

To prepare for this discussion, we asked if there were questions that individuals wanted to ask the group. Several of you sent in questions, and I will pose them to all of you—and then open it up for further discussion. The first question comes from Jessica Cusick, and it goes back to the original team: what did you hope to accomplish, and did your goals evolve over time?

To address my own question, I think, as with any project, there were multiple goals. The first, most obvious one was to help New Orleans rebuild. And then—in my mind initially at least—there was a notion of validating this type of artwork at the intersection of all of these arenas—pushing the envelope in terms of how this could happen. In fact, we had a long list of things that we hoped to achieve. So I don't know if Sam, Rick, or Robert would like to add other goals.

Well, my goal was very simple—to try to bring some creativity back to the rebuilding of the city. My initial thought was just—can we do something right here, right now in the rebuilding process?

I think Jessica kind of laid out the core goal, but I'll add that we tried to explore a new way in which artists can engage in community-building projects. We tried to see how we could look at a balance between the artistic or aesthetic agenda and the social benefits that would come out of the artistic engagement. One important aspect was what we called the “resource team,” which could monitor that engagement—that was an unusual aspect, something often left out of projects promoted by arts institutions.

The project did evolve constantly. In the beginning, in our first trips to New Orleans, we had all kinds of different ideas, including possibly getting a building and renovating it with a group of cultural producers and making a community center or something really modest. We realized pretty early on that those things weren't really necessary because of the scope of devastation and damage. And I think having the community meetings with all of the folks in New Orleans early on really changed our direction.

It's not so much that our goals changed, but our ways of approaching them, our methodology was constantly in flux, and it was so responsive and iterative.

Another goal for me personally was to assure that it was collaborative and to try to figure out ways of constructing collaboration with a certain level of buy-in, participation, and engagement among a broad group of collaborators. It seemed from the beginning that when Robert came to me he assumed correctly that this wasn't something that I wanted to take on by myself, so immediately Robert was a collaborator—not just somebody calling up to ask for advice. Then Sam and Jessica joined, and later Jess as a staff person. It was really about everyone understanding collaboration—the process of being collaborative.

Jessica's last question is: Do you think it's worthwhile to undertake something like this in another city, given the complexities of New Orleans and what happened there? And what do you take away from this in terms of your own practice?

One of the big take-aways from this project is the importance of infrastructure. In the beginning we thought that New Orleans would be a great site for such a nontraditional approach because so much was broken. We thought perhaps the doors would be open for any kind of creative approach to enter into that rebuilding process. But we found out that actually without adequate infrastructure it's extremely difficult to get the support and the kind of focus that you need to make a project happen.

My biggest lesson—I was hoping for an immediate reaction. Let's do something right now. And I realize in hindsight that was more of a knee-jerk reaction. It really wouldn't have benefited anyone to just start doing something. Sitting back and listening to the community and then forming a loose strategy was really the correct way to go. But when you are completely surrounded by chaos and destruction, your impulse is to jump in and start doing something. That is why the national team was so important—because just having local people, we were running around trying to get stuff done as quickly as possible. The national folks slowed down that process, which was essential.

One of the things that I am certainly taking away is a new empathy with how incredibly complex and difficult it is to parachute into a situation. In general, I am the person on the ground facilitating the project. I have the local contacts and make them available to the artist, who has to work with those contacts and has to figure out what to do. Now I understand better how hard it is to really get the lay of the land, no matter how good a set of local contacts you have—because we had an incredible local resource team. I don't know if it was aggravated or not by the circumstances in New Orleans. So I'm not sure, having done this in New Orleans, if there's a way for truly facilitating the work of artists in other communities—there are a bunch of

hypotheticals, but making it practical is easier said than done. You can try to network or provide access to different resources, but it's incredibly difficult to get up and running. So that reinforces what Robert was saying about the time factor. And the other thing that I took away from it is that, even with our level of expertise and understanding, it was really difficult to get any cross-disciplinary participation until we had specific projects. The concept that all of these other disciplines would be involved was just too conceptual.

