

Integrating Art and Life

artway of thinking

interviewed by Mary Jane Jacob

Mary Jane Jacob:* So just what is artway of thinking?

Artway of thinking: artway of thinking is the name we gave to our research on making art in the public context. We started at the beginning of the 1990s, when a new and different interpretation of “public art” was being developed. We wanted to take the US practice of “community-based” or “new genre” public art and see if we could make the processes ergonomic, more sustainable. Creativity, multidisciplinary, and reading complexity were our main experimental paradigms. Our vision was of a more harmonious relationship between the individual and the environment. This research became for us a metaproject for the optimization of creative collective processes aimed toward a common good.¹

Then we realized this was more than a two-person project; we were always working with others. So by the mid-1990s we founded the artway

This interview with Stefania Mantovani and Federica Thiene began on May 24, 2010, at Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy, and continued online.

¹ The public projects and processes of artway of thinking will be documented in a forthcoming book, *artway of thinking life*.

of thinking cultural association (*artway of thinking associazione culturale*)—a multidisciplinary organization that activates collaborations among administrative institutions and other enterprises.

MJ: Where did you situate your role as artists?

AT: We imagine an artist as one who operates, together with other professionals, in the development of the contemporary society; a professional who is an asset, whose “plus-value” is to bring creative thought into planning, who has the courage to imagine outside the norm and bring innovation into production in many realms. With this image of the artist, the question that we have addressed in our research has been How? How can an artist bring creativity into socially responsible transformation?

Today, after living through such experiences, we can affirm that making art for us is, in principle, the way in which we create relationships in the world and through which we build life experiences. Being an artist is an expression of the soul that takes form in work and in daily life. We firmly believe that the responsibility of the artist is to act with awareness in order to produce and inspire responsible changes in oneself, in personal relationships, and in society. We have seen that we cannot bring to the world that which we have not already digested ourselves. We have recognized the value of operating in groups, creating together and in an interdisciplinary way. We have made this value our foundation, and from

this we seek to activate collective creative processes in social and public environments. And always to bring attention to social dynamics, with an intention to bring these into harmony, while furthering processes of personal and collective growth and positive change.

MJ: How do you guide that development? Can you discuss the structure or your methodology?

AT: The methodological model that we identified for the good governance of collective creative processes is based on phases, dimensions, and tools; it acts on the “creative fluxus,” on functions and dynamics, as in game theory. For this we developed a diagram beginning in 2000. It is the image of the methodology that we apply – a methodology that remodulates itself every time to address the given circumstances, yet without losing its essence. It is the vision of the interconnection between human beings and the environment. It is this vision that generates a creative act, responsible and therefore, free. We call it the co-creation circle.

MJ: This is an unusual term: co-creation.

AT: Co-creation is intended as an alternative to the creation of individual artists, authors, or creators. To create together is the goal we set for ourselves. It is an essential theme of our artistic research.

The diagram serves as a map or reference for this collective creative process. It is also a checklist, an evaluation system. By following the diagram, the process can be opened, allowing the process to function as an

incubator for one's personal and collective growth, and ultimately, as a generator for innovation that is sustainable and integrated into the environment—that is the totality of the human being, the society, or the ecosystem.

The result of each successful passage around the circle, each completion of a creative process, becomes a seed for the future—a responsible and collective act toward transformation—in which egocentricity and narcissism, as well as interpersonal confrontations, are contained and also transformed.

But it is important to say that all the parts of the diagram were drawn from our own experiments with them. We tested each aspect many times. When we started artway of thinking, we did not have a diagram. But we came to understand that the work was very important, and so we wanted to find a way to share how to do it. We had the will to integrate with reality, and not just overlay our processes onto reality. We had the will to work together. But this was not enough. So we decided to make a diagram. This diagram is the product of our evolution with others.

MJ: Did you have certain influences as you synthesized and tested approaches to arrive at a creative understanding of individual and group dynamics and the potential for collaboration, co-creation?

