

Dodging Instrumentalization

Social acupuncture, the social impresario, the grease and the glue¹

At performance company Mammalian Diving Reflex, we use the metaphor of Social Acupuncture to describe a range of projects as well as our underlying intentions behind the work. Real acupuncture is a mildly invasive modality that affects the chi, one of the body's fundamental substances, often translated into Western thinking as energy. This westernized conception insists on a distinction between form and function that is not present in Chinese medicine, where chi is more accurately understood as the functioning of the body's different systems as much as something that infuses those systems with life, both force and form.

Ideally, chi flows smoothly, and all the body's systems along with it, but it can also be clogged, creating an excess, or it can be deficient, leaving the body depleted. If we think about chi in a social context, excess might be the presence of a coercive force, such as the state or other forms of authority, blocking healthy interactions, while a deficiency might be a situation without community links, networks or social capital.

This is a simplistic description; the social body, like the physical body, is a complex and nuanced system with many excesses here and deficiencies there. For example, the amount of resources plugged into the media spectacle, with its endless parade of entertainments, can be seen as an excess dialectically related to a deficient and apathetic, politically alienated public. And just as the physical body experiences energetic eddies and stagnations leading to chronic holding patterns, so, too, does the social body. In the physical body, a chronic holding pattern may develop due to tension in a given set of muscles: the shoulders creep up or the butt is clenched and the excess of nerve impulses in the area – the excess of energy – creates a tension that restricts the flow of blood and nutrients. Here, excess leads to a deficiency. Eventually, problems arise: pain, restricted mobility or worse. In the social body, an excess of power or opportunity held by one group – white people, for example – is contingent on a deficiency in other parts of the social body, and again we have pain, restricted mobility and worse. Classism, racism and sexism can all be read this way.

Traditional Chinese medicine is not as attached to first causes as its Western counterpart; there is no search for an underlying and definitive reason for disease. Instead, the whole body is seen in process, a system whose interlocking parts contribute to the situation in a continuous feedback loop. For example, there is no viral or bacterial theory, not because there wasn't the

¹ Adapted from *Social Acupuncture*, Coach House Books, 2006; the North American spelling of the text has been kept intentionally.

technology back in the day to detect the microbes, but because it doesn't matter – the streptococcus bacteria in your throat are always there, but they only become a problem when your immunity is compromised. There's no need to identify bacteria as the first cause, as there is in Western medicine, since the bacteria matters only in certain circumstances – circumstances that can be avoided through a preventative and holistic approach to health care. That's not to say antibiotic herbs don't exist, but antibiotics just don't play the central role they do in Western medicine.

Acupuncture is used to break system-wide holding patterns that are compromising the function of nervous, muscular, vascular, organ and psychological systems – these never viewed separately but always as a totality. And just as chains or archipelagos of tension link psyche and soma across disparate parts of the body, the elements of the social body are intertwined. The lack of free public space for unstructured discourse can be seen both as symptomatic of a democratic deficiency and as contributing to the situation, in what amounts to a feedback loop, each contributing to deterioration of the other. In the physical body, eddies of energy can gather far from the problematic area – the bottom of the foot is connected to the healthy functioning of the kidney, for example. Needling distant muscles can affect organs, and the whole system responds to the intervention. It shouldn't be surprising that the organs affect the muscles and the muscles affect the organs, that both affect the emotions, and that no single aspect of the entire system should be isolated and analyzed without taking the whole into account. Theoretically, then, the same thing should apply to the social body: small interventions at key junctures should affect larger organs, in turn contributing to feedback loops that can amplify and affect the distribution of energy resources.

But the metaphor of acupuncture, it turns out, is not enough. The instrumentalization of art and culture comes from a couple of distinct angles, leaving the acupuncturist lacking and not the ideal figure to apply the treatment. On the one hand, large-scale often international cultural events are deploying art to grease economic wheels, attract tourists and make neighborhoods more appealing while on the other, artists are being asked to glue the social fabric by working with vulnerable and marginalized communities to make the world a better – or at least more governable – place. These two imperatives rarely overlap, providing a clear instance of energetic blockage that can be addressed by a maneuver where we see the economic grease contaminated by the social glue, and vice versa – the figure required for this operation being an artistic conflation of the social worker with the opera impresario; an individual concerned with

the health of the social fabric mixed with an individual focused on the spectacular promotion of her own interests, yielding the social impresario.

The social impresario intervenes, applying social acupuncture, spectacularly inviting the community into large-scale cultural events and proving to an art community struggling with snobbiness that rigour, excellence and beautiful is possible anywhere, in collaboration with anyone.

Haircuts by Children is a small performance with big demands on the audience: step up and let a kid – who has had about six hours of training – give you a chop. We generally partner with schools, looking for about twenty children between 8 and 11 years old. We spend a week, with the kids, offering a couple of workshops that contextualize the piece within social art practices and address the themes of children's rights. Then we dive in with haircut training, spending about two hours a day for three days, followed by a day at the salon where we can sometimes manage to distribute upwards of 70 haircuts in a day.

