

Ghana Think Tank

A Participatory Media Case Study

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I. Ghana Think Tank: Dissolving Dichotomies

On a number of levels, Ghana Think Tank strives to dissolve dichotomies, or disrupt those notions of difference that perpetuate cultural misunderstandings and reinforce hegemonic power structures. By using self-organized citizen think tanks in “developing” nations to propose solutions to problems in “developed” ones, the project helps develop connections between cultural, social, political, and geographical groups that are often presented as inherently different or without points of convergence or intersection, presenting opportunities for intercultural connection and community interaction across false binary oppositions like *East/West*, *first world/third world*, *religious/non-religious*, *democracy/theocracy*, and *old/young*. In the context of participatory media, Ghana Think Tank also breaks down a very particular assumed dichotomy: that of *real/virtual* worlds.

A number of theories purport that the notion of any substantive difference between “real” and “virtual” worlds today is outdated, as the “tangible” elements of individual, communal, and social lived experiences offline are inextricably intertwined with online and digital media, tools, and platforms. According to Lister, et. al (2009), “[i]n networked, technologically intensive societies we increasingly pass between actual and virtual realities” (2009, p. 37). In turn, these authors emphasize that simulations and simulated environments “*are* real, they exist, and are experienced within the real world which they augment” [emphasis is mine] (2009, p. 44).

Charlie Gere (2008) argues for the value of our use of digital tools and culture to resist power and make social change, and Ghana Think Tank aims for social change and impact through innovative models for intercultural dialogue and community engagement.

I would add that the value of digital tools Gere puts forth can be maximized through *hybrid* approaches to resistance activity, and Ghana Think Tank is an exemplary project in the realm of hybrid online/offline programming and documentation that helps us move forward in theorizing notions and testing hypotheses of participatory media that abandon the irrelevant real/virtual dichotomy. Lister, et. al. help frame the notion of combined offline/online, or place-based/digital, or even (formerly) real/virtual participatory media designs and platforms and their value to digital resistance in new media.

Thus, both the formerly “real” and formerly “virtual” are *both* real, and a hybridized approach to socially engaged art and resistance activity is critical if such projects aim to reach broad and diverse audiences, create conditions for active and rich public participation and dialogue, engender transformative experiences for participants, move communities toward positive social change initiatives and innovative problem-solving techniques, open up space for dialogue and intellectual and political exchange, and experiment with new approaches to living.

As such, Ghana Think Tank is informed by Gere’s theory of the resistance capabilities of digital culture and media well as that of Lister, et. al, who argue that the notion of a real/virtual binary is a false dichotomy; Ghana Think Tank collectively embodies and practices these theories in such a way as to **test the hypothesis** that such resistance and cultural activity—especially in the context of relational/participatory/socially engaged art and social practice—is most effective when both place-based and online components are incorporated, dissolving the distinction between real/virtual (or rather, helping to define a

new norm that fully integrates both) that is in line with emerging research, theory, and practice in both participatory art/media and arts participation.

2. History and Overview of Ghana Think Tank

Ghana Think Tank (GTT) was created in 2006 by graduate students at the Rhode Island School of Design as an art project now also considered to be an exercise in community and cultural exchange. GTT is a “worldwide network of think tanks creating strategies to resolve local problems in the developed world” (2009, fphotogallery). This network includes self-organized think tanks in Ghana, Cuba, El Salvador, Serbia, Mexico, Ethiopia, Iran, and in a program for incarcerated girls in Boston, and are comprised of average citizens with no training or background in “international development” (C. Montoya, Personal communication, December 1, 2011).

Ghana Think Tank exists as a computer- and internet-equipped teardrop trailer that visits first-world communities and asks locals to identify “problems” in their neighborhood, town, community, or city. Those problems are sent to the “third world” think tanks mentioned above, which collectively propose solutions to these first-world problems. According to the GTT website, “[s]ome of these actions have produced workable solutions, but others have created intensely awkward situations, as we play out different cultures' assumptions about each other.” (Ghana Think Tank, 2011)

The final step of this exchange is for the “host” communities that initially posed the problem to enact one or more of the solutions proposed by the think tanks, thus experimenting with new methods for solving unusual problems. The results of many of these exchanges and actions are documented, publicly presented, and formally exhibited in partnership with art spaces, museums, universities, nonprofits, social service groups, and other commissioning or sponsoring institutions in the host communities, thus manifesting as both a social change-oriented and community-driven initiative and a contemporary art project, all the while serving multiple participant groups through positive, challenging, engaged interaction, including think tank members, host community members, audiences, exhibition viewers, and website visitors. Further detail on the step-by-process followed for each GTT project is provided below.

3. Project Purpose: *Intercultural Exchange through Experimental Problem Solving*

[Ghana Think Tank] has become a way to explore the friction caused by solutions that are generated in one context and applied elsewhere, while revealing the hidden assumptions that govern cross-cultural interactions.

– Ghana Think Tank website, 2011

Ghana Think Tank is a response to the problematic practice and power dynamics of developed or first world nations “saving” or solving the problems of developing or third world nations through organized initiatives. According to an interview with GTT (Tikhonova, 2011), “[a]t the heart of this project is socially mediated problem solving, an activity which bridges divergent cultures and technologies. The intention is to transpose parts of one culture into another.”

