

How to Use Artistic Strategies to Attenuate Cultural Conflicts and Communication Barriers

Taking “A cup of stories” Project as an Example

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Abstract—The concept of culture is very complex and composed of many different elements, parts and layers. To create a platform of understanding among different cultures, it is important to be aware of the complexity of the term “culture”. The project “A Cup of Stories” set out a series of interventions in public space to foster storytelling and tear down different stereotypes people create about different cultures. Cultural conflicts have escalated in the past decades and especially with the biggest refugee crisis in post-war Europe. Media has played a big role in shaping people’s perception and understanding of different cultures; as well it created borders and widened the gap between them. Using an explorative and artistic approach, through the interventions in public space different approaches were taken. It is not easy to break these borders to bring people together. Sharing stories among different people of different cultural backgrounds could open new possibilities for interfacing and living together, to narrow the gap between differences and strengthen the social bond in a society by community building through storytelling.

Keywords—culture; identity; stereotype; intervention; story

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of culture is very complex and has different definitions. It is composed of many different elements, parts and layers. It evolves and changes all the time and doesn’t have neat boundaries to define. But simply it can be defined from one point of view as “it refers to a group or community with whom we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world.” (Margaretha, A., 2012) Culture is present in people’s everyday life. It influences them in many aspects, in their values, hopes, humor, fears, worries, views, etc. “Moreover it works for a group and individuals as a unifying factor and at the same time it gives identity to a group or an individual.” (Margaretha, A., 2012) When people move or migrate they bring with them a part of their culture. At the same time they

will be affected by the culture existing, therefore both sides are affected (Margaretha, A., 2012). When people of different cultures get together and engage, it can generate and allow new meanings to be formed, but it can also create cultural conflicts due to differences in values, beliefs, misinformed stereotypes and perceptions caused by prejudiced attitudes and other external influences (Avruch, K., 1998).

The arrival cities are transitional places, reshaped by the embrace of waves of composed of many different elements, parts and layers. It evolves and changes floating population and constant emigrational movement. We should put more attention to this so called arrival cities, since they have the potential to transit and forged better generations, where dreams could be fulfilled and violence is not longer ruling. These places will host the next cultural boom, it is up to us whether to embrace it or ignore it.

A cup of stories is a project in which people are invited to participate in an artistic intervention, taking place in various public locations of Vienna. We want to survey and publicly visualize some stereotypes about various cultures. Moreover, it invites people to join into informal conversations with people with different backgrounds to connect and share stories.

“The globalization of world society, in particular, demands increased attention to mediation processes and problems of transfer, in terms both of the circulation of global representations and “travelling concepts” and of the interactions that make up cultural encounters”. (Bachmann-Medick, D., 2009).

We want to use storytelling as a mediator, to tear down negative stereotypes, and narrow the gap between people. Storytelling is not a new concept for connecting people. It has been a practice for centuries in many different cultures

around the world. In the Arab culture, (especially in Levant, Damascus and Cairo) storytelling is practiced by the “Al Hakawati” (storyteller). This practice brought people together and generated a moment to learn, listen, understand past, socialize and connect.

Why stories? The power of stories is huge. Stories have the ability to shape our life, individually and collectively. We connect with people and value them. By sharing our stories, it seems, we invite each other into our worlds. We break stereotypes, misinformation and misunderstanding. This enhances our interrelation, shared awareness, and possibilities for effective interaction, it is said by Janet Litherland: “Stories have power. They delight, enchant, touch, teach, recall, inspire, motivate, challenge. They help us understand. They imprint a picture on our minds. Want to make a point or raise an issue? Tell a story.”

II. FRAME

Michel Foucault explains that what defines your identity is how you communicate and interact with others. It is in constant change and continuously reconstructed by culture. Rather than having a fixed idea of what defines you, he thinks about it as an imposed power to be exercised over others to fit in a certain category.

“Rather than pretending that difference does not exist, we take on, in part through legal action, the social reshaping of identities rather than ignoring them.” (Appiaht, A., *Stereotypes and the Shaping of Identity*, 2000)

When people relate to a social identity, they try to refer it as a positive perception of their groups and collectives. But if there are some stereotypes about a group, they might feel threatened or experience negative emotions. Even their attitude, interaction and behavior changes, and motivation could be diminished. We try to make the best impression when we meet someone, so if we don't fit in the concept people want to frame us, we feel insecure. “A stereotype is a widely held, simplified, and essentialist belief about a specific group.” *Stereotypes* (Retrieved from <https://genderedinnovations.stanford.edu/terms/stereotypes.html>) If we, as a society, challenged ourselves to change the perceptions and take time to see the values in others, a feeling of safety can be spread and trust could rise. We can show who we are without fear. The project pretends to serve as an instrument that potentiates the construction of a dignified individuality.

