

Holding Spaces: An Interview Series

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Holding Space: An Interview Series about Assembling Philadelphia Assembled

with Jeanne van Heeswijk, Phoebe Bachman, Kirtrina Baxter,
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*Introduction and interviews
by Daniel Tucker*

Transcription by Abigail Dangler

Starting in October 2014, at the initiation of curator Amanda Sroka, I began meeting with Jeanne van Heeswijk to discuss her gradually unfolding process with the Philadelphia Museum of Art that began in 2013. We met five times over the course of two years, during which the *Philadelphia Assembled* project continued to take shape.

While developing this interview series, I also spent eight months meeting other collaborators (of whom there are over 150), attending meetings, and visiting the project's citywide events. In order to account for the scope of the project, I attended a collaborators assembly (one of the few times that collaborators from across the

project came together), a weekly editors meeting (an intimate gathering of the core artistic team), and a variety of public programs associated with each of the project's five guiding principles, termed "atmospheres." Evocatively referred to as "atmospheres of democracy," *Philadelphia Assembled* addresses a number of issues central to the future of the city by focusing on key concepts such as **reconstructions**—how we deal with questions of social displacement and reentry into society; **sovereignty**—how we define self-determination and autonomy; **sanctuary**—how we understand self-care, asylum, and refuge; **futures**—how to reimagine our tomorrow; and **movement**—how we facilitate action and collective learning.

Each member of the artistic team was responsible for a different atmosphere.

The individual atmospheres, in turn, were organized around the guidance and methodologies of its editor and had a corresponding working group made up of twenty to thirty individuals who met on a regular basis—thinking together, learning, unlearning, and knitting a network that continued to take on new forms over the course of the project phases.

Participating in, and as a witness to, this process, I started to see thematic patterns emerge that would serve as the basis for a series of more formally staged interviews. During the more public phases of the project (from February through July 2017) I conducted three interviews with nine members of the artistic team. (The result of these interviews—this booklet— is being released after the portion of this project taking place at museum’s Perelman Building (September 9, 2017 - December 10, 2017).

The way I see it, fundamentally the project has taken up the relationship between the Museum and the city of Philadelphia. While great pains have been taken to make sure that the two characters in that framework are not centered over each other, particular questions have emerged about both that remain discrete as well

as overlapping. The particularity of an “encyclopedic” museum like the Philadelphia Museum of Art and its embedded narratives about art and culture became a lens through which this relationship could be explored. On the other hand, the specificity of Philadelphia as a place existing across time emphasizes the limits to the ways in which the Museum figures into the many overlapping histories and experiences that constitute this city.

At a moment when museums are increasingly grappling with “community engagement,” the support the museum and the *Philadelphia Assembled* organizers have offered this project has signaled an altogether different approach that focuses on collaborative artistic practice over the conventional model that resembles outreach (plus occasional parties at the museum). Concurrently, as artists are increasingly heralded for their participatory processes and socially engaged practices, institutions are considering what role they can play in the development and presentation of that work. Relatedly, artists debate whether or not there is even a need for such presentations within institutions at all.

While prominent examples of this often exclude conflict in favor of fun events and inclusive gestures—perpetuated by museums and artists alike—there are occasionally examples of “community engagement” coming head-on into contact with activism and social justice. These conflicts challenge the participants’ commitment to neutrality. Such examples include, to mention a few, *Las Agencias* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona, in 2001; *Hardcore: Towards a New Activism* at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 2003; and *The Interventionists* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, in 2004; (and certainly many other significant examples in smaller non-museum exhibition settings as well.) *Philadelphia Assembled* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art has brought a new generation of activists and agents into collaboration—and confrontation—with the museum, and as these interviews demonstrates there is a great deal of questioning to be done about the value and meaning of such a collision.

One feature that figures admirably into this project is a commitment to ethical collaboration that

foregrounds group process and relationship building. Evidence of this can be read through these interviews with the recurring focus on “holding space” for time, attention, and generosity with respect to the people and partners who have come together in this process. This confrontation between the prefigurative language of social justice seeking to embody its values and a museum grappling with its relationship to the city in which it resides can be felt with the emphasis on the “table” as a metaphor for power relationships. While museums may consider questions such as “who is at the table” with the optics of diversity, they rarely consider that their tables may be upturned and remade by neighbors who may not share their priorities. What *Philadelphia Assembled* promises is that the priorities of those with whom they partner may have to fundamentally alter their work (and, in turn, the work of the Museum). In the process, what a museum is may change, but a city may also change along the way.

