



Transdisciplinary Art

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This article outlines my work of a 30 plus year journey in building communities through art. What initiated my journey was my longing for a “dustless world” in the classical Chinese paintings, a Taoist ideal. As a community-based artist working with people from various communities in the world, I noticed that participants, from different regions and cultural backgrounds, of my projects often went through a process of individual and collective transformations despite the dire environments in which they live in. Over time, I discovered that my approach is transdisciplinary in nature and that the Taoist concept of Yin and Yang meshes well with the notion of the Hidden Third.

Keywords: Transdisciplinary art, barefootartists, community-based artist

1 Introduction: Transdisciplinary Art

I have been intrigued by Professor Basarab Nicolescu’s work on “Being transdisciplinary” and “The Hidden Third.” He suggested, “Being Transdisciplinary” is like a Zen koan: it has multiple meanings, depending on the level of understanding of the reader. Through my decades long work on community-based art, I would like to explore what “being transdisci-

plinary” means in the field of art.

Professor Nicolescu’s opening address at the ATLAS 2018 conference suggests that one of the meanings of “Being Transdisciplinary is Being of the transdisciplinary person.” It involves necessarily a spiritual evolution of a person, “enabling him or her to embody the unification of the Subject and of the Object through the action of the Hidden Third.” The Hidden Third seems to refer to the area between subjectivity and objectivity, the space between two opposites. It is dynamic and transformative. It divides but at the same time unifies.



The concept of “Being Transdisciplinary” brings forth in me the image of Tao. It is a circle divided by an S curve line. The pair of the opposites, the ying and the yang, the feminine and the masculine, the dark and the light, is locked in in an eternal embrace. Nothing stays still. These two opposing and yet complimentary forces are constantly moving to become each other. Each element contains the seed of its opposite and will eventually become its opposite. For the Chinese, this symbol suggests the way of nature, the cosmos, and its ever-evolving mystery.

Taoist teaching helps me to see things not only

as they appear, but also their potentials. This understanding is essential in the work that I do in broken places in the world. When I see deficits, I see resources on the other side of the coin. When I see poverty, crime and devastation in traumatized communities, I also see the enormous potential and readiness for transformation.

I am an artist but an anomaly in the art world. I define art as creativity in thinking, methodology, and implementation. I don't have a private studio. Broken places are my canvas; disenfranchised people are my team members. Together, we create art works that at the end belong to the people.

Peter, a conference attendee, asked me what is interdisciplinary art. He looked it up online but could not find much information. That got me thinking.

I approach my projects through interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary lenses, using my skills in the visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography) and collaborating with people practiced in the fields of health, construction, job training and economic development. But the two disciplinary approaches described here do not reflect the transformative energy that often takes place during the development of my projects. If "being transdisciplinary" can unify all fields of knowledge and practices as suggested by Professor Nicolescu, its approach must be holistic and multi-dimensional. Its concern must include all aspects of life - nature, environment, people, society, science, technology, art and their inter-connectedness and balance. From online Wiktionary, I found that the prefix "trans" indicates "across, through, over, beyond," and I add "in between." To me, "being transdisciplinary" points to action and realization. For this dynamic process to take place, it requires an inner transformation (or spiritual evolution) of the involved person.

I have experienced the impact of this energy personally. I used to be a studio artist and taught at University of the Arts for many years. My effort in building an art park with people, mostly children at the beginning, on an abandoned lot in North Philadelphia was so profound that it changed the course of my life, from teaching in the academic world to community building and healing in traumatized places.

During my public art career of thirty some years, I collaborated with local communities to carry out projects that brought in colors, innovation, and fun activities. During the process of making art, we wit-

nessed the emergence of some elements such as gentleness, trust, cohesion, and confidence that started to turn around some of the entrenched difficulties in the neighborhood such as drug addiction, frustration, low self-esteem, and fear. My training as an artist and my dedication to realize the vision revealed to me gave projects energy and direction. The beauty conveyed through our creation brought forth comfort and a sense of fulfillment. Through the process, inner transformation among the participants began to take place.

In our work, when we keep our hearts open, be attentive to the needs of others, and invite community to co-create, we observe that deep bonding, sincerity, and a sense of belonging, the heart and soul of a genuine community, begin to grow in the participants. When we create art that comes from the heart, art that reflects the pain and sorrow but also joy and beauty of the partaking communities, the process has the power to transform brokenness and grief to hope, new possibilities, and joy.

Since I learned this process through working in inner city North Philadelphia, I call it urban alchemy.

