Compost and the Arts

How to keep the arts from dying of old age

AS220 StinkTank

25 June 2004

Between 1780 and 1790, Vienna boasted the composers Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, Franz Asplmayr, Luigi Boccherini, Giuseppe Bonno, Giacomo Durazzo, Giuseppe Ferlendis, Adalbert Gyrowetz, Michael Haydn, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, FranZ Krommer, Wenzel Krumpholtz, Antonio Salieri, Johann Baptist Schenk, Josef Starzer, Johann and Philipp Theimer, Alois Luigi Tomasini, Johann Baptist Vanhal, Georg Cristoph Wagenseil, and Anton Zimmerman. And also Josef Haydn, Wolfgang Mozart, and even Ludwig van Beethoven, briefly.

Between 1870 and 1880, Paris could claim the painters Frédéric Bazille, Edouard Beliard, Gustave Caillebotte, Félix Cals, Frédéric Cordey, Franc-Lamy, Armand Guillaumin, Jacques-François (a woman's pseudonym), Ludovic Napoleon Lepic, Leopold Levert, Alphonse Maureau, Berthe Morisot, Ludovic Piette, Camille Pissaro, Henri Rouart, Paul Signac, Alfred Sisley, Charles Tillot. And also Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, George Seurat, Edgar Dégas, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Auguste Renoir.

Between 1950 and 1960, New York saw the abstract expressionists Karel Appel, William Baziotes, Elmer Bischoff, Norman Bluhm, Louise Bourgeois, James Brooks, Alberto Burri, Jack Bush, Lawrence Calcagno, Mary Callery, Raphael Collazo, Edward Corbett, Robert De Niro Sr., Enrico Donati, Edward Dugmore, Herbert Ferber, John Ferren, Perle Fine, Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, Elaine Fried de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Morris Graves, Cleve Gray, Philip Guston, David Hare, Grace Hartigan, Al Held, Hans Hofmann, Paul Jenkins, Alfred Jensen, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Ibram Lassaw, Rita Letendre, Norman Lewis, Morris Louis, Conrad Marca-Relli, Joseph Marioni, George McNeil, Joan Mitchell, George Morrison, Robert Motherwell, Kenneth Noland, Louise Nevelson, Isamu Noguchi, Alfonso Ossorio, Jean Paul Riopelle, Richard Pousette-Dart, Ad Reinhardt, William Scott, Aaron Siskind, Theodoros Stamos, Richard Stankiewicz, Clyfford Still, Antoni Tapies, Alma Thomas, Mark Tobey, Jack Tworkov, Esteban Vicente, Adja Yunkers. And also Willem De Kooning, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and David Smith.

In each of these cases, we readily remember the few at the pinnacle of their profession, but few beside the devotées remember the names of all the others, despite the fact that all of the artists named above have work in major museums, and all the composers are ones whose works are still regularly played by choruses and orchestras around the world. This quirk of historical memory is easy to understand—there's only so much we can remember. Unfortunately, the quirk leads us to forget that every pinnacle has a mountain underneath it. Mozart was a genius, it is true, but he was a genius born into a milieu that was remarkably fertile ground for composers and musicians. Claude Monet was an original eye, but his eye learned from his friends and fellow rebels against the Salon painters. And whatever you think about it, Jackson Pollock's work wouldn't have made the impact it had on America had it not been for the ferment of the artists and critics who were working in the same place and time.

Arts policy in America is predicated on the search for the next genius: competitive grants and fellowships are the rule of the day, where a large number of artists compete for a small number of opportunities. Certainly there was competition in eighteenth-century Vienna. Not everyone could become a composer patronized by the Emperor, or the concertmaster at the Esterházy palace. But those who didn't could go work in the only slightly smaller musical establishments of the Trautmannsdorfs, Lobkowitzes, Liechtensteins and their friends, or at one of the dozens of choruses and ensembles at churches and theatres all over the city and surrounding area. The environment provided the demand (and the means) to support a fantastic flowering of talent, much of which is still heard more than two hundred years later.

Looking back, and trying to explain the phenomenon of Viennese music, it seem that it was due to more than just the selective munificence of the royal court and the aristocracy. It seems as likely that the large number of available venues and the supportive audience for new and interesting music were at least as important. At the distance of two hundred years, the point can only be debated, not settled. However, over the past couple of decades, we have been watching the arts in Providence, Rhode Island, and we have the following observations to offer.

