
— NEW MODELS FOR CREATIVE PUBLIC PRACTICE —

an essay by

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The past twenty years have seen a growing body of scholarship on new-genre public art, activist and community-based art, dialogic art, collaborative and participatory practices, and relational aesthetics, much of it addressing work produced from the 1960s to the present day.¹ Articles, books, and exhibitions; workshops, conferences, and symposia; and academic programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels address the overlapping practices grouped under these terms. During the same period there has been an expansion of undergraduate and graduate programs in the public and community arts arenas, including the MFA in public practice at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles (est. 2007), the MFA concentration in art and social practice at Portland State University in Oregon (est. 2007), and the Master in Public Art Studies Program at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles (est. 1991; since 2009, the MPAS Program: Art/Curatorial Practices in the Public Sphere). Undergraduate programs include the Visual and Public Art Institute at California

State University, Monterey Bay (est. 1996); the Center for Art and Public Life at California College of the Arts, Oakland (est. 1998); and the Community Arts Program at Xavier University in New Orleans (est. 1999).

» Noting the growing number of MFA graduates designing products for businesses, the February 2004 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* announced as part of its “Breakthrough Ideas for 2004” that “The MFA Is the New MBA.” Authored by Daniel Pink, this brief item garnered a great deal of attention and fanfare, both in the business world and at art schools. MFA programs quickly used the piece to promote the relevance and applicability of their programs. In the feel-good introduction (at least to MFA programs), Pink noted that compared with the MFA program at UCLA, “getting admitted to Harvard Business School is a cinch.” His basic premise was that businesses were “realizing that the only way to differentiate their goods and services in today’s overstocked, materially abundant marketplace is to make their offerings transcendent—physically beautiful

¹ Texts that have been important to my understanding of the topic include Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Lynda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland, eds., *The Citizen Artist: Twenty Years of Art in the Public Arena: An Anthology from High Performance Magazine, 1978–1998* (Gardiner, N.Y.: Critical Press, 1998); Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110, no. 1 (2004): 51–80; and Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (2006): 178–83. Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Presses du Réel, 2002), also stands as a foundational text but is not included in the list above as it differs in its focus on artworks outside the activist realm.

and emotionally compelling” and that tasks traditionally performed by recent MBA graduates were being outsourced overseas.² This article followed Richard Florida’s 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which traced a shift from an industrial to a creative economy.

² Daniel H. Pink, “The MFA Is the New MBA,” *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 2 (2004): 21–22.

» What these two trends indicate is the ability and desire of some artists for a practice that extends beyond the traditional art world arena of exhibitions to include “real world” change, be it through community redevelopment, political activism, and public policy or via product development and marketing. Reading Pink’s article highlights one of the main issues facing these artists—the difficulty of having their creativity understood beyond the ability to produce “physically beautiful” objects. Similarly, publicly funded art projects are still largely focused on improving the appearance of urban environments and public spaces such as parks, public buildings, and airports. For those artists interested in being taken seriously outside the decorative arena, there is a need to advocate on behalf of the relevance of artists in a much-expanded field and to challenge the traditional models of how art work—the work of artists—is carried out and understood. Transforma, a five-year artistic experiment in New Orleans led by a group of artists and art professionals in response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, proposes a new model and pedagogical methodology for the field.

- BACKGROUND -

In October 2005 Robert Ruello, a New Orleans-based artist who had evacuated to Houston in preparation for Hurricane Katrina, returned

to his home in New Orleans. He was met by a devastated city. As he described it: “It was a mess; nothing worked. Eighty percent of the city was unoccupied. . . . It is hard for people who weren’t there to understand. There were no grocery stores, no gasoline stations. No signal lights worked. No street lights worked. And this was not just for a couple of weeks; we are talking months and months. . . . Mail delivery—I didn’t get mail delivered until late April. . . . People were getting laid off in December; the city just couldn’t support things anymore: schools were laying people off, businesses were moving. . . . Crisis after crisis just seemed to continue. It wasn’t just like Katrina hit and then the healing process started.”³ He describes institu-

³ Robert Ruello, conversation with the author, October 18, 2009.

tions “shedding” during the initial months, with the Catholic Church deciding to close about a third of its New Orleans-based churches.

» Ruello was familiar with Project Row Houses (PRH), artist Rick Lowe’s neighborhood-based artwork, and its impact on the Third Ward in Houston, where it is located. He contacted Lowe to see if he was interested in using the empty buildings left by the Church throughout New Orleans as community centers. Lowe visited New Orleans in December and invited arts administrator Jessica Cusick and artist Sam Durant, two of his former and current collaborators, to visit the city to see what they might be able to do. Durant visited in January 2006, and Cusick arrived in late spring of that year. Following those visits, Cusick, Durant, Lowe, and Ruello joined together to explore how they could help with the crisis in New Orleans, a collaboration that led to the founding of Transforma.