As discussed, in order to do this, the project partners with self-organized think tanks in the developing countries described above that generate “characteristically playful social interventions” in response to problems posed by communities in the developed/first world. According to Ghana Think Tank, “the ambition is to challenge the hidden assumptions that govern many cross-cultural interactions. Traditional power-roles are swapped, places are exchanged and communities are connected through what had previously been their differences.” (artspolicynow.org, 2011)

The think tank process is three-fold, incorporating *problems*, *solutions*, and *actions*. It begins with GTT’s trailer being used in an actual community in the developed world (e.g., German towns; New York City neighborhoods) to collect proposed *problems*. Host communities generally have some form of commissioning funding for GTT and work with project leaders to develop the procedural aspects of the partnership and the logistics of bringing GTT to its physical site. The problems posed by host communities might include those that seem curious, humorous, or even inconsequential, such as a town being “too flat and boring” (Karlsruhe, Germany) or that “PowerPoint is ruining our minds” (MobilityShifts Conference, The New School, New York); more broadly social, such as old people being viewed as a burden to society (Wales) or the lack of sensory learning in the digital age (MobilityShifts Conference, The New School, New York); to highly specific and divisive issues informed by ethnic, racial, and gender-based history, tension, violence, or social injustice, such as a lack of connection and communication between Serbs and Albanians across the river in the town of Mitrovica (Serbia/Albania) or high levels of police harassment (Corona, Queens, New York City).

Once problems are posed by locals in host communities, they are shared electronically with the self-organized think tanks explained above in any number of the developing countries who participate in GTT; the think tanks then generate and respond to the communities with proposed *solutions* taken from their own cultural and human contexts, thus contributing to a developing inter- and cross-cultural exchange between groups in two countries that probably know very little about one another, especially when it comes to the general public who comprise participants on both ends.

One of GTT’s core artists/group leaders, Carmen Montoya, describes the organization of think tanks and how they fit into the overall project scheme:

The think tanks grow out of personal connections with people in other countries or who work in domestic organizations...sometimes a think tank is a pre-existing group, as with Artistic Noise, who make up the Incarcerated Girls think tank in Boston. In El Salvador, the think tank is composed of people who run a community radio station. We are currently developing think tanks in the migrant worker community in Oregon through PCUN and in the Oregon prison system. We keep in contact with the think tanks via email, sending problems, receiving solutions and providing documentation and feedback about the implementation of solutions. (Personal Communication, December 1, 2011)

The third step, *action*, involves the initial host community implementing or enacting one or more of the think tanks’ proposed solutions, whether they seem to make sense or not. This is an exercise in experimentation that privileges the process of community engagement, dialogue, and exchange over end results. However, the larger public in a given host community has a chance to participate in actions either directly or through exhibitions in

museums, art spaces, or other public settings that display the results of this three-step *problem-solution-action* process and its documentation.

One example of this process is in Wales, where GTT settled on addressing the *problem* that “there seems to be a perception that old people are a burden to society”. The GTT think tank in Iran then proposed the *solution* that that communities collect “dirty” stories from their local old folks (that is, ask them about their sex lives). Communities in Wales took *action* on this by partnering with senior citizen centers to produce oral history projects that included recorded interviews with residents/visitors about their memories of first kisses, sex, love, and romance—which proved quite entertaining for the community! The final project was exhibited as a project of Ghana Think Tank at the National Museum of Wales.

Ghana Think Tank has a ten-year project plan. Group leaders will assess GTT in 2016 to determine how to proceed and take stock of shape, form, and direction at that point. After those ten years, as co-founder Chris Robbins stated in an interview, “we’ll see if it has grown into something else entirely...” (Personal communication, December 1, 2011).

3. Project Leaders

Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) graduate students and friends Chris Robbins, John Ewing, and Matey Odonkor founded Ghana Think Tank in 2006 as a ten-year project. After Odonkor left the group, visual artist Maria del Carmen Montoya, who also attended RISD, joined as the other project leader. Thus, artists became involved in the project through their shared education, intellectual exchange, and artistic collaboration and agreed to collectively develop, fund, maintain, and program the project.

Maria del Carmen Montoya is a new media artist who works in sculpture, performance, and video. Her work explores the personal, emotional, and utterly irrational tendencies of technology. Her collaborative projects include *WineBloodBloodLove*, a performance and sound installation inside the Herman Nitsch retrospective at the Station Museum in Houston, and the creation of *The Digital Poplar Consort*, a family of handcrafted wireless musical instruments used in a concert. Her most recent work *I Sky You*, winner of a 2009 Rhizome commission, is an installation that sonifies the radiance of chemically synthesized light. (www.eyebam.org, retrieved 12/5/11)

Christopher Robbins works on the uneasy cusp of public art and community action, creating sculptural interventions in the daily lives of strangers. He uses heavy material demands and a carefully twisted work-process to craft awkwardly intimate social collaborations.

He built his own hut out of mud and sticks and lived in it while serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Benin, West Africa, spoke at a United Nations conference about his cross-cultural digital arts and education work in the South Pacific, and has lived and worked in London, Tokyo, West Africa, the Fiji Islands, and former Yugoslavia. He has exhibited at the New Museum Festival of Ideas, Trade School at the Whitney Museum, the National Museum of Wales, PERFORMA 07, Nikolaj Kunsthallen/ Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, and been awarded residencies/ fellowships from Skowhegan, MacDowell Colony, Haystack, Penland, and Anderson Ranch, among others.