AT: Many. We drew from Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff's vision of a human being; the transformative value of the self-reintegration of our

multiple dimensions, as expressed in the Hoffman Quadrinity Process; Bruno Munari's ideas on creativity; Claudio Naranjo's vision of personalities; the concept of space-time in Einstein's theory of relativity; the idea of unity proposed by quantum physics; the interaction between organism and the environment in biology, as well as Fritjof Capra's research found in *The Tao of Physics*; the metaphor of the butterfly in chaos theory; Ken Wilber's integral theory; the action of the artist as conceived by Marcel Duchamp; Joseph Beuys's idea of social sculpture; and Michelangelo Pistoletto's ideas on the role of the artist in bringing about socially responsible transformation.

MJ: The chart functions on two levels: the individual and the group. The individual level is the baseline; it always is at work because a group is made up of individuals. So the individual, the self, is at the center. Can you explain that core aspect?

AT: The idea and the experience, as we state it, is that "each creation reflects its creator, both individual and group." This means that every creation reflects the human being who thinks, feels, acts. Harmony in the created work mirrors the balance of the individual being. Each one of us has four dimensions: intellectual, emotional, physical, and energetic. We have to harmonize and align these four languages every day, each time, because each one is telling us something. The diagram acknowledges

these four aspects in each one of us and collectively as a group. They combine to make up our point of view of reality.

MJ: Moving on to the next ring of the circle, we come in contact with the environment.

AT: The reality around us is telling us something: the diagram acknowledges its four aspects that influence and come into play in the creative process. So if in the first ring we see the Dimension of the Self, then the second one is the Dimension of the Environment, which also needs to be taken in consideration. In the environmental dimension we use the intellect to gather knowledge, that is, all the information we can find in the real world—data, written material, research studies, all the information you can find there. With the emotions we come into relation with others: making connections to other people and to the environment. The physical state of the environment relates to its available material and economic resources. Finally, the energetic state is related to its potentiality for growth and change, allowing for the generation of new points of view.

The four dimensions of the self and the four dimensions of the environment are the two platforms that need to be considered to generate a collective creative process or any conscious action in life. In the diagram, you see that the “self” or the “environment” is at the center of the collective creative process; it represents the reality observed by the

individual or the group that comes in contact with it and on which we act with awareness.

MJ: Then how does the creative process begin?

AT: The diagram functions like a map for co-creation processes, a tool to prevent getting lost while working. We divided the process into four phases: Observation, Relation, Action, and Integration. In our research, as we came to understand that *creation* is the result of the reflection of a creator, and for the group to engage in co-creation it needs to become, for a time, a collective body and take on the identity of “creator,” like an individual self, so we use the word “self” at the center.

Observation is when we collect information to produce a systemic vision of the situation on which we will act. And as we observe, we collect information in the four dimensions: knowledge, human relations, resources, and potentiality. During this phase, as in all four phases, the persons in the group need to remain also always aware of their own dimensions, as required for inner balance and harmony. For example, if in being excited about all the information you have found, you’ve become very tired but by the end of the day, forgetting to take care of yourself, this diagram can serve as a wellness-checklist. But it is almost impossible to be always aware of what we are doing, because we are inside the process. And by nature, as human beings, we are sleepers, so we can’t be fully aware of what we are doing. So we also introduced the external

observer who takes the position of observing the observers—ideally not emotionally involved, as far as possible from the conditions of the environment being addressed, and with an awareness of his or her own state of being. This person can tell you more objectively what is going on. If you do all of this without having someone observing from the outside, you're not being critical.

And *we* practice all this. We look at the environment, observing the reality of the situation or problem or set of circumstances. We observe in different ways and with different filters to acquire different types of information from which to understand the reality of the situation. We use also our sensitivity and feeling to connect to other people and establish new relations. We consider the physical condition in terms of resources and limitations, strengths and weaknesses, while staying open and readying ourselves to feel what is the potentiality for growth and the need for positive change. And when we are doing this, we observe ourselves, being conscious and aware of our own state—intellectually, emotionally, physically, and energetically—and we use this diagram to remember those parts of ourselves. In the diagram of the dimension of the environment, we add this: the “eye” of the self in the lower left corner.

MJ: From the diagram, it appears that once you have completed the observation phase, you gain intuition about the situation.

AT: From our experience, intuition comes during these moments of intense observation. Then in the co-generation phase, we share points of views, perceptions, feelings. There is a kind of creative chaos as making new connections, so we must arrive at some consensus, a feeling of unity, to go forward. This comes together in the form of a gesture. Its substantive results are forms of communication and participation in the creative processes by which the group becomes a network that can work toward the common good.

