

POWER OF THE TEMPORARY:
Social Art in Spaces of Transitional Living

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role of ephemeral and temporary artistic interventions into the systemic problem of homelessness and the question of sustainability in social art practice. I approach these issues through my work with homeless service agencies that are shaped by rules and procedures intended to increase predictability whereas as an artist, my work resists such rigidity by carving out space for spontaneity, vulnerability, and renewal. The dilemma of sustaining socially engaged art long-term raises particular questions within the context of institutions such as these. Can a project be successful as a temporary intervention within systems of predictability? If a project does become sustainable in the long-term, is there a way it can retain a level of energy incited by newness and unexpectedness? I discuss these issues in the context of two of my long-term projects, *Beauty in Transition* (2013-2016) and *Choreographing Care* (2016 - 2018), both working within homeless service agencies. *Beauty in Transition* was a pop-up mobile hair salon offering free haircare for transitional housing residents. *Choreographing Care*, a project supporting homeless service staff, started as a socially engaged art project and was adopted into an emergency shelter in Charlotte North Carolina, U.S.A as an organizational initiative.

KEYWORDS: Social art practice; homeless service agencies; anti-poverty support; sustainability; community driven collaboration; bureaucratic intervention

INTRODUCTION

Whether artists are responsible for sustaining social art initiatives for the long-term is a contested issue. With the rise in popularity of social arts practice, more artists are entering vulnerable communities and leaving once their project is completed, not always taking into consideration what happens next. This 'here today gone tomorrow' attitude can leave vulnerable communities back in the same position they started in, or as some may argue, worse off for having a glimpse of an unattainable utopia. The importance of resolving this ethical concern can be summarized in the controversy surrounding the *Gramsci Monument*, a project in a Bronx public housing project by Swiss artist Thomas Hirschorn. In brief, *Gramsci Monument* functioned as a community center that Bronx Forest Houses residents built and experienced based on Antonio Gramsci's premise that all men are intellectuals but not everyone enjoys that function in society. The project drew visitors from the New York City art world elite, deriving a clash of opinions voiced mostly by those not intended to be the work's primary audience. Critics of the project claimed its temporality only brought reminders to the Forest Houses community of services they don't have. Whitney Kimball, writer for a well-known art blog ArtFCity mused, "...was this a productive collaboration? Or an ultimate reminder of what the Forest Houses lack?...The one-time nature of projects like these reinforce the idea that sympathies and political ideals can be compartmentalized and laundered only through an art project as a hypothetical, single-authored

proposition." (Kimball 2014) According to Kimball, because the project was impermanent, it only posed hypothetical rather than real solutions to the multifarious problems faced by public housing project residents. Such critics believed the project's temporality created a bubble of false hopes that burst once it ended.

Hirschorn maintains his position that *Gramsci Monument* was intended to last a short time (one summer) and that the project's temporality placed heightened value in the present moment. He states that "It's a Monument which understands eternity as 'here' and as 'now'. I am convinced that ideas are alive forever – even without the "*Gramsci Monument*." The project may have been too grand to be sustained long-term by tight city budgeting, but it was nonetheless enacted in reality. However briefly, the project transformed potentiality into actuality.

The question of longevity in my own social art practice is a central concern of mine. While Hirschorn worked in the context of public housing, I work in the context of homeless services where these concerns face similar but distinctive challenges. I will look at the question of temporality as it relates to my practice-based research in *Beauty in Transition* and *Choreographing Care*. Both projects are grounded in conditions particular to homelessness and the agencies that serve to address it.