I think I would agree with Jessica, although I had some experience with this—being the parachuter in—how long it takes and how hard it is. But Rick's comment about the infrastructure is important. If I were going to do something like this again, I would start with much smaller-scale ambition, a very specific intervention, very targeted. The other thing I would mention is this: when you are volunteering in another city, it is hard to overstate how much energy that takes, especially if you're trying to do something long-term.

Okay. Having heard from the original inner circle, are there questions from the observers?

I am interested in hearing more about the mentorship/peer support function that Transforma played.

I think it happened in a lot of different ways, Aimee: It happened through the convenings, where we were able to get a number of people together to discuss their projects and to provide peer critique and support. It happened throughout one-on-one sessions with the national resource group and the individual artists. And then it continued when we hired Jess Garz. I'll let her describe the different ways in which she provided support and mentorship.

There was not really a systematic way to deliver support. However, in my mind there were a handful of different strategies. There was the support of the pilot projects and then the mini-grantees. More broadly, there were the convenings and the website. In addition we interacted with other arts organizations and projects, some not formally supported by Transforma. With the pilot projects—Home, New Orleans? (HNO?); Paydirt/Fundred; and then Plessy Park—my role as the Transforma staff person offering technical assistance was unique, based on the projects—much more administrative for HNO? whereas for the Plessy project it was much more as a facilitator, helping to coordinate a lot of what Suzanne Lacy was trying to do with that one event and also trying to navigate the politics between some of the groups involved on that site. And with Mel Chin, the Paydirt/Fundred project, we have maintained prolonged connection, though in truth

our role has ebbed and flowed—everything from fund-raising support to hooking him up with the local scene, whether it was political or organizational.

All of this support is clear to me. I am curious to hear more about the mini-grants. I was looking at the idea that Transforma could be an alternative pedagogical model in these contexts.

Well, the mini-grants were less structured even than the pilot projects. There were so many mini-grantees, and their level of expertise was really varied! Some of the mini-grantees saw Transforma as a real lifeline, in terms of not only financial support but also access to other information, whereas others were already very confident and well connected. It depended how much the grantee inquired about who we were and how we could help. And I think the convenings opened up our role a bit. For the first round of grantees the relationship was much more formal. We would communicate via e-mail: "Here's your contract; here's your check; this is when I need your final report by, etc." Given the nature of New Orleans but also given the fact that we had more grantees in the second and third rounds, the relationship became more informal. They connected more, asking about space or opinions about transportation. They connected more with one another in addition to connecting more with us.

I just wanted to say that the circumstances around the mini-grants were also connected to the idea that, from early on, we wanted to have a range of ways to engage with artists or projects. We wanted to be engaged with some projects that were long-term and broad in scope, but also to explore the possibilities of smaller projects that were more immediate, short-term, less involved. We expected that we'd support projects that would just be at the whim of the artists. We would just be investing in them to see how they would address issues with a minimal amount of support, hopefully finding some nice surprises—people doing things on their own in ways that we might not have otherwise been able to see, given that we were not looking from their perspective. Of course we were deeply involved with the pilot projects, so we had a deeper sense of what was going on. But most of those mini-grant proposals we didn't really have the opportunity to explore too deeply in terms of their methodology.

Given the really amazingly positive feedback that you guys got from the mini-grants, is one lesson from Transforma that in a distressed situation, in a fractured city like New Orleans was, the thing to do for the most bang for your buck might have been to very quickly set up a mini-grant program and organize convenings (which also seem to have been very strongly embraced)?

You may have hit it on the head. You know, I am thinking about Sam's comment about scale. But as Robert said, the scale of the disaster almost forced everyone to think about things on a large scale. I mean, the needs were so great.

Early on, the need was purely survival. So holding off for a while on the mini-grants actually put the money to better use. A little bit of time to allow people to get their bearings, get on their feet. At which point an injection of money was helpful. This was more effective than trying to get something started with that money.