MJ: You have used the word “sustainability” in the third quadrant of the circle. We usually see it used in ecological terms—it’s very popular in terms of design today. How do you mean it in regard to the action phase of the circle?

AT: In the collective creative process, sustainability is the harmonic relation between resources and limitations, between the group and the natural and social ecosystem. To have a sustainable process, the group needs to remain open, reconfiguring functions flexibly to take action. Whatever is sustainable can be more easily integrated into the reality of a situation, and a nonsustainable action cannot generate wellness and collective growth. So it is necessary to consider the process’s sustainability, otherwise what takes place next as an innovation will not be of use, productive and integrated. We don’t want to build new

“cathedrals in the desert.”² Sometimes innovation becomes an obsession for the creator, a fulfillment of the ego. In the world there are many innovations that we actually do not need. Our use of the term is indebted to the 1987 Brundtland Report to the United Nations.³ When we look at sustainability we take into consideration its four pillars: economic development, social development, environmental protection, and culture. The problem with many artists’ projects is that they just do an action without considering the three other parts, sometimes even leaving off the observation part!⁴ So then their work can never become integrated into reality.

² See Jeffrey P. Stahley, “Building Cathedrals in the Desert: The Spanish American Short Story of the Neo-Absurd” (PhD diss., Boston College, 1997), and J. Hardy, J. “Cathedrals in the desert? Transnationals, corporate strategy and locality in Wroclaw,” *Regional Studies* 32 (1998): 639-52.

³ The Brundtland Report looks to sustainable development as that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. See “Our Common Future,” Report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (1987).

⁴ In 1998 the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud pointed to a contemporary art tendency characterized by “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” Cited in Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004), 51–79. See also Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: La Presses du Réel, 2002). This term has entered art language, seized as a handy moniker for a wide range of artists’ projects. Artway of thinking’s creative process diagram goes beyond these relational practices. Yet it also clarifies them. By situating the

MJ: Then this all comes together in the integration phase?

AT: Any change in a person or society, as well as any innovation, requires time to be absorbed. So we need space and time to fully develop a personal or collective process to the point of integration. And we need also time to activate the other parts of ourselves. The integration phase assumes this time lag for the “new” to become part of the collective consciousness. When an innovation answers dreams and real needs, it is more easily integrated into a living situation; it can create a feeling of collective trust. Trust innately boosts our well-being, which is also essential energy for co-creation. So integration is very important—it is the only way transformation happens in society. Moving from observation to integration, we grow together. And then another need presents itself, and we start the cycle again.

MJ: As we internalize the first three phases in the fourth, we integrate this change into our way of living and our point of view, so that the next time we go around the circle, we start with a transformed point of view,

“relational” in the second co-creation quadrant of the circle, artway of thinking shows where relational art lays (usually ending with the gesture in an art institutional space, not always concerned with an action and certainly not with integration), in contrast to their model of artistic practice, which, as the diagram indicates, is completed only when integration into life takes place. So “relational art” is, in fact, an apt label according to artway of thinking’s co-creation circle.

because we have responded to the previous action. László Moholy-Nagy said the artist is the integrator for society.⁵

AT: Yes—when the artist has a systemic vision and the feeling of unity inside and outside him- or herself, when acting in a sustainable and responsible way toward the common good, and when attending to the growth and wellness that includes beauty, poetry (*po-ethic*), and freedom.

MJ: Give me an example of when, as artists, you have been an integrator for society. A project in which you think, as artists, you have made an action that became integrated into the larger realm as well as into yourselves, so that innovation was integrated.

AT: In 2001 we were invited to participate to the exhibition *TerraFerma*, curated by Riccardo Caldura, a program of the Cultural Office of the city of Venice and the Venice Biennale, on the occasion of the opening of the Cultural Center Candiani in Mestre-Venice. It was to reflect on the city of Mestre. Our intervention, *MS3*, became a five-year project.