2 A Personal Journey Made Public

When I was 15, my father took me to study Chinese landscape painting with a master. Painting landscape became the passion of my life. Through painting, I came in contact with a special place, which the Chinese call the "dustless world."

Dust here refers not so much to the physical but the mental pollution such as self-centeredness, ignorance, attachment, and greed. The dustless world is a place of pristine beauty and poignant serenity. It is a place in this world and yet it reveals the mystery of "the other." Through creating paintings, I was able to travel from the mundane world to that of the sacred. It is a place I found solace. It is a place I call "home."

I have read much and traveled far looking for the "dustless world." Through working with residents particularly children, I found the entryway to that "dustless world" in an abandoned place in inner city North Philadelphia. The act of creating art in broken places is like making fire in the frozen darkness of a winter's night. The beauty that we create together shines through the dark overcast of decay and despair. It brings light, warmth, hope and it beckons people to join in.



Figure 1: (Left) the abandoned lot next to Arthur Hall's headquarter, (right) Lily Yeh, Joseph (JoJo) Williams and neighborhood children at the start of the park building project in 1986.



Figure 2: (Left) Lily Yeh sketching out the new mural for Ile-Ife Park, (right) the completed Ile-Ife Guardian Mural in 1990.

3 The Village of Arts and Humanities

It evolved from a summer arts project on an abandoned lot to a multi-faceted non-profit community building arts organization. Lily Yeh was its co-founder, executive and artistic director from 1986 to 2004.

Mission: Through our innovative educational, social, construction, and arts programs, we aim to build a genuine community in which people are re-connected with their families, sustained by meaningful work, nurtured by the care of each other and will together raise their young. We understand that this is how social change manifests in action.

4 Ile- Ife Park

In 1986, Arthur Hall, the late visionary leader, eminent dancer, choreographer, and founder of Ile-Ife Black Humanitarian Center, invited me to build an art park on an abandoned lot next to his headquarter

in inner city North Philadelphia. Ile-Ife in Yorba language means the house of love. To honor Arthur Hall, we named our first park Ile-Ife Park (see Figure 2). Here I also want to commemorate Joseph (JoJo) Williams, the first and only adult from the neighborhood to step in to help during the first two years of the project. He was the person who anchored our work in the community. He became my teacher, guardian, and heart friend (see Figure 1).

5 Meditation Park

Situated right across the narrow street from Ile-Ife Park laid another big abandoned lot. In 1990 we launched one more park building project. Witnessing the tension and ordeal of life in inner city, I aspired to create a space where residents could retreat, relax, reconnect, and re-center. I named it Meditation Park (see Figure 3). I brought images that have inspired me, such as Chinese gardens, Islamic courtyards, and the sculptural Mali architecture into the design of the park.



Figure 3: The construction process and the before and after images of Meditation Park.

Seeing that children were happy working with JoJo and me, adults came in asking for jobs. Some people advised me not to work with them because they had addiction problem. Figuring that we should not be bogged down by past mistakes and negativity, we needed to find a positive outcome through our cooperation. Together, the work team leveled the ground with a bobcat, poured foundation to build an undulating wall, and collaborated to mosaic the whole floor with stones and colorful tile pieces. Becoming skilled, the team took on renovating houses. Transforming the rugged brick wall facing the park into a colorful mosaic “Tree of Life” mural, we as a team felt empowered and proud through the beauty we fashioned together.

6 The Tree Farm

In the Village neighborhood we found a two-acre vacant lot near a railroad track. It was once occupied by General Electric but now highly polluted and littered with trash. In this inner city area with few trees, I felt that the land called to become a tree

farm. With the help of the city government, generous funding from various sources, and under the guidance of tree expert Ken Kolodziej, the Village staff, Americorps members, and neighborhood volunteers worked together to transform dereliction to a green landscape made spectacular with mosaic animal sculptures. In addition to host grown trees, the farm cultivated 150,000 tree seedlings for the benefit of different neighborhoods in need (see Figures 4, 5, and 6).

7 Transformation of individuals

During my 18 years sojourn at the Village, I have witnessed many significant personal transformations. One of the most dramatic is the story of James (Big Man) Maxton.

He was called Big Man because of his huge stature, 300 pounds in a 6’8” frame. He was called Big for another and darker reason, using and selling drug in the community for two decades. His addiction has racked his body and sewn havoc in the community. He thought he would die one day in the gutter. He



Figure 4: (Left) The 2-acre abandoned industrial site before, (right) Neighborhood residents, guests, and Americorps volunteers holding hands in the dedication ceremony in 2000.