I think that the mini-grant program was effective, but overall I also thought that the convenings, dialogue, and conversations were really impactful—informal, unstructured mentoring. This was a part of the project from the very beginning. From day one, we brought people together. Circling back to Aimee's question about this pedagogical or mentoring goal, as the administrator, I would say that it was pretty formal. We worked with each of our pilot projects to have them articulate goals, aesthetic and social-impact goals. I'm not sure how visible it was, but we worked with them, checked in to see where those goals were going. So it was formal mentoring, initially, but I don't think it was as effective as the convenings. Like at a convention, you get way more out of the conversations in the hallways with your peers than you do out of the formal sessions.

Again, the situation in New Orleans was unique. If you were going into another city in the U.S., you could start off with mini-grants pretty quickly. Even if you're going to a devastated community like Detroit, there is still somewhat of an infrastructure there—people working, electricity, and running water, etc. In New Orleans, I'm not sure that there would have been anywhere for the grants to go, at least in the first year.

From the local perspective, I don't know if the national team really understands how important those convenings were. They made all the difference psychologically as well as in the formation of a network. Suddenly local people from Home, New Orleans? and these other grassroots groups who were at the convening were meeting Bob Frankel, the visual arts head of the NEA. And it made connections for people who were feeling cut off from the rest of the world. As Jessica said, lots of conversations were going on outside the general talks, and these

were very important. I think it's an important model for going into communities that are struggling or looking for interaction, something that could be replicated elsewhere.

I am not sure that Transforma needs to continue in order to facilitate that sort of conversation, though. In New Orleans, those convenings were connected to a specific time frame and a specific set of events happening in the city. In themselves, the convenings in New Orleans were very important because they filled a void, but I think if you look around the country, you'll find people are actually having those conversations in specific neighborhoods.

I came down to a convening not so long after the storm, and there was an incredible urgency in the air, a lot of emotion. It reminded me of the first meetings of the Visual AIDS—the sense that the art community had to do something though nobody was quite sure what. (Eventually that energy was translated into projects like Day Without Art and the AIDS Ribbon, coordinated by a small office at Visual AIDS.) Importantly, both Visual AIDS and Transforma were not conceptualized and executed by outsiders. In Transforma there were local folks who had been displaced, just as in Visual AIDS a number of the key players were people with AIDS, creative people coping with incredible challenges and wanting to see how art might be applied to the situation.

I think you're right, Tom. The presence at the table of people who wanted to do something and people who were actually affected was a key part of the dialogue.

| And it wasn't like "us and them"; it was everybody trying to figure out something together.

I agree for the most part. Engagement in disaster relief is a great humanistic urge. But from the standpoint of an artistic or creatively engaged project, I would be more inclined to look for opportunities that are not so closely connected to disaster relief. If you're not in the center of that sort of effort, there might be less tension, and you can actually galvanize rational intent and capacity—to move it in a direction that is helpful, as opposed to just the outpouring of emotion.

At one of the early meetings, Rick, you pointed out that while we were in the midst of this disaster in New Orleans, there are mini-disasters happening everywhere, and perhaps these are the places to go into—not trying to intercede in Haiti after the earthquake. Now that we've taken lessons from New Orleans, is there a way to go into communities within other cities and do some projects where the issues are not catastrophic?

What about the interdisciplinary goals? If you were going to give advice to others seeking a similar pursuit at the intersection of arts and other fields, what would you tell them based on what you learned?

I would start out by making a clearer case for why it is relevant or important for people from other sectors to participate. I think we made a very good case to the art people for why they should be there, but I don't think we made an effective case for why people in the fields of the environment, housing, and education should spend energy working with artists. "How can we work effectively together to address all of our shared interests?" We found ourselves defaulting to what the art issues/solutions were, so if I were an environmental justice person, I might have said, "I think what they're doing is great, but my time is better spent focused on the wetlands."

Again, I feel that the lack of infrastructure is probably a big reason for not being able to connect the sectors outside of the cultural stakeholders. For instance, if somebody has a wetlands project already up and running, we could quickly connect them with an appropriate artist. But we weren't able to do that, unfortunately.