» With the exception of Ruello, who describes himself as “primarily a studio artist,” the

founders of Transforma have many years of experience working in the field of community-based and activist art. Cusick, currently cultural affairs manager for the City of Santa Monica, California, was the founding director of the civic art and design program for the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County, conceiving and overseeing the Houston Framework planning process. Prior to that she founded the art program at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in Los Angeles. Durant, an artist based in Los Angeles, has undertaken a number of projects with different communities in the United States, including one with Twin Cities Native American community members as part of a residency at the Walker Art Center and one at Project Row Houses in Houston. Lowe is the founder of the multi-award-winning neighborhood-based artwork and cultural organization Project Row Houses. During its sixteen-year existence Project Row Houses has transformed the Third Ward neighborhood in which it is situated, and Lowe has served as adviser to a number of other community-based art projects. In addition to their independent projects, the members of this team were familiar with one another: Cusick, Lowe, and Ruello from Houston, and Durant and Lowe from Project Row Houses and from a project that they have been exploring for the section of Highway 62 between Selma and Montgomery in Alabama. Their relationships with one another go back several years.

» Transforma emerged out of a series of community meetings, called convenings, with local and national stakeholders, including artists, architects, lawyers, journalists, and academics from a variety of fields. People affiliated with redevelopment institutions in New Orleans—including Neighborhood Housing Services, the Office of

Recovery Management, the City Council, and the City Planning Commission—were present, as were people from outside New Orleans, such as Julie Bargmann, founding principal of D.I.R.T studio, a landscape architecture firm committed to working with marginalized communities and postindustrial terrain; Marie Cieri, geographer, faculty member at Rhode Island School of Design, and codirector of Artists in Context; Jan Cohen-Cruz, associate professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts; Andrew Commers, Kelley Lindquist, and Bill Mague from Artspace, Minneapolis, a nonprofit real estate developer for the arts; Robert Frankel, museums and visual arts director and visual arts division team leader for the National Endowment for the Arts; Tom Finkelpearl, director of the Queens Museum of Art; and Nato Thompson, chief curator of Creative Time, New York. Artists experienced in the field flew in, including Mel Chin, Ashley Hunt, Suzanne Lacy, Daniel J. Martinez, Linda Pollack, and Sara Wookey. Local participants included artists John Barnes and Ron Bechet, faculty members at Dillard and Xavier universities, respectively; Don Marshall, director of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Foundation; and artists Jan Gilbert and Robin Levy.

» Over time participation shifted, with some early attendees remaining involved; others, such as Mel Chin, taking on projects of their own (in this case a Transforma pilot project); and others drifting away. During Transforma's five-year existence, the convenings drew hundreds of participants. Key elements of the project were its responsiveness to its local context and its collaborative nature. While the founders had ideas for projects in New Orleans, they were, from the outset, more interested in listening and responding to the needs of people in the city. The convenings provided the foundation for Transforma

and ensured its continued flexibility in support of the city's changing needs.

» Recognizing the vitality of projects happening on the ground in New Orleans and wanting to use their talents to support a larger framework rather than to carry out individual art projects,⁴ the founders envisioned a multipronged initiative supported by the skills and resources of a shifting “national resource team,” a “diverse and fluid group of professionals, local and national, that provide the structural backbone of the initiative,”⁵ of which they would be a part.

⁵ From the document “Ars Futura New Orleans,” the first “manifesto” of what was to become Transforma. This document was drafted following and based on the June 2006 meeting.

Experienced members of the resource team, including themselves, would provide methodological and artistic expertise and a broad network of international,

national, and local contacts to artists, both local and nonlocal, working in collaboration with other professionals to rebuild New Orleans both physically and psychically.

» Parallel to the work of the national resource team, Transforma continued to host convenings throughout its five-year history. These provided an opportunity for people committed to the creative rebuilding of New Orleans to connect with one another, to teach and learn from one another, to work collaboratively, and to share resources. The group also launched a website in 2007 to serve as a social-networking site for artists working to rebuild the city. With the Internet functioning before dependable phone service was available, it seemed to make sense to create a virtual forum for the

continued sharing of experiences, lessons, and resources. Together the convenings, website, and broad-based resource team formed a support network—the core of Transforma—for the pilot projects, the mini-grant projects, and other local artists working in New Orleans. A key component of this support network was Jess Garz, the program manager and sole staff member of the project, who joined the team in mid-August 2007. With a background in architecture and urban planning and with a natural tendency to connect people, Garz played a critical part in the success of Transforma. Her role was cited in interviews with pilot project leaders, mini-grantees, convening attendees, and project founders. Garz, a resident of New Orleans for the duration of the project, also played a crucial role as a local member of the team, both in terms of her accessibility to the various projects and as someone who came to understand the local situation intimately.