The Ghana Think Tank, a project he co-founded in 2006, was a finalist for the Frieze Foundation Cartier Award in 2010 and was awarded the Creative Time Open Doors commission for Public Art at the Queens Museum of Art in 2010. (www.christopher-robbins.com; retrieved 12/5/11)

John Ewing is a digital media artist creating public art with an emphasis on community participation. He works on large sustained projects that often last several years. He has exhibited at the National Museum of Wales, FACT, the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, and the Cambridge Arts Council, with upcoming shows in New York City and Shanghai, China. Previously he worked in El Salvador for two years, using the arts to organize and inspire dialogue about human rights. Other work includes projects in Nicaragua, Uruguay and Cuba, as well as various cities in the U.S. In 2009 he was a recipient of the Knight News Challenge Grant. The Ghana Think Tank has been shortlisted for the 2010 Cartier Award. (dm.risd.edu; retrieved 12/5/11)

4. Project Partners

Aside from the project leaders mentioned above, the following individuals/groups are involved with Ghana Think Tank as partner organizations, individual volunteers, or contracted consultants:

- **The Vera List Center for Art at The New School** (New York City) is dedicated to serving as a catalyst for the discourse on the role of the arts in society and their relationship to the sociopolitical climate in which they are created.
- **Kevin Patton**, Asst. Professor of Music and Performance Technologies at Oregon State University, manages GTT's physical computing
- **AJ McGuire** is GTT's webs designer
- **Rachel Pedderson, Catherine McTague, and Tom Kietz** were GTT's most recent associates.
- **Host communities** in the developed world, which put forth the "problems" to be solved by **self-organized, citizen think tanks** in developing countries, including Ghana, Cuba, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mexico, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iran, Kosovo, Serbia, and within Artistic Noise, a program for incarcerated girls in Boston, Massachusetts.

According to Carmen Montoya (Personal interview, December 1, 2011), "many of [GTT's] partners grow out of relationships in the host community and change depending on the context...for example, in Corona, Queens we worked with the Lion's Club, Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International, and Make the Road NY. In Karlsruhe, Germany we worked with Noah's Arc Senior Center, Movement Karlsruhe, a parkour [French martial arts] club, and improvisational theatre SERVIERVORSCHLAG." Thus, Montoya shares here GTT's model for temporary partnerships that are site-specific, culturally appropriate, and arise as obvious choices for collaboration based on the "problems" posed by community members as well as their choice of "action" or implementation of think tanks' solutions.

Upcoming project partners include the US State Department's smART Power program, the Bronx Museum of Art, and the Arab Image Foundation (Ghana Think Tank website, retrieved 12/4/11).

5. Funding and Resources

The following organizations have or continue to support Ghana Think Tank through grants, donations, and commissions. In turn, the group leaders often front the costs of various incarnations of the project until funding is secured through other means. Because GTT is not a 501(c)(3), it receives fiscal sponsorship through various entities when applying for grants, or group leaders apply for or seek funding individually or collectively as artists. Project leader Christopher Robbins has mentioned the group's interest in the possibility of pursuing for-profit, LLC status (Personal communication, December 1, 2011)

- **CEC ArtsLink** promotes international communication and understanding through collaborative, innovative arts projects for mutual benefit.
- **SUNY Purchase College** brings two styles of education—traditional liberal arts and sciences programs and conservatory-based arts programs—into close contact on one campus, thus striving to inspire an appreciation for both intellectual and artistic talents in all students.
- **The Rockefeller Foundation** supports work that enables individuals, communities, and institutions to access new tools, practices, resources, services, and products.
- **Queens Museum of Art** in New York City presents artistic and educational programs and exhibitions that directly relate to the contemporary urban life of its constituents while maintaining the highest standards of professional, intellectual, and ethical responsibility.
- **Creative Time:** Guided by a passionate belief in the power of art to create inspiring personal experiences as well as foster social progress, Creative Time strives to commission, produce and present the most important, ground-breaking, challenging and exceptional art of our times—art that infiltrates the public realm and engages millions of people in New York City and across the globe.
- **The Lily Auchincloss Foundation** supports art, preservation and community programs that serve to enrich the lives of the City.
- **Puffin Foundation, Ltd.** seeks to open the doors of artistic expression by providing grants to artists and art organizations that are often excluded from mainstream opportunities due to their race, gender, or social philosophy.
- **The Black Rock Arts Foundation** supports and promotes community, interactive art and civic participation.
- **The Greenwall Foundation** *formerly* operated an arts and humanities program focused on support for small and midsize New York City arts organizations, especially those fostering experimentation and creation of new and interdisciplinary work in theater, dance, music, visual and literary arts, and new media.
- **New York City Department of Cultural Affairs** (DCLA) is dedicated to supporting and strengthening New York City's vibrant cultural life. Among our primary missions is to ensure adequate public funding for non-profit cultural organizations, both large and small, throughout the five boroughs.
- **New York State Council on the Arts** is dedicated to preserving and expanding the rich and diverse cultural resources that are and will become the heritage of New York's citizens and believes in supporting artistic excellence and creative freedom of artists without censure, the rights of all New Yorkers to access and experience the power of art and culture, and the vital contribution the arts make to the quality of life in New York communities.

6. Participation Model: *Engagement in Both Digital and Place-Based Contexts*

Ghana Think Tank clearly, comprehensively, and purposefully embodies the participatory qualities of *community* (Week 9). As put forth in our course syllabus, GTT is a transmedia project “continually grounded in real history, real geography, and real time—what we know as human beings” (Participatory Media and Social Practice course blog; retrieved 12/5/11).