Figure 5: (Left) The newly planted and ribbon bedecked trees at the dedication, (right) Part of the tree nursery at the farm.



Figure 6: (These life-size sculptures were conceived by Lily Yeh and constructed and mosaic-decorated by Big Man and his four crew members, all coming from the immediate community.

came to Jojo for refuge.

The city tore down a house in the middle of our block at the Village. I wanted to design something for the bare wall of this newly created hole. What to design?

Sensing danger lurking all around in our neighborhood, I figured, “why not evoke the presence of angels to protect this community? To serve this

primarily African American community, the angels need to come from Africa.” Ethiopian angels were the answer.

If I wanted the angels decorated in mosaics, I needed help. Big Man never did art. He has lost everything precious in life at this point; the only thing he has was time. We decided to collaborate. I coached him on the art of color and mosaics. Piece



Figure 7: Angel Alley.

by piece he placed the broken tiles together to create the angels (see Figure 7). Although he suffered great physical and mental pains, the making of the angels gave him the strength to get up and face the day with new hope.

Passing by residents began to praise his effort and work. The positive feed backs comforted his broken spirit. He said to himself, if Miss Lily returned next summer, I would leave drugs. I stayed on with the project for a total of eighteen years. He left drugs and eventually became a well-established mosaic artist, the foreman of our construction crew, and the organizer of Narcotic Anonymous meetings at our organization for a ten-year period. He became a pillar of strength and light in this inner city community.

“The magic of art captures your heart and shields your mind away from the pain. By the time the heart and mind reconnect, there is no pain. The drug addiction is a psychological thing. When I pick up art and put down drug, it was a life saving and magical experience.”

James (Big Man) Maxton

8 The Power of Children

Reflecting on the building of the Village, if children did not step in to help us in our various endeavors, the Village would not have developed. Their enthusi-

asm, trust, innovation, and the sense of joy became essential in all our work.

In 1986 when I stepped into the project, no adults with the exception of JoJo, came to my help. But with children, it was a totally different matter. Seeing that JoJo and I were probing around on the empty lot, children from the neighborhood offered to help. Getting shovels, spades, brushes, pigments, and plenty of cement for children to play with, we started painting, digging, and making sculptures (see Figure 8). When paints peeled off from our sculptures, I decided that mosaics would be our solution. Our fledglings and teens became our first mosaic team. In addition to making vibrant mosaics, they became the fervent guardians of Ile-Ife Park.

9 Their Imagination Fueled our Creativity

Many of the art works emerged from our children’s workshop moved me with their power and originality. I began incorporating their works into my mural designs for some of our parks (see Figures 9 and 10).

10 Healing and Self-Empowering through Celebration and Ritual



Figure 8: Ile-Ife Park.

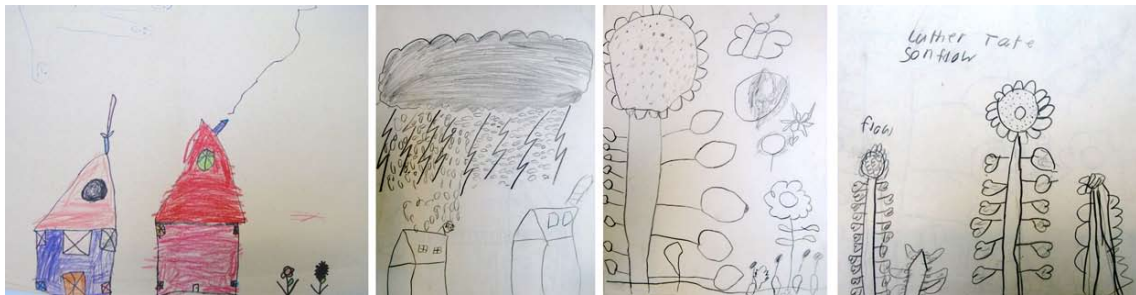


Figure 9: Art works from children's workshop.



Figure 10: The two murals decorating Kujenga Pamoja (Together We Build in Swahili) Park at the Village. (Left) Flowers in Sunrise mural, integrating children's drawings into the mural design, (right) the Cosmic Night mural, including some images like space ships and insects by children. Both murals designed by Lily Yeh and executed by Village staff, crew members, and volunteers.

10.1 Annual Arts Festival

Despite the dereliction and brokenness of our community, we celebrate our togetherness, creativity, and life. We launched our first arts festival in 1992. Again, the children's eager participation gave us courage to formulate our thoughts into reality.