» The hoped-for outcome of these efforts was a series of creative models, shifting the identity of New Orleans from “catastrophic city” to “rescue city,” a place where solutions to problems plaguing a broad range of other places would be imagined and piloted. Early on, the team identified five areas of particular need and interest—housing, education, health care, economic development, and the environment—selecting three pilot projects that focused on some of these concerns: Operation Paydirt/Fundred Dollar Bill Project, Plessy Park, and Home, New Orleans? The team saw these three projects as representative of three different models of activist and community-based

⁴ According to Rick Lowe: “Creating a particular work in New Orleans at that time for me just wasn’t relevant. Even if it was Project Row Houses right now, affecting some forty households, artists, even if I could have done that in New Orleans at that time, it still wouldn’t have been something I was interested in. What I saw in New Orleans, the impact was so huge; it was just much larger than one single project could have” (conversation with the author, September 5, 2009). During interviews other members of the group echoed this sentiment. Sam Durant said: “This is a major, major catastrophe on many levels: social, political, cultural . . . one of the biggest challenges a U.S. city has ever faced. So the idea of doing an art project there seemed very limiting” (conversation with the author, August 2, 2009).

art practice: artist-initiated, with Mel Chin as the conceptual and organizational center of Paydirt/Fundred, a large-scale artwork tackling lead remediation in New Orleans and environmental and civic education across the country; community-driven in the case of Plessy Park, a grassroots effort to create a park at the site where Homer Plessy was arrested in 1892;⁶ and an institutional collaboration in the case of Home, New Orleans? which integrated neighborhood projects and local artists with the energy of students and faculty from three very different universities in the area. Each project also addressed some of the five areas of interest: environment, education, and health care in the case of Paydirt/Fundred; community development and education in the case of Plessy Park; and education and institutional change in the case of Home, New Orleans? Transforma provided each pilot project with seed money, advisory support, local and national contacts, and the support of Jess Garz. Garz played different and varied roles for each of the pilot projects, with the main ones being serving as a bridge between Chin and the local community in the case of Paydirt/Fundred; facilitator for Plessy Park, moderating the sometimes contentious relationships among the stakeholders in that collaboration; and administrator in the case of Home, New Orleans?

» In addition to the three pilot projects, Transforma also initiated a mini-grant program. Launched in 2008, the program was a late-term outgrowth of Transforma's other activities. A rotating panel of jurors from a variety of fields awarded grants of \$500 to \$2,500

to artists working "at the intersection of art, social justice and recovery in New Orleans . . . supporting the vibrant activity that occurs on the ground level."⁷ Key to this undertaking was the removal of the usual bureaucratic hurdles in the field of art funding, which, in practice, give preference to larger, more established organizations. Recipients of Transforma mini-grants did not need nonprofit status, could be individuals or collectives, and were engaged in a variety of activities, undelineated by the Transforma team. Recipients have included a community garden project; a poster project, the collaborative construction of a "semi-utopic virtual town" by marginalized youth from New Orleans and Tallaght, Ireland; storytelling and oral history projects; a jazz hip-hop orchestra; and a Mardi Gras Indian history and bead-sewing course, among many others. The mini-grant program has been very successful, both in New Orleans and in its other incarnations as a nationwide program being piloted by the Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts in San Francisco and Houston.⁸

⁷ "Creative Recovery Mini-Grant Program," Art, Social Justice, and Recovery, hosted by Transforma, <http://www.transformaprojects.org/minigrant>.

- PILOT PROJECTS -

The members of the core Transforma team successfully leveraged their own cultural capital into project capital, using their art world and community development reputations and connections to access funding, human resources,

⁶ The Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation in public accommodations such as railroads based on the doctrine of "separate but equal." Homer Plessy's arrest was planned by a small group of black professionals in New Orleans in order to test the constitutionality of a Louisiana law mandating separate but equal accommodations for blacks and whites on intrastate railroads. The decision was overturned in 1954 by *Brown v. Board of Education*.

⁸ In San Francisco the program is administered by Southern Exposure (more information at www.soex.org/artistsresources.html), and in Houston it is administered by an institutional collaborative made up of Aurora Picture Show, Diverse Works, and Project Row Houses (more information at www.theideafund.org).

and partners in support of both the pilot projects and the mini-grantees. Over three years \$400,000 was raised and distributed, and the Transforma team served as advisers for a wide array of projects.