This is in part evidenced by GTT’s model of engaging real people from divergent cultures and specific communities through self-organized citizen think tanks in *developing* countries paired with the project’s connection to actual locals in host communities in *developed* countries who put forth the “problems” addressed by the think tanks. By using a physical trailer that travels throughout the host community seeking input and responses on community problems from locals in public spaces—while providing the privacy of the trailer and a personal computer to submit the “problems” in question—GTT welcomes input on civic, artistic, or even completely irreverent problems, questions, or concerns from concerned, engaged citizens or those who simply feel welcome to participate in a creative project thanks to GTT’s open forum and method of soliciting participation. The trailer could be parked at a commissioning art space, organization or institution, in a public square, or outside a government building—somewhere accessible and visible to the public. GTT project and partner leaders or volunteers are on hand to assist participants if they have questions or need help submitting a problem via the computer stations or other means.

GTT think tanks demonstrate very particular models for community engagement in that they are informed by culturally specific ways of organizing a group of people in a developing country to participate in moving the project through its process. While GTT projects have some connection to the think tank being formed in a given location, they do not necessarily know who will end up being in the group, only that the members will not have any experience in “international development”, which plays into GTT’s efforts to subvert the traditional top-down model of global problem-solving. Thus, these communities form somewhat organically—through a combination of in-person and electronic communication forums, or because they are all involved in another community project together (e.g., a radio station)—and manage their time, meetings, and ongoing contributions to GTT from their home site, on a volunteer basis, thus forming a community that connects with the project leaders as well as the host community to which they are posing solutions to problems, creating a larger, more complex network of intercultural exchange and dialogue that transcends the traditional notion of real versus virtual divisions of space, place, and time. The exception to this organic model of think tank formation/organization is the Artistic Noise program for incarcerated girls in Boston, which builds the think tank into its programming more formally.

Critical to Ghana Think Tank’s online presence and use of digital tools and media are documentation and archival practices for tracking each cultural exchange arising out of GTT. Initial community problems are often posed electronically through computers in the GTT trailer. Think tanks in developing countries document their decision-making processes through photo and video. Both GTT and its’ presenting partner organizations document and archive projects on their websites through photos, videos, news feeds, and blogs and through social media outlets, particularly Facebook and Twitter.

7. Community-specific Impact: Transformative Participatory Experiences

GTT co-leader Carmen Montoya tells a touching story about the impact of Ghana Think Tank that exemplifies the interpersonal connection and community collaboration brought about by successful GTT projects. Here she discusses an incarnation in Germany of a problem originally put forth by someone in Wales: “the elderly are treated like a burden to society,” to which Iran’s think tank responded, “collect funny dirty stories from old people.”

GTT was in Karlsruhe, Germany for the Global Contemporary Show. I arranged a tea at Noah’s Arc Senior Center in hopes that I might find someone willing to talk to me there. When I arrived the administrators ushered me into the back room office for a briefing. I was told that the center had hosted artistic projects in the past and that they were always very hard for the seniors. I was solemnly reminded that everyone at the tea that afternoon had lived through World War II, through terrible tragedies, had suffered hunger, sudden loss of family and friends, and other unspeakable events. Remembering the past was often an unpleasant exercise. I explained that I only wanted to socialize with them in a natural way and that there would be none of the typical prodding. My plan was to have tea and to have fun.

There happened to be woman there named Carmen who spoke fluent Spanish. She explained that she learned Spanish from her husband, with whom she had to flee to Holland to marry. In the 1950s it was illegal to marry a divorcé (her husband was divorced) in Germany, so they ran away together, leaving everything and everyone to marry in Holland. As we drank tea and ate cake, a far-away look came over her face and she said, "Oh, those were good days." She told me about romps in the bushes on the way out of town and was simply giddy after our chat. People around us became curious about the unintelligible Spanish and all the giggles, and soon people were volunteering and jesting about who was naughtier than the other. By the end of tea, we were all one enormous group of giggling senior citizens (plus me) vying for the title of "most naughty," grabbing at the recorder for a chance to go back to those "lovely days"... to kiss and tell. It was such fun. The uniqueness of GTT is that the project is about the community’s agenda. As artists, we are but catalysts for a dialogue just waiting to happen.

As Montoya says, one of the most unique qualities of Ghana Think Tank is its ability to create conditions for community to come together around what it is they need or want, not to impose solutions or notions of what works best elsewhere. The community’s “agenda” guides the project through both its process and its end results, which really don’t end, but rather reverberate throughout the communities it touches through conversation and dialogue, memory, and tangible change.

8. Methods of Participation

Ghana Think Tank’s process, methods, vision, and values all demonstrate an awareness of and emphasis on emerging arts participation theory and practice. For example, as previously described, GTT is committed to presenting its projects in both place-based and digital contexts, which allows it to serve the mission of many of its funders and sponsors in making socially engaged, community-oriented experimental art available and accessible to a broad public.

GTT’s combined use of electronic, digital, and place-based engagement methods demonstrates their value of a variety of methods of interactivity and presentation that serve

a number of purposes: participants with lower levels of media literacy can still participate in the project; those who seek more online interaction and exchange have a plethora of resources, information, and archival images and texts to reference after the projects are complete; funders can easily track the trajectory of a project; multiple partners can share the project on their own websites; and exhibitions of projects' final products can employ both place-based and digital tools for engaging current and new audiences, or those who were already a part of the project as well as those brand new to it. This demonstrates an awareness on the part of GTT of the need for multiple nodes of entry for participants and the provision of multiple levels and types of interaction and engagement options for audiences, viewers, visitors, and participants, which can be tailored in terms of cultural context, site specificity, media literacy, and community dynamics. The need for making diverse levels and methods of participation available to audiences and publics is an emerging best practice in arts and culture programming, supported by recent research from museum studies scholar Nina Simon in her book *The Participatory Museum* (2010) and The James Irvine Foundation's report *Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation* (2011).

