific art, ecology and society programs that engage the general public in what we call community dialogues. Intended as an investment in public realm or shared space issues with bottom up creative intent. Our project has two goals, we seek to develop: 1. strategic knowledge and 2. platforms for creative discourse.

On the simplest level, I see these efforts in terms of deep dialogueⁱ and shallow dialogueⁱⁱ. A deep dialogue occurs over time, usually over years and includes intellectual and experiential forays into the material condition of a place with diverse participants. We usually begin with significant outreach planning, to understand who cares about the issues we are dealing with, and how to engage those interested parties. We develop a range of opportunities for the public to help us identify research that could change the perception of that place, to co-create new visions for

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the development (or conservation) of that place and to test those ideas in dialogue with regional decisions makers. In a deep dialogue, we constantly work and rework both the threshold – who is invited and how they are invited; as well as the program - what you want to talk about, and how it might be discussed in ways that enable creative dialogic engagement.

A shallow dialogue, occurs in either one meeting or in a limited series of meetings. Ideally it retains the intellectual and experiential forays into the place, but the opportunity to identify research, and co-create visions is more constrained. To achieve our goals in the more limited time setting we have developed a range of techniques. Since we have a limited period to tune the threshold, when it is possible, we spend six to eight weeks working with 2-3 non-profits and community groups preparing for the event, with the intent of attracting up to 80-100 members of the community. With the realities of a limited program, participants identify opportunities and constraints after a physical tour of the place. We work with institutions that take a long-term interest in these issues to assure that regional decision makers are engaged. There are two reasons for conducting a shallow dialogue, the first is when working at a larger scale, the second is as an alternate strategy when time and funding is constrained. In the best of all worlds, shallow dialogues instigate deep dialogues.

Returning to the conference, we believe it is important to consider the difference between what we do as artists and what a traditional planner does. We do not enter community with the material means and political intent of a professional planner. Our role is to create an excitement about change and an investment and passion for perception, values and visions. Change is constantly happening. The question is can artists intervene as advocates for shared spaces and ecosystems and can this advocacy transcend primary authorship and apply the theoretical ideals of social sculpture to shape a place in the process? If we effect the material condition of a place, it is through strategic civic dialogue and public investment in shared-space creativity rather than through private land control and market desire. These are very different dialogical relationships to power, access and equity questions, they have similarities but are not the same.

When entering a community en mass, as we did on Saturday afternoon in Braddock, we can not change the fact that we arrive as both outsiders, and experts. It is up to us to take the various theoretical issues of agency, representation and dialogic equity to heart and mind and to work with care and consciousness in any resulting dialogue. We must act with full awareness of the fundamental need to do no harm. We must act with the clear intent of dialogue, and we must act with a clear understanding of the relationships of power and our role in that context. I believe that it is only through experimentation with its threat of failure and success that we will find ourselves with new tools and new ideas for art-based creative change. We must create safe places for action and supportive networks that will allow an honest

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and equitable dialogue about our successes, our failures our hopes, dreams and nightmares.

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SHARED (PUBLIC) SPACE DEFINITIONS

- **A group using any space/place**
- **To me, shared space includes all species**
- **A shared space, cared for by diverse people**
- The creative commons, and creating commons
- I think the idea of the commons is just an ideal of public space
- We've banished that word public space. We talk about shared spaces
- Anywhere outside domestic space- anything outside the private space
- I'm not sure that public space really exists any more – we have to redefine that.
- It's like –how do you reoccupy space. How do you occupy another space besides the domestic?

How do you influence shared space

3-classic questions

1. what is good?
2. what is bad?
3. what do you want to do about it?

Action

Make the shared space visible.

TWENTY GOALS

1. **public realm advocacy**
2. **encourage and spawn creativity**
3. **breathe life into a dead or injured earth**
4. **provoke desire through impossible visions**
5. **(re)incorporate aesthetic practice in daily life**
6. how can we help or support the spirit of nature
7. create situations with multiple points of access
8. a creative processes of democratic engagement
9. infuse sites, places, regions with understanding
10. revitalize ecosystems in relation to social systems
11. art at the union between body, mind and watershed
12. spaces for contemplation, listening and thoughtful action
13. direct involvement with communities (natural and social)
14. address the co-evolution of biodiversity and cultural diversity
15. understand how we change the landscape and how it changes us.
16. challenge reigning paradigms of economic control and domination
17. A new kind of art that is purposeful, with a stated intent to change the world
18. identify the specific ethical and epistemological effects of collaborative interaction.
19. examine contemporary cultural practices that involve a critical response to culture and society
20. focused critical engagement with questions of political efficacy as it refers to engaged art practice

FIFTY-THREE METHODS

Primary methods

1. **garden-er**
2. **ask nature**
3. **investigate**
4. **seek networks**
5. **how big is here**
6. strategic action
7. means are ends
8. let a vision emerge
9. allow for evolution
10. I must be non possessive
11. interdisciplinary collaboration
12. **connect the site to a larger system**
13. feed innovative ideas into ecosociety
14. this is less about me and more about we
15. understand the social and natural history
16. learn what patterns are forming or reforming
17. how can what is happening be understood and engaged
18. I/we remain faithful to the landscape and nature as client
19. create communities of interest to discuss complex issues
20. be pragmatic in strategy, medium and practice
21. develop in depth understanding of the issues
22. approach reality in a radically different ways
23. grow wisdom and new understandings
24. question and doubt all conclusion

