A Diary of the IMPACT Design Lab
September 2018
A semi-informal account of the process, the challenges and the people
By Ellada Evangelou

The IMPACT initiative is driven by “a vision for university-based and cultural institutions providing stable anchors for a multi-faceted field, an ecosystem that includes artists and cultural workers, peacebuilding practitioners and organizations, researchers, policymakers, funding organizations and philanthropic professionals”. The IMPACT Design Lab lasted 3 days, brought together twenty five individuals from all over the world, and has attempted to tackle the challenge of supporting the field to transition from individuals and clusters of activities to communities of practice and inquiry to a system of influence.

A picturesque New England suburb was the setting for difficult conversations, centering on ‘where do we go from here’. After a full year of work by a successful tri-part partnership (Brandeis University, Juniata College, and Maseno University in Kisumu, Kenya), a dedicated steering committee, a larger circle of 500 people from all around the world which emerged though research and online engagement around Arts, Culture and Conflict Tranformation, the challenge was collosal: What kind of structures and processes will build on the field’s strengths, address its key needs, and, at the same time, distribute power in ways that actively challenge patterns that have been prevalent since colonization? Where do we go from here?

And there was diversity, there was disagreement, there were concerns, there were challenges, but there was listening, there was understanding, there was synthesis, there was sharing, there were commons.

oh, and there was voting
The afternoon of promise, everything is open and possible. A room full of individuals, with personal expectations and promise. Refilwe Nkomo thought:

“My biggest question at the moment: how do we create more inclusive, more expansive, more liberatory and decolonial feminist futures, and imagine… that actual work of ‘imageneering’, that imagination and the work it takes to imagine something that is different from our current oppression, while currently existing in the complexity and mess of what that is? How do we even start to talk about futures?”

Lunch in the room with the ‘oriental’ wall paper, became a great first point of connection: the “orient” and the “occident”, colonial aesthetics and a first sharing of narratives of resistance and transformation.

How will we work together? How does everyone find their place? A mixture of academics, artists, students, technocrats, policy makers, NGO workers. The components of the ecosystem are diverse, and dialogue is based on each person finding the place where they feel comfortable to ‘be’, and take it from there.
A favorite reaction to the process by recent Brandeis Alumni, LaShawn Simmons:

“The empowerment of ‘I know this, I know this, I can contribute’, it’s the moment I’ve kind of been looking for this entire time.”

LaShawn Simmons (front middle)

Introduction to the IMPACT initiative: What is this project? What were our questions and concerns? What are we trying to achieve?

“people have been divided from each other, because of the hierarchies, such as being in the global North and global south, being in University research or working in the field. In order to be as effective as we can be, we need to cooperate with each other, we are dependent on each other, in ways that people were not aware. This is what we brought into IMPACT.”

A primary mapping of the field was an amazing challenge, for various reasons. Primarily it was the variety of experiences of individuals in the room. Creating a new, common vocabulary of past experience had to be negotiated. On the other hand, there was the fluid nature of the ‘subject’ of the mapping: the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation (ACCT) Field, still a fluid entity, both in practice and scholarship.
But the questions persisted, they were there and needed answering. So the work and contribution of Carmen Oleachea, were crucial. This is what she mentions in her article “Art, Culture and Conflict Transformation” (translation here):

“since the end of the 20th century, there is no field of knowledge that has not been questioned from one perspective or another: its veracity, its legitimacy, its interrelatedness with power, its usefulness. Nor is there any field of generation and transmission of knowledge whose authority has not been questioned and whose right to set standards and define contents has not been highly disputed. School, university and science have been losing their halo as places of prestige and are being questioned as regards their pertinence to respond to the problems that we face today.”

The next set of questions attempted an even deeper probe into the ACCT field up to date: What has research uncovered about “what has worked well” and “what has not worked so well” to date in building the field? What do these dynamics suggest about what’s persistently challenging in field-building?