9. Weathering Economic and Technical Challenges

Neither Robbins nor Montoya feel that Ghana Think Tank is currently faced with exceptional economic challenges, though they maintain that the project's operations are sustainable and lean, using as much recycled material and found resources as possible, and that they often rely on the generosity of volunteers. Says Montoya, "this is possible in part because the issues we work with are ones that rise up from the community and people have an interest in resolving." In turn, GTT's core artists (Robbins, Montoya, and Ewing) have other means of supporting themselves and so will often front the cost of an initial project while awaiting institutional support, or they will work for very small honorarium fees. "Funding has not been ideal, but we make it work," says Montoya (Personal communication, December 1, 2011).

However, Montoya and Robbins both agree that there are broader financial challenges to be addressed than simply the amount of funds that can be garnered to sustain the project in its current form. For one, because GTT was started as an independent art project by friends, it lacks a strong operational, managerial, and procedural infrastructure, including by-laws, a board, and clear guidelines for decision-making. Robbins identified the need for a consultant to address some of these organizational gaps and prevent future miscommunications or problems, especially as the project scales up. Robbins also discussed the challenge of responding to increased partnership and exhibition opportunities. "As we continue to work on the project, our sense of scope and responsibility expands," says Robbins. "We want to bring think tanks to the US and visit them ourselves. We want to extend the scale of projects beyond the relatively short (3-6 month) timescale of art shows. This requires longer-term partnerships that outlive specific art shows, and more funding and management than a typical exhibit." (Personal communication, December 1, 2011)

In response to such challenge and opportunity, the group has begun to reach out to non-art donors—such as those who make grants for community engagement and inter-ethnic reconciliation projects—as well as to much larger arts-related funders, including Creative Capital, the Rockefeller Foundation, and ArtSpace. In turn, the group has considered forming an LLC, especially in light of the fact that their work can be highly subversive and,

in some cases, even illegal. Another funding option, which has become more prevalent in the nonprofit arts sector recently, is fiscal sponsorship under an existing nonprofit, which could potentially provide both funding and legal protection. The group has also considered forming as their own 501(c)(3) nonprofit (Robbins, Personal Interview, 12/1/11).

Montoya discussed other challenges faced by the group. “We suffer from physical distance...[t]he three of us [Montoya, Robbins, and Ewing] are scattered in different cities and we feel we would benefit from extended time together, sharing quarters and having continuous contact during the execution of a project...life gets complicated and the logistics of the project suffer due to the demands of daily life.” Montoya is quick to add, however, that a “triangle”, or three-person team, is also “the most stable structure.” Montoya also mentioned that some of technological challenges—or at least a need for oversight and advancement in this area—have recently been addressed by adding Kevin Patton to the team as physical computing consultant. Patton creates custom technology for each exhibition (C. Montoya, personal communication, December 1, 2011).

10. Transcendent Communities: *Crossing Borders, Blurring Boundaries*

Some aspects of how Ghana Think Tank generates cross-cultural connection, communication, and community have already been discussed (see Section 6). To elaborate, it is important to draw attention to the project’s aims and successes in developing projects that put groups of average citizens in dialogue with one another using GTT’s unique, exploratory problem-solving method as an “ice breaker” of sorts in generating a connection. Both the think tanks in developing countries (or other underserved areas, such as US prisons) as well as host communities in developed areas have a stake in the process—and in some ways, the outcomes—of the action steps taken to implement the think tanks’ proposed solutions in response to the problems put forth by host communities.

This creates a literal exchange—often across a vast physical distance—between, as Ghana Think Tank terms it, “divergent” cultures. If members of either a GTT think tank or host community did not participate in GTT, they would likely never have the opportunity to be exposed to and openly discuss the cultural ideas and values of the other group and its individual members, nor to learn so intimately about a specific place, or geographical/cultural/social context, and the impressions, memories, associations, frustrations, and delights its own local community members have of it. For example, other than through the vision and mission of a project like Ghana Think Tank, how likely would it be for a group of poor Filipina immigrant women in Lebanon to become intimately acquainted with the local residents of Corona, Queens, New York and their perceptions of the place they call home? Ghana Think Tank’s mission and model break down barriers to intimate yet broadly human intercultural communication of this sort, allowing diverse cultural communities to connect.

11. Cross-Sector Interaction and Outreach

While also previously discussed, it is important to address these aspects of Ghana Think Tank’s organization in this context of cross-sector connection and collaboration. According to both Montoya and Robbins, they identify how GTT has already begun to actively diversify its funding sources across sectors, including turning to international NGOs, peace-building

initiatives, and grassroots community development organizations for grant funding and support. In turn, the individual projects conducted by or commissioned for Ghana Think Tank almost always work across sectors. A single project might involve place-based interaction (collecting “problems” from neighborhood locals using the GTT trailer) in front of the Queens Museum of Art or at the city- and cultural planning-oriented Festival of New Ideas in New York City; a think tank in El Salvador comprised of community radio station members; an exhibition of the project’s process, outcomes, and documentation at a local nonprofit art space for both existing and current audiences; and online image and discussion content on the GTT website or social media platforms that engages participations from across sectors and around the world.

An example of GTT’s success in this regard would actually be the hypothetical example described above, since it is really a combination of actual events and actions associated with real GTT projects. Another example would be a recent commission from the US State Department’s smART Power program, a new initiative that seeks to use art for international development purposes. GTT sees its role in this commission as one that would be helping a primary institution of international political power re-assess, problematize, and re-work standard approaches to international development. This commission truly exemplifies a cross-sector collaboration, in this case between international government and independent, experimental art (and between groups that demonstrate approaches to international and humanitarian politics that differ highly, if not being fundamentally opposed)

A future cross-sector partnership goal for Ghana Think Tank is its desire to branch out even further in establishing funding and collaboration relationships with non-arts groups while also expanding its audience and participation demographic—as well as the public’s perception of the program’s value—through this diversified funding/outreach model that exposes new audiences to GTT.

