

Slought Foundation: Fostering Unhindered Dialogue Through Adaptability

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Summary

Slought Foundation fosters dialogue between artists and their wider communities as a strategy to bridge academic and public spheres. In doing so, they create new forums for intellectual engagement over a wide range of topics in public culture. Ventures have included diverse themes such as: *Architecture on Display*, a research project on the cultural history of architecture at the famed Venice Biennale; *How to Get Started*, a permanent and interactive installation that invites the public to add to a rare composition by experimental composer John Cage; and *Civic War and The Corruption of the Citizen*, a public conversation exploring the idea that individuals exist in a state of war in the everyday spaces they inhabit.

Slought Foundation's structure allows it to adapt to projects at hand. It retains a core staff, networks with a wide range of advisors, and bases its curatorial work on a dialogical process that mirrors the dialogues that emerge in its programs and exhibits. The organization takes risks

with program design and strives to be flexible from start to finish, allowing projects to evolve in unexpected ways and adapt to the political and social context in which they participate.

Mission and Structure

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“Curiosity should be understood as something that has the potential to challenge fixed thinking. Curiosity can be fundamentally destabilizing.”

– Aaron Levy, Executive Director

Slought Foundation started, over 10 years ago, as a five-year experiment. It emerged through an intergenerational conversation between co-founders Aaron Levy, Osvaldo Romberg and Jean-Michel Rabate. Together they established a series of live and curated events on the edges of the University of Pennsylvania campus, where Rabate was a professor. A major goal was to bridge the divide between the academic community and general public in West Philadelphia.

If the mission of Slought Foundation can be concisely stated, it is to provide an unencumbered space for dialogue about cultural and socio-political issues. Dialogue is a prominent feature of Slought Foundation’s work. The organization frequently interviews cultural practitioners one-on-one or places them in conversations

across differences in geography, artistic medium and cultural background. Projects that can be experienced digitally are archived on the Slought website, www.slought.org, so that they can continue to be accessed by the public. Aaron Levy, the current Executive Director, views the online archive not as a static repository designed to preserve the viewpoints of artists within it but as a dynamic collection of “case studies” that can be drawn upon as models for future cultural exchanges.

The structure of Slought Foundation is at once tight-knit and expansive. The core staff consists of the Executive Director, Director of Operations, and two staff who handle communications and exhibition strategy. However, their research and curatorial efforts are coordinated by a broad base of individuals that includes paid staff, volunteers, interns, fellows and advisory committee members. The group conceives of projects through internal discussion and through exchanges that individuals have with their own networks, be they academic, artistic or community-based. The organization then vets potential programs through a deliberative process that considers questions of value and feasibility. Decisions are guided by a curious spirit and preference toward institutional collaboration. Levy views curiosity as a force that can “challenge fixed thinking” and nurture innovative ideas.

Adaptive Capacity

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The adaptive nature of Slought is one of its distinguishing features. Its structure allows it to respond flexibly to ideas that emerge during program design and implementation, even when a project is underway. Slought Foundation has developed *adaptive capacity*: “the ability to advance the organization’s mission by strategically changing in anticipation of and in response to changed circumstances and in pursuit of enhanced results” (Sussman 2003).

Adaptive capacity is distinct from organizational capacity, which focuses on improving processes for more efficient program delivery, such as investing in a new database program or in professional development for staff. Adaptive capacity is also distinct from programming capacity, which speaks to an organization’s ability to deliver its services. Organizations can focus on either type of capacity as a way to stabilize operations and catch up with program delivery. But adaptability is inherently destabilizing—allowing staff to act nimbly in the moment and respond to emerging ideas—and Slought Foundation feels most comfortable living in this uncertainty.

A program that illustrates this adaptability is the *Perpetual Peace Project*, which centers on Immanuel Kant’s 1795 essay, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch.” It attempts to revitalize political discourse on the concept of universal peace by facilitating conversations across cultures about the potential for peace to be a “positive human construction” rather than merely the absence of war (Marc 2011). The project emerged in 2008 as the

result of informal conversations between Slought Foundation and individuals from multiple institutions, including the Syracuse University Humanities Center and the European Union National Institutes of Culture. It was conceived through dialogue rather than through one institution inviting another to partner. The project itself is not housed or funded by any one institution, and representatives from the partner groups operate its programs jointly.

Over time, the project has produced short films, art installations, workshops across several countries, and a UN symposium. Its scope and methods were not fully determined from the start. In fact, the organic nature of the project's conception has been mirrored in program content. Each program is a spontaneous response to Kant's original text. The films, for example, ask prominent public figures for their reactions to the text, and the interviews are very intimate, nuanced and minimally edited. The workshops are structured as roundtable discussions, and participants are invited to share their reflections with others in the room. Events that can be recorded are available for download on the *Perpetual Peace Project* website—even the audio stream from the UN symposium.

The project itself is a perpetual conversation. Because Slought acts as a convener and has not predetermined the thrust or content of discussion, the long-term structure of the project and its outcomes remain fluid.

Curiosity, encounter and exchange are themselves core values. As a result, the collaborating group is free to advance the project using whichever forums prove fruitful over time—whether workshops, exhibits or another format. They can adapt with agility as reactions to the core text unfold.

Adaptive Capacity in Practice: From Cultural to Political Dialogue with Fairytale Project

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"I've been drawn into the vortex of politics. I will never avoid politics, none of us can. We live in a politicized society."