The ‘outsider’ insight of Raj Sampath, a Brandeis professor of ethics, rights and social change, allowed the conversation to have a larger platform to stand on:

“What I saw was a great degree of cross learning and openness, from the practitioner base, from the experiential knowledge there is so much to think about. From a research perspective perhaps we can bring a perspective on how fields are built.” (…)

“The power of art is not something peripheral to a formalistic and institutional dialogue that is taking place around conflict. [We can find] a great degree of inspiration as to what art and artists can do in this complicated world of peace and conflict.”

Carmen Oleachea

Raj Sampath
Identifying Challenges in Field-Building: a primary one amongst them was to have a frame for the discussion which would suit a very diverse group of people, those who need lines and sentences, those who need sounds and colors, those who need quiet and reflection. The challenges of the field were discussed through the Cynefin Framework, introduced by facilitators Liz Dreyer and Richard Evans of EMCArts. This exercise required an amazing number of post-its.

As questions and dilemmas became more real and more crucial (e.g. what kinds of strategic interventions may make sense in a complex distributed field like what we’re engaged in? How do such fields develop strength?), there was also an intense need for grounding and perspective. Polly Walker offered inspiring insight:

“I see the changes in the field, I think it’s a very fertile space right now. Yes, there is a lot of work that needs to be done, but it’s a fertile space to take us forward in ways that will make a real difference in people’s lives around the world, in conflict resolution, transitional justice, in peacebuilding, and hopefully even in conflict prevention. As we learn these kinds of processes and we watch for the smoke and we see the fires of those impending conflicts, we can bring artists and peacebuilders together into creative collaborative responses, in ways that are fully human, to help restore [constructive relationships].”
The afternoon session was all about constructing, building the ACCT field, and addressing the magnitude of options and hinderances. The identification and/or improvement of existing field-building strategies was also at the center of the discussions. Lee Perlman states:

“Extending the reach of the ACCT fields, not just those who currently self-identify with the field, but many in parallel or connected groups, involved in development, human rights work, in ‘proper’ traditional performing or visual artists. [...] What I found exciting here was identifying how the work that we know so well and believe in so much, cannot just continue to exist for its own sake but needs to have much more reach and impact on circles both close and afar.”

Strategizing and the inherent traps of ‘us and them’ was addressed repeatedly; putting on different thinking hats, and having input by individuals in vantage points across the spectrum was eye opening. Johanne Bouchard, affiliated with the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights Office of Cultural and Religious Rights mentions:

“This was a strong word that was used in the workshop I was in yesterday: let’s avoid the traps of powerplay that have existed before and infrastructures that have powers over us, and in the end kill the creativity that we might need to move forward. This might be one of the challenges of bringing the two worlds together.”
That evening of the group gathered for a collective experience of sharing artwork, video clips, and conversations about each other’s work. Curated by Germaine Ingram and myself, the Salon appealed to another side of the group, the variety of expressions shown in the tapestry, and the intensity demonstrated in the quote from Colombian cultural worker, Angela Perez.

“There are also some people [in Colombia] that don’t want peace, because of the business. Gold is booming, and there is an economic base to this. (...) we are trying to enable people to imagine, that there can be a different future. It’s hard for people to imagine that we can do it in a different way. [Till now] we are subjects of war, we are not subjects of peace.”

Angela Perez
The morning almost demanded a reconciling with all that had happened the previous day, the intensity and the potential, the complications and complexities. And the future looming even more promising ahead.

“We are all working within transformation of conflict through the arts, and [asking] ‘now what?’ This ‘now what’ question, the fact that we can continue from this common ground and go further, is already a winning situation. (...) But I think we can start formulating a shared vision, a common need, and that’s what I found.”

Jasmina Ibrahimovic

Paradoxes and dilemmas were a feature of the conversation in the afternoon, navigating the complex challenges of field-building.

“I don’t know how often we put ourselves to a hard-nosed and steely-eyed look to what the impact is of our work, and how we can identify those aesthetic and artistic strategies that are most likely to have positive impact and where, because those strategies need to be different depending on where.”

