

INTRODUCTION: Toward a Cultural Prophylactic

In late April 2009, Andi Sutton and I performed a survey over two consecutive days at an experimental arts venue on the South Side of Chicago. The event was moderately well attended, tickets cost \$7, and a healthy spate of mostly object-based visual art projects lined the floor of the high-school gymnasium in marked contrast to our “performance.” Andi and I alternately donned business attire, lab coats, or tyvek suits while we occasionally supplemented our outfits with protective health and safety devices including surgical masks, chemical gloves, hand sanitizer, plastic wrap, and SAF-T booties.

The survey consisted of an oath, a written section, and a series of questions administered orally. It, along with our performance, combined aspects of instruction and information gathering. Together they asked respondents, directly and indirectly, to draw parallels between the notion of public health and the notion of creative freedom. The survey and performance also explored participants’ opinions about and understanding of the several sticky issues that fester beneath this relationship, such as those pertaining to cultural appropriation, labor compensation, gender discrepancies, racial diversity, and plain old self-worth. We sought to inquire: what of our culture requires protection? And what of it should we protect ourselves from?

Of course, the information *actually* gained was far more diverse and interesting than the questions we set out to ask: mainly, we learned (again) that people are *hilarious*. Random subjects were asked to create and wear a tinfoil hat, for example, or multiple pairs of latex gloves and a hospital gown. To others we would sit uncomfortably close or move distressingly far away. One gentleman cheerfully wore a double-gas mask throughout the verbal portion of his interview. Most seemed to enjoy the process, however puzzling, taking both the seriousness of purpose in the questions and the oddity of the interactions in stride. Some, however, reported feeling judged, left before completing the survey, or complained that they could not understand the subtext behind our questions.

Issues of cultural appropriation and cultural protection—and for that matter, public health—come to a head over matters economic. Tourism, copyright law, branding: these charged issues are all rooted in who has, or takes, the right to determine culture—and decide who will benefit from it. The influence of economics is key to our determining the stakes of protection, for whom, and from what, in order to create an environment of safe and healthy cultural intercourse. What follows is a selection of findings from our survey that pertain to these questions of economy: arts funding, federal spending, personal income, and related matters of capital.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Our respondents identified as the following:

- 36% Hot
- 64% Interested
- 10% Hip Hop
- 28% Punk
- 30% Anti-Capitalist

- 56% Caucasian
- 8% African American
- 5% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 3% Iraqi

They claimed to earn incomes varying between “None of your business” and \$40,000,000.00; including those who claimed to earn negative amounts per year (\$25,000 and \$20,000 were both cited), this leaves each respondent earning an average annual income well above the national average in a recession. Other write-in responses included “varies”, “some”, “solvent”, “enough”, and “student”. Several left this question blank or wrote in “none”. 52% of our respondents saw incomes fall in the last year; 32% saw an increase, and 13% saw no change. 3% of our respondents, when asked to “(circle one)” circled the word “one” in the question.

PRIORITIES

Asked to rank the following in order of “import to your life,” respondents assigned numerical values that placed priorities in the following order:

1. Physical Health and Safety
2. Food
3. Pursuit of Happiness
4. Art
5. Shelter
6. Entertainment
7. TIE: Candy and Ability to See Self Reflected in Media Images

Asked to rank the following in order of “monthly spending priorities,” respondents assigned numerical values that placed priorities in the following order:

1. Shelter
2. Food
3. Physical Health and Safety
4. TIE: Pursuit of Happiness and Entertainment
5. Art
6. Candy
7. Ability to See Self Reflected in Media Images

Asked to rank the following in order of “personal educational achievement,” respondents assigned numerical values that placed priorities in the following order:

1. Art
2. TIE: Food and Pursuit of Happiness
3. Entertainment
4. Shelter
5. Physical Health and Safety
6. Ability to See Self Reflected in Media Images
7. Candy

Finally, asked to rank the following in “the way you believe the current government would order them,” respondents assigned numerical values that placed priorities in the following order:

1. Physical Health and Safety
2. Shelter
3. Entertainment
4. Food
5. Pursuit of Happiness
6. Ability to See Self Reflected in Media Images
7. Candy
8. Art

TRUTHFULNESS

On average, respondents marked that 4.35% of their answers were untrue, highly questionable, or unverifiable, with most choosing to underscore or add notes to the effect that nothing is verifiable. Only 18% indicated that more than 50% of their responses were for various reasons not fully truthful or verifiable.

In addition to the acknowledged difficulty of verifying all data, everywhere, respondents expressed further reasons for a lack of factual data in the following percentages:

- 30% because of the art context of the survey
- 18% chose the answers that seemed the funniest
- 15% because the test was likely to be processed by machines
- 15% marked the answer “I don’t see how the truth here could benefit me”
- 5% felt that their pen didn’t work properly

PUBLIC HEALTH

Between corruption, branding, and community resources, 42% of respondents felt branding to be the most influential over public health; 31% chose corruption, and 26% selected community resources.