The city also requested that we involve young people in the process. So the first thing we did was to create a group, bringing in young architects and artists, along with sociologists. We did a workshop, learning how we could work together as a group, looking at individuals

⁵ “Our time is one of transition striving toward a synthesis of all knowledge. A person with imagination can function now as an integrator.” László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938), 17.

and group dynamics, exploring the talents and capabilities of each person. Then we went out and observed the context of Mestre. And we did it as a performance called *MS3 H24*: twenty-four hours of observation, from six in the morning until six in the morning the next day, looking at what Mestre was producing. We went around asking simple questions about this place that could create a changed point of view: If Mestre was a person, what would be its personality? Which diseases would it have? Would it be a man or a woman? What job would it have? and so on. We asked these questions to many people—from those in the streets to major urban developers, priests, teachers, vendors, students. . . . We were followed by journalists who reported on the experience, inviting their readers to come to our headquarters in the Candiani to express their views on Mestre.

During this observation phase, with the ideas, data, and information we collected, we had already started to relate with people by sharing and listening, and to locate possible collaborators. Because when you observe, you start to flow into the cogeneration phase that helps us understand which of the people you meet can be part of the process in the action phase. Intuitions develop. It's like reading; it's a fluid action. The lines in the diagram are an indication but in the process everything is dynamic. So, while we are working to produce a creative collective process, observation and cogeneration are connected. But it's very important to

analyze them separately, because otherwise you do an action that is just an emotional reaction to people's needs, instead of a sustainable process that will continue to develop in the future.

MJ: Which is why the diagram becomes a checklist as we move through the process. So what did you learn from the first two phases, your looking at Mestre with the people there?

AT: We came to understand that Mestre is a city of water where the water is invisible. Most of people who live in the mainland of Venice come from the surrounding islands, and water is part of their heritage. But in Mestre, the people are separated from the water by an industrial area. Here, water means all the reality of life that is going on in the port. We understood that the port and the people who were coming and going in the port were invisible. We are talking about an area in which three hundred thousand people live, and a port with another three hundred thousand seafarers from 120 countries coming in and out every year. So there are two cities, in fact, and one is invisible. In this we found a potential. The goal became to create a relation between the two cities. We intensified relations with the people in the port—authorities and others—and from that, developed an action. The action phase was the result of the observation and the cogeneration.

MJ: What action did you take?

AT: The action was the creation of a not-for-profit organization with the young people in the group, and also with other elements that we found during the observation and cogeneration phases: the port authority, the city of Venice, port entrepreneurs, and a Franciscan friar who was already helping seafarers. This organization helps seafarers enter the city, because before they didn't have any relation with the city and had no services. Reciprocally, it also opens the port to the city, so that citizens could regain a connection with that lost part of their history. Venetians have always been seafarers.

MJ: This was a volunteer organization?

AT: Yes. It is the Stella Maris Friends' Association/Seafarers' Welfare Venice, and the people working there are part of the original group—artists—along with other volunteers who have joined the mission. At first we led the organization, but after less than two years others were integrated into the system and they went on by themselves.

But during this action we found that we couldn't just have a volunteer organization because there were three hundred thousand people.

MJ: There was such a big demand?

AT: Yes, so we needed to find another structure. During the observation phase we got to know a social service organization in Mestre, Centro Don Milani; we had talked with them about the social disease of this city. In

the action phase we had asked them if they were interested in integrating seafarers into their social services. So instead of creating something new, we went back to them, and they offered a co-op that they had already formed but it was dormant. We said, “You give us the structure, because it’s already made, and we will activate it through our process of learning in order to make it an action that functions in the port.”

We created Passport, a cooperative in which Federica became vice president for the first year. Passport began with five paid workers coming from Stella Maris, serving seafarers with free bus service from the port to the different areas of the city and giving other services in two Seamen’s Clubs. Meanwhile the people from Stella Maris continued with cultural and social actions, promoting the idea of relating the life of the port to the city through events, international and local partnerships, conferences, fund-raising, and memberships. The two organizations are financed by unions, ship-owners, the city of Venice, the port authority, seafarers, and self-generated income.