In the early 1990's, a group of artists, looking for cheap, flexible space in which to live and work, began living in an industrial mill building in the Olneyville section of Providence. Dubbing it "Fort Thunder," the artists there lived all over the building, and worked there, too. There was a shared kitchen, a shared silkscreen studio and a large flexible performance area for anything from film nights to costumed wrestling, rock concerts to puppet shows. Around the corner from the performance space, there was "Cafe Intelligentsia" (a comic/zine library with an antique espresso machine), and in the very back there was a rehearsal space—filled with exotic noisemakers and encouraged by the lack of neighbors to complain about the

noise in this remote industrial area of the city.

The artists who made up the Fort Thunder community supported one another not only by sharing resources (apartments, studios, food) but by showing up for each other's performances and applauding or criticizing, buying or bartering for posters, comics, zines and recordings, and by collaborating on larger projects. Fort Thunder provided fertile soil in which these musicians, graphic designers and installation artists could grow. Indeed, the metaphor of a "compost heap" easily suggested itself to visitors greeted by rooms filled with bicycle parts, toys stuck to the walls and ceiling, and a communal kitchen often stocked with free food from local dumpsters.

To the surprise of only those who hadn't been paying attention, Fort Thunder was catapulted to international acclaim when Forcefield, a four-person collective working there, was invited to create an installation for the 2002 Whitney Biennial. The installation was favorably reviewed by the New York Times, and Forcefield made the cover of the November 2002 Artforum and also contributed a "Top Ten" list to their summer 2002 issue.

Another Fort Thunder group, the Drum/bass duo Lightning Bolt has enjoyed fame among the underground music scene for several years. The band has toured in Asia and Europe, as well as the US, and has their own DVD called "The Power of Salad." In April of 2004 the group entered into a new realm of notoriety when it recorded a "Peel Session" with John Peel of the BBC.

Not only did Fort Thunder foster the individual success of groups like Lightning Bolt and Force Field, but—before it was leveled in 2002 to make way for a shopping center—the space itself soon earned its own critical acclaim. What began as a place for a group of local artists to live and work soon became a music venue for bands from all over the world. Musicians came both to perform and to sit in the audience of the various shows that took place at Fort Thunder. In November of 2003, The Comics Journal devoted an entire issue to the artistic work of Fort Thunder residents and noted that the Fort was "important not just for the sum total of its considerable artists but for its collective impact and its value as a symbol of unfettered artistic expression." Even the physical space at Fort Thunder achieved national attention in summer of 2001 when the architectural publication Nest Magazine featured photographs and descriptions of the building.

In 1988, Shepard Fairey moved to Providence from South Carolina to attend the Rhode Island School of Design. At the time he was already part of punk and skate culture, but it was the sticker scene in Providence that played an integral role in his artistic development. Fairey goes so far as to say that it changed his life—and he's right. In the summer of 1989 he put up the first Andre the Giant sticker: a stenciled black-and-white face with crude handwriting

reading, “Andre the Giant has a posse – 7’4”, 520 lbs.” Today, 15 years later, the image can be found around the world. You’ve probably seen one, maybe in the airport, maybe in a bathroom. In fact, once you start noticing the stickers, you’ll realize how widespread they are.

The sticker itself came from teaching a friend how to silkscreen–he picked Andre’s image out of a newspaper to use as an example for learning color separation. The rest was an inside joke about skateboarding culture—specifically about the type of people who want to join “a posse.” The project gained momentum and media attention when, during an election season, Fairey pasted Andre’s image on one of the mayor’s re-election campaign billboards; at that point, a phenomenon was born. You may never have noticed these stickers, but others have, and the explosive growth of the Giant phenomenon is well-documented on websites, in magazines, and even in a slick coffee-table book called “Post No Bills.”

