

Making, Becoming, Keeping Real:
An Introduction and Reflection to Social Impact in Practice

By:

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In Social Impact in Practice class on Wednesday, August 30th 2023, we started to meet each other, and we talked a bit about how to meet the world, meet others, meet subject matter. Meeting isn't always easy – it's layered with the stuff of experience, history, place. Meeting is tied to being and necessitates us representing facets of who we are. The following too-long and self-indulgent narrative celebrates and pursues the fleeting vibe of “keeping it real” established in our class discussion to protract the moment of meeting, to be a brief introduction to me, to what I'm reading, to how I have been and how I am being. Despite being a fan of realness, I am deeply attuned to an external and internalized mandate to be unreal, to participate in social and cultural circumscribed normativity, to perform excellence, to be a good student/wife/gardener/have a clean house/be “fitter, happier, more productive. (Radiohead 1997)” When I grow up, I want to be real.

In *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Rabbit asks the wise Skin Horse, “What is REAL?” Does real hurt? Does real happen all at once, or bit by bit? The Skin Horse explains how to become real:

"Real isn't how you are made... It's a thing that happens to you. ...When you are Real you don't mind being hurt. ... It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."
(Bianco, 196AD)

As *The Velveteen Rabbit* elucidates, we achieve real only through doing our work to the point of exhaustion, playing well with others, and when external perceptions of us match our actual selves.

Suffering from imposter syndrome coupled with workism², I am unsure of how to decouple my sense of identity and value from the work I perform. “The best-educated and highest-earning Americans, who can have whatever they want, have chosen the office for the same reason that devout Christians attend church on Sundays: It's where they feel most themselves.” (Thompson, 2019) “In the past century, the American conception of work has shifted from jobs to careers to callings—from necessity to status to meaning. ... for today's workists, anything short of finding one's vocational soul mate means a wasted life.” (Thompson, 2019) I

¹ To “keep it real” as defined by Wiktionary is “To be authentic, true to oneself; to be cool. You can trust Pablo. He always keeps it real.” (Wiktionary N.d.)

² Thompson defines workism and the evolution of Homo industrius in his 2019 essay in *The Atlantic*: “What is workism? It is the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must always encourage more work.” (Thompson, 2019)

am what I do. We should be defined by what we are more than by what we do or what and who we know. However, the catastrophic feedback loop created by a racist³, sexist neoliberalist system does not ensure that the best of plans could ever realistically be laid, much less executed holistically, with patience, and sustainably. Technocratic optimism does not exist. Knowing, naming, diagnosing a problem is theoretically the first step to harm reduction and potential healing of the problem. I'm finding the more I dig at the problem, the more problems I find.

“The Gods Will Not Save You.”

I am an artist, educator, and cultural organizer with over twelve years of community and economic development, project management, and arts administration experience. In my tenure, I have worked for and with arts service organizations, community design organizations, arts-focused real estate development corporations in both the public and private sectors. I have co-founded, managed, and run non-profit boards that are leaders in the arts and entertainment industry, taught at the graduate and undergraduate levels at major arts institutions. I've established and grown my own independent arts and development small business. Does looking good mean being good⁴?

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter dissects the mechanisms and methods of personal and professional practice and their relationship to what we do:

“What does he do, this man you seek?” “He kills women.” - Clarice “No. That is incidental. What is the first and principal thing he does? What needs does he serve by killing? ...” (Clarice answers incorrectly.) “Nope. He Covets. That is his nature. And how do we begin to covet, Clarice? Do we seek out things to covet? ...No, we begin by coveting what we see every day. ...Don't your eyes seek out the things you want?” (Tally, 2001)

I covet the familiar. I want to work for an institution. I covet the power of the institutional name, whilst simultaneously criticizing it, acknowledging its role in the systemic, personal, and professional crises of our present, past and future. Even in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, it is the Rabbit's subjective value to the dominant power (the Doctor) and his dedicated service to his community (the Boy that loved him) that ultimately lands him in the rubbish bin. I want to serve the things that destroy me.

³ Also thinking about the White Supremacy readings here, especially the section about perfectionism.

⁴ See Appendix A for the author's resume for an example of “looking good on paper.”

“[I]t’s the postmodern institutions that are the gods. And they are gods. And no one is bigger.” - David Simon, “Behind The Wire” (Love, P. 487)

“The gods will not save you” -Ervin H Burrell, The Wire (Love, P. 487)

The ability to exercise power enables us to change power dynamics - to simultaneously feed on and critique that proverbial hand that feeds us. I have absolutely allowed the devil to buy me dinner and drinks on the company card in the name of the greater good. I worked with teams to advise institutional and government officials on the commercial property issues and land use policies that were preparing to unleash themselves upon scores of unsuspecting, and undercapitalized, artists and creatives. As a part of the institution, the non-profit industrial complex, I was at the forefront of fighting for the underdog against all of the real and perceived villains in the development cycle, in the middle of the sausage factory of city governance behind the practices of placemaking and placekeeping.