» Mel Chin, who attended a number of conventions, pushed for a multidisciplinary, project-based approach, and his Paydirt/Fundred has brought together scientists, elected officials, and artists in an effort to clean up lead pollution in New Orleans. Transforma provided connections to local and national collaborators and significant seed monies and administrative support for the elements that launched the project, including *Safehouse*, a physical work based in New Orleans that served as a local anchor and Prospect.1 biennial presence for Paydirt/Fundred; the *Sous Terre* armored truck, which traveled the country gathering “fundred” dollar bills, drawings that symbolize one hundred dollars worth of creative capital, to deliver to Congress for a hoped-for even exchange of \$300 million, the amount needed to implement lead remediation throughout New Orleans using the method developed by Chin and his team of scientists;⁹ and the *Love Where You Live* neighborhood party in the Eighth Ward, which built local support for the initiative. In addition, conversations with the founders have guided the project along the way. According to Chin, “Many times when I was too loosey-goosey, they told me to do something different.”¹⁰

» Home, New Orleans? created vital connections between historically divided black and nonblack universities in New Orleans and, in the first year, between the New Orleans schools and New York University. The innovative college course Building Community through the Arts is

entering its fourth year. It is an interuniversity offering taught by faculty from Dillard, Tulane, and Xavier universities, bringing together students from these historically divided institutions.¹¹ In addition to the college course, Home,

¹¹ For a description of the project in mid-2007, including an insider's perspective (the author was the NYU collaborator in Home, New Orleans?), see Jan Cohen-Cruz, “Art in Rebuilding Community: The Transforma Project in New Orleans,” http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive-files/2007/06/art_in_rebuild.php.

New Orleans? is also working to create ties across distinct neighborhoods in New Orleans, a goal that was prioritized in 2009. For the core Transforma members the ongoing university collaboration and attendant infrastructural shift have been the most important

successes of this program.

» In the case of Plessy Park the additional energy and resources Transforma brought to the table in 2007 invigorated an ongoing effort to create a park at the site of Homer Plessy's arrest in 1892. In 2008 the New Orleans City council issued a proclamation celebrating that year's Homer Plessy Day, and in 2009 a historical marker was installed at the site. Commemorative celebrations in 2007 and 2008 included a participatory event organized by artist-professors Ron Bechet and Suzanne Lacy and their students at Xavier University in New Orleans and Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, respectively, and presentations and activities organized and conceived by the Students at the Center (SAC), a writing-based independent program working with middle school and high school students in New Orleans at Frederick Douglass, McDonogh 35, and Eleanor McMain schools;¹² by the New Orleans Center for Creative Art (NOCCA), a state-run regional preprofessional arts-training center for secondary students in the city; by the Crescent City Peace Alliance, a grassroots organization dedicated to increasing peace and safety

⁹ For more information, see <http://www.fundred.org/>.

¹⁰ Mel Chin, conversation with the author, May 8, 2010.

¹² For more information on Students at the Center and its place within the larger educational context of New Orleans, see Catherine Michna, "Stories at the Center: Story Circles, Educational Organizing, and Fate of Neighborhood Public Schools in New Orleans," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 6 (2009): 529–55.

in New Orleans; and Transforma.¹³ Descendents of Homer Plessy and John Howard Ferguson, the judge who presided over Plessy's court case, appeared together at the 2009 unveiling of the new marker. That year they also announced the

formation of the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation for Education and Reconciliation.

- MINI-GRANT PROGRAM -

Transforma's mini-grant program leveraged the flexibility of the artist's role within what can be a bureaucratically burdened funding model. As artists and established community organizers, members of the resource team were able to raise funds from national organizations such as the American Center Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Ford Foundation, Joan Mitchell Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Open Society Institute, and Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts in support of Transforma and, through the mini-grant program, to use a portion of those funds to support local grassroots projects. Their identity as artists gave the Transforma team more flexibility in how they distributed the funds they raised, and they were able to regrant funds in a way that might not have been possible for a traditional institution, offering quickly responsive

funds and expertise to a wide range of innovative projects reaching deep into the neighborhoods of New Orleans. The application process was straightforward and did not require the grantees to be nonprofit organizations, passing on the Transforma team's flexibility to the grantees. According to Durant: "The mini-grant was a good model for ways to fund at the local, grassroots level. [Practitioners] were able to get a grant without becoming institutionalized."¹⁴

» Bethany Rogers, director of Cornerstones, a project to celebrate "everyday monuments and gathering places" in the city, noted that the Transforma mini-grant process "did not demand unnecessary demonstrations of our qualifications or project details when there is a certain amount of question as to how projects will play out in 'real time' and in 'real life.'" ¹⁵

¹⁴ Sam Durant, conversation with the author, August 2, 2009.

¹⁵ Bethany Rogers, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 16, 2009.