Children dressed in colorful costumes, some with faces painted. Our head drummer Skip Burton led the procession. Holding paper baskets filled with

fruits and vegetables, children, accompanied by parents and Village staff, marched on to the beat of the drums. The procession stopped in front of each house in our main street in the Village. When the door was opened, a child offered his/her basket of gift to the resident. We chimed in chorus, "May the good spirit bless this neighborhood. May the good spirit bless this household. And may the good spirit bless all the children." We threw confetti in the air and cried out in laughter and joy. When we passed



Figure 11: The arts festival.



Figure 12: Meditation Park (Photos by Matthew Hollerbush and Liz Murray).

vacant lots, we blessed the land with the wishes that some day the lots would be transformed into something lovely and beneficial to the community.

We formulized our blessing ritual at our first festival (see Figure 11). The yearly festival provided an opportunity to bring people together and celebrate. Children particularly loved the occasion to dress up, offer gifts, and have their voices heard in spreading the blessings. Our procession became longer, bigger, and more lavish as the Village grew in size and impact. The arts festival soon contained art exhibition, dance and theater performances, game competition, and food. The blessing is the heart of the ritual for it spreads kindness and good will for deep community bonding.

11 The Rites of Passage

Witnessing that young people in our community, particular boys, are very vulnerable to the many dangers in our neighborhood. I designed this ceremony to express to them that when they graduated from our programs, we would continue to be here for them, to listen, guide, and support.

Under months' preparation, teens in their white ceremonial gowns and with torches in hands would march into Meditation Park (see Figure 12). Surrounded by their families and friends, they mounted

the platform to form a circle. With candles and torches in hand, the audience would say together to the teens, "We are your foundation. We will stand by you." Each teen would in turn utter his/her personal pledge. Then together they would say to the witnessing audience, "We respect you. We will work hard and realize our potentials. We will bring out light to the future." This became the transformative moment when we sensed the togetherness of our community witnessing the Coming Of Age Rite unfolding in a poignant space bathed in light.

After near two decades of service, I left the Village in 2004. The Village of Arts and Humanities of today, under the current leadership of Aviva Kapust and her innovative team, continues to receive awards and lead in the national movements of community building, youth education, and creative place-making.

In 2002, I became the founding director of a new non-profit organization, the Barefoot Artists, Inc.



Barefoot Artists works to empower local residents, organize communities, and take action to create a more compassionate, just,



Figure 13: Leaves burning in open air.

and sustainable future. Its logo expresses its intention to bring beauty and healing to broken places in the world.

12 The Twa Transformation, Rugerero, Rwanda

From dire poverty to a shared prosperity.

The Twa were the original inhabitants of the Great Lakes region of central Africa, including Rwanda. Over the centuries, they have been subjugated by the Hutu and Tutsi and driven from their land without compensation. In Rwanda, the Twa occupy only 1% of the current population and have no power in the nation's politics. Living in dire poverty, discarded and forgotten, they have become invisible.

Deprived of resources, the Twa find opportunity through working with the soil. Most of them become potters. Their poverty restricts them to fire their pots in the most primitive condition, with leaves burning in open air (see Figure 13). Their products sell for a pittance. Moved by their talent, energy, and their desperate situation, Barefoot Artists intervened in 2009. But how was the question.

12.1 An Ingenious Method in Creating Resources

Our team discussed giving the villagers goats. Damas, one of our team members warned us, "No, not with the Twa. They are people who have forgotten their own history. They don't think of tomorrow. They will kill and eat the goats, dance all night and get drunk. Different NGOs have tried and failed." "But, there must be a way," I thought.

It was our resourceful Jean Bosco Musana Rukirande, the Barefoot Artists Rwandan program coordinator and a former regional director of Red Cross, who came up with an innovative and successful goat rearing program. At the start, Barefoot Artists provided only half of the 36 families with goats (see Figure 14). Goats multiplied. Within six months, the other families received their goats too. This was the first step in organizing the community, building mutual trust, and establishing steps to generate assets.

13 Building together, the Rugerero Pottery Center

To understand how Barefoot Artists could further help them, we held community meetings. They asked for help to build an art house where their wares could be properly displayed for better pricing. Musana Rukirande helped Barefoot Artists to purchase a piece of land for the building project (see Figure 15). The villagers now collectively own the land through their newly established cooperative. They asked us not to hire people from the outside because they wanted to do the work themselves. Soon after the acquisition, the whole village, men, women, and children, mobilized to clear away the sharp edged volcanic rocks and tree roots. Working with great eagerness, they readied the ground in short order for construction.