So what can happen when these two amorphous and sometimes contradictory entities—the city and the museum—are brought into proximity?

The tension seems to be captured by the competing goals of representation versus redistribution. Exhibiting activism in a museum may do very little to advance the specific agendas of social justice. Yet beyond representing activism, what could be the use in taking the time, space, and resources to reflect/document/imagine/perform/present the aspirations of a city and its residents? Similarly, diverting resources from local philanthropy toward activism under the auspices of art may be a clever act of Robin Hood-ism, but it comes with the catch-22 of temporary project funding that can be as distracting to accommodate as it is meaningful to redistribute. Is there a remaking of that dynamic here, that confronts the possibility of the city's wealth being redistributed via reparations and programs designed by and not imposed on those historically left out of grant making? And finally, if the narrative power of the encyclopedic collection is in question, what can be gleaned from that power and how it operates for those who want to shape the new narratives of what Philadelphia is and can be moving into the future?

It is exciting that a single project could hold space for such a rich and challenging set of questions while honoring and cultivating deep collaborations and friendships. In the end, I see these relationships as being a major outcome of this project with *Philadelphia Assembled* functioning as a kind of political and artistic leadership development and community building platform for culture in the city. The interviews you are about to read should provide some insight into how this worked in the words of the people doing the work.

—Daniel Tucker

Interview with Jeanne van Heeswijk February 3, 2017

Most of our organizing is done towards a particular goal. How do we organize for a collective future or imagine collective futures without necessarily determining the goal? That's preenacting the 'not yet.'

—Jeanne van Heeswijk

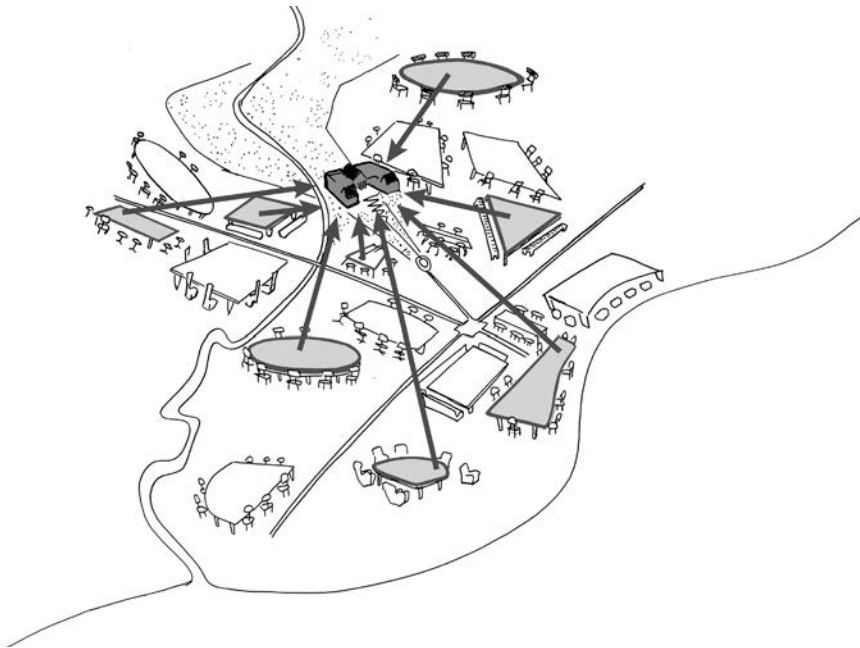
Daniel Tucker (DT): Could you talk a little bit about the initial prompt that brought you here?

Jeanne van Heeswijk (Jvh): Over the years, Carlos Basualdo [the Museum's Keith L. and Katherine Sachs Senior Curator of Contemporary Art] and I have had ongoing conversations about socially engaged practices and institutions such as a large museum of Contemporary Art or even an institution such as this Museum, which is an encyclopedic museum. I think Carlos wanted me to come and work with the Contemporary Department, based off my practice, to examine how an encyclopedic museum at this moment in time not only embraces the contemporary, but also embraces the contemporary in relation to the city. In an institution that has been predominantly about conservation, how does it deal with living material, living discussion, living artists and art? The museum itself is actively trying to rethink, as part of their restructuring, about their relationship with their audience, with the city. What is their place in the city as a public institution?