Asked to rank the following in order of relevance to public health, respondents assigned numerical values that placed their priorities in the following (descending) order:

1. Open access to contraception
2. TIE: The Plague and Health Care
3. Birth rates of developed nations
4. Homelessness
5. Democracy
6. Lifespan and age expectancy
7. Well Paid Doctors
8. The Prison-Industrial Complex

9. Independent Media
10. Media Conglomeration
11. Affordable or free Museums
12. Arts & Culture Funding
13. Fat People at the Beach
14. Cake and Pie Access
15. Hot Nurses
16. The TV Show House
17. Spitting on the Sidewalk
18. America's Next Top Model (one write-in response read, "Anorexia!")

YES/NO

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a series of questions, and the ratio of favored responses to disfavored responses is listed following their answer, except in cases where the answers were unanimous (with a 100% correspondence rate) or inconclusive (containing a 1:1 ratio).

- Do you consider yourself a commercial artist? No (2:1).
- Can everyone make art? Yes (10:1).
- Is culture inevitable? Yes (10:1).
- Does the future look good? Yes (2:1).
- Do you think your voice counts? Yes (5:1).
- Do you watch television? Yes (4:1).
- Would you donate money to a political campaign? Yes (2:1).
- Would you donate money a youth dance troupe? Yes (3:1).
- Would you buy a candy bar from a kid on the street selling them for his basketball team? Yes (3:1).
- Would you donate money to support your friend's art project? Yes (22:1).
- Is all money dirty? Inconclusive.
- Is benefiting from the labor of others dirty? Yes (2.5:1).
- Is benefiting from the labor of others without their consent dirty? Yes (5:1).
- Does everyone really "gotta eat"? Yes (9:1).

CULTURAL VITALITY & PUBLIC HEALTH

Respondents were asked to rate the following figures in terms of their impact on culture and cultural vitality, and supplied numerical or verbal responses. The latter were assigned numerical value. These indicate a perception of cultural power ranked in the following order (write-in comments added):

1. Community Organizers ("locally")
2. Oprah Winfrey ("mainstream," "she gets a bad wrap")
3. You ("locally")
4. Terrorists ("not in a good way")
5. Hugo Chavez ("yeah Citgo!")

6. Pirates
7. Jennifer Aniston (“idiot”)
8. Tipper Gore (“oppressive,” “supports her husband”)
9. Kal Penn (“no idea,” “isn’t he the new guy in charge of that?”)
10. Sam Zell (“Go Cubs!”)
11. Shepard Fairey

Respondents were then asked to rate the same figures in terms of their likely self-perceived impact on culture and cultural vitality, under the same value system as indicated above. These indicate a self-perception of cultural power ranked in the following order (write-in comments added):

1. Oprah Winfrey (“the hand of god”)
2. Community Organizers
3. Terrorists
4. Tipper Gore (“defender of righteous”)
5. Hugo Chavez
6. Jennifer Aniston (“once dated Brad Pitt”)
7. Pirates (“they don’t care”)
8. Sam Zell (“the hand of god”)
9. Shepard Fairey
10. Kal Penn
11. You

Respondents were asked what three factors determine their own vitality in the public sphere, and their top five responses, in order, were (comments also supplied):

1. Community support/Socialization
2. Receiving press on artwork/Media appearances (“isn’t that awful?”)
3. A sense of awareness/Presence/Deliberation
4. TIE: Labor/Sense of purpose and Art-making/Writing/Creativity

Other write-in responses, many of which featured physical aspects of public life, included: “Feeling informed/Able to access information”; “Supportive relationships despite opposing views”; “Depth of sofa indentation”; “if it’s raining”; “Amount of beer in fridge”; “Shoe relacing frequency rate”; “If one person on the Internet agrees with you”; and “if I am happy and not stressed out”.

Respondents were finally asked what three factors should be used to determine public health, and their top six responses, in order, were:

1. Barriers to public assistance/Affordability and accessibility of health care
2. Access to healthy/sensible food/obesity
3. Life expectancy and infant mortality rates
4. Homelessness rates/Affordable housing
5. Income
6. Access to information/Media
7. Happiness/Shooting for the stars

ANALYSIS

By our estimation, our respondents had drastically underestimated their own hotness and interest level, with a full 50-70% qualifying as “Hot” in our books, and interest level clearly being, at least in terms of taking the survey, closer to 80%. Additionally, many did not choose to identify racially, which should not be taken as a reflection on racial makeup, but as a reflection on an interest in engaging with racial identification. Based on visual data, approximately 90% of our respondents were Caucasian.