In addition to providing much-appreciated funding, which allowed for the remuneration of some project leaders and paid for materials and

supplies, the grants also provided affirmation and lent legitimacy to the projects, as many of the recipients noted. According to Eve Abrams of the Neighborhood Story Project: "It's surprising what being paid . . . for your efforts does to your self-esteem. This perhaps has been the greatest boost of all. The Transforma grant felt like a major pat on the back saying: what you do is valuable."¹⁶ Joanna Russo of 2110 Royal Stories reported that "having the backing of an organization like NPN/Transforma adds

¹³ The political situation surrounding this plot of land is complex. According to Reggie Lawson, director of the Crescent City Peace Alliance, it was purchased by NOCCA in 2007. Prior to this the Crescent City Peace Alliance held a lease from 2001 to 2004. As part of its purchase agreement NOCCA agreed to allocate 3,000 square feet of the site to commemorate Homer Plessy. On its website is an article published on July 16, 2009, announcing plans "for an eventual expansion from 131,000 to over 500,000 square feet to accommodate NOCCA Conservatory—performance spaces, professional training studios and classrooms for current arts disciplines; kitchens and classrooms for Culinary Arts; studios for new arts disciplines yet unknown; and academic labs; NOCCA Forum—student dining, health facilities, retail cafe and gallery; Residential Hall—serving statewide, national and international students; Visiting Artists Quarters—for visiting arts and academic master artists; Green space and Culinary Arts gardens; Plessy Memorial Park; and on-site parking" (<http://www.noccainstitute.com/index.php/2009/07/a-new-horizon-chapter-3-master-planning>).

legitimacy to the project. It arouses the curiosity of other professionals in the field and makes it more likely that additional granting organizations will take note. After receiving less than the full amount of funding . . . from Transforma, I was able to procure further funding from the Convergence Center for the Arts . . . to make up some of the difference.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Eve Abrams, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 17, 2009.

¹⁷ Joanna Russo, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 22, 2009.

» In addition to providing funds, Transforma brought mini-grant recipients together at conventions, encouraging them to share experiences and expertise. The recipients are also required to post their projects on the Transforma website, promoting communication among the mini-grantees (admittedly not as actively as the team had hoped) and documenting their work, creating an archive of some of the ways that artists are working to rebuild New Orleans. The grantees also had access, through project coordinator Jess Garz, to the expertise of a wide net of Transforma affiliates.

» In spite of its many successes, the mini-grant program suffered because it came so late in the life of Transforma. The funded projects, relatively modest in scale and led by individual artists and activists, could have benefited greatly from the expertise and experience of the type of resource team that the group envisioned. By the time the mini-grant project was launched in 2008, many of the early Transforma participants had scattered, in part because of the demands that the interminable government response to Katrina had taken on their time and energy and in part because their skills were not required by the early pilot projects. Launched earlier, the mini-grant program might have engaged more people more deeply, both as members of the resource team and as members

of panels to select grantees. This engagement could have contributed to a broader-based resource team for the duration of the project.

» This dip in energy included the energy of the core team as well. According to Lowe: “Unfortunately, we didn’t get to [the mini-grants] soon enough. . . . As it turned out, it was only in the last year that we’ve been doing that, and that was the point at which the resource team was less connected.” Nevertheless, he noted, “the New Orleans artists are doing incredible stuff with what they get.” Lowe feels that the New Orleans projects, compared with those that the Warhol Foundation has instituted in San Francisco and Houston, have a different tenor: “The nature of the artists in New Orleans—everybody there is trying to figure out how what they do impacts the city they are in, which is devastated, whereas [in Houston] people are not. [Community] impact is not something they are worried about; it is more personal impact.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Rick Lowe, conversation with the author, September 5, 2009.

LESSONS FROM THE TRANSFORMA MODEL

Transforma’s undertakings in New Orleans provide us with an alternative ecosystem for community-based art practice—one based on a collaborative support infrastructure led by artists, in contrast to current exhibition- and academically oriented models. The founders of Transforma view their project not as an artwork but as “an artistic investigation,” with the distinction that they “didn’t have a particular way of thinking about what might happen”;¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jessica Cusick, conversation with the author, Jess Garz, and Maria Jackson, July 18, 2009.

as a support network and a process;²⁰ and as an experiment in a collaborative approach—a

social infrastructure—to supporting artists working at the intersection of social justice and community development.