There are a lot of questions there that have also been part of my thinking. What is the place of art in society? What is the place of culture and cultural institutions? I think actively about forms of education, learning, and unlearning and the way in which contemporary institutions of art, Contemporary Art, or art in general have been very siloed. The curatorial department is different from the education department.

But there is simultaneously a lot of discussion around the educational turn [in Contemporary Art]. There are other ways of thinking about art, learning, and radical pedagogies that can inform our understanding of how we are in the world.

So when Carlos asked me this question [about the Museum and the city], it was a huge question, an almost impossible question. I can think of the scale of the neighborhood, or the scale of the local. I see the local not as a territory, but as a condition which embodies global conflict with site specificities. But it is a condition more than a territory. To think on the scale of the city is like thinking in an abstraction that is new and challenging for me. To ask what kind of narrative can a cultural institution like the museum hold, a narrative of a changing city or cultural landscape, while it is in motion? Institutions everywhere are asking: How can we hold multiple narratives of culture, of art? How do we make the dominant narrative that we have been collecting, which is Eurocentric, become more porous? How can it also hold other narratives and those that are not yet fixed and set?



I think that all of these are important questions for which radical pedagogy is very important. Having said all of that, this is sort of how I work—from a place of curiosity. I began looking at different departments that the museum has. It has numerous departments dealing with audience, from visitor services, to education, to curatorial, and outreach. But they don't talk about what I call "inreach". I also wondered what a collaboration between the city and its changing landscapes could mean in the museum. And not as a representation, but a co-production. Questioning how the extended field of the city can become a co-producer with an institution like a museum, in order to build a contemporary narrative.

DT: When was that first meeting with Carlos?

JvH: October 2013.

DT: Growing out of your description of the curiosity that you were able to access upon this invitation, I want to talk a little bit about artistic process and your research. When you have that kind of opportunity in front of you, but none of the necessary pieces are in place—the funding, the infrastructure—and maybe even in your own mind you can't see any kind of shape or scope of it—how do you start feeling your way through the city to make sense of this invitation?

JvH: My first year here was a set of visits, one time for six weeks, one four weeks, and another time four or five weeks. In my practice, I have my sketchbook, which I call "public faculty"—public conversations that I hold twice, three times a year as a way of sketching, but it's also how I often start my larger research. It's basically having conversations on the street with people about the local conditions of the city and doing that without necessarily having a fixed set of questions and outcomes, but more so listening to the way in which people describe their daily condition and if they feel they have any agency in it. With public faculty, I do it on the street corner with whoever joins in. So I try to create many variables in that conversation. For my practice, it's very important that I create a field of interaction based on the conversations and the questions that emerge. These fields of interaction form the basis of my project. I step into them and become a participant.

From each project I learn certain methodologies.

Often things emerged from a project that were important learning moments. Over the last years, an important learning moment for me is that whenever I start a new project, I bring somebody from another project with me to the new situation, to also act as somebody who can explain how the previous site worked. Somebody from Liverpool joined me on the journey in Germany, because then the lessons learned in Liverpool could also be applied here. For me that's been very important.

So I looked at my working practice as a whole and asked: Who did I work with that has a deep relationship with Philadelphia? And can they introduce me to someone they feel is important for the changing landscape of Philadelphia? That's basically what I did. I spoke with Sue Bell Yank, who I knew was born in Philadelphia. I said, "Listen, I'm going to embark on this endeavor. Who do you think I should meet?" And she said, "You should meet my stepmom. She's very active in the healthcare community." I specifically asked people to introduce me to someone that is not a part of an art institution. I think that was important because of course as soon as you start talking to museum or art world people, you get the usual suspects. "You have to meet the director of the ICA," and so on. For me, it was very important to start with people that are not part of the art world and ask them if they would host me in their home—in their house, preferably or in a café, or a place they thought was important. After every conversation I asked the person if there was somebody else, based on our conversation, they thought I should meet. That was a referral process that was organic, that was based on conversation, and I think that was a very important part. In that year, 2015, I had over three hundred conversations.