12. Putting Communities First: Contextualizing Digital and Participatory Media

Part of what makes Ghana Think Tank unique is that it strikes a good balance between using digital tools, media, and online platforms to augment its place-based programming while also incorporating some digital-specific elements. For example, without electronic communication devices, the “third world” think tanks involved in the project would never be organized or enabled to share solutions to first-world communities’ problems. In turn, computers with electronic processes for submitting community “problems” are set up inside actual trailers that visit physical locations and public spaces, thus concretely merging online and offline interaction, connection, and engagement. The project does a very good job of employing sophisticated digital tools and media and demonstrably recognizing their value while not privileging or glorifying them, thus exercising an awareness of the false complex politics and workings of technology on a social level in such a way that feels different from other projects we explored this term.

For one, Ghana Think Tank is not overtly political in its praise or critique of digital media or, alternatively, community connection. It truly seeks to empower communities to define for themselves how they want to approach addressing, resolving, and discussing local issues. If a given project were more “digital” in focus—such as the concentration on “digital problems” with the group at the New School’s MobilityShifts conference in New York—than

the level of digital presence and media that particular project might have on the GTT website would reflect this focus.

This awareness of the productive tension and relationship between digital/analog allows Ghana Think Tank to uniquely tackle community problems from a variety of angles, without prescribing a particular project or program design and taking it into communities. Rather, with very loose processes in place—and the provision of tools more than rules—the project opens up opportunities for community engagement and leaves doors for content, process, and results wide open, demonstrating its commitment to process and experimentation (and in some ways, resistance to quantifiable data) above all else, which in turn lies in its roots as an experimentation in socially mediated art, not a nonprofit organization, or a research initiative, or a public office.

While there is room for GTT to grow a more robust identity in the online sphere, it successfully integrates its place-based program through multimedia, is in discussions about more intentionally documenting and archiving its projects, and stays true to its investment in community change that comes from the people, not from GTT, thus ensuring that the development of its digital activity is never at the expense of the type of community engagement, participation, and accessibility its participants and partners seek and expect. Its simple DIY aesthetic, design, layout, and accessibility helps project both an image and substance indicative of accessible engagement and interactivity while leaving room to grow and advance in terms of technology, media, nodes of entry, and methods of participation.

13. Socially Mediated Art: *An Innovative Incubator for Social Change*

The very essence of Ghana Think Tank is its ability to create conditions for experimenting with social change methods through its own model of “socially mediated art” (mentioned previously by Robbins and Montoya as integral to the project’s vision and purpose), which meets the criteria for an “incubator”, or laboratory for testing out new and innovative approaches and models. GTT allows communities and publics to test out a new, subversive model for international “development” that brings ideas together across cultural and physical distance; the project privileges process over product and uses cross-cultural dialogue focused on solving even the most seemingly nonsensical problems or implementing the most apparently impossible tasks so that the dialogue and exchange of ideas and stories themselves—and the collaboration on a project across borders—are what allow for greater cross-cultural understanding and appreciation and an increased sense of empowerment for citizens everywhere, in both “developing” and “developed” places that really have far more in common than we are pressured to believe.

As previously discussed, another aspect of this innovative incubator model is that users engage in both very real, tangible place-based contexts (through community “problem” gathering, think tanks, and final presentations/exhibitions) as well as online through documented and archived collections of posing, working through, and actively addressing social, political, and cultural issues or problems that international participants can engage with, comment on, and connect through via the GTT and partner organizations’ websites and social media platforms.

14. A DIY Sensibility: *The Image of Ghana Think Tank*

According to Robbins (Personal Interview, 12/1/11), Ghana Think Tank both embodies and represents “a process meant to give people direct access to the decisions and projects usually run by large, far-off institutions.” Thus, for Robbins, the “DIY aesthetic” is critical to the operations and appearance of the project as it “[u]nderscores the idea that ‘you can do this’ or ‘this is yours’.”

Robbins also compellingly illustrates GTT in a way that informs its appearance and the idea behind its key message: “[o]ur works are often tangles of interconnected tools and media, with structures linking together any way they can manage, which is a visualization of the intuitive, dynamic connections we are constantly making...” (Personal communication, December 1, 2011).

The DIY aesthetic and appearance of accessibility that Robbins describes is evident in the clean, simple, unintimidating language, layout and organization of content on GTT’s main website, which carries over to its Facebook page as well as the messages it shares in public interviews presented on various online platforms. While one can easily dig into the more complex, even academic and highly political layers of Ghana Think Tank, the project succeeds just as well as an ongoing series of community-based experiences that are far more personal and communal than they are political.

If communities—and not political bodies of power—are the heart of GTT, then the project does well in making its online presence accessible to a broad public (albeit internet literate), keeping the volume of information presented through news feeds, blog entries, photo, video, and interviews reasonable and digestible while also being rich and well-edited, making it enjoyable for both those who want to skim and dive in. It will serve its devoted followers even better once the archive is more fully developed through both text and multimedia.

The group also understands the range of ages its project engages, as well as varied English-language skills of its partners and participants considering its international involvement and reach; thus, it is GTT’s responsibility to make print and web content (especially text) accessible and comprehensible. In terms of its symbolic and representational power, GTT’s DIY sensibility is critical in its alignment with the project’s commitment to subverting and re-imagining traditional power dynamics, hegemony, and dominant ideology in international relations and geopolitics and in embracing grassroots and community-based organizing and the empowerment of individual change-agents.