But this was not the work of one artist. Fairey’s studio in Olneyville’s Atlantic Mills was a mecca for skaters, who would often visit just to practice tricks in his half-pipe skateboard ramp. Fairey was equally at ease teaching kids how to skateboard or silkscreen. Many skaters, punks and local scenesters would come to Fairey’s studio with an idea for a poster or t-shirt, and he would patiently help them to print it themselves. By freely sharing his artwork, his space and his expertise, Fairey created a community. Visitors who received free stickers carried them to the ends of the earth. Fairey’s generosity was rewarded by eager volunteers who ensured the underground notoriety of the Giant graphics. This word-of-mouth campaign eventually created the market and validation necessary for Fairey to support himself as a full-time artist, though this did not happen until he moved away from Providence. He now runs a design/production studio, making T-shirts and posters, but also doing corporate graphic design work for companies like Mountain Dew and Mozilla, which affords him the time to, as he puts it, “travel around to different cities to put my stuff up and to make more posters, stickers and stencils, all the time.”

In August of 1985, AS220 (Arts Space 220) opened its doors in a third-floor office space at 220 Weybosset Street in downtown Providence. AS220 was established as an unjuried space where artists could perform, exhibit and, most importantly, commune. With eight hundred dollars and a manifesto, a small group of artists set a movement in motion.

AS220 was created as an intentional community, its values and practices designed to encourage experimentation and innovation, reaction and response. It was meant to create a dialogue amongst artists, and also between artists and the community at large. It was also created to be uncensored and unjuried. If you have work you’d like to show, you can show it at AS220, no matter the medium—video, painting, music, photography, drama—and no matter your experience. If you make art, you can show it there, period.

One consequence of this is that you never really know what you're going to see when you go see something new at AS220. Some nights, you're in for a pleasant surprise. Other nights may be different, but the big surprise is how well the founding notion has worked. Over 19 years, thousands of artists have performed or displayed work at AS220 and Perishable Theatre, its resident theatre. Many of them found the opportunity to present their work there crucial to the development of their careers. And many have gone on to great success: Cynthia Hopkins, a musician and performance artist, has won two Obie awards in Off-Broadway shows, and has showed work she developed at AS220 at the Whitney Museum, and Mass MOCA; Erin McKeown, a musician who lived at AS220 for three years, and started playing there, now has a touring career that has her sharing the stage with Ani DiFranco, Joan Baez, and the Dave Matthews Band.

AS220 has been incubator not only for artists but also for other non-profit organizations. Some of these, such as the Providence Black Repertory Company and Youth in Action, have gone on to purchase their own spaces.

The success of those AS220 has nurtured has gone hand-in-hand with the success of the organization. AS220 now has a $1 million-dollar budget, and owns its own 22,000 square foot building in downtown Providence, while managing two remote spaces—a gallery in the Rhode Island Foundation building and a 3,000 square foot working studio on the city's Southside. The organization provides live-in and work studios, galleries, performance spaces, a café and resident theatre, commercial tenants, darkrooms, silkscreen print shops, recording studios, youth programs, and more.

Most importantly, since its founding, AS220 has not strayed from its original mission. In addition to maintaining its commitment as an open, unjuried forum for artists of every genre, AS220 and its staff have also helped a number of other non-profit start-ups realize their visions. AS220 has been a catalyst for Providence's celebrated renaissance. AS220 is one of the forces ensuring that arts and culture hold a central place in our rapidly developing and revitalizing capital city.

AS220 was and is a strategic action in response to a community need, a focal point through which cultural activity is stimulated. AS220's primary purpose is to create opportunity. The underlying belief is that the way to ensure cultural vitality and quality of place is by providing opportunity for creative exchange. AS220's growth and success is due to its commitment to openness, and to its flexibility—its ability to adapt to the ever changing and evolving needs of our community and of our community of artists.

The three examples here: Shep Fairey's studio, Fort Thunder, and AS220, could be accompanied by many more we've observed in the recent history of Providence's arts scene. What

they have in common is a place where artists can come together, where they can show work to each other and to anyone else, and where there is always something happening. They are places to put up posters for events, places to have events, and places where having events is easy enough that you can spend time on the art and not on the arrangements. They are places of cultural ferment. One can think of the conditions that produce art as akin to a compost pile. Compost contains a little bit of everything, all mixed up, and decidedly not neat. But everything in the pile contributes to the final product: rich soil in which to grow your vegetables.

Trying to derive lessons for policymakers from these examples can seem challenging, and not only because our government and community leaders usually think of the unruly as to be avoided. No one explicitly set out to create the Abstract Expressionist movement, or Fort Thunder; they just "happened," through a lucky confluence of talent and circumstance. But this doesn't mean it's not possible to cultivate the circumstances. AS220 was a completely deliberate attempt to create activity, and it has succeeded far beyond even its founders' imaginations. It is possible to promote the creation of the kind of fruitful mess we describe here, but it's important to understand the phenomenon.

