

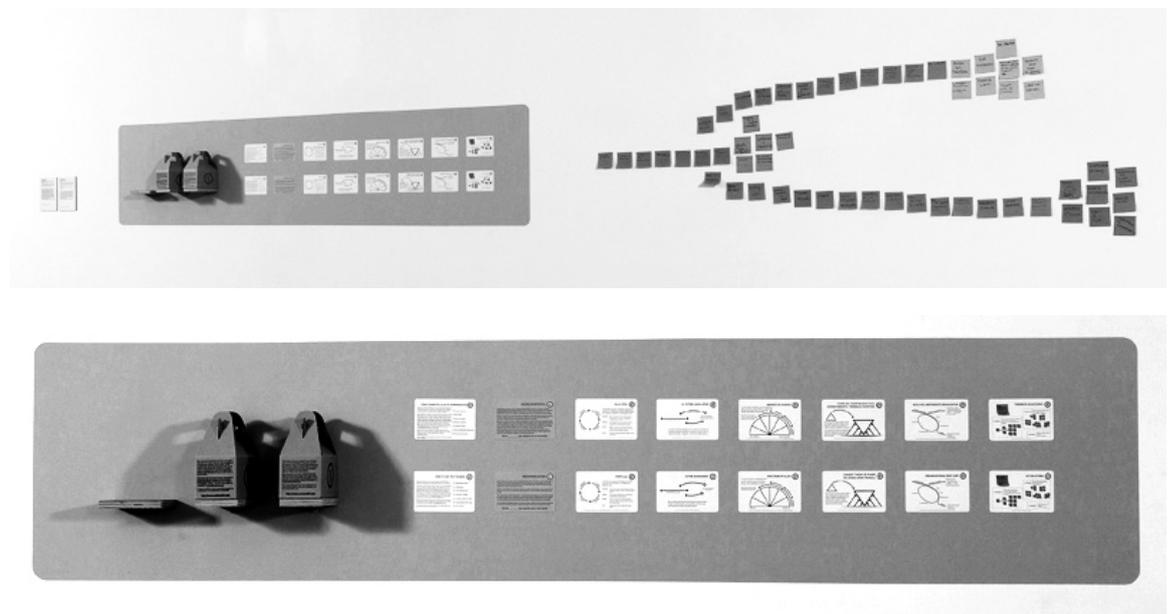
Meaningful Action

For Manifesta 8 in the Region of Murcia, Spain, The Action Mill was invited by Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum to produce a project as part of OVERSCORE, their contribution to the biennial. Toolbox Prototype [Fig. 1 & 2] was designed after spending two weeks working with community members in Murcia. These community members were concerned about public funding decisions that are made without sufficient public input. As is typical in our work, we spent several hours over many days taking them through a process of discovery, questioning, ideation and finally prototyping possible meaningful actions they could take. Following from that collaboration, we created this tool box as a way to share some of the methods we

THE ACTION MILL

The Action Mill designs objects, actions and systems that change the behavior of people who interact with them. We do this by offering new frameworks for making sense of the world around us. Part of our work depends upon building useful tools that facilitate meaningful change for individuals and communities. These tools allow people the opportunity and space to create the world they want to live in rather than describe it, and as such we constantly strive to move beyond the symbolic and toward the actual. We believe that the direct experience of change is the most powerful tool available to us, and that individuals and groups contain within themselves the solutions to many of their problems, though those solutions are far from obvious. We challenge individuals and groups to see beyond the usual dividing lines and dogmatic arguments and to ask new questions in order to find practical strategies for change. (<http://www.actionmill.com/>)

Toolbox Prototype. Photo Ilya Rabinovich, courtesy of Manifesta 8



use in our work to address complex, intractable problems. These tools are intended to help organizations and individuals design their own actions that make tangible change in their communities.

Many of the tools contained in the toolbox were created by others but adapted by us over a long process of trial and error in order to serve our transformation design work. Borrowed from diverse fields, the tools have been refined through iterative development and are ultimately effective to the degree with which we understand the partners and context for each design situation. In this spirit, The Action Mill presents three of these tools in the Manifesta Workbook with suggestions of how we imagine they might be used within a contemporary art mediation context, but we also expect (and hope) that the tools will be adapted by groups for situations we cannot begin to anticipate. It is essential to note that these tools are meant to build understanding about a certain context, set of issues or problem, and then provide the raw material for taking meaningful action.