Social Context of Homelessness

I once walked past a shop owner in Brooklyn who was furious, yelling because someone had stolen one of her tall potted plants displayed on the sidewalk. "A homeless person stole my plant," she yelled to anyone walking by. "It must have been some homeless person!" Passersby were nodding sympathetically to avoid the shop owner's wrath. The incongruity of imagining a person who doesn't have a home stealing a huge potted houseplant was overlooked in the commotion. Misplaced outrage such as the shop owner's commonly plagues people experiencing homelessness. If you tune in, before long you might overhear someone asserting that a mysterious illness can be traced back to proximity with a homeless person. Or an unseen attacker, who despite not being witnessed, was likely one of the homeless people in the area. The seemingly trivial incident of a stolen plant underwrites a pervasive truth: the impoverished and homeless are among society's invisible, nameless scapegoats. The danger assigned to those who are poor speaks to people's deep fears of their own vulnerability, especially in America where independence and economic self-sufficiency are heralded as our highest values. Instead of hardening into stigmas, how can entrenched fears of vulnerability shift to service a more caring society? To cultivate grounds of vulnerability into a generator of social intimacy, I created first *Beauty in Transition*, followed by *Choreographing Care*. Both works address dignity and care within the transition of losing one's home and being rehoused, a process often aided by municipal homeless service agencies. *Beauty in Transition* focuses on clients of these services and *Choreographing Care* focuses on staff. Both projects are positioned within the framework of social art and exhibit a public component in hopes of illuminating some of the less obvious conditions of homelessness to people like that shop owner and her bystanders.

Shelter is Not a Home

When the label of 'homeless' is invoked, people commonly think of those who sleep rough on the streets or in train cars. While these may be the most visible examples of homelessness, they are the minority. The great majority of people use temporary transitional housing facilities such as

emergency overnight shelters, wherein social workers lead efforts to navigate complex bureaucratic systems to regain housing for each client. In the United States, unless a shelter is run by a religious organization, they are funded and mandated by a city oversight agency and managed individually by nonprofit organizations. This paper focuses on the latter. To keep order within an overcrowded environment, clients must abide by shelter rules with the threat that not doing so could lead to forfeiture of one's bed. Being inside by curfew, keeping bunk areas clean, signing out for smoke breaks, and meeting with case workers are some of the mandates one must agree upon to enter the shelter system. The New York City oversight agency, the Department of Homeless Services, advises clients not to get too comfortable in these temporary dwellings, stating in their client code of conduct, "Since shelter is not a home, but rather a stepping stone to permanent housing and rejoining the community, there are certain expectations for you while in shelter." As stated here, participating in a community outside the shelter is paused until housing is regained. Being only temporary, homeless shelters occupy a purgatorial space between where one was and where one ought to be. Temporary spaces are usually not meant to be comfortable, and even less so when the occupants therein are poor. But when a lack of affordable housing means homelessness can last six months or longer, and when staff occupy those same temporary spaces year after year, might we need to change those expectations of discomfort? Likewise, even though the condition of homelessness is temporary, isn't social inclusion a human need?

Social exclusion doesn't only affect clients; negative public attitudes toward homelessness trickle down to social workers and other staff of homeless service agencies. Being ostracized is compounded by the fact that homeless service jobs offer low pay and low prestige. While such institutions are meant to serve the public good, they are invisible to, and moreover, separated from the rest of society. It serves agencies well to remain invisible to local residents and business owners who may feel threatened by the idea of a homeless shelter in their neighborhood. Furthermore, the daily activities in homeless service agencies can be extreme, emotionally taxing, and difficult to translate to outsiders. This is in part because transitional housing occupies a transitory space collapsing private and public activities - what sociologist Erving Goffman years ago called a 'total institution.' The totalizing aspect of these institutions is that staff and clients alike are subject to rules and mandates controlled by an external authority, don't have a lot of independence, and are ostracized by the general public. In these restrictive environments, work can become a drudgery. The self-protective coping mechanisms staff use to just get through the day may become entrenched habits that promote passivity rather than empowerment to affect difficult situations. For example, when I asked a front desk staffer at a North Carolina shelter how he felt when he had to turn people away when the shelter was full, he gestured to a script he followed and told me he was thankful there is a script for every scenario so he doesn't have to think about it.