Critical methods

25. **Critical thinking**
26. **Systems Knowledge**
27. transdisciplinary ethical aesthetics
28. **"art re-presents reality while accusing it." (after Marcuse)**
29. **alternative histories, insights .- "alter-tales" (after Haraway).**
30. **promotion and elucidation of ideas of integralism (after Wilbur)**
31. contest dominant models of cultural production and identify abusive structures
32. contestation is a matter of power, a struggle over program, logic, dreams, ideals and goals
33. analysis and reaction to the limits on intersubjectivity imposed by poststructuralist and phenomenological philosophy
34. analysis and reaction to the arid proceduralism of Gadamer and Habermas with an awareness of the nonverbal/physical nature of dialogue
35. understand that knowledge is historically specific and theory is produced without certainty or authority

FIFTY-THREE METHODS - CONTINUED

Applied methods

- 36. create a network
- 37. know your resources
- 38. identify the priorities**
 - i. possibilities**
 - ii. impossibilities**
 - iii. improbabilities**
- 39. enter into community with nature
- 40. simple propositions in conversational form
- 41. impartiality and objectivity in final presentation
- 42. an expanded set of 53 senses (After M.J. Cohen)
- 43. value and practice of neo-folk/performative traditions
- 44. silence and stillness, the attention that is falling in love
- 45. Take time for potential to realize itself through indirection.
- 46. honor everyday backyard interactions with the environment
- 47. develop a public feedback component to encourage dialogue
- 48. simple methods to connect diverse issues, communities, material
- 49. aesthetic experiences that are built upon trust and experimentation**
- 50. art as a catalyst, creativity applied to real situations, over the long term**
- 51. network with a core group of organizers, project teams and a membership.**
- 52. experience in place, with creatures that define that place and the phenomenon that gives form to that place
- 53. awareness that a problem is often defined by conflicting belief systems, and a relationship or lack of relationship to a place**

For those with an interest in synchronicity, see item 42.

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EIGHTEEN TOOLS

Personal Tools:

1. **Trust**
2. **Caring**
3. **Respect**
4. Humility
5. Listening
6. Visioning
7. Cheek, Moxy, Humor and wit

Social Tools

8. **Play**
9. **Discourse**
10. **Risk taking**
11. Strategic Knowledge
12. Information/research
13. Imbedded knowledge
14. Oral history- anecdotal

Material Tools

15. 2 Dimensional (painting, drawing, printmaking, computer graphics, www)
16. 3 Dimensional (sculpture, landscape, performance)
17. Time Based (video, radio, narrative)
18. Scale based (maps, GIS, GPS)

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FOOTNOTES:

ⁱ A DEEP DIALOGUE

At Nine Mile Run we conducted a deep dialogue over three years, with an onsite trailer open every weekend, and outreach to community groups, schools and others. For the first three years of the project, the majority of our funding kept us focused upon work in the lower (white middle class) watershed, in the third year we were able to bring a national landscape-charrette team into the more culturally diverse and economically deprived upper watershed, with the help of Rocky Mountain Institute. Our paid work on the Nine Mile Run project closed out in the year 2000, by 2001 working as primary board members, Reiko and I had helped establish and incorporate the Nine Mile Run Watershed Association, and it hired its first Executive Director in 2003. Today the NMRWA, has a significant budget and has programmatic focus in both the upper and lower watershed. With the non-profit, there is an opportunity for a more applied restorative approach as a result funding has shifted, and more money is now available for the upper watershed than the lower watershed, where the restoration is ongoing. Our board is still lacking in diversity, we are working with the Executive Director on a plan to resolve that in 2004. Over the last six years, a broad group of artists, citizens and institutional interests assembled to change a plan for a park and a small stream. To do that we had to engage the entire 6.5 square mile urban watershed and develop a network of social, political, creative and economic support.

ⁱⁱ A SHALLOW DIALOGUE

3 Rivers 2nd Nature conducts two River Dialogues each year. Over the last two years we have begun to focus on a two-day public design charrette on water trails, or the planning for recreational use of water and water edges. We assemble a team of content and design experts with the express intent of unpacking what the community thinks are important about a place. To instigate the dialogue and to promote attendance we offer free boat tours offering many people their first chance to reverse the land-water viewpoint. We frame the boat tour with presentations by our project scientists who talk about how the riverfront is changing, an initial attempt to offer an intellectual argument for its value. The experience of being on the river confirms emergent values, as well as remnant industrial threats and new development that are affecting most waterfront areas. We work to center the dialogue on public realm – shared space issues. We then return to a 3 or four hour mediated design and discussion session, where we attempt to understand as clearly as possible what people think is important, what are the issues and opportunities that occur here in there place? The discursive record and initial drawings are then brought back to the STUDIO where we work with our non-profit advisors to develop a concept plan, and a document for a water trail. Our partners are charged with final publication and the application of the concept plan with municipal interests to begin final design.

Postscript: Two weeks after the Monongahela Conference we conducted a River Dialogue on the Allegheny River Water Trail. We hired four facilitators to work with us, as well as a part time outreach coordinator. That program resulted in over 80 participants, some local, and some regional. We ran four tables, one on women's use of the rivers, one on youth and the rivers and two open public forums on rivers use.