“By oversimplifying their subject, stereotypes ignore both the complexity and the diversity found empirically when one examines actual people and their practices; by their very nature, stereotypes misrepresent the groups they seek to describe.” (Appiaht, A., *Stereotypes and the Shaping of Identity*, 2000) What we gain by collecting stories helps, in a way, to break stereotypes. Avoid doing assumptions and actually know people and their practices to reveal important hidden truths.

In order to understand other cultures, we must interact with them. It is crucial to accept the importance of being together by sharing and exchanging experience.

Nowadays, we live in an era where the truth is always hidden. Where information is preselected by some and limited for others. Controlled knowledge appears to be shaping our conception of the world. On the other hand, we have a surplus massive attack of information, which lacks of quality. It spreads and reproduces rapidly.

Giles Deleuze explains: “The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people from expressing themselves, but rather, force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, the thing that might be worth saying.” (Deleuze, G., *Negotiations*, 1990)

Every day media shows the world as a place filled with violence, placing mankind in a mistrustful conception. Locking us in a prison society dominated by fear. We should rethink and change our interaction with media on how to deal with what we get from it.

“When we refuse to be mediatized, we have not only to stop allowing ourselves to be fooled, believing everything we read in the papers, and simply digesting the truths we are fed, but also we need to break our attention away from the media.” (Hardt M., Negri, A., *Declaration*, 2012)

The strategies that we set into action have as a goal to interact with minorities. Firstly, we believe that we should vanish the obstacles (mainly built by information's managers) because they are only keeping us apart. Throughout the project, we focus on the need of creating new schemes of social participation. In order to make ourselves visible, recognize other's intelligence and learn from them.

By sharing stories and actively engage with physical proximity, we break the chain of the unknown and destroy the invisible borders built based on misconceptions and together new truths can be created. The impoverishment of minorities is fed also by a misconception we have about them.

It is not only important to discover new ways to communicate, but to create new principles and truths with which we could relate and be part of. Through these strategies we organized ourselves and together refuse stereotypes and set a starting point to become different. We create a better and more open society.

When you externalize yourself to others, a feeling of trust and confidence emerge. This exercise empowers people, facilitates the development of story exchange as a “collective linguistic act of creativity” and of self-production.

Generating a space where people feel safe and is able to share is a crucial point for this project; as well as the act of being together, because it makes the experience much more intense.

The production of new knowledge activates the creation of political affects within a group. Collective intelligence is the result from discussion and participation, and it also leads you to forward questioning.

Dealing with new people needs new strategies based on new knowledge. We want to believe in a society with the power to generate, animate, and regulate new forms of life. We create opportunities for all to participate, promoting tolerance and mutual respect for all through the value of diversity. For a moment we eliminate physical and social barriers. The act of listening becomes an act of mutual support.

With this strategy we promote collective interests and curiosity. We want to foster people's aim to seek for more information about cultures they share the city with and encourage national and international exchanges, dissemination of knowledge in an independent way. As a bigger aim we would like to enable people to make a positive contribution to society by recognizing the value of other cultures for an interracial harmony and cross-cultural understanding.

Making people participants is a way of empowerment; making them aware they are agents of change, by stimulating open dialogue, creating a network and partnership with mechanisms that address new communicational dynamics between all of us.

III. ARTISTIC STRATEGIES

The point of departure for the project was a collaboration between the Social Design Arts as Urban Innovation Department and the TBA 21* (Thyssen- Bornemisza Art Contemporary), through a series of events that took place here.*TBA 21 currently is engaged with Atopia - Migration, Heritage and Placelessness and educational programs in cooperation with refugees.

We wanted to create a comfortable atmosphere to bring people of different cultural background together to connect and share stories. The first tryout for gathering people took place in the Social Design studio, with a number of 16 participants. It was not an easy task to gather people and open up. Through the process we realized that the will to participate exponentiates when a story catches your attention, therefore we adapted and developed some strategies to achieve the aim of the project.