How can some of these habits be reflected upon through the vehicle of social art without disrupting the operational efficiency of homeless service agencies? Along with considering ways to shift experiences inside homeless service agencies, I have considered the reasons why I ought to, and what I could hope to achieve as an outsider with temporary projects. I did not wish to temporarily make homelessness more tolerable for the sake of asserting it should simply be a pleasant experience, but instead I wished to shift perceptions about self-worth and dignity in opposition to dominant cultural values. I also surmised that any way of relieving pressure on staff and clients while they navigate through the challenges of homelessness could be beneficial,

even if done through temporary care-based gestures.

The gesture of care through social art practice is not a one-way paternalistic service; care embodies an ethics of equality and is a tool to build connective networks toward that goal. In her monograph “The Ethic of Care” Carol Gilligan points out that within a patriarchal society, care is a feminist ethic that approaches justice with a relational, nonhierarchical, and anti-oppressive framework. She asserts that care and justice are synergistic and the ability to resist injustice is restored through the capacity to empathize. For this reason, positioning care at the center of a social art intervention is not about creating a frivolous feel-good moment; rather, it addresses equality through intangible and relational methodologies.

BEAUTY IN TRANSITION

Beauty in Transition was a mobile hair salon on wheels providing free haircare to those living in temporary housing. The project aimed to break down social stigmas that keep people who are homeless isolated and raise questions about maintaining dignity in addition to basic sustenance-level human needs within state-assisted programs. Partnering with a range of transitional housing agencies such as prison-re-entry housing, emergency overnight shelters and day centers for LGBTQ youth from NYC to Denver, Colorado, the project focused specifically on the condition of homelessness notwithstanding its cause. A salon that moves from place to place offers flexibility demanded by a transitory situation, as well as a private, safe space on shelter grounds that can allow the label of homelessness to dissolve. I secured professional hair stylists from top rated salons to volunteer styling services emphasizing a luxurious experience. A few of the stylists shared that the project brought them into a position to aid a community they were once part of. In addition, several residents in transitional housing had studied cosmetology and became service providers with *Beauty in Transition*. Consequently, shelter residents participated by either giving or receiving haircare, or as bystanders around the salon while it operated. At a glance, you would not be able to separate who was homeless from who was not. The project was evaluated externally by Jan Cohen-Cruz, Ph.D., whose report I will reference at times below.

Overcoming Stigmas

Many of the stylists who agreed to volunteer with *Beauty in Transition* already had an uncommon openness to community engagement or service. However, it was still common for stylists to feel apprehensive about visiting shelters. Some stylists were concerned about their safety and asked if security guards could be present and if they needed to wear extra protective clothing or gloves when touching homeless men and women. Instead of offering protection to assuage fears, I aimed to sculpt an intimate social environment where those fears could drop away - and where the human could be separated from the label of homelessness. This was partially done by sculpting social dynamics to facilitate a social gathering rather than a mechanical service. If there was a day I thought the social dynamic wouldn't gel, I opted to wait and run on a day it would.

One stylist who I will reference anonymously confided in me that she first had apprehensions about joining *Beauty in Transition* because her friends warned her that she could get lice or a disease. She said her fear quickly transformed into understanding when she realized people at the shelter were just "real people facing real challenges."

Identity Expression

Whether beauty is essential or nonessential would require a larger discussion than this paper provides. But I would like to suggest that the gesture of administering beauty services in relation to human needs evokes the issue of identity in relationship to social inclusion and exclusion. The temporary ability to control how the body appears to society has extra meaning within the specific context of homeless service agencies for two reasons. First, it is a way to access autonomy in a place where control over daily circumstances is limited. As I mentioned above, many rules are set and must be followed, and some items like beauty tools are not allowed in the shelter. Having the means to choose and control one's self-presentation is something most of us take for granted. Hair in particular has a deep connection to cultural identity expression. Without the ability to control how we appear to society, we lose our ability to control our cultural signifiers and we risk being ostracized and isolated from larger and more sustaining social participation. Second, for those without housing, identity expression through the body takes on an additional significance. For those with housing, that private space becomes an extension of the body – a second barrier of protection against public spaces that must be entered. For the unhoused, public spaces are never escaped - the body is exposed and public at all times, even at the shelter. Underlining the importance of identity expression in the context of homelessness, Cohen-Cruz states, "That the unspoken contextual element is people who've lost something, and have had to shed part of their physical being, shapes the mobile salon experience. When you're homeless you essentially no longer have things to define you. You are your body, so how your face and hair look take on a greater portion of your identity."

