Artists in Local Government

Local government artist-in-residence programs must include opportunities for artists and public sector workers to collaborate on public sector innovation.

By Joanna Woronkowicz & John Michael Schert

In 1977, Mierle Laderman Ukeles became the unsalaried artist-in-residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation. The self-described "maintenance artist" became famous in this role with her *Touch Sanitation* project, which involved her shaking the hands of 8,500 city sanitation workers and saying, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive" while documenting her activities through photographs.

Ukeles' work is known as both political art *and* social practice art. Political art documents social and political systems, while social practice art relies on social engagement. Both share the goal of advocating for social change. Her work inspired New York City's Public Artists in Residence program (PAIR), which began in 2015. It matches artists with city agencies such as health, sanitation, and sustainability, so that artists can work "collaboratively" to "propose and implement creative solutions to pressing civic challenges."

Cities across the United States have or are starting artist-in-residence programs. They typically have artists work on projects within local government to enable them to use their creativity to find innovative solutions to public sector problems. For example, Boston's Artist-in-Residence (AIR) program states that as part of the program, artists have the "chance to exchange ideas and co-design civic practice proposals." Kara Elliott-Ortega, the City of Boston's Chief of Arts and Culture, hopes that future iterations of the program will focus more on "systemic impact through policy change."

While Ukeles helped lay the groundwork for artists working in the public sector, critics have argued that her work was less about social change and more about her own artistic practice. Similarly, current versions of local government artist-in-residence programs stop short of figuring out how to induce social change by focusing too much on the artists' narrowly defined art projects. Often what is missing from these programs is the opportunity for artists to work directly with public sector workers on addressing public sector problems. The artists are typically not involved in decision-making concerning policy design and implementation, and the provision of public services. Instead, artists are expected to focus their efforts on practicing their art, now

using a local government agency as their studio and being surrounded by an audience of non-artist workers.

By limiting artists' responsibilities to practicing art, local government artist-in-residence programs neglect finding out whether artists can offer new ways of thinking about public sector problems. One of the motivations behind artist-in-residence programs is that artists are creative problem-solvers and that they engender more creative environments. If this is true, then the presence of artists in the public sector could give way to more innovation. Local governments, by running artist-in-residence programs, should therefore enable artists to participate more directly in civic work, in order to see if they can stimulate innovation and spark social change.

Artists, Creativity, and Collaboration

Artists may be accustomed to exercising their creativity solely through their artistic medium(s). But recent research on pairing artists with industry, as well as the popularity of artist-in-residence programs in both industry and government, suggest that artists possess general factors of creativity that allow them to work across domains.

For decades, researchers have debated whether creativity is domain-specific or domain-general. If it is domain-specific, then an artist may be creative when practicing her art, but not when working in computer science. To be sure, people can be creative in more than one domain, but it is rare to find a polymath—someone who is highly creative in multiple domains. By contrast, if creativity is domain-general, an artist who uses creativity when practicing her art can also exercise that creativity in unrelated domains.

Researchers have also recognized that there are a combination of factors that determine a person's overall creativity. The current consensus is that some factors of creativity apply only within domains while others apply across domains and are more generalizable.

The amusement park theoretical (APT) model offers a convenient framework for understanding how creativity can be both domain-specific and domain-general by conceiving of creativity as a hierarchy of factors. The first level includes general factors, such as intelligence and motivation, which are necessary to any creative domain. The second level includes general thematic areas, such as arts, science, sports, and entrepreneurship. The third level includes more specific domains, such as music, visual arts, computer science, and psychology, that require specific skillsets. The fourth, and final level includes micro-domains, such as Haiku within poetry, Shakespeare within theater, and cognitive psychology within psychology, that involve individual specialization and expertise.

The APT model helps explain why industry and government, through artist-in-residence programs, seek to embed artists in non-arts settings to help others working in those settings be more innovative. The idea is that artists possess general factors of creativity that enable them to work across domains. Some of these factors include: adaptiveness to foreign environments, autonomous decision-making and idea generation, capacity to deal with uncertainty and discomfort, and willingness to depart from norms and create new frameworks. Moreover, depending on their medium(s), artists can offer domain-specific factors of creativity that transfer

across domains, such as spatial reasoning (visual artists consulting on urban planning projects) and analysis (choreographers co-designing public transit systems alongside engineers), and public-speaking (actors coaching lawyers on delivering effective courtroom communications).