A. *Storytelling and Sharing Stories*

We established some dates to gather immigrant and talk about their life stories. For each meeting different activities will be developed to have better and more dynamic approaches. We organized three sessions with people from different cultural backgrounds to tell and share their stories. From Mexico joined us Lutz Alexander Keferstein. He holds a PhD on Ethics and Politics, he is interested in crossing over the fields of Philosophy, normativity, history, politics and culture, and presenting academic conferences to Universities and Institutions that foment criticism and analytic thought among listeners. From Austria Fariba Mosleh. She studied Cultural Anthropology, Sinology, Cultural management and Education in the Fine Arts in Vienna, Barcelona and Guang Zhou. Received several research aids and grants. Specialized in transcultural, collaborative and community engaged artistic practices. Works and lives as independent cultural manager and curator in Vienna and abroad.

Brigitte Prinzpod (along with her students) and Bo Mu gave a lecture about their projects and how they relate to cultural links and differences between Austria and China. Brigitte's project aimed to start cooperation with a group of Chinese artists to experience the city and research on the living structure, the traditional crafts, and life in the countryside. Mu Bo did a project about the left-off newspapers in Vienna under the title: "Abfall und fall ab". From an Asian perspective, the research on how do people define "dirtiness"? What's the threshold of garbage and usage?

The main guests were representing the role of the Alhakawati (storyteller). They had the role for bringing people together to listen, learn, socialize and build connections with the group.

The most successful session was held outside TBA 21, on the wooden stage. Where a more relaxed atmosphere was created. The arrange of the chairs are very unformal, the sitting position of the storyteller is just directly on the wooden stage among the participants, so everybody could speak in a relaxing way. The connections between the participants and the speakers (the storytellers) were deeper.

B. *One to One Collection of Stories*

In order to understand others, we need to seek for interaction. By sharing our stories, we open our world. When you externalize yourself to others, a feeling of trust and confidence emerge; we feel empowered and confident while somebody listens to us. The collections of stories will be showed as a booklet. Where stories can be continuously added, read and spread. The use of invisible ink, which could only be seen by a ultraviolet lamp, aims to keep the stories hidden for those whom are not interested, but those who seek them.

C. *Eye Contact*

We asked the participants to select a stranger and sit facing him or her and look into each other's eyes for 4 minutes. Immediately different reactions arisen, from nervousness, being ashamed, laughs, etc. "Four minutes of eye contact brings people closer to each other better than everything else" (Arthur Aron).

The experiment allowed the participants to create a connection and sort of trust before we start our storytelling session. It was clear that this situation was an icebreaker and helped to have a more free and informal dialogue.

D. *What if You Were ____?*

For this strategy, we used a pin board and located it at the heart of Stadtpark to collect and visualize people's response to this triggering question: What if you were ____?

Each day we changed the question, ending with different nationality:

- What if you were Austrian?
- What if you were Chinese?
- What if you were Mexican?

This let you place yourself in other situations completely different from your own and reflects your perspective towards other cultures. Whether you have a clear or vague idea. It shows how media builds prejudices and stereotypes about the people with whom you share everyday activities. These people have different stories and backgrounds, but rarely we get in touch or have deeper interactions. Through this strategy we gather information that will help us understand what people in Vienna feel and think about others and will open the question on: what is our posture towards who surround us?

The question might be critical for some people and can receive aggressive responses. However, we receive a very positive interaction and easily caught people's attention. We noticed that people are very curious to see what is written.

As Edward T. Hall suggested, culture is like an iceberg. There are two parts to culture: internal and external. Only a small portion of the external culture is above water and visible in the behavior of society. The larger portion, the internal one, is hidden beneath the surface. This is represented by the beliefs, values and thoughts, patterns of a society. (Hall, E., 1976). Our interaction proved so. By analyzing the material we have collected, we realize that most of the mentioned answers were referring to the external iceberg feature, which are: art, music, food, dress and literature.

IV. CONCLUSION

Talking about cultural differences leads us to actually talk about deeper levels of understanding culture. What we see and think we know and understand is just the top of the iceberg. Culture is way much more complex than just an immediate and superficial grasp. When you look closer and immerse into other' s culture you gain knowledge, but most important you also learn about yourself. We all posses the ability to create spaces of encounter, where ideas are complemented and different areas of knowledge witness how physical and mental boarders fade away. Inhabitants are a key factor for cities: their creativity determines the possibility for future success. The more a city grows, the more complex it becomes. Migration is happening, is up to us whether embrace it or ignore it.

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