Germaine Ingram
Sunday evening featured intimate dinner conversations among Design Lab participants, members of the Brandeis community, and Boston-based socially engaged artists. These dinner conversations were followed by cultural sharing from the Brandeis African-American dance group Toxic, and Boston area poet Ashley Rose, and members of the theatre collective Artists Theatre of Boston. The evening ended with a story telling treat from Design Lab participants Babu Ayindo and Refilwe Nkomo.
Monday, September 3rd

“There was a conversation what we had on the porch last night. Even though we are a group of people who are like-minded, we care about this, there are loads of differences amongst us, we come to this place from very different experiences. One thing that one person said was, ‘Who is not here?’, is there any transgender representation? But what I have seen is that people are embracing the idea of challenging their own fields.”

That encapsulated my feeling on the morning of the last day: overwhelmed by the possibility, embracing and planning how to go forward, now from a place of more awareness. So, as facilitators Liz and Richard put it, we were ready to leave the shore, following a different path. A participatory artistic activity led by Reilewe Nkomo, was a summation of the aesthetics of our learning about strengthening the regional and global field of Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation.

As creative and intellectual concerns intermingled, we asked:
Who does what next? What are the next stages of the IMPACT initiative? What do the timelines, resources and expectations on all sides for the period September 2018 – February 2019 (and beyond) look like?

In a final small circle of discussants, concerns were raised about inclusivity, with an example from the Virtual Learning Exchange:

“What do we do? How do we reach those we haven’t been able to reach? There are those who cannot participate in the learning exchange because they can’t speak or read English fluently enough.” Toni Shapiro

Toni Shapiro Phim and Lee Perlman
In their short article Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale (2006) Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze talk about social change, and how that comes about through Emergence, the life cycle of which they describe thus, “It begins with networks, shifts to intentional communities of practice and evolves into powerful systems capable of global influence.”

We had been considering the place of the IMPACT community and the ACCT field in the context of the emerging effort to involve arts and culture in social change mechanisms. The ACCT field seemed somewhere between networks (local clusters of activity) and intentional communities; in other words, they are clusters coming together to work around the field, carrying a first awareness of the existence of the field as a whole. As the Design Lab concluded, we were thinking about how an infrastructure for the field could facilitate the development of ACCT as a system of influence with broadly distributed power and decision-making authority that also creates sufficient coherence to influence policies that widen the space for our work.

The IMPACT Design Lab has provided the opportunity, through multiple perspectives, to discover ways in which this process can form a new ecosystem out of our local networks while also recognizing our interdependence. As the planning stage of IMPACT prepares to wrap up in February 2019, and the future steps are being conceptualized, new people, ideas, strategies, synergies and approaches have come together, aiming to populate and enforce the existing research, virtual exchanges and creation of a global community.

Stay tuned for the next newsletter, with more reflections on the direction of IMPACT, contributions from members of the community, and how you can stay/get involved.
First row, left to right:
Mary Ann Hunter, Australia; Emily Forsyth Queen, USA, Brandeis alum; Toni Shapiro-Phim, USA; Refilwe Nkomo, South Africa; Lee Perlman, Israel; Tom King, USA, Brandeis faculty.

Second row:
Cynthia Cohen, USA, Brandeis faculty; Polly Walker, USA, Juniata College faculty; LaShawn Simmons, USA, Brandeis alum; Kiran Singh, UK/USA; Clare Shine, Austria; Ruth Daniel, UK; Christine Vertucci, Philippines;

Third Row:
Emily Diouf, USA, Brandeis faculty; Shahid Nadeem, Pakistan; Carmen Olaechea, Argentina; Catherine Muhoma, Kenya; Sarah Terrazano, USA, Brandeis student; Angela Perez, Colombia; Liz Dreyer, USA; Richard Evans, USA/UK/France; Ellada Evangelou, Cyprus; Johanne Bouchard, Switzerland/Canada; Germain Ingram, USA.

Missing:
Raj Sampath, USA, Brandeis faculty; Madhawa Palihapitiya, Sri Lanka/USA; Kitche Magak, Kenya; Armine Avetisyan, USA, Brandeis graduate student