– Ai Weiwei, Chinese artist and activist

Fairytale Project is a recent undertaking by Slought Foundation in collaboration with Hong Kong-based co-curator Melissa Lam. The project is an extension of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale* from 2007 and seeks to translate interviews with and questionnaires from participants in Ai's original project. As Slought Foundation embarks on *Fairytale Project*, the goal appears simple: translate various texts from Chinese to English. But as with all of Slought Foundation's projects, the process of program design is as important as its outcomes, if not more so. Beginning as an exercise in cultural dialogue, the

project became a site through which Slought Foundation's political conscience emerged in a particular form: participation in advocacy efforts. This tactic was impossible to anticipate at the outset and depended on Slought's adaptability for its expression.

In 2007, Ai Weiwei brought an unprecedented 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel, Germany to participate in the famed modern and contemporary art exhibition, Documenta 12. Participants were chosen by open selection on Ai's blog—a democratic process—and for many, this trip brought them out of China for the first time. Participants represented a diverse range of citizens, including farmers, teachers and students, all who likely would not have the means or opportunity to leave China. In this way, the title "Fairytale" is apt as it implies the improbable and enchanting nature of the quest (and fittingly, Kassel, Germany was the home of the Brothers Grimm).

Ai's Fairytale (2007) contained three parts, including two large-scale installations erected at Documenta 12. The third installation was the 1,001 Chinese citizens themselves. Participants were asked probing questions about identity, art, culture and their vision for a personal fairytale. These interviews were documented in writing and through audio and video footage before, during and after the trip. It is here that Slought Foundation revisits the project.

Slought Foundation's *Fairytale Project* attempts to translate, archive and curate the interviews conducted with the 1,001 participants. As an exercise in cultural dialogue, the project touches on issues of art, culture, politics, identity and dreams. Ai's original project intended to highlight people as individuals rather than as part of a group. Each participant has a unique view and contribution to the project through personal narrative. The interviews capture these narratives at a transformational moment in each participant's life, and Slought Foundation hopes to contact each participant in 2012, five years after the original trip. The outcomes of this potential contact are unknown.

On the surface, *Fairytale Project* is simple. However, there is an inherent complexity and need for sensitivity given the political tensions in China. While the Chinese participants of the original *Fairytale* were allowed to travel to Germany, the trip was still at least an intellectual risk, with participants being confronted with a new environment and new ways of thinking. Slought Foundation acknowledges its need to treat the participants and their words with delicacy, respect, and discretion.

Furthermore, the artist, Ai Weiwei, is also a controversial figure who has been openly critical of the Chinese government. In response to his growing internet presence and unrelenting public criticisms, Ai was arrested, beaten, his movements tracked by surveillance cameras and vans,

and his blog and Twitter pages censored. Most recently, in April 2011, Ai was arrested and detained by the Chinese government (Frontline 2011). It was not immediately clear the reason for the detention, but he was eventually charged with economic crimes (tax evasion).

In response, Slought Foundation and co-curator Melissa Lam publicly joined the fight for Ai's release. *The Fairytale Project* was interrupted to devote attention to advocacy efforts. Slought Foundation distributed notices decrying the detention and posted information about the incident on its website. Public events were held to educate people about the incident. Slought Foundation also leveraged relationships with local and international colleagues and used social media to protest the detention and advocate for Ai's release. Aaron Levy, Slought's Executive Director, even contacted high-level diplomats and government officials based in China. In order to avoid censorship the websites of both Slought Foundation and *The Fairytale Project* (www.sloughtfoundation.org and www.fairytaleproject.net) intentionally leave Ai's name blank even today—the hope is that supporters in China will still have access to information about him.

Ai was detained for more than two months and finally released on June 22, 2011 amid outcry from the arts and culture community and pressure from the U.S. and other international governments (LaFraniere 2011). But despite Ai's release, the fight continues. In keeping with their mission to be responsive to changing environments, the

next chapter for Slought Foundation will likely mean taking a more central role in advocacy and increasing the public dialogue about the intersection between arts and culture and socio-political change.

As stated by Aaron Levy and Melissa Lam after Ai's release, "Advances in social, political and environmental justice will need to occur in the years ahead, and they will require significant transformations in existing political and economic frameworks. However, these transformations will only be achievable alongside a radical rethinking of art and activism. We hope that a model can be found in the inspiring and inclusive cross-section of individuals and organizations that have come together in the past months to advocate for Ai Weiwei's release—including that of artists, journalists, cultural and civil-society organizations, as well as governments. There is a potential here to construct an extraordinarily powerful and sustained network for artistic advocacy in the months and years ahead that should not be overlooked" (Levy and Lam 2011).

Fairytale Project itself has shifted in the wake of Ai's detainment by the Chinese government. Slought Foundation continues to translate the many hours of transcribed interviews. But the project that began as a study on cultural dialogue has emerged into one that must acknowledge the complexity of artistic and cultural freedom and exchange in the face of external political factors. As the curator's statement explains, the project

continues to unfold with “the understanding that the process itself will be reflexively acknowledged and incorporated as it develops. This seems necessary in terms of the significance of the work, and is indicative of the conditions of art, artists, and institutions in the contemporary environment” (Fairytale Project 2011).

Fairytale Project is still a work in progress. Ai’s detention is now an integral part of the dialogue, though it is yet to be seen how this will influence the public presentation of the project. There is certainly a new urgency to make the translated documents available. Part of the ethos of Slought Foundation is the notion that conversation is never complete. It could be argued that once translations are finished and documents made more accessible, the work itself will offer up new paths.

Slought Foundation’s position in the cultural sector is intentionally responsive. Due to its flexible nature and the value it places on self-reflection and dialogue, the organization is not easy to describe structurally or programmatically. But its very ambiguity and complexity is what pushes Slought to inhabit a space unlike others—where meaningful commentary on socio-political issues emerges through collaboration and a willingness to adapt.

References

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