The creative capacity of artists to work across domains is only one part of the formula for understanding how local government artist-in-residence programs can help stimulate innovation. The other and perhaps more important part is the collaborative potential of artists working with public sector workers to find creative solutions to public sector problems.

There are several possible mechanisms for understanding whether including artists in collaborative problem-solving can lead to more creative solutions. In general, research on team creativity suggests that the synergistic creativity of diverse teams might be greater than the aggregate of individual creativity, especially when accounting for inputs such as team composition and processes for problem-solving. For example, the creativity of a team can be enhanced through job-relevant diversity; artists can contribute here by having different knowledge bases and methods of problem-solving. Artists can also promote team conflict, prevent group-think, and encourage the elaboration of ideas among team members—all of which can bolster team creativity.

Artists can also act as creative role models through demonstrating, supporting, and encouraging engagement by non-artists in the creative process, in effect boosting the creativity of team members. Artists can illustrate the benefit of taking risks and accepting failure—in effect helping to create a safe space that is conducive to creativity. On the other hand, artists could also be detrimental to team problem-solving, given that some research has indicated that creative people have traits, such as fastidiousness and peevishness, that make them more difficult to work with. But the ultimate question is whether artists, on balance, can boost creativity and innovation in the public sector and whether the benefit outweighs the cost.

Public Sector Innovation
To get the most from artists in advancing public sector innovation, it is not sufficient simply to allow them to participate. Local government must become receptive to finding new ways to design and implement policies, and provide public services, either through product or process enhancements.

While the term "innovation" is not often used when describing public sector work, innovation does take place within local government. Many city governments create departments of innovation to emphasize its importance in the public sector. Furthermore, the term "innovation" might have a different meaning in the context of the public sector. Whereas private sector innovation often has to do with delivering economic benefits, public sector innovation goals often include improvements in the quality of production or delivery of public services.

The practice of introducing artist-in-residence programs in local government is an innovation in and of itself; however, the application of integrating artists' abilities in public sector work is still relatively foreign. To date, there are too few examples of artists working with public sector workers in finding innovative solutions to public sector problems.

Nevertheless, there is ample opportunity to understand the role of artists in public sector problem-solving. First, existing local government artist-in-residence programs can be a vehicle for discovering the transferability of artist skill-sets to the public sector. Given the newness of many of these programs, there is still flexibility and leeway in program design and implementation. Programs could incorporate initial training periods where artists work within a specific local government department and become oriented with the methods and processes for how that department functions in delivering public services. After this initial period, artists could propose a project that addresses an apparent public sector problem with an explicit goal of providing a solution.

Alternatively, artists could be matched with local government departments with corresponding creative needs. For instance, in 2015 Los Angeles named oral historian and artist Alan Nakagawa the city's first Creative Catalyst and tasked him to help the Department of Transportation with its Vision Zero initiative to eliminate traffic deaths by 2025. Nakagawa has attended DOT meetings, helped officials with their communications to the public, and worked with local safety advocates to raise public awareness. This type of approach could ensure that residencies are focused on public sector and policy-related outcomes, as opposed to outcomes solely related to artistic work.

Second, researchers should study the role of artists in public sector innovation. The Arts, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation Lab, a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, is currently analyzing data from running experiments on collaborative problem-solving in the public sector. These behavioral experiments are meant to test the effect of including artists in teams of public sector workers tasked with proposing innovative solutions to public sector problems. Coupled with programmatic efforts, the results from these experiments can help illustrate whether the public sector has something to learn from artists in the way of innovation.

Most importantly, the opportunity to discover whether pairing artists with the public sector can be mutually beneficial is contingent on allowing artists and public sector workers to step outside of their prescribed occupational boundaries and work in roles that are unrelated to their specific domains. It might just be that art is universal, not to the extent that anyone can do art, but that art can be applied in universally useful ways.

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