I also would advise people not to attach themselves to the idea of cross-disciplinary collaboration just because it seems to be a good idea in general. There has to be some specific need. Generally the projects themselves should lead the way. What kind of cross-sector collaborations are needed? I think that there is an issue when we try to insert a conceptual and idealistic perspective. It's great if we have housing or education folks at the table because we knew that these are issues relevant to the city, but what we didn't pay attention to was the fact that our projects were not venturing into those areas yet. We brought people in prematurely. For Paydirt/Fundred, if it continues to go along and gets into the implementation stage, there will be plenty of opportunity to engage with housing issues. But it's just not far enough along that you can clearly articulate exactly what form that engagement will take.

So the work should dictate the collaboration?

Yes, but there is also the general problem of placing the different disciplines in different silos—art is here, politics is here, sociology is there. What about the question of training—the problems that we have talking across disciplines? Where are there obstacles to discussing an artistic response to Katrina?

Yes, training is important. If the artists are going to work cross-sector, to work on an issue around housing or community development, they need to understand the field. But perhaps they do not need to be an expert. There is something to be said for having a fresh shot, and that's what artists might bring. In Transforma we all have varying degrees of experience, from Rick being a pioneer in this field to me being someone who is just getting started—and several steps in between. I think we were fortunate in that way.

Yes, the team includes an experienced arts administrator, a coordinator/producer, a politically based artist, a social artist. Robert, while you were a crucial instigator of the project, it seems furthest from your normal practice.

Yes, as a studio artist, I consider what I do, how I do it, and maybe how it will be interpreted, but the collaborative part is not there. That was such a learning curve for me in the beginning of this project. I was thinking, "Why aren't we doing something?" But a certain amount of it is conversation—talking and strategizing in a way that even the people you're talking to may not understand. I think Plessy Park is an interesting example because they had such an agenda, but it was really hard for them to actually see a side step or see past that agenda. At one point Rick had talked about getting a railroad car and putting it on the site, but that was completely foreign to them as an option, and they quickly seemed to eliminate it as an option. So it's this weird balance—what is going on in the community and your reaction to it. That's not something you learn about in school.

Well, there are art and public practice graduate programs now where perhaps you do study that, two years of study where you come out with training on how to be a community practitioner. And I'm learning how important it is that people pick up some very basic things in those programs. But it seems important to have a vehicle through which people can explore and make use of their training in ways that are more directed. Because most of those people who will come out of those programs at this point will have to navigate themselves into communities. I feel the best projects happen when people find their own way. And find what's interesting to them. And find people interested in how they think and invite them in and they become part of a community process. But I also think that having other opportunities that challenge people in a community-engaged process is really important. Places where people can experiment and get experience. I'm going to talk to a museum that is going

to set up a public practice residency. Those kinds of things are starting to happen. But then, since there is not a “best practices” handbook out there, the question becomes how to navigate projects that are valuable for the artist, the communities, and the institutions. I can see it very easily going in a direction where the museum gets to talk about how great their public practice residency programs are and their artists are out there running amok in neighborhoods where people don’t really understand or appreciate what’s being done.

| Or simply don’t need what’s being done.

| The first thing is that you have to be there.

| Yes, I think you know what I’m talking about, Jessica.

| Speaking of being there, you, Jess Garz, were the person on the ground here in New Orleans. I was just wondering how you felt you had been prepared for this endeavor.

Somehow I felt that part of my strength was that I wasn’t so strong in any of the fields. Initially Transforma was very allied with the arts community or the arts field, and that was the field with which I was least familiar. Coming from a context of design and urbanism, I had a general interest in housing and environmental issues in New Orleans. I did not necessarily know the details, but just the broad strokes politically and organizationally. This allowed me to bring a broader perspective to this project. Frankly, I did not know what was going on aesthetically with a lot of the projects. Initially that was not my primary concern. So much of what I did was keep my eyes open and my ear to the ground. In terms of cross-disciplinary collaboration, I think we brought in some people at key moments with limited expectations, which seems okay. For instance, we brought in people from other sectors to be panelists for the mini-grants, just so that they could look at these projects and maybe gain a greater understanding and offer a different perspective. It was important too that they felt empowered to share their opinions. I think those were important moments of cross-fertilization.

