
Social Sculpture: Enabling Society to Change Itself

by Jeff Barnum

In our work at Reos, we help stakeholders from across an entire social system come together to see their challenge from a whole-system perspective. With the whole picture in view, they then design, test, and evolve ideas for initiatives that they believe have the potential to address their challenge.

A key part of this process is uncovering and identifying the mindsets deep within the fabric of the social challenge: core beliefs, paradigms, assumptions, world views, dogmas, and identities that in turn shape behaviour, relationships, policies, and other structures that profoundly shape our lives. These vary from culture to culture, challenge to challenge, but they are always present. Systems thinking pioneer Donella Meadows pointed out that changing a mindset is a powerful leverage point.¹ Imagine, for example, if we all believed that money in the bank became less valuable over time—a negative interest rate—or if nature had rights. Our use of money and natural resources would look very different.

Identifying the key mindsets that shape a particular system affords stakeholders the possibility to shift those mindsets within themselves, their organisations, and their constituencies. Doing so can radically push a large social system in one direction or another. For this reason, in our Dinokeng project, leaders from across South Africa addressed the relationship between the people and the state, the issue at the heart of that country's future.² When facing a large-scale challenge, we need to affect the dominant mindsets in thousands or millions of people.

Therein lies the challenge I'd like to consider in this article.

My colleague Adam Kahane writes that because challenges characterised by “generative complexity” are fundamentally unfamiliar and undetermined, they cannot be addressed through a pre-formulated plan: we have to “carve” a way forward.³ Some examples from our work include the challenge of caring for millions of vulnerable children whose parents have died from AIDS, the creation of a local and green economy, and the expansion of the middle class in Colombia.⁴ Because the nature of these challenges is new and unfamiliar, there are no precedents from which we can draw; instead, they require an “emergent” process through which people can *find* a solution while working on the problem.

For a problem characterised by high generative complexity, the mindsets of the masses can be a powerful point of systemic leverage and a powerful force for systemic change. I've been studying this challenge for some time now, and I see some examples of practice and success I think can guide our thinking about working for massive change.

1 See Donella Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*. Chelsea Green, Vermont, 2008.

2 <http://www.reospartners.com/project-view/109/link>

3 Kahane, Adam. *Solving Tough Problems*. Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2007.

4 <http://www.reospartners.com/projects>

The Creative Process

As an artist, I have studied creativity for 20 years. The key challenge in making a work of art, I've learned, is to arrive at something powerful and interesting without knowing exactly how to do so. An artist works in situations with no pre-existing solutions. What is it about artistic processes that might help us work in systemic challenges with high generative complexity?

The defining characteristic of a creative process is that it structures the process of *metamorphosis*. For an artist to create a finished work of art, he or she must navigate a journey of reaching or hunting through which a final form can emerge. This is a metamorphic process: In art as in nature, the final form emerges at the end. Unless you have seen them before, it's impossible to predict the butterfly from the caterpillar, the rose from the thorn bush, or the oak from the acorn. Even if you were familiar with the sequence, you would be hard pressed to exactly predict the emerging form. In art, if you're sure of what you're going to get before you start, you're using a formula. A creative process structures the hunt for an emergent solution.⁵

Social Sculpture

The social application of the creative process is, it turns out, the main idea of artist Joseph Beuys, who coined the term "social sculpture" in the 1960s and 1970s. Beuys demonstrated his idea in his last major work, "7,000 Oaks", a city forestation and sculpture project in Kassel, Germany, designed to heal the deep psychic scars of the Third Reich and help renew German, European, and Western culture over hundreds of years.



Beuys achieved this objective with remarkable simplicity, a simplicity that certainly arrived, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "on the other side of complexity." Beuys spent millions of dollars and five years to realise an utterly simple idea: In the giant plaza at the city's center, Beuys piled 7,000 irregular, human-sized basalt columns in a formation, exactly as thousands of bodies were piled after the 1943 bombing of Kassel. Over the next five years, donors purchased the stones one by one. As each stone was purchased, it was moved to a different location in the heart of the city, where it was placed upright, sticking at least a meter out of the ground, next to a tiny oak tree: a symbol of death and a symbol of life. One of the forms would remain static, while the other would change and grow over time. One dwarfed the other at first; as the oak tree grew, it would match the basalt column in size and eventually become a giant.

During the installation, sidewalks were dug up, traffic rerouted, and utilities moved, all at significant cost to the project and the taxpayers. Some citizens were bothered by the inconvenience and

⁵ See for example a clip from the 1957 film *Mystery of Picasso*, in which the artist wipes out and repaints many attempts, any of which most people would consider masterful, in order to arrive at a final form: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1_hv24_Usg

Usg Picasso famously said "I do not seek; I find." These two states of mind are, upon close inspection, very different.

expense of it all. Trees were broken, and complaints filled the news. Today, however, the trees are no longer tiny; they shade the city and change colours in sync. “You cannot touch a Beuys tree,” one woman declares in a documentary about the installation. Beuys died in 1986, and the project is no longer about him. What remains is a long-lasting, living testament to the regenerative forces in nature and in humankind. The sculpture will transform the city, disrupt sidewalks, and shape culture for at least the next three centuries.

With this act, Beuys removed art from the studio. He tapped into the deepest history of the German people, the Druid lineage of stones and trees, and the healing potential of connection with nature. He leveraged his reputation as an internationally known artist to achieve something that will far outlast his museum works. And the main idea of the work is not the stones and the trees: it’s the relationship of the people to the stones and trees and to the regeneration of society. As the trees and stones become an integral part of the cityscape and identity, the “sculpture” of tree and stone stimulates the “social sculpture” of massive participation. The social sculpture is the participatory creation of the social field over time.