I also took a few books with me when having these conversations. I read this book called *the Spirit of Philadelphia: Social Justice vs. the Total Market* that I really liked. It's a short book about labor and about the *Declaration of Philadelphia*—a full-fledged social bill of rights written in 1944 by the International Labour Organization—and how they could be reinterpreted today. That was a nice booklet that I was carrying with me to talk about postindustrial transformation and poverty and work. I took DuBois's *Philadelphia Negro*. I also had the book *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia*. I asked "What is the spirit of Philadelphia?, What are the nonspoken things in the city?"

It was these intense and immersive conversations that laid the foundation, and I started to map them.

There were also questions and terms that kept coming up. Sovereignty came up all the time—questions about self-determination, about what you [Daniel] said, "how to organize your own," about land rights, food justice, about all the empty lots in the city. If I were a researcher searching Philadelphia online, I would also find a lot of this; it's nothing new. But for me, those conversations are not about if you find hidden things that nobody knows about. It's about listening into how people describe their daily situations, the conditions they are under, and if they feel they have agency in it or not. For me that's important. It's a deep listening into the territory. I do that for hours and hours on end! And then just distill thought patterns and emotions. What are the common threads that emerge? It becomes a beautiful mess in my head that forms/ shapes my thinking.

In PHL, these questions then started to form a second round of conversations. What is Reconstructions? What is Sovereignty? What is Sanctuary? What is Futures, within this city? And who do they move/ connect (which led to the Movement atmosphere)? And then the conversation started to deepen. This is how it's been growing. From these conversations came this idea of creating "atmospheric" working groups that work on specific questions, holding and deepening that conversation. From the very beginning I've been strict about cutting up my artistic persona from one lead artist, into an artistic team. The artistic team is made of nine editors who came from these conversations.

DT: I appreciate your description of finding the editors and your process of asking questions. One thing that I am curious about is this process of assembling key people that are going to hold a project together, but also give a project its capacity and its purpose and its drive. You took some steps to circumvent typical gatekeepers who might prescribe a certain itinerary through the city or a set of relationships. I want to hear you say a little more about the theory of that process, about why you would approach something that way, and what kind of relationships you hoped would converge that had not existed before. Obviously, people know each other. There's a way that inevitably you're meeting people through other people,

and you do come from an art field, so there's going to be a center of gravity that exists around art, even if you try your best to avoid it.

In relationship to this I'm curious what you think about the concept of prefiguration. And if you are in fact trying to prefigure some kind of network or community or a kind of democracy, what is the relationship between this circumvention of typical or preexisting itineraries, and your ultimate prefiguration of a new relationship or constellation of relationships, that would be the foundation of this project? Can you talk a little bit about why that's important to you, that it comes together in that way?

JvH: Preconfiguration is a very important concept in my work. I talk about it as a preenacting the "not yet," or training for the "not yet." Max Haiven, a Canadian art critic, says that imagination is always in motion. It's embodied. It's a collective exercise of care. I like that he thinks about imagination as something that's always moving, but at the same time it's embodied. When I talk about preenacting the "not yet," I think about how can we think about a collective future while at the same time not predetermining the collective body? For me, it's very important that you closely look at how two people become collaborators. If we want to think about an imagination that can hold our differences, that can be that exercise of collective care, then how do we do that without predetermining or prescribing that collective body? Most of our organizing is done towards a particular goal. How do we organize for collective futures without necessarily determining the goal? That's preenacting the "not yet."

I think a lot about how to circumvent or subvert, as much as you can, the dominant channels/structures. One of the hardest things for people to grapple with in the [PHLA] working groups is that we are not organizing around one theme or issue. We're organizing in an atmosphere. I think people are growing into that idea after some resistance in the beginning, to now understanding what we are actually doing. We are becoming a body, although it may be a temporary body, and holding uncomfortable conversations, not necessarily with a direct goal to a thematic action. For me, that is important—I think through the lens of imagination, because I'm not organizing direct action.

It is imagining together a more just future that can inform direct actions.