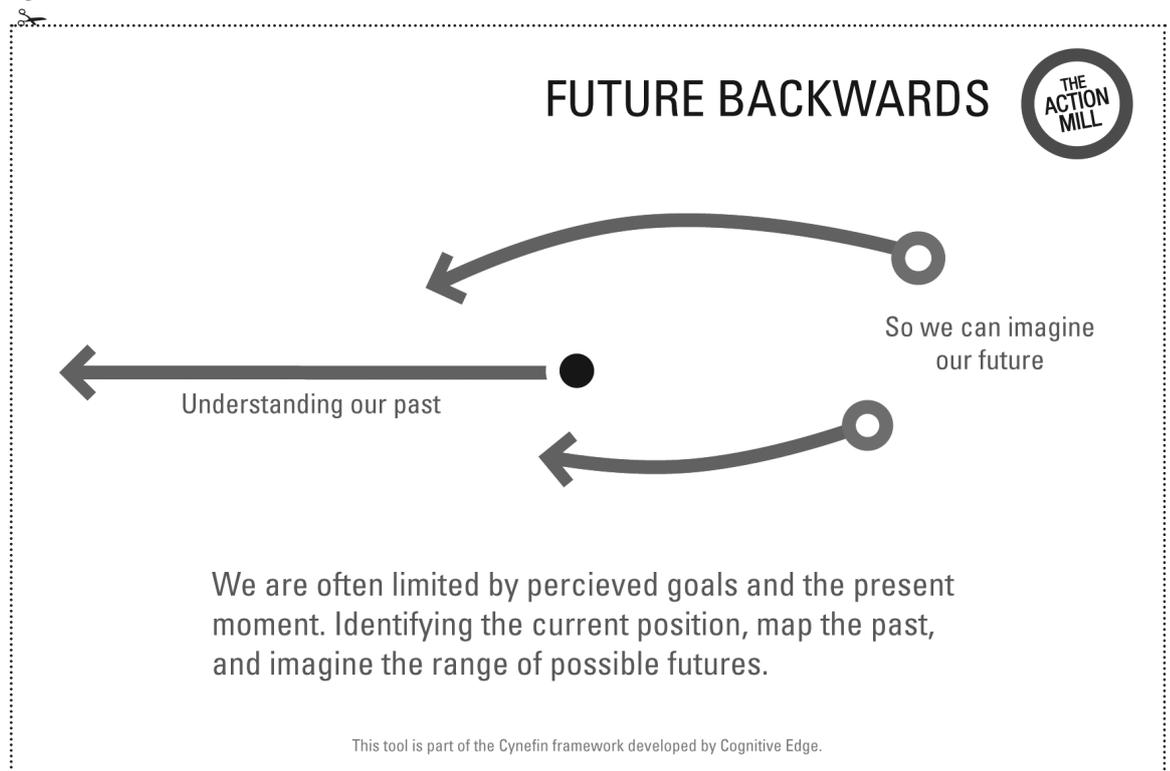
FUTURE BACKWARDS

The Future Backwards tool [Fig. 3] allows participants to understand the present situation by exploring a sequence of significant past events that led to the present moment and by imagining what

possible futures might lie ahead. The purpose of this exercise is to allow participants to describe their long-term and mid-term goals and fears in discrete anecdotes that are not restricted by their perception of obstacles. As a sense making exercise, the ultimate outcomes of Future Backwards are often short descriptions of a world that the participants would like to build as well as a vision of a world they fear.

This tool could be particularly useful for art institutions and art mediators who wish to clearly understand the current status of the institution and its programming and then begin to articulate a vision for where it would like to be. For example, art mediators might describe in brief terms their education and outreach program. From there, they would map in reverse chronology all of the key events and decisions that brought them to this current state. After that, they would imagine so-called “heaven” and “hell” states for the programming - that is, the impossibly good and bad future states - and map in reverse back to a point just before the present moment a sequence of decisive events that led to these two future states. What emerges from this exercise is a wealth of knowledge about the motives, biases, assumptions, hopes and fears that can inform a considered strategy for clearer, more meaningful art mediation programming.

Figure 3 Future Backwards



As a way to connect art institutions and contemporary art with its audience, the Future Backwards tool could also be used to learn more about how individuals and affinity groups perceive the contemporary art world. Rather than asking them about the current state of an institution or organization, art mediators could pose the question: “What is your relationship to contemporary art?” What follows from this question is a mapping of those important past events that led to their current state. Then, participants would imagine the “heaven” and “hell” scenarios that point to the best and worst relationship to contemporary art in the future. What can be gleaned from this knowledge serves both the participants and art mediators. Art audience members see -- along with their peers -- a host of assumptions, anxieties, frustrations and energies that impact their ability to connect with contemporary art.

Future Backwards is a tool developed by Cognitive Edge and released under a Creative Commons license.