Sustainability

In regards to the question of sustaining *Beauty in Transition* as a regularly expected service, one resident of a shelter said, "Consistency is a big deal in the shelter; there's so much we can't control. If we could know this truck was coming every other week, say, it would be terrific. Also if you look good you feel better. You have a better sense of yourself—that you are worth doing this for." For despite the project's momentary value felt by some residents, hair grows out, color fades, split ends return.

How would one repeat those moments of care in perpetuity, and extend the timeframe in which they could happen? In New York City alone, if *Beauty in Transition* went only every other week to the over 600 shelters in the city, we would need a fleet of approximately 44 mobile salons all running 7 days of the week. Even at that scale, we would only be able to administer haircare to a small percentage of clients at each shelter. In the face of these numbers it's difficult to see the small gesture of doing hair out of a mobile salon as anything but temporary. Aside from the question of feasibility and scale, maintaining *Beauty in Transition* as a regular service would lose part of what gave the project value. There is a special charge of novelty that social art can bring into spaces where it is not expected. *Beauty in Transition* was a strange sight to behold - it took the form of a nondescript, industrial truck that opened into a small, handmade salon with tiled flooring and wooden walls stained dusty rose. It was complete with a hair washing station and two comfortable chairs for styling that some referred to as a 'dollhouse.' A potted plant hanged off the door, and wispy sheer curtains opened at the back of the truck so the salon 'breathed.'

Even outside the truck there was a charge in the air. While awaiting their appointments or waiting for the newly-coifed to emerge, sometimes people would spontaneously sing, or start an

impromptu dance party outside. Once, a karaoke machine materialized and a singing party ensued. A director of a Manhattan shelter compared the experience to seeing fireworks: “This was their fourth of July. They were playful with each other which was not typical since they do not usually have the opportunity.” I surmise that part of the reason for this energetic charge was specifically due to the knowledge that the truck was new, unexpected, and temporary. Consequently, I concluded that instead of repeating the same project as a sustainable initiative, it would be more vital to continue intervening in homeless service agencies with different projects. That way the power of the unexpected could be retained and different aspects that *Beauty in Transition* missed could be addressed. While clients come and go from transitional housing, staff remain there longer and I wondered if a project that addressed their experience could shift social dynamics at the shelter longer term and lead to system change.

CHOREOGRAPHING CARE

My next project, *Choreographing Care*, focused on staff at homeless service agencies and imagined what it would look like to sustain their emotional health in this high-pressure, under-resourced environment. *Choreographing Care* took the form of an open workshop series for staff to process and transform stress and secondary trauma using somatic exercises rooted in theater, nonverbal communication, and performance art. Staff who participated were asked to explore thorny subjects related to their work such as the role of touch, power dynamics, and self-agency through body work and discussion. We drew upon Theater of the Oppressed, a series of methods that Augusto Boal began developing in the 1960s, especially his Image Theatre technique, which use theater to collectively address shared problems, along with other established community-based debriefing techniques. Just as important as the methods we used was the role of agency buy-in. After much maneuvering with management, the workshops were scheduled during working hours as a paid part of the workday. This helped build a case for supportive ways institutions can facilitate active processes of self-care for their overburdened staff without adding an extra obligation to staff in their off time.