According to our experience, these are some of the important components of the kind of mess out of which grows exciting and interesting art:

- First and foremost, artists need inexpensive space in which to live and work. But space needs encompass more than that. Fort Thunder was a magnet not only because artists lived there, but because they could perform or exhibit there. It's important to have space in which to show work, whether it be the kind that hangs on the wall, or the kind that you perform. Our experience has also shown that the ease of making arrangements is an important part of the success of venues like these; spaces that are easy to use are spaces that are frequently used.

- We've also seen that another kind of space, shared resource space, has been consistently productive. Shep Fairey's studio was a place where many people could learn to make silkscreens, and use them to print posters, T-shirts and stickers. Fairey has moved away, but his real legacy may be the popularity of silkscreening in Providence, and the number of people his work inspired. AS220 has cooperative darkrooms and a print shop, and we've observed the same thing: people teaching one another, and using the shops as a focal point for joint work.

- The front window of AS220 is always covered with posters about events on its schedule and about other events around town. That is, AS220, for example, is a place to share information through old-fashioned means—posters, flyers, stacks of handbills near the café bar, and the people sitting around in the café—as well as the newfangled electronic email listservs and web pages. Posters are often seen as the enemy of tidy

streets and shop windows, but they are also a way that words gets out: a facilitator of ferment.

- Community is important. Finding kindred souls with whom to talk, collaborate or find inspiration is an important part of most artists' lives. Again, places to get together and find that common ground are crucial.

There are straightforward ways to promote all of these, and they need not be expensive, though most require a public commitment of some kinds of resources. For example, promoting the exchange of information can be as complex as setting up internet resources, or as simple as enlisting BID (Business Improvement District) workers to promote hanging posters, or at least not tear them down. Promoting space could mean finding and rehabilitating buildings, but it can also mean maintaining lists of available properties and interested landlords, and helping expedite code variances. Promoting community could mean establishing an arts center, or it could mean getting artists together for joint "gallery nights," as has been done in Providence.

The result of policies like this will be ferment. Not all of what grows out of it will be great art, but experience shows that with enough ferment, some will.

In 1644, the English poet John Milton wrote the *Areopagitica*, a plea to Parliament not to censor books. His point: that even bad books should be tolerated because truth rises from the ferment. "Opinion in good men," he wrote, "is but knowledge in the making," and he went on to say that argument and experience were what forge knowledge from opinion. He wrote that even the books bad enough to be considered "the dust and cinders of our feet," were to be valued because they "may yet serve to polish and brighten the armoury of Truth," and so must not be cast aside. Milton's pamphlet was the intellectual ancestor of the modern American guarantees of freedom of speech and assembly enshrined in the Bill of Rights and Supreme Court opinions. But Milton wrote not just a defense of free speech for the sake of political progress. His argument was also intended to apply to music, poetry, drama and dance, where he also held that the jumble of free exchange of ideas produced great work.

Milton dwelt on the contrast between ancient Athens, where "books and wits were busier than in any other part of Greece," and Sparta, where the people were "museless and unbookish," to emphasize that, with the benign neglect of the rulers of Athens, and the enthusiastic audiences for the work supported, Athens produced art that lives on 2700 years later. Lycurgus, the king of Sparta, on the other hand, offered support for the few poets and musicians he deemed important, and they helped him transform his society into the one we remember, but who remembers the Spartan poets?

Culture grows, expands, and explodes from the organic remnants of past cultural phenomena. Most often, the compost from which inspiration sprouts is unplanned: the artists who organized Fort Thunder were looking for affordable places to live and work, not for collaborative opportunities, and the skate punks at Shep Fairey's studio weren't doing anything more than pursuing their vision of cool. Whatever ferment went on there was an accident of people and place. But it doesn't have to be an accident. AS220 was founded to foster this ferment, and in its mission, values, core beliefs, and practices, it represents an organized, defined artistic compost heap.

You can grow things in a petri dish, but they need special care, and may not survive on their own. If you want to find something healthy, lively and strong, don't build a lab to grow it in; grow it in the dirt you make from your compost.

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