The initial appeal of the idea was simply affording the kids some crazy autonomy, allowing them to fulfill a legendary desire amongst many kids, fully hoping that anarchy would ensue and the adults would leave looking insane. We were, however, quite surprised by some unexpected outcomes. The first problem was that anarchy did not ensue; the kids were terrified of screwing-up and took their job completely seriously. Initially disappointed, we quickly noticed that what had replaced anarchy was an unusual intimacy between the child stylist and their adult client – both had to be brave in the face of this nervous situation and reach out to connect while in such close quarters. These days, adults and children who do not know each other have almost no means of making meaningful contact. The stranger-danger that grips so many people's imagination, while entirely overblown², makes these kinds of small encounters next to impossible, deferring contact between strangers to later years when all involved are adults, leaving childhood a strange time of thoroughly unwarranted paranoia. This small intimacy was fun to experience for all concerned and nice to watch.

Another surprise was the intense professionalism of the kids, a desire to do an excellent job and often, in fact, the ability to do so – though, admittedly, not always, thankfully; there are always

² James R. Kincaid points out that abuse of children predominately occurs in the home and is committed almost exclusively by family members. That the occasional abduction by a stranger manages to galvanize vast media attention is, he insists, a self-serving hypocrisy of a very high order. James R. Kincaid, *Little Miss Sunshine: America's obsession with JonBenet Ramsey*. Slate.com, August 2006 <http://www.slate.com/id/2148089>

plenty of excellent hatchet jobs. The most exciting and unexpected dynamic to occur has been a creative one that occurs because of a reversal. The way the project is ordinarily read, the adult offers their hair and trust to the child with the understanding that they will likely not be getting a high-end cut so they agree to some innovation that they would not ordinarily agree to but which the kid, in their ill-informed naïveté, wants to try. But occasionally what happens is that the kid, in fact, does know better, and not only provides a great cut, but provides a cut that makes the client look much better, so much better that, years later, the client still maintains the style, in one instance, the client requesting the kid's contact information so she could continue to get the same haircut again and again.

But not all of the social impresario's work needs to occur in such a spectacular way; small but powerful interventions are possible that manage to needle sensitive areas. *Home Tours*, for example, was a simple intervention in which the audience was invited to meet us at a predetermined spot and then, once assembled, we set off in a random direction, knocked on random doors and asked to be given tours of random people's homes. Predominantly people greeted our request with positive surprise, about half the sample thinking that it was a nice idea, but an inconvenient time, while the other half had no problems letting us in, showing us around and even letting us pick herbs from their garden. We eventually used the *Home Tours* modality to create elements of a stage show, *Diplomatic Immunities*, and wandered around neighborhoods in Calgary, Ottawa, Toronto and Lahore, Pakistan, knocking on doors and meeting folks. If any generalizations can be made, it was that the inhabitants of the wealthy dwellings in Calgary reacted most negatively to our request. Though rarely was it the owner themselves but, rather, their service staff who were unable to facilitate our request. It was Lahore, Pakistan, where we experienced the most generosity with not a single person refusing us entry. In fact, the remarkable thing about the reaction in Lahore was that, unlike in Canada, there was no surprise – it didn't appear to be an unusual request at all, it was accepted with complete equanimity as if this group of five Canadians and four Pakistanis were asking to borrow a cup of sugar.

Interestingly, the people most resistant to the exercise have consistently been other artists who work in the realm of community, with cries of "*power imbalance*" greeting my description of the project in workshops and conferences. This kind of intervention can trigger a moral panic that reaches for the metaphor of invading colonialist in order to, it seems to me, assuage some vestigial guilt many artists feel for crimes they had nothing to do with. The big problem with this

kind of oversensitivity is that it negates any agency the people in the homes have to simply say 'no.' But, the argument will follow: even the people who say yes may be doing so simply because we are a large group and they don't want to be a spoil-sport but, later, they will suffer intense regret, feel violated and may wonder if their joint had been cased for a break-in. People have proposed this scenario vehemently, calling into question the ethics of the project, refusing to step outside the workshop to give the exercise a cursory try.

The *Floating Curator* was undertaken for curator Christine Shaw's *Public Acts* project, which assigned the themes of the 29 issues of the cultural theory quarterly *Public Access* to artists across Canada. In the summer of 2006, Shaw traveled the Trans Canada highway to document these twenty-nine public acts³. I was assigned Public Act 21⁴, Childhood, and in an act of childish mischief, I designed a project that placed the onus squarely on Christine, using her as the subject of a social experiment.