» It was hoped that the resource team would help such artists fully realize the multiple goals of their projects. According to Cusick: “We all felt that in our practice the thing that is often missing is constructive feedback. . . . Because often times we have found that the work gets off track. You start out with aesthetic and social justice or social service and community development goals, and usually one of those three suffers tremendously in the course of implementation, whether because of lack of resources or overweening ambition or an unrealistic assessment of what could be accomplished with the project. . . . The idea was that if you could provide a safe group of people who had expertise in a lot of these areas it would enable artists that are doing this type of work to be more consistently successful and to more consistently achieve both their aesthetic goals and quantifiable social change.”²¹

» Durant adds: “Many artist-initiated social projects are failures [in terms of community impact] because most artists don’t have the experience and know-how and aren’t aware of how to get the desired outcome. . . . If you want to increase economic development there are ways that work and ways that don’t work and one can’t be ignorant about it if one wants to be effective. It is a very specific situation and I think that has to be understood. Having said that, I think that Transforma does and hopefully will offer a model for ways for artists who do similar types of things to take what they’ve done and improve on it.”²²

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Ars Futura New Orleans.”

» Notes from the June 2006 meeting that launched Transforma include the following: “The opening is now to really influence

policy. . . . Art/culture need to be at the table for the big issues. . . . Forge artists/creatives as a strong advocacy group. . . . Build partnerships with local government. . . . Create ‘think tank’ groups around the issues.”²³ Different reasons and possibilities have been put forward by the core Transforma team for why they were not able to

²³ Notes provided to the author by Jessica Cusick by e-mail on October 7, 2009.

integrate artists into the core of the rebuilding process, including an overly optimistic view of the openness of cities to major change in the wake of large-scale disasters. Initially the team thought that the lack of infrastructure would lend them flexibility in reenvisioning the city; instead they found not only that it was difficult to operate without a functioning infrastructure but also that in a situation of such devastation people often gravitated toward what had existed in the past in an attempt to establish security and equilibrium. This finding has been cited by the Transforma team as one of the major lessons learned from this process. These difficulties were exacerbated by the political complexity of New Orleans, especially for a group headed by people who were not living in the city full-time. Furthermore, Naomi Klein’s explication of disaster capitalism and subsequent applications of her theories to New Orleans make it clear that the rebuilding of a socially heterogeneous city was not the goal of the profit-driven corporations, including Halliburton, brought in for the task.²⁴

» In spite of the retrospectively insurmountable challenges of influencing the rebuilding of New Orleans at the policy level, one key to bringing artists to the community development and policy table in any location is a revaluation of artistic labor and an increase in artists’ credibility in the eyes of their collaborators. To Lowe an ability to focus on a larger project rather than

24 Vicanne Adams, Taslim Van Hattum, and Diana English, "Chronic Disaster Syndrome: Displacement, Disaster Capitalism, and the Eviction of the Poor from New Orleans," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 4 (2009): 615–36.

solely on an individual artistic vision is critical to winning the confidence of others working to create positive change in communities: "The one side about community-engaged work right

now that is still lagging is that it is still so much about the individual artist's vision of what they need to do in a community context. So there isn't a strong trust that artists bring something to the table other than their agenda, that they are engaged in the process to help it move. . . . We have not established ourselves as a legitimate participant in serious issues that are going on in neighborhoods or cities. . . . My question is: how do artists that are working within the community have some aspect of their work rest on the idea that they are doing something meaningful to make an impact on the community or environment beyond what was there before and in a way that balances or rivals the impact they get from it?" 25

25 Rick Lowe, conversation with the author, September 5, 2009.

» This idea, which suggests a different way of thinking about the vision and priorities of artists, challenges the trope of the individual artistic genius, creating a different model of artistic practice. As Grant Kester has written: "Modern art is often associated with the emergence of the solitary genius out of the lumpen collectivity of the medieval guild or lodge. . . . The future of (European, modernist) art from this point on is foreordained as the titanic struggle of individualistic progress against the stultifying conformity and consensus imposed, variously by bourgeois consumerism, communist propaganda and, eventually, the history of modernism itself. . . . But there has also been, through the modern period, a parallel history of art

practice that runs counter to this tendency. It is a subterranean tradition of dispersed or collective authorship, collaborative interaction and process-based forms of production that periodically emerges into art world consciousness, only to be written off as kitsch, activism, theater, or any of the other pejorative terms reserved for the work of those who refuse the privileges of the exemplary subject." 26

26 Grant Kester, "Conversation Pieces: Collaboration and Artistic Identity," catalog essay for the exhibition *Unlimited Partnerships: Collaboration in Contemporary Art* at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, New York, in 2000, available online at <http://www.cepagallery.org/exhibitions/Unlimited2/u2mainpage.html>.