Montoya touches on individual and personal elements of the project as they inform simplicity, accessibility, and feasibility not just of graphic design and media interface but of structure, operations, and group dynamics: “One of the most important phrases I use when discussing GTT is “human scale.” Many of the problems we collect are deeply personal. These problems may seem insurmountable despite their personal nature and many of them are simultaneously ones that we all know. One of the few guidelines we give our think tanks is that solutions should be ones that can be executed by 5 to 10 people. This idea that enormous problems can be tackled by small groups of people through direct action is essential to our approach.” (Personal communication, December 1, 2011).

15. Future Development of Ghana Think Tank

Ghana Think Tank launched in 2005. As mentioned, its' leaders plan to keep it alive in its current form until 2015, at which time they will assess next steps, the state of the project, and whether it should be completely archived, handed over to other project leaders, or continue to operate and develop similarly to how it has been.

Says Montoya, "I see real potential in GTT as a process. I would like to see it work as a customizable strategy for grassroots organizing and community activism. I feel that this will grow out of the relationships we forge as we execute each iteration of the project. I feel the timeline will reveal itself to us." Montoya also feels GTT's online process is developing positively thanks to a recently redesigned website and an established format that combines blogging and archiving, which she says "has proven useful" in terms of the GTT's operations and goals (Personal communication, December 1, 2011)

According to Robbins (Personal communication, December 1, 2011), GTT is midpoint in its development and beginning to branch out beyond the contemporary art sector to incorporate and partner with international NGOs and various peace-building initiatives, community development, and innovation efforts.

However, Robbins is quick to note that the project is in much need of continued assistance and support: they hope to receive help in creating a book; they would like more assistance with grant writing, video editing, and filmmaking; and they require overall media assistance in order to create a more cohesive digital presence, image, and message. Montoya agrees that GTT could use a written document of processes and an archive of materials that have been generated over the years. (Personal communication, December 1, 2011)

16. Assets

For Montoya (Personal communication, December 1, 2011), GTT's most valuable assets are:

- The originality of the idea, its structure, and implementation
- The core artists involved in the project and their collaboration/cooperation
- The generosity of partners/sponsors/funders
- Human optimism; change can be made "from nothing but our own efforts"

From a case analyst's perspective, I would add these other resources based on my research:

- Well-established, high-profile funders in nonprofit/public contemporary art sector
- Support and respect from a diverse constituency: scholarly communities/academia, high art (contemporary), nonprofit/grassroots art initiatives, community groups, international nonprofits/NGOs, local and federal governments, both national and international, public art programs
- Home base of location-specific funding/support (New York City) despite the physical distance between core organizers and integral project members (e.g., think tanks)
- A clear process for projects to follow that still allows for unique, open-ended results
- Mid-scale support, involvement, and investment that is international in scope
- Active volunteer support
- Means for core artists to front some project costs before funding is secured

- Presence and recognition at regional, national, and international conferences, symposia, festivals, and other events across sectors, including Festival of Ideas for a New City (city- and cultural planning initiative in New York); contemporary art festivals, fairs, and biennials, such as the Shenzhen Biennial (China), Liverpool Biennial (UK), and Frieze Art Fair (London, UK); and academia, including the MobilityShifts Conference at the New School for Social Research and the ongoing support and engagement of SUNY Purchase.

17. Goals

Although not provided by interview respondents as a list, based on their other answers and my overall assessments of data gathered, I determined the following to be key project goals:

- Establishment of an LLC, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, or securement of a fiscal agent
- Enhanced operational and managerial infrastructure, including establishment of by-laws and board of directors or advisors and formal project guidelines/procedures
- Online archive of all projects
- Program manual or written version of each sub-project's process
- Enhanced online presence
- Re-design/organization of website content to aid in visualization of projects/process
- Increased, up-to-date social media activity
- More frequent in-person interaction and project work among three leading artists
- More robust media/relevant skills (filmmaking, video editing, and related archives)
- Assistance with publishing a book based on GTT
- Stronger partnerships/connections with major US funders (e.g., Rockefeller)
- Continued diversification of both monetary and collaborative partnerships (e.g., branching out across sectors to connect with international NGOs, peace-building groups, community development initiatives, models for innovation, etc.

18. Outcomes

- Intercultural exchange and dialogue in both place-based and digital/online contexts
- Practices in local problem-solving, experimentation, and innovation
- Culturally-specific, community-generated responses to self-determined problems
- A sense of community-based self-sufficiency, civic dialogue, and engagement
- Powerful anecdotes and testimonials from participants
- Actual implementation of a reverse international development model (developing countries offering development solutions to developed nations)
- A new notion of public/socially-engaged art focused on the experiences of individuals within diverse communities living in divergent cultural contexts
- Formal cross-sector partnerships, collaborations, and funding relationships
- Active website with developing documentation and discussion forums to help build an ongoing, cross-cultural online community around these and other issues (could benefit from more options for more advanced or engaged web users)

19. Impact

At this time, GTT relies on anecdotal and documentary evidence of impact, which in part stems simply from being an art project—literally, an experimental and conceptual project of artists—rather than a traditional social change/justice, education, or community development project. Says Montoya (Personal communication, December 1, 2011), “[w]e operate in the gray area between art and activism...[t]he products of the project are difficult to measure because the goal is a dialogue. How do you measure the impact of a smile or the sustainability of a handshake? We can’t really know this, so documentation of actions is our main tool for ‘measuring’ the process.”