The concept was simple: I drafted an airtight contract that required Christine to spend an hour-and-a-half per day for five days in August floating in the shallow end of Toronto's Alexandra Park outdoor pool, approaching children and becoming their friends. Marks were assigned for – among other things – participation, convincing the kids to take her photo, time spent with the children outside the confines of the pool area and connecting with kids of different races. If Christine did not achieve a mark of 50% or more, she had to remove all traces of the project from her website and accompanying material and, when referencing the 21st Public Act, she had to declare: "Children do not exist."

Needless to say, Christine was angry and nervous about being perceived as a pervert. I sympathized but felt that, at worst, they would think she was a batty lady and, in the event they did vilify her... well, what can I say, art is risky and there's nothing romantic about taking a risk.

The first thing the social impresario needs to examine is where the project sits along the continuum stretching between the two prevailing imperatives that culture is currently being subjected to: the grease and the glue. *Public Acts* was a national event, involving over 30 artists from Victoria to Halifax and included public works that were intended for wide participation and more intimate events. With *The Floating Curator*, intimacy was pushed to the limits, the

³ <http://www.publicacts.ca>

⁴ <http://www.publicacts.ca/act21>

social aspect of the agenda taking precedence over the impresarial except with the conception itself, which was relatively obnoxious and flamboyant. This is where I locate the showmanship of the work: in the very idea of pinning someone down and demanding that – in order to retain the project – little kids would have to be approached in the pool. But once we get over the irrational stranger-danger, all we've got left is an earnest attempt to make the social sphere a more generous place.

The social impresario is concerned with diversity for the same reason that everyone is concerned with diversity: fairness. However, that's just the social side of the equation, the impresario also understands that it makes good business sense to involve and attract a diversity of participants. But cold hard capital is only one consideration; the impresario also appreciates the social, cultural and emotional capital that is generated in creating diverse networks, the possibilities that are created by encounters with difference. This, the impresario undertakes strictly to make himself a better person, in a proudly self-serving gesture.

The impresario, then, relies on atypicalness of generating unusual and flamboyantly charged encounters that produce new and meaningful contexts, questioning current social flows and throwing things into as much turmoil as possible. This, in contrast to the social worker who tries to introduce stability and normalcy and, rather than disrupting social flows, helps others to swim along more comfortably with the prevailing current. Not always, of course, but even when working with clients for whom conforming would mean death, there's still a disavowal of antagonism. The impresario, on the other hand, knows that antagonism sells, but not just any antagonisms, *fruitful* ones where friction and tension are triggered and the ensuing dynamic examined in an artistic arena and under the gossamer shroud of Art, where all is easily forgiven. The impresario, being the ever-alert opportunist, looks for ways to maximize antagonism, turning to accepted hierarchies as a way in. In this, the two figures find agreement, with the social worker, too, struggling against the effects of hierarchies. In the *Floating Curator* we have the fruitful antagonism of the nice curator approaching children in the pool combined with the nervousness and weakness she feels, where, ultimately, the kids have the power to blow the whistle on this aberrant behavior.

The social impresario uses the social sphere as the venue for activity, trying to bring the spectacular out of the realm of privatized entertainment and into the public, but always – as dictated by the social side of the duality – with ameliorative effects in mind, contaminating the

grease with the glue. Situating the activity in public proves a challenge to the impresario, who knows that cache is developed by increasing demand by decreasing access – to a point – and that public transactions are harder to meter than those occurring in private. The social worker, however, wins this round, trumping the impresario with the fact that – in the long run – the public realm is the place where all the power is located. This is an act of faith; not the impresario's strong suit. On the other hand the public field does provide the opportunity to engage and entice additional participants, providing an opportunity for wider involvement in the project. In the case of the *Floating Curator*, the children who were approached got involved, contributing insights.

3:20 – The 2 people swim towards The Curator. The Curator asks, “*Are you kids? Do you think of yourselves as kids?*” They laugh. The female replies, “*I’m not a kid.*” The male replies, “*I’m a kid. I don’t have to pay rent yet!*”

3:25 – Together they begin to talk about the concept of “youth,” what constitutes being a kid and how it is an abstract concept. Donna (16 yrs of age) refuses to be thought of as a kid and reiterates once again that she is not a kid, without explanation. Tyson (15 yrs of age) tosses out a range of different examples that trouble the concept of childhood and youth. They all laugh together

Social impresarios employ social acupuncture, keen on generating beauty and amazement, wanting to dazzle, but seeking the civic sphere as the challenging arena for these encounters, anxious to make the world a better place while still providing the requisite thrills, spills and chills that is demanded of good art. They understand the two-pronged instrumentalization that they are being subjected to – the grease and the glue – and rather than responding in a reactionary way, terrified of protecting an autonomy they probably didn't have in the first place, running in a panic away from the idea that they're being used, they move strategically, attempting to use their users, flipping the tables, creating a complex mash-up of intentions and, if they're lucky, making both great art and a great world.

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