» In his writings Kester lays out a continuum of collaborative models: from technical collaborations, like those between an artist and a print studio; to collaborations between artists and spectator-participants, as in Rirkrit Tiravanija's inter-

active gallery and museum installations; to ones that "involve an even more extreme disavowal of the 'ego imperialism' of artistic identity, through the artist's long-term involvement in a given site or community. . . . Here the sublation of art and life is sought . . . through the dismantling of the artistic personality itself in a splay of mediatory practices and exchanges." 27

27 Grant Kester, "Collaborative Practices in Environmental Art," http://greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=208.

» In keeping with this description (though perhaps with less drama), Cusick describes Transforma as "all about process . . . the product is the way of having an impact on all these people." 28 Asked if Transforma was transformative and for whom, Lowe replied: "We were interested in transforming the way we think about artists practicing in community-engaged projects. A transformation from the notion of the hero-artist to a notion of collaboration." 29 In contrast to Kester's description of a

²⁸ Jessica Cusick, conversation with the author, Jess Garz, and Maria Jackson, July 18, 2009.

²⁹ Rick Lowe, conversation with author, Jessica Cusick, Sam Durant, Tom Finkelpearl, Jess Garz, Maria Jackson, and Robert Ruello, February 21, 2010.

“disavowal of . . . artistic identity,” however, the Transforma team argues for an expanded field in which to practice, one that includes collaboration between artists and other professionals on equal terms and in which

their identities and unique skills remain intact, if transformed, and are key to their success.

» The artistic process is critical to the incorporation of deeper meaning into our everyday lives. Much as Nicolas Bourriaud called for alternative forms of social interaction as a challenge to the mandated forms of social discourse endemic to our postindustrial age, there is a need to shift community redevelopment and city building away from its current move toward a homogenized process and product. The artistic process can elevate the mundane, giving it a more layered, richer meaning. As Lowe points out: “Mel is an artist advocating for cleaning the soil, but the method of advocacy is completely not mundane. How can we push housing out of a mundane state, create more poetry and mystery around it, do things that feed the soul in the process of doing it?”³⁰ In Chin’s case his methodology—the creation of hundred-dollar bills by people across the country, with an armored truck that picks up and delivers the bills to Congress—empowers participants and creates a collaborative network in support of lead remediation. Participants are educated about the effects of lead poisoning in the process and, if the project is successful, will feel ownership of that success. The pilot and mini-grantee projects, including one pairing artists with small businesses in need of signage after the storm, also illustrate this elevation of the everyday.

³⁰ Rick Lowe, conversation with the author, September 5, 2009.

» Durant highlights the expansive nature of Transforma: “Rick is not a traditional artist in the sense of producing objects or even producing cultural dialogues or discourses like someone like Suzanne Lacy, although they have done that it in the past. His practice is evolving, so I was learning a lot from him as well in terms of what one can do. [Transforma] has expanded the idea of what it means to be an artist and what one can do as an artist. It is not so much that if you do a social infrastructure project like Transforma that it means that producing objects or installations is no longer necessary anymore. It is a pluralistic idea.”³¹

» In addition to proposing an expanded idea of art work, Transforma also offers a new pedagogical model for community-based and activist art. In spite of the growth of academic programs supporting social and public practice, there is little formalized support for the practice outside academic and institutional settings.³² The mini-grant program, led by an engaged resource team, is a strong model for a nonacademic, nimble, and flexible support infrastructure for emerging artists in the field. Even without the grant-making element, the model could connect seasoned practitioners with emerging artists, helping them realize the multiple goals these practices necessarily encompass while avoiding the many pitfalls along the way. As a teaching and learning opportunity, this would do much to grow the field, in terms of both practitioners and the success of individual projects. The Transforma team worked with each of the pilot projects to

³¹ Sam Durant, conversation with the author, September 5, 2009.

³² Practitioners have found mentors and rely on support networks that have improved with the growth of the Internet. Art in the Public Interest, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting community-based practices, operates Community Arts Network, a website documenting projects, disseminating information, and connecting practitioners.

articulate goals and later checked in to see how the projects were proceeding, providing mentorship and support. The convenings have been identified time and again as critical to the various artists working in New Orleans.

» The Transforma model also provides us with an alternative support structure for experienced artists in the field, one that offers an additional option to the current museum-based exhibition model. Among the best-known exhibitions showcasing community-based and activist art practices are *Culture in Action* in Chicago in 1991–93; *Places with a Past* at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1991; and InSite, a roughly biannual presentation of artworks commissioned to address the San Diego–Tijuana corridor. Prospect.1, the first of a planned series of New Orleans–based biennials founded by curator Dan Cameron and on view in 2008, was part museum exhibition and part exhibition of site- and community-specific artworks located throughout the city. Residency programs at a wide range of institutions, including the Walker Art Center and Project Row Houses, invite artists from across the globe to work with local communities under the auspices of and with the support of the organization. Staff at the inviting institutions often provide an ongoing connection with local resources and communities, working with artists who have a limited period of time in the location to realize their works.