SPECTRUM OF ALLIES

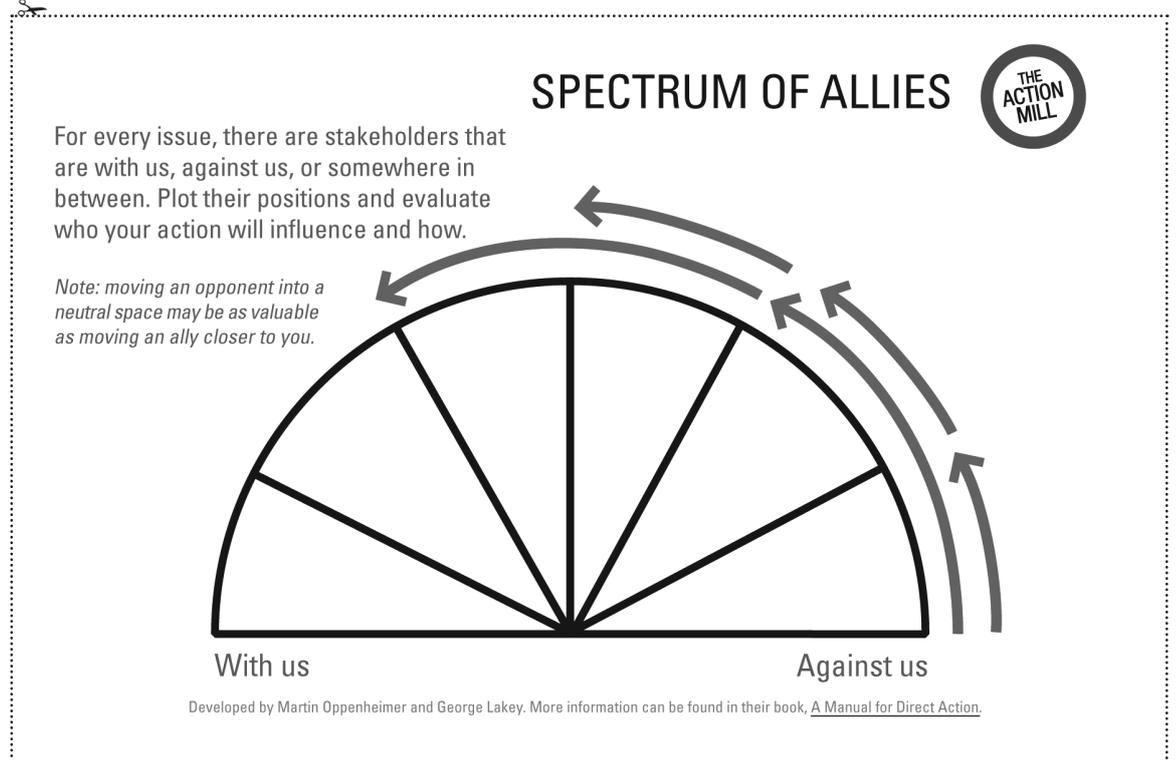
The Spectrum of Allies tool [Fig. 4] is used to identify and map a range of stakeholders or actors within a particular issue with emphasis on their relationship to you along a continuum between the poles of “ally” and “opponent”. In forming a broader image of where all of these stakeholders stand, one of the goals of the

tool is to determine who within the spectrum might be moved to a position that is more desirable for successfully achieving a stated objective.

Within the context of contemporary art institutions and art mediation, the opposing poles of “ally” and “opponent” may not always accurately describe the nature of stakeholders’ relationship to you. It may be more useful to exchange these polarities for others given the problem at hand. For example, from the perspective of the art institution, there is a range of potential audience members that extends from “likely” to “unlikely”, meaning those individuals who more commonly attend the institution versus those who do not, for any number of reasons. With this polarity, the institution could begin to map in great detail that range of all possible audience members and better understand the motivations for or against visiting the institution, thus suggesting strategies for moving potential audience members towards the “likely” pole.

For the art audience, the Spectrum of Allies tool could be used to help individuals or groups identify which stakeholders impact their access to and/or understanding of contemporary art. In this case, the ends of the spectrum might be “encourage access and understanding” and “discourage access and understanding”. This knowledge could serve

Figure 4 Spectrum of Allies



both the art audience members as well as institutions and mediators. For the committed audience member, knowing who within the spectrum can aid their understanding and access to contemporary art might lead to clarity about the most effective steps towards this goal. For art mediators, learning about the barriers to access and understanding from audience members can give them insight into more effective ways to meaningfully engage people with contemporary art programming.

Spectrum of Allies was originally developed by Martin Oppenheimer and George Lakey. More information can be found in their book, A Manual for Direct Action.

ACTION STORM

The Action Storm tool [Fig. 5] is a robust brainstorming exercise that pushes groups to quickly and iteratively generate a large number of ideas in response to a particular problem or question. The tool is effective in pushing participants to move beyond the framework of what they think they know about an issue in order to elicit a large quantity of novel ideas that can then serve as the basis for more refined discovery and development. One of the more useful aspects of this exercise is simply the act of capturing and making visible within a group setting all of the many ideas and questions that so often either get lost in a discussion or never even emerge.

The applications for Action Storm are incredibly far reaching. For example, art mediators might wish to provoke a group of art viewers to consider a broad range of possible interpretations of a particular artwork or exhibition thematic. With this brainstorming tool, the viewers could generate a wealth of possible interpretations that touch on physical and formal characteristics, emotional responses, semantics and semiotics, and cultural references, to name a few. These could then become the basis for more discussion or activities that bring an art audience to a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the artwork. Conversely, art mediators might begin with the task of generating “questions for art”. In this case, rather than propose possible interpretations, participants think of many questions (each building off the other) regarding specific artworks and prevalent themes within contemporary art.

Similarly, art institutions and mediators might use the tool internally as an effective way to more methodically brainstorm ideas regarding many different problems. From developing novel art mediation activities to planning participatory workshops to audience engagement strategies, Action Storm is flexible enough to move quickly from the blank page to a wealth of ideas while offering a number of insights along the way.

Figure 5 Action Storm