Social sculpture is the extension of art beyond the museum and art world into the realm of shaping social reality. It is an art form in which everyone creatively participates to shape our shared social reality together. Of course, everyone already shapes social reality anyway—it’s just that we don’t do so *artfully*. Beuys demonstrated that it’s possible for us to stimulate this process. And we’re starting to see that his view of human potential was prescient in other places, other cultures. One of the best examples of this approach happened in Colombia.



Antanas Mockus, the former mayor of Bogotá and a candidate in Colombia’s upcoming presidential election, is famous for his theatrical interventions that quickly, effectively, and inexpensively changed behaviours across Bogotá and beyond. He is sometimes maligned as a “clown” or other such pejoratives because of his “antics”, but actually, there is a discernible rigor and discipline to his approach.⁶ Mockus’s most famous act addressed the city’s most dangerous intersections,

places where pedestrians were frequently hurt or killed. First, he placed large bronze stars in the ground to signify the death of a citizen. Then, he distributed 350,000 large cards, each with a green thumbs-up on one side and a red thumbs-down picture on the other. Finally, he deployed 40 mimes at the problematic intersections. The mimes theatrically championed good driving behaviour and shamed bad driving behaviour. Bystanders could hold up a corresponding card. The effect was instant: A mixture of awareness of mortality and the fear of humiliation changed driving behaviours

⁶ It is illuminating to remember that the jester, in times past, was also the truth teller, the one who could say the unspeakable for the collective benefit.

within a few weeks. The measure was so successful that Mockus hired 400 more mimes. Over time, the new cultural norms stuck. The bronze stars are still there today.

Mockus is methodical. He carefully plans each intervention to enable his fellow citizens to recognise and then realise their aspirations and needs for a healthier society.⁷ In this way, he strategically and systematically taps into what has been called “cultural agency” or “cultural power”: the ability for a social system to metamorphose itself from within.⁸

Another example of this creative and participatory approach is Mayor Edi Rama’s transformation of Tirana, Albania, which in the last decade has gone from being the poorest city in Europe and a literal cesspool to a burgeoning cultural destination. Rama began his city’s extraordinary metamorphosis by cleaning up the public spaces, changing the flows of polluted water through the city, and painting Tirana’s communist-era concrete buildings in a glorious blaze of bright colours and abstract patterns. The colours, Rama said, were a signal that life could be different, and that Rama’s government was open to radical change. Notice that here again, the painted buildings are only part of the intervention. Thousands of trees were planted, shanties bulldozed, illegal activities routed, waterways and utilities repaired. The cinemas began to show foreign movies.



Rama was after a cultural revolution first, which he believed would be followed by economic revitalization. Over time, his efforts breathed new vitality into the city and into people’s hearts.⁹ Today, Tirana is a destination, even a site to some of the world’s most prestigious architecture competitions.

What’s common to all of these examples is that the three artists identified fundamental needs underlying their societies’ dysfunctional behaviours and created environments in which those needs could be fulfilled through mass participation. The idea can be misconstrued as propaganda or government control of culture. But upon closer inspection, what’s at work isn’t manipulation; it’s an invitation to engage where we’re not engaged. The tactic is to put participation on the table as a way to unstick the mess, whether it’s deep psychic trauma or unacceptable driving behaviours. Mockus said, “As mayor, I didn’t regulate behaviors; I created conditions for people to regulate each other’s behaviors.” Similarly, Beuys and Rama

7 http://www.hks.harvard.edu/kokkalis/events_pages/2010_mockus_rama.html

8 For more on cultural power, see Nicanor Perlas, *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power and Threefolding*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada, 2003. For cultural agency, see Doris Sommer, *Cultural Agency in the Americas*. Duke University Press. London 2006.

9 For before and after photos of Tirana, see <http://www.tirana.gov.al/?cid=2,10>. For more on Rama, see <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0323/p01s03-woeu.html>.

created conditions for the public to engage in its own metamorphosis. This is very different from a situation in which the government manipulates the public into obedience or loyalty or support.

Practical Implications

Could it be that we can solve many of our social challenges if we understand, focus, and apply cultural agency in this sense? What might a “social sculpture” practice look like? In our work, as in so many social change efforts, initiatives often focus on influencing the powerful few in business and government to act. Involving such leaders may seem or be necessary, but I wonder if it also reinforces the belief that we’re dependent on only a handful of people to change social reality. I believe that our dependence on the powerful few to cause systemic transformation needs to change, and can change. The key, to me, seems to be in the social sculpture: the collective creative power of everyone to change the ways we think, see each other, and live.

What does it feel like to go through such a process? In my experience, there are three aspects to creative work. First, we must establish the conditions for creativity, a setting or context in which we can do creative work.¹⁰ For an artist, this might be a studio, or at least a guitar and a street. For a social change project, it means setting ourselves up to achieve outcomes in uncertain and open-ended terrain. Second, we need to deeply understand and trust the medium, in this case a social medium, and have the requisite expertise on hand to design and facilitate the socially creative process. Finally, we must exercise specific disciplines and capacities to navigate a creative and emergent space.

I would like to invite us to consider ways in which “the masses”—meaning all of us—can participate in our own collective metamorphosis. As social innovators, we’re in the business of creating new social realities, and I propose that we do more of what Beuys, Rama, and Mockus have done. Such processes will enable social change agents to work in creative, high-leverage ways to activate cultural power for massive change. To me, the future of social innovation is the work of enabling society to change itself. This is, I believe, the new art form of social sculpture.

¹⁰ Malcolm Gladwell refers to “structuring for spontaneity,” a similar idea. Spontaneity is one aspect of creativity. See *Blink*. Little, Brown, and Company. New York. 2005. Chapter 4.