Figure 14: The goat sharing ceremony at the Twa village in Rugerero in 2010.



Figure 15: (Left) Celebrating the purchase of the land for the art house, (right two) villagers removing rocks and leveling ground.



Figure 16: Collective decision making.

13.1 Setting up a Situation of Equality through Collective Designing

The next question was what to build on this newly cleared land. We asked them for suggestions.

Following Musana Rukirande's insightful suggestion, Barefoot Artists organized a series of workshops in which men, women, and children worked separately to express their respective visions for the art house (see Figure 16). Through the process and in all the three groups, their desire for one art house expanded into an art compound, which would contain a communal workspace, a large high temperature kiln, a storage room, an exhibition space, and a large bathroom with shower and toilet.

13.2 Made Visible and Successful through Art

After sharing designs in the group presentation, villagers agreed on the final layout of the construction

plan. Lily Yeh created the designs for the façade and the Twa dancers mural for the exhibition building. Villagers painted the storefront with floral patterns and decorative pots (see Figure 17). They named the compound Rugerero Pottery (see Figure 18). Although the art techniques were not perfect, the colorful and unique compound attracted visitors. People began to notice them. Many arrived by motorcycles and cars to purchase their goods. Through working together, they managed to buy firewood for high temperature firing, produce bigger pots, create new forms like animal sculptures, and charge higher prices for their wares (see Figure 19). Soon local government noted them. Then the villagers regularly get commissions from the government such as producing one-stick-energy-saving stoves for mass consumption.

On Sep 17, 2017, I received an email from our program coordinator Musana Rukirande updating me the situation of the Twa.



Figure 17: Twa villagers and volunteers painting murals and making mosaics at the pottery center.



Figure 18: (Left) The exhibition building in the Pottery Rugerero compound, (right) the communal workshop space.



Figure 19: The various products from the Pottery Rugerero photos by Teresa Yeh, Musana Rukirande, Lily Yeh

“Dear Mama Lily:

Some days ago President Kagame and the rich American (Howard) Buffet inaugurated a big office building of immigration at the border with Congo!! All materials for decoration near the building are from the Twa pottery. Today when I passed by the border, a friend who worked there told me that Kagame and Buffet were attracted and touched by the art of the Twa. They are well made and authentic. Also many districts have bought big pots (from them)

to decorate places for presidential election campaign. Really they are doing very well, proud and self-sufficient. Some are building new homes. They are the first Twa in the country to do that.”

14 Reflection

Recently, reading letters from people who created projects that were inspired by our work, I realized that the essence of all of our endeavours is really

about humanity and the heart. Below is the most recent email I have received on Sept. 17, 2018 from Ana Maria Fomin of Petru Rares National College and the director of a youth mural project in Suceava, Romania.

“Your art and powerful message represent for us that wonderful gift of love we had been waiting for to understand how we can be closer to our dream, our ‘dustless world.’ I am grateful for everything we have learnt from you. We have been transformed, as we feel stronger and more motivated to work hard and open our hearts. There is so much to say, and words seem to just melt in a wave of love that embraces all of us.”

I would like to conclude with these words from Mahatma Gandhi, “There is a force in the universe, if we permit it, will flow through us and produce miraculous results.” Is this the Hidden Third?

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About the Author



Lily Yeh is an internationally celebrated artist whose work has taken her to communities throughout the world. As founder and executive director of the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia from 1968 to 2004, she helped create a national model in creative place-making and community building through the arts. In 2002, Yeh pursued her work internationally, founding Barefoot Artists, Inc., to bring the transformative power of art to impoverished communities around the globe through participatory, multifaceted projects that foster community empowerment, improve the physical environment, promote economic development and preserve indigenous art and culture. In addition to the United States, she has carried out projects in multiple countries including Kenya, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Rwanda, China, Taiwan, Ecuador, Syria, Republic of Georgia, Haiti, and Palestine. (www.barefootartists.org)

In 2004 she launched a decade long Rwanda Healing Project which aimed to address the lingering grief of the 1994 genocide. As part of this project, she transformed a rough mass grave into a beautiful memorial park in Rugerero. It became the official genocide memorial for the region. In addition, she launched multiple programs in healing, education, and job opportunities to transform the survivors and the Twa villages in Rugerero from destitution and grief into vibrant and joyful self-sustaining communities. Using art as a medium for social change, Yeh has positively influenced many impoverished communities worldwide.