I first launched *Choreographing Care* in various locations in New York. Between August 2017 and May 2018, I worked with staff at two homeless service agencies, and then launched the most complete version of *Choreographing Care* in Charlotte, North Carolina. These agencies allowed me to sit in on staff meetings, interview staff, and attend their trainings. I initiated the workshops after conducting small-group forums with front line staff so that staff concerns directly informed workshop content. Evaluator, Jacqueline Larson, Ph.D. candidate in Health Psychology at UNC Charlotte, collected anonymous participant responses. I pulled the excerpts that follow from her report.

Unexpected Perception Shifts

I brought in guests from different artistic fields including music and theater to lead workshops on specific topics that I developed with feedback from staff. In addition, I facilitated, debriefed, and led some of the workshop exercises myself. Like *Beauty in Transition*, this was not meant to be a one-way service. One social worker based in Charlotte, NC, Heather Bartlett, also practiced theater, and was a tremendous workshop leader for multiple shelter staff including at her own agency.

One of our workshop leaders, Tiffany Borgelin, is a vocal wellness instructor in Charlotte, NC,

and certified crisis intervention counselor. She led workshop exercises in Charlotte on self-agency through voice. In one exercise, she guided staff to create a self-amplifying microphone with their hands and speak a desire out loud to themselves. Through this tactile exercise demonstrating intimacy with oneself, participants could hear their own voice amplified through their cupped hands. One staff later shared their thoughts provoked by the simple exercise despite their initial hesitance to participate in the project.

In that first day, that thing where we did our hands and we talked to ourselves [about what we want]. That was so powerful... I wasn't expecting to feel any type of way after doing that. But I was like, 'Oh! Yeah! I knew I was right.' ...I've reflected on that moment, of just saying something to myself and then validating myself – 'that's right. I am right.' You can validate yourself, I guess. Usually you get that from other people.

The results of these workshops were gradual, intangibly broadening perceptions regarding how staff saw themselves and each other in relation to their organization. Often during a workshop, unconscious thoughts rose to the surface, and staff began to see themselves as vulnerable yet capable humans with needs of their own. Participants like the person above voiced that the workshop helped them to trust their gut instinct, which was always inside them but had been forgotten or lost in the day-to-day. Another staff member voiced their perspective shift about a colleague:

Really clarifies and crystallizes things as a result of Image Theatre. It can be calming. I had premonitions about things, but it crystallized them. For example, a [colleague] with a reputation of being a curmudgeon - I saw his persona as stemming from a more vulnerable core. [I] was able to see him more vulnerable, complex being.

Sustainability

Staff from both shelters in Charlotte, NC --Urban Ministry Center (UMC) and Men's Shelter of Charlotte (MSC)-- expressed a strong interest in continuing their own version of *Choreographing Care* within their organization. I met with the Executive Directors of each shelter, along with a small group of staff to make a case for investing in staff support. We proposed to continue the project in a new form that would be developed by each agency. The director of UMC said he would form a self-care committee to develop the initiative and I gave them a guidebook full of techniques they could draw from to shape their own version of the project. Although I checked in several times afterward, the self-care committee had never been formed. One staff member told me it was because none of the staff were given a reduction of their other tasks to be able to take on the extra burden of managing a new program. Another staff member affirmed this opinion but went one step further to reveal the divide between social workers on the ground and their upper administrators in leadership. "Integrating self-care as part of the organizational culture would take someone stepping up to lead that. People in leadership roles aren't social workers. It would take someone on the ground stepping up and saying something. Finding time is really difficult."

At MSC, the Executive Director understood the value in adding vulnerability into the work culture, and was on board for the extra perk it might offer staff that she admitted were not paid

what they deserve. She seemed exceptionally committed to innovate and embrace complexities as well as large-scope advocacy that was rare in my limited experiences with shelter directors. Many MSC staff agreed with the need for the project to continue at their agency in some form, voicing that they observed internal shifts happening within their organization in the final workshop.