Individuals might heal; they might forgive and be forgiven in the reciprocal union that governs social life. But institutions and professions do not really do these things. They function and act; they are creations and, to some degree, reflections both of the political community and the agency of the professionals within those institutions. The instrumental nature of institutional actions undermines their atoning actions without credible commitments to reform that prevent future harms and wrongs, and those commitments may not be credible absent transformations on the part of the broader political community. But while institutions may not be capable of soul craft, those who work within them are, and they can act within their roles in support of justice for the wronged and remedy for those harmed. (Schweitzer, P.130-144)

When I grow up, I want to be paid a comfortable salary with a flexible schedule that allows me to continue my art practice. I want to be excellent at my work, to find validation, to be told by an institution via a paycheck that I am really good at what I do. This is a perverse success. I am a workist. “But work is tangible, and success is often falsified. To make either the centerpiece of one’s life is to place one’s esteem in the mercurial hands of the market. To be a workist is to worship a god with firing power.” (Thompson, 2019)

Some of my rationale in going back to school was rooted in a specific desire: to earn the degree that would help me achieve the goal of getting hired in an institutional position—at a salary rate that I am qualified for via my expansive experience to date—that I do not currently have the pedagogical boxes checked to even apply for. My feelings of illegitimacy as a planner and preservationist are underscored by community, radical, and insurgent planning theory, which argues that I must participate in the systems of professional standardization even though I am, functionally, already a planner because I practice planning and I am an ordinary person who knows things:

A profession's legitimacy rests on its knowledge. The study of practice shows that what ordinary people know is at least as relevant as what is found through systematic professional inquiry, but we have no professional standards to evaluate what ordinary people know. (Innes P.185)

This path—from degree, to standards, to expertise, to a job with legitimacy and a salary—is encumbered by systemic societal and economic externalities at odds with individual or collective intentions of keeping it real.

“Wasn’t I Real Before?”

As an artist, I refer to the studio as a problem factory. Planning is studio practice.⁵ Planning is a problem factory.

Since 2012, I have been teaching Senior Thesis for the General Fine Arts Department at the Maryland Institute College of Art. The course is an extension of the studio, which is an extension of the world. The studio is the foundation on which students are able to form an academic voice, contextualize the value and productivity of the art object as a tool for self-expression and cultural commentary, and hone habits that have value both in and out of academia: like time management, personal engagement, self-assessment, and attention to detail. Over the course of the year, the successful student transitions from undergraduate to emerging artist. To teach thesis is to participate in the gateway to a truly interdisciplinary practice. As a teacher, my methodology of engaging students in their independent practice is broken down into the following core concepts: Support the project, Support the work, Support the individual, Invest in exchange, Follow opportunities. (Glebes 2018) I hope that these core concepts from studio practice translate to the practice of planning.

This focus on art as planning, and planning as art, stems from my personal practice and informs my planning practice. The detours and practices and definition of planning – much like our individual identities -

⁵ Planning is conceptual art. I assert that art is a legitimate form of research, to arrive at the theory of art or of planning by means of a detour through the ordinary forces and conditions of everyday experience is part of the studio practice. The most primal necessity of an art practice, and the most paradoxically nimble and concrete, is the studio. The studio is a medium itself, in the service of other works - it precedes the sculpture, the painting, the video, the installation - it is inherently conceptual, interdisciplinary, and dichotomous. The studio is never only itself, despite its occasional autonomy and specificity. It is a real-time translation of form and space, context and content, intention and explanation. Since the studio practice is the sacred space from which the platforms of communication for all creative disciplines, even disciplines outside the fine arts - engineering, science, architecture, etc - emerge, it is the backbone of my planning education and future professional development.

are shaped for and by people and our places. To borrow from Lonnie Sandercook, “I see planning as an always unfinished social project whose task is managing our coexistence in the shared spaces of cities and neighborhoods in such a way as to enrich human life and to work for social, cultural, and environmental justice.” (Sandercook P.133-141) My practice as an arts educator combines the vocabulary, interests, and expertise of many disciplines. My approach to engaging students, academics and professionals seeks to develop holistic conversations that dissolve disciplinary boundaries. (Glebes 2018) As a planner and as a teacher, I aim to instill this same respect for, and an engagement with, diverse disciplines, opinions, and methods; maintaining and nurturing the community’s or the student’s ability to question—and to make—their own place and time.

As a teacher, artist, and planner/preservationist, I work to believe in people, helping them to become real. My engagement work with my selves and others embraces the lessons from the Skin Horse: becoming real takes time, it sometimes hurts, and it happens bit by bit, collaboratively. I am already on my path to real because I am loved. Though focused and intentional work, like that through which I guide my students, I will meet the magical nursery fairy that is in me, that has the power in the narrative to proclaim, “Now you shall be real to everyone.” (Bianco, 196AD)

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