I agree. It was meaningful. It is important to get people involved, even without a specific thing that is related to what they’re doing. So if you can get somebody in housing involved in the process, even though there’s not a real housing issue on the table at that moment, it could become an educational possibility for them, and for the other people who are not from the housing sector as well. More perspectives are in the room. If you can get people to open up to a conversation that’s in a field just outside of what their expertise might be, that can be productive. Just like Sam said, artists are not experts in doing certain things in the community, but they bring a fresh eye to problems. Just so with people from other fields, who can surprise you if they feel comfortable enough to express themselves. I think there are opportunities for learning to happen—in both directions.

| Was Transforma transformative and, if so, for whom?

At the start there was that basic idea that we wanted to be a part of transforming New Orleans from its catastrophic situation. But I also think we were interested in transforming the way that we think about artists practicing in community-engaged projects. A transformation from the notion of the hero artist to the notion of collaboration. And for me there is the notion of personally transforming. Because I think that if you are truly collaborating and you’re working with people, there are things that should happen in the process that give you some different insights in terms of what you do and how you do it. Not just as a practitioner, but as a person. For me, Transforma has been very layered.

| Transforma has a collaborative aspect. Another word might have been intervention. We were not interested in intervention; we were not interested in simply going in and telling people what to do. We were hoping to merge our ideas with their ideas and push projects forward.

| In the beginning of the project, we were playing around with a number of titles that had to do with the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In choosing a name for what we were trying to do, we recognized that when you come together you transform in some way.

| Thank you, Jessica, for discovering the name.

So the name of the project is Transforma, and the goal is a set of small and larger-scale transformations. Does this mean that if you sponsored a project that had a positive social impact on a particular community it was a successful work of art?

Not necessarily. I see two different sets of criteria: one for social impact and one for the type of artwork. One does not necessarily equate with the other. I feel that really strongly.

I think it's a question of how you define what is a good or successful work of art. That's a constantly debated idea. I guess one of the aspects of Transforma was to challenge some of the commonly held definitions.

You know, there are great projects that have significant impact, but depending on the eye of the beholder, there may or may not be meaningful aesthetic quality. A lot has to do with the context and the intent. So if there is a project with positive social value and a complex and interesting process, but the intent of the production was not necessarily as an art project, then, well, it doesn't have to be an art project. It can just be what it is. But if the person who is exploring it can find quality and value from the standpoint of both impact and aesthetics and they have a desire or need to contextualize it in an art context, then so be it. That observer can make it a great work of art. I always like to boil it down to this simple point: it is what it is, and you can call it what you want to. That's the basis of readymades, found objects. If somebody sees it and puts it into an artistic context and can articulate it in a way that that context actually demands and has a format for criteria and it meets it, then yeah, it's a great work of art. But it could be a project with no arts agenda. Then it just is what it is, just a great project in social service.

As you're talking, I'm thinking of another way to read the name Transforma, dividing the two parts: *trans* and *forma*. In art criticism there has traditionally been a distinction between form and meaning, or form and function. Formalists try to look exclusively at aesthetic form, to isolate the artistic gesture from the historical conditions of an artwork's creation or its social function. They focus on what is going on within the frame that is inherent to the medium of painting, for example.

But when you think of social practice, one is inherently questioning a formalist approach. Then if you look at the other half of the title, *trans*, the root Latin meaning is "across" or "beyond." So Transforma, in its overt interest in the social aspects and their relations with artistic form, works across or beyond form. Artworks like Paydirt may have formal qualities, but Mel Chin and the tens of thousands of others who have participated are also working outside the normal precinct of form.

Indeed, the implication is that we were going beyond the form.



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