Two staff members were appointed to lead the new initiative for a 6-month trial run. They retitled it *Refresh & Recharge* because they felt *Choreographing Care* sounded too experimental and they didn't want to intimidate staff. To become sustainable, the project needed to be more accessible to a wider audience, with less novel content. Staff took turns leading warm-up and debriefing exercises, and they hired guest workshop leaders with whom I forged connections, paying them small fees that wouldn't burden the shelter's tight budget. Although the staff leaders were excited about their new initiative, it was a low priority and the bi-weekly workshops were often rescheduled whenever an urgent issue came up at the shelter. I noticed that there were some all-staff meetings that were never rescheduled, so I believe more groundwork would have been required to rearrange institutional priorities placing staff health first. After the six-month trial period concluded I asked if the shelter would renew the project. They said scheduling and managing the series on top of their other tasks was too burdensome, but their organization was already investing in a meditation class for staff and felt a new openness to looking at unconventional ways of supporting staff.

Although *Choreographing Care* transitioned from a social art project to an organizational initiative, it only did so for a short time due to unchanged institutional priorities and internal staff leaders feeling overburdened by the extra task. Even in the process of sustaining the project longer, it lost something of intrinsic value -- its novelty. Whereas staff leaders needed to make workshops more accessible and expected, I asked participants to stretch outside of their comfort zone and try something novel, hitting the sweet spot of newness, spontaneity, and renewal of their own capabilities that were always there. Some of that novelty was necessarily lost in the transition to longevity.

CONCLUSION

The space between temporality and permanence is on a spectrum. The projects I discussed in this paper are neither permanent, nor are they in-and-out one day projects. Nothing lasts forever broadly speaking, but as social artists, we would like a project to operate long enough to meet its goals. *Beauty in Transition* had relational rather than systemic goals, which were able to be met during the project's timeline running for 1 week to 3 months in each city it visited over the course of three years. *Choreographing Care* aimed for a goal of staff health that necessitated system change and deep shifts to organizational priorities, which was not achieved within the project's constraints. *Choreographing Care* ran for nearly one year in Charlotte, NC - long enough for shelter administrators to understand the need for organizational change. However, to truly shift priorities within a system, additional interventions are needed that would cultivate relationships with upper administrators, board members, oversight agencies, and legislative bodies. As cities become more open to innovate on approaches to homeless services, this is something I wish to explore in future projects.

Gramsci Monument ran every day for three months, and its initial construction by the community

also produced energy of anticipated newness. If any of these projects could be maintained permanently by people other than the artists, wouldn't that newness energy dissipate? Artists bring vision and energy as they explore new ground. When something stops being exploratory, it can lose some of that novelty energy. Giles Deleuze refers to the value of novelty to revive customary and established rule. He in fact perceives an enduring power in newness by stating, "the new, with its power of beginning and beginning again, remains forever new." (Deleuze 1994, 172) While social art projects may not last forever in principal, they can endure in spirit.

The potential of something new to charge energy into social service agencies is a particularly important discussion for me to continue with other practitioners. Modern bureaucracies often rely on rules and order to serve a high volume of needs, but they also need to be able to evolve and embrace change to understand new developments and empower their workers. Bureaucracies aren't very good at addressing intangible experiences and discretionary tasks that don't easily fit into rationalized metrics. Sometimes a quick charge from an outsider's perspective can awaken an overlooked issue. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead warned against traditional European philosophic thought seeking permanence at the elopement of other experiences, and reminds us that "changeless order is conceived as the final perfection...the result has been that the most evident characteristics of our experience has been dismissed into a subordinate role..."(Shaviro 2009, 74) Philosopher Brian Massumi also argues that it is much more utopian and hopeless to wish for long-term permanent solutions to social problems, and argues for restoring potentiality in the present moment. "The present's 'boundary condition', to borrow a phrase from science, is never a closed door. It is an open threshold – a threshold of potential." (Massumi 2015, 3). There is power in affecting change temporarily in the moment. "When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold." (Massumi 2015, 4). However small they can seem, temporary gestures have power to affect people in ways we can't foresee. Social art can recharge the present moment, reminding us we can begin again, and begin anew.

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