And now there are two buildings, the Seamen’s Club at the tourist port in Venice and another in Mestre’s commercial port, where they can find Internet, newspapers, a small bank that allows them to send home their salary, shops with their local community foods, counseling, lawyers, doctors, unions, a lounge, a kitchen area, book and video sharing, and a play room where they can relax. They can receive a “portpass” card to go

to shops friendly to them in the city. This was one of the first actions that we made. At the beginning, when we did not have a building structure to provide the services, we asked the shop owners in Mestre to become friends of the seafarers, welcoming them in with discounts and a good attitude. The shops that take part in the initiative have a sticker on the door, and seafarers receive a map that shows where they are located. There is also a service, so that when seamen are close to Venice they call a toll-free number and say, "We are arriving." And they say, "I need to go to a doctor. I need to go to a church. I need to go shopping." And there is a little bus that goes and picks them up and takes them around.

MJ: So the integrated innovation is that now there are a host of services for three hundred thousand seafarers that didn't exist before.

AT: The innovation was that these two concrete actions made the seafarers visible. The goal was to integrate the two societies – the residents and the seafarers – into one. A collective process is integrated when the idea that was generated becomes part of the collective consciousness. And now this integration has led to more political and social integration. In Venice a portion of the port that was closed is now open, so Venetians can walk in the port. There are also some departments of the University IUAV working inside there. Every year there is an event when the port is open to everyone: Seafarers International Day is today a city event. In the past in Italy, seafarers were not considered as a category within the society.

People would say, “They are workers, so they don’t need anything.” The offices for social needs are there to help minorities, but there was no category for seafarers. But in reality they have many problems because they travel on the sea and things happen there. Maybe they’re not paid, maybe the owner of the ship abandons the ship, so they are . . .

MJ: Left at sea – the reality of the phrase.

AT: It’s really an amazing situation. But for us, to not even see those people as human beings was absurd.

MJ: The general population may have imagined that the companies took care of everything for the workers aboard their ships, but they also just didn’t hold them accountable because the workers were invisible.

AT: Let’s say that, for instance, one person is sick onboard. When they arrive at the port, if they’re not perceived as a human being, they don’t have access to care. So our innovation was to put that label on them as part of the society.

Ninety percent of the goods we use daily arrives by sea. Ports are designed to make goods arrive on land as quickly as possible. Very little is done for the workers, who spend six to eight months on a boat without stepping on land. There is also the problem of flags of convenience; the owners of a boat can change the flag according to their needs, and this determines the laws they follow. A ship is like a piece of floating land. So if in Liberia workers are paid five dollars per hour and they do not have

human or workers' rights, then that is the way they are treated under a Liberian flag. If in Indonesia there is the death penalty for a person who smokes marijuana, the captain can change the flag in twenty minutes by Internet, temporarily becoming an Indonesian boat and legally killing a member of the crew, and then change the flag again. So these people that are providing us with what we need, need to be integrated and respected as human beings.

MJ: Seafarers are actually making everybody else's—our—reality possible.

AT: Yet they were not "real." To be very concrete, when we needed funds to do activities for them—when this part of the population doesn't exist—every department we went to said it was not their issue because seafarers didn't exist on their list. So the innovation was to say, "Hello. They exist." And the integration is that after four years of fighting in the courts, now they are on the list of minority groups in society.

The innovation on the resource dimension of the environment is that now we have a new reality. Seafarers have places to go to get services. On the knowledge dimension, there is a new law that became possible once it was acknowledged that seafarers exist.

MJ: And on the relation dimension?

AT: Here the partnership with the public administration, local authority, the union, and all the nonprofit organizations and businesses have

changed how they feel about the situation, and these people have taken responsibility to act. And this innovation produces a new energetic field of experience, a new collective growth.

MJ: And this all began with an invitation from the Cultural Office of the city of Venice and the Venice Biennale. Did they stay in the process, or were they just there for the youth action and performance? Did they know what they were starting?

AT: They stayed only for the first part. From there we immediately shifted into the social and urban issues and began talking to people working in those realms, and the money for the project shifted. This was our work of art. Today we are not part of the two organizations; others are doing the job and pursuing the mission.

But as artists we stimulated a new vision for the city and made it possible. From a cultural point of view we also stimulated a new idea of space for artists to act. From this experience many of the young artists and architects in the group applied this practice in other realms, generating new groups and processes. The curator transformed the City Contemporary Art Galley into “an open space gallery” where artists are invited to work in the city and in participatory projects, and the gallery is used as a space to document the process. And processes, if they are integrated into reality, create space to restart the circle.