The close-to 30% of respondents’ identification as “punk” and “anti-capitalist” corresponds with one-third’s identification as non-commercial artists, but not necessarily with the 50% agreement with the statements that “all money is dirty.” (Keeping in mind that a belief that all money is dirty does not necessarily eliminate a need for it in modern life.) Relevantly, 100% of the respondents that claimed to earn over \$50,000 per year also admitted to providing untrue or unverifiable information, and claimed that their incomes had increased in the last year. My personal knowledge of the sole individual who responded to the income question with \$40,000,000.00 leads me to believe that he—being an art student—is either terrible at maths (and no questions on the survey gauged mathematic ability nor number identification) or is in this case a big fat liar, which his survey does indicate is a possibility. (25% of his responses were indicated as untrue or unverifiable, and humor and the art context were listed as reasons.) Overall, these potentially inflated reported incomes seem to indicate a desire for a large income that is entirely expendable—not based on need. No respondents, for example listed their income as \$0 and then indicated that they lied about it.

Likely, if given a large expendable income, most respondents would support the work of artist friends over youth sport or art programs; fewer still would donate to political campaigns. A major factor may be the discrepancy between one’s personal spending priorities as compared to the perception of the government’s: This ranks art dead last, below even candy.

A comparison of actual government spending to the respondents’ perception of government spending is even more telling. Using a wide latitude in our definition of terms, government spending priorities (as evidenced by 2009 awards, loans, and federal assistance) can be listed in the following order:

1. Entertainment (military spending, which accounts for 54% of annual budget)
2. Physical Health and Safety (Health insurance agencies, big pharma, state health and human services departments)
3. Pursuit of Happiness (motor vehicle manufacturer spending)
4. Shelter (state housing authorities)
5. Ability to See Self Reflected in Media Images (telecom)

This particular ranking lists first what in most respondents’ cases came second-to-last, although Physical Health and Safety is still granted prominence.

The popular interest in attaining wealth evidenced by the large reported incomes isn’t all that surprising, either, when compared to the 42% rate of responses that indicate branding (which impacts personal economics) to have more power than corruption (likely perceived as a governmental problem) or community resources. Elsewhere, however, the organizers of community resources—community organizers, a term made popular during

Barack Obama's presidential campaign—fared better, when respondents were asked to list various figures' impact over cultural vitality. Community organizers were deemed the most powerful, and the respondent her or himself was deemed the third most powerful. (Fascinating, then that when asked to rate his or her own perception of their own influence of cultural vitality, the respondent ranked her or himself dead last.)

When mentioned in the Public Health section, "The TV show *House*," produced a great deal of laughter, but was also intended to remind respondents that Kal Penn, a former actor on the series, had recently been named the Associate Director of the White House Office of Public Liaison. Still, the program was deemed to have little to do with public health—less even than democracy, independent media, cake and pie access, or hot nurses. Former bubonic plague scare-inducing saws about spitting on the sidewalk were overlooked in favor of listing access to contraception as the most relevant to public health, while arts and cultural funding ranked only 12th. It would seem contradictory, then, that "Labor" and "Art-making" were together ranked fourth most significant in determining personal vitality in the public sphere, except if we consider how rarely artists are taught to consider their work labor, a lesson that would predetermine a demand to be compensated for it. Despite one of the few self-proclaimed feminist's notes that anorexia inspired by *America's Next Top Model* may influence public health, the reality program was ranked lower than Penn's former medical dramedy.

The apparent lack of knowledge cultural producers hold about contemporary political figures in the public sphere is surprising. Chicago resident and owner of Tribune Media Inc., Sam Zell produces media that is consumed by 95% of North Americans, and thus quite literally holds more sway than any other figure on the "impact on cultural vitality" list. It is surprising that other image-makers, even those working on a smaller scale, wouldn't come across this information, especially considering the recent popularity of news stories about Zell's public proclamations that purchasing the troubled Chicago Tribune may have been a mistake.

Still, the cause may run deeper than a disinterest in news. Respondents ranked "Ability to See Self Reflected in Media Images" last (tied with "Candy") in order of "import to your life"; ranked it dead last in order of "monthly spending priorities"; and ranked it slightly above only candy in order of "educational achievement." Yet, some minutes later, respondents ranked "Receiving press on artwork/Media appearances" second in how they determined their vitality in the public sphere. The several embarrassed comments that followed this admission (exemplified by the "isn't that awful?" comment of one) seem to indicate that there's a shame tied to a desire for media appearances that isn't, for example, tied to a blatant desire for money—even in a crowd that runs 30% anti-capitalist, 50% of whom believe all money is dirty. It is, however, common enough in media reform circles to acknowledge that a loss of control over our ability to represent ourselves in the public sphere—represented by figures such as Sam Zell—is a legitimate political problem, and that seeking to be reflected in our own cultural products within a democracy is a civil right.