GTT is unique in its value of immeasurable or unquantifiable influence and impact on communities, and their funders currently support this model, which makes the project stand out in the current nonprofit landscape characterized by strict requirements and demands on the part of funders and grantors, including clear assessment tools, metrics, and measurable outcomes.

In addition to Montoya’s story related earlier about senior citizens’ joyous and communal storytelling in Karlsruhe, Robbins recalls the powerful community-based social change in the town of Mitrovica (located between Serbia and Albania) as a result of a GTT project: “...half a dozen Serbs who had not crossed the river in Mitrovica to the Albanian side since the war ended in 1999 chose to cross that river in order to work with a group of Albanians to come up with plans (some of which they implemented) to help reconciliation between the two ethnicities. Not a huge scale, but an important step, and not something I had even considered achieving with that project. In an area where people are still being hurt and murdered because of this ethnic tension, after a decade of ethnic war, this was an important step” (Personal communication, December 1, 2011).

However, GTT leaders do anticipate that the project will branch out in terms of impact assessment and measurement in the near future. Says Robbins, “[i]mpact assessment is not generally a part of an art initiative from the artist's perspective. Institutions track economic impact and audience numbers, and as we reach into other fields, qualitative analysis of impact will become more important. For now, this is an art project bringing people together and helping them work directly with stereotypes with their own lives.” (Personal interview, December 1, 2011)

20. Participation and Engagement Assessment

In my overall assessment of Ghana Think Tank based on primary source document analysis and interviews, I can comfortably say that given such a lean budget and resources, the project has achieved a considerable amount in terms of short- and mid-range goals related to participation and engagement with communities. In the interest of not repeating what has already been addressed with regard to community building through place-based and online forums, it is important to also mention that GTT possesses lots of potential for diversifying and growing its audiences and increasing and enriching its online participation and engagement.

A short-term future goal for GTT should continue to be the building of a more multimedia-rich website that is still highly accessible, navigable, and unthreatening to visitors with varied levels of internet access and literacy. For example, a page devoted to video clips

would be an easy way for a visual learner or someone with a more active visual or aural participation style to engage. While this is not meant to be an educational project with concrete learning outcomes, it is devoted to diverse audiences and methods for community engagement, which might be better served through a website with more streamlined content that maintains a DIY aesthetic while also adding layers of complexity for those who wish to dig deeper or engage on multiple levels.

In turn, some re-organization of the website's map would better enable participants to follow the trajectory of a particular project and respond to and engage with it in a more informed perspective. For example, the GTT website might re-organize its information such that instead of group blog posts by the menu items *Problems*, *Solutions*, and *Actions*, it could instead lay out a timeline and process—with embedded photo and video—of the three-step problem-solving process for each project/community. This would allow for a shareable, transferable model since GTT aims for innovation and change in international development and community organizing efforts across the board. A different nonprofit, community, or arts group might be more willing and able to try out an appropriately modified version of GTT if they had access to a more straightforward visualization and account of the trajectory of one project from start to finish.

In connection with this, it might be effective to create a guide or set of tools—not unlike those used *The New Metropolis* or *Saving the Sierras* projects—that other groups can use to conduct similar problem-solving processes, especially if such a group is working to advocate for particular issues that are socially, culturally, or politically sensitive in their community.

21. Overall Project Assessment

Overall, Ghana Think Tank is an exemplary organization on the cutting-edge of experimental innovation invested in both intellectual rigor and accessibility for diverse communities, all the while maintaining a focus on the human aspects of the project and its ability to generate transformative experiences for participants in both digital and physical contexts—or perhaps in the space between the problematic notion of difference between the two. By purposefully—and often successfully—reaching out to participants, partners, and funders with similar aims and values, and by incorporating digital platforms as well as opportunities for place-based interaction, dialogue, and connection, the project continues to successfully develop as an alternative, human-centered model for social change (in this case, via the broad context of “international community development”) that proves—at this stage, through anecdotal evidence and qualitative testimony—of the value of its tangible short- and long-term impacts on the communities with which it works (think tanks, host communities, partner organizations, etc.)

My sense of this project is augmented through my interviews with its founders and leaders, who have helped me better understand the numerous angles through from which the project can be viewed and understood, thus making it a dynamic representation of cross-sector collaboration and multimedia innovation, indicative of the future of nonprofit, government, private, and arts/culture programming, while allowing its meaning, impact, and influence to take many forms. This is not a project that means the same thing, or looks the same way, to any two people, and that is part of its unquestionably unique value to its communities.

I also better understand the project in terms of its achievements to date and its future goals—all things that are manageable but require time, money, and people power. A clearer understanding of the project's history, inner workings, opportunities, and challenges allows me a clearer perspective on how it might move forward with its goals as well as the larger theoretical and practical contexts in which it situates itself.

Ghana Think Tank has captivated publics and captured sustained interest of major funders and partners. This can only be a good thing as it moves forward with expanding and broadening reach, streamlining operations, stabilizing funding sources, experimenting with new innovations, and developing models and tools for making processes more transferable.

In terms of its place in participatory media, Ghana Think Tank stands out as a promising example of a hybrid online/offline project that has worked hard at cultivating its place-based program aspects and is now well-positioned to move forward with advancements to its online presence and opportunities for community engagement through digital tools and media in such a way that audiences, participants, and partners will still find this arm of the project accessible and navigable. As such, Ghana Think Tank represents our contemporary cultural moment—the tension between place and space, analog and digital, online and offline contexts, and the promise of liminality to be found in the dissolution of dichotomy.

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