DT: Can you say more about the relationship between different forms of capital and the commitment to maintaining a prefigurative practice, in terms of the social relations? In this case, there's a way that money is on the table, in an explicit way because people are being paid for their modules of time. That money is raised in some part on the basis of a symbolic or cultural capital that is only available to the project because of its relationship to art, to art institutions. Then there are other kinds of capital that people bring into a project like this, everything from their relationships that they laid out to their deep knowledge of and commitment to the place, to their reputation. Can you talk a little bit about assembling what you called a score, an organizational form that could account for those different forms of capital, while still keeping the fire burning through funds, so it could evolve in the directions that people desired?

JvH: Time is the biggest issue to negotiate in the institution. People do understand linear time and allocated time in an institution. Allocated time is very prescribed time. What's very hard, I think, for any institution to understand is nonlinear time and non-prescribed time. So that you say, "The curator is going to work four hours," or "The installment crew is going to work four hours on building a wall." You can budget for that. But just say, I project this amount for the possibility of amplification of ideas of importance to the community, without saying it's four hours of building or five hours of typing. It's nonlinear. That's been the hardest discussion.

I have an amazing companion in the journey, Yana Balson, who is in Special Exhibitions helping me and our artistic team manage the entire budget for the exhibition. And she joined the team as a collaborator. She helps us to align our modes of time with the ways of an institution. So there's been very interesting conversations about that. One of our core values is transparency about power and budget, from the beginning, the amount of money we have and how it's divided. All working groups and editors know the budget and they know how the time is allocated. When we started, we didn't have any budget. So the other side of it is going to funding bodies or to people to ask for money without having a clear and finished program.

These discussions are always difficult because there are many of them running parallel. Since we are transparent about power, we don't take away that this project is hosted, with the Museum as a collaborator that actively puts its resources - including staff - towards it. That's just part of the reputational capital that the Museum holds. It's one of the ways in which the money comes in. Having said that, William Penn Foundation gave an important part of the funding of the project. It's the first time the Museum got that kind of a grant. That is also attributed to the reputational capital of the group as well as of the Museum, or the relationship between those two. Because I think a lot of people are there because they are there interested in finding ways to decolonize the institution. They're not only there to organize around these principles in the city, but to possibly de-colonize, or at least bring another narrative, to the PMA. I think that is an important part of why people participate. That's also why a lot of people are totally skeptical, even in our working groups, especially now. Will the Museum not backtrack on this? Will they not start censoring? All these questions keep recurring in our conversations. It's always difficult.

Across the project we work with stipends or fees based on \$18 an hour. And for working group meetings we are also providing childcare, travel expenses, and a meal. Predominantly for activists in the group, the provisions are part of good activist practice to allow for a diverse as possible group of people to participate. I think the discussion is more with the artists in the group, who basically are used to negotiating their self-worth in a different way, which is also directly linked to their reputation or the possibility of entering a reputational domain. There's much more negotiation there than with some of the activists or the healers or the gardeners. That's also interesting.

DT: Who is willing to accept the premise of redistribution from an institutional sponsor, and who is suspicious of it?

JvH: Everybody is suspicious, sort of. This is a very feisty bunch. We have about 150 people. They're all suspicious of redistribution, but then again a lot of them also know that's a start of a needed conversation. The budget is relatively open; we spend one third on compensating time, one third on the public phase, and one third on the Museum phase - for materials, build, and stuff like that.

In the public phase, that one third goes predominantly to investing in amplifying the amazing work already done in the city. Of course, you can also point out that redistribution itself can be seen as a colonial act. because of who has the ability to redistribute? That whole discussion is also always there. We're not denying it. We're not going to say, there's this anonymous resource and we're all going to decide what to do with it. That money has come through this project, which intends to look at that landscape of the city and the Museum and look at those questions of power, the possibilities of entering a different cultural narrative—it's part of the process.

People have knowledge, and then there's always this question of what is knowledge worth? You can argue, "I went to university and I have a big college debt, so my knowledge has to be worth more because I cannot live off of \$18 an hour." But then we come into a very difficult construct about what to value, which knowledge to value more. I've been very precise; I get the same amount an hour. Within the group there is discussion: some people have one day a week, other people have three days a week, some people have one day a month. This also creates an imbalance in that not everybody has five days a week. It's not a full-time job for everybody. We're just valuing people's time and work. We're asking people to actively, collectively build something, and they put work in it, so we are valuing that work. Full stop.