» These exhibitions have received both positive and negative reviews, with much of the criticism centered on readings of the work as superficial, ad hoc, and, at worse, self-serving for either the artist or the institution involved or both.³³ The temporary nature of the interventions and the model of pairing nonlocal artists and local communities have come under attack. Artists, often from areas far from exhibition

sites, travel from place to place, creating temporary, site- or community-specific works.³⁴

³³ See Grant Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage* 22 (January 1995): 5–11.

³⁴ See Kwon, *One Place after Another*, for an in-depth reading of site- and community-specific art, especially a reading of the problematic of "community."

Often their understanding of both site and community is limited; time pressure can lead to oversimplification in the constitution of who represents "community" and in how artistic labor is divided. These conundrums are to some extent endemic to the field and

indeed to group endeavors in general. But some of these issues—especially in terms of commitment, compromise, and understanding—might be improved through a model supporting local artists working where they live, on projects that they originate, supported by a network of local and national collaborators. In contrast to the exhibition model—which tends to provide local expertise, often in the form of staff support and knowledge, to a wide range of artists with differing degrees of familiarity with the context, both geographic and methodological, in which they are working—the Transforma model supports ongoing local projects through a broad base of resources and expertise.

» This is not to say that there are not advantages to what I am calling the "exhibition model." Extraordinary works of art have been created through that model, often in part because of the tension between local communities and artists from afar. Fresh eyes can see different possibilities, and nonlocal practitioners may be free of social and political constraints that local artists might feel. Transforma provides an additional model, one that might realize more integrated and longer-term engagement between artists and communities at the local level.

» Critical to the success of this alternative

model is the availability of the type of resources that museums and exhibition support structures are able to provide, including financial backing, critical advice, promotional efforts, and audience—many of the elements of the Transforma support model. At the inception of Transforma its founders had considered the idea of an alternative biennial. This could involve the commissioning of local artists to generate community-based work. Viewers instead of artists could travel from site to site. Given the current mobility of an art world already accustomed to traveling from biennial to triennial to Documenta, it is not hard to imagine the success of such an endeavor, especially if it had the budget of some of these other ventures.

» Watts House Project, “a collaborative artwork in the shape of a neighborhood redevelopment” in the area surrounding the landmark Watts Towers in Los Angeles, is an example of the potential for this model.³⁵ Originally

³⁵ From the Watts House Project website, <http://wattshouseproject.org>.

founded by Lowe in 1996 as part of the exhibition *Uncommon Sense*—

organized by Tom Finkelpearl and Julie Lazar for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—the project attracted the interest and assistance of Edgar Arceneaux, then an undergraduate art student. After Lowe’s departure the project went dormant. It was relaunched in 2008 by Arceneaux, by then an internationally recognized artist. By 2010 Watts House Project had three projects under way, each bringing together an artist, an architect, and a resident to reimagine a house and its surrounding area and, by extension, neighborhood. Larger projects include an artist residency program; a still-to-be-determined community facility, such as a day-care center; and a café. All these are planned with area residents, and all projects use

and pay for as much local talent as possible. The project is now a nonprofit organization that has drawn the support of a wide range of funders and institutions, including Creative Capital, ForYourArt, the Hammer Museum, LA><ART, and the Soros Foundation. Growing out of the exhibition model, Watts House Project, like Project Row Houses, has thrived with the care and attention of a local artist committed to the project and the neighborhood it serves and is becoming a long-term established player in the transformation of its neighborhood through a network of artists and other stakeholders. Lowe has remained involved as an active adviser.

» Although successful projects have grown out of exhibitions, traditional exhibitions are often not ideal venues for the dissemination of works in the field, which are often site-specific, temporally based, and, perhaps most difficult for traditional methods of art criticism and history, not object based. These projects, when presented in a gallery setting, usually in the form of documentation, often appear lifeless. A comparison might be an exhibition of photographs of sculptures and paintings, something most in the art world would consider absurd, or exhibitions about architecture, which many consider a poor substitute for experiencing an actual building. In order to be truly understood and evaluated, these projects should be seen at their site and over time.

» Art and city building are already intricately linked, with the current system of global exhibitions a key method of city promotion and tourism. There is potential within this system to reach beyond tourist dollars and cultural cachet to harness the arts to create lasting change. Just as artists working publicly have a desire to reach beyond the decorative, there should be a desire on the part of art professionals to create new ways of supporting new

art practices. Similarly, current academic models still favor established hierarchies of class and learning, ones that many of the students and professors in the academy are hoping to challenge. These new working methodologies need new models, and even as it concludes, Transforma offers a promising new template.



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