Also that's maybe a difference of when people talk "audience." There are so many tiers about audiences. For me all of the people working on the project, they're collaborators. They're co-producers of the work. Then there are participants, somebody who will come to a public event to participate. And you have the audience, people who come and look at a lecture, event or the exhibition. But that's different than this group of collaborators who are co-workers on the project. I think that has to be very clear.

DT: With all of this consideration and background in mind, I'm curious then about how you balance all of the work that it takes—not just your work, but everyone's work—to keep it transparent and keep the fire burning, while also talking about the content, the commitments, the ideas, the relationships that really keep people caring about this project and showing up.

JvH: Like I said, I'm not doing this alone. The artistic team at the moment is a strong team. A lot of people on that team are holding a lot of those relationships. I think the other notion that is very important to me is this idea that Marina Garcés coined, "honesty with the real." She states: "Exposing oneself and getting involved are ways of assaulting the reality that the democratic channels of participation and freedom of choice are constantly neutralising in all spheres of life in our societies." How can we create enough safe space for people to take risks in relation to others? In principle, you have to be able to let go of your subject position, to momentarily allow others to take space. I think that's a very active practice, a continuous learning curve. That's part of where I need to practice my skill sets. It's like allowing yourself to be in complexity. The situation and the world we're living in are complex, so it's allowing complexity, and if you want, messiness, to be part of the process. There was some pushback from the collaborators about halfway through last year: we have to have clear goals, clear facilitation, clear community agreements; we have to decide if we organize on consensus or not. I felt from the beginning that it would not work like that, as often consensus and creativity are maybe not each other's best friends. Or even anger and consensus are not each other's best friends. Sometimes the project needs anger or conflict in order for it to change dynamics. But ultimately consent is needed.

Here, in Philadelphia, groups have a very strong social justice organizing paradigm. There's a clear set of facilitation skills that go with it, which people like AORTA do an amazing job with. At the first collaborators assembly, we asked them to hold the day. Skills like "One diva, one mic" and "Move up, move up"—I know them by heart now. I don't know necessarily if they are all the facilitation skills needed for a project that is about collectively embodied exercise of care towards imagination, they are a part of the whole. I think there are other things that are needed as well and that we need to learn together. I also always say this is not only a project for social justice organizers.

DT: Let's talk a little more about that. This project from the outside could look like a kind of microcosm of an existing social movement that exists in Philadelphia. Maybe it was not known to itself, visible to itself, or the city it was in, but it was actively working its way in the cracks as well as in the halls of power.

And yet it is not a social justice organizing project—it is a different kind of project. How are you able to make that distinction between what this is and a social justice organizing project? Does it have to do with your definition of categories like "politics?"

JvH: For me, there's a big difference between politics and the political. I think that aesthetics are very important—next to ethics and economics—when it comes to the political, but it's not necessarily party politics. It's not that kind of linear organizing. Like you said before, all of these things are already happening. If you think about this "training for the not yet" towards a collective body, then it is working with all that is there—making it emergent and rerooting it. The project is just now forming itself towards a collective, beginning to strengthen itself as a future body that can hold ideas. Collective ideation—that's what it's doing. With the current situation in the world, the project becomes more fragile because it runs the risk of becoming politics, or becoming only protest, and not a platform for collective imagination.

Turkish artist Zeyno Pekünlü talks about "being prepared," in relation to the Taksim Square protest. A lot of people said that it was a spontaneous moment, but she argues it was not—that even though the unexpected can happen, aka it is not planned—that does not mean we are not prepared. In the moments leading up to that which you don't know, you practice on a small scale, practice for a possible change that everyone may feel but cannot yet articulate. This happened not necessarily through political organizing alone, but also by organizing alternative spaces, like rescuing their local cinema. People are training their skills of imagining different possibilities, so when the moment comes, people will be ready to bring that together.

If you think about imagination as a collective exercise of care, you can create a space where all of those different forms of exercising care can actually come together form a new paradigm. It's just like momentarily allowing this group that's been working for a year now to emerge a vision or a form of cultural narrative that they want to share at this moment, or feel should enter a space like a museum. I think that's interesting because in one of the very first meetings, when we were talking about the atmospheres and their working groups, we called them coalitions.

And someone said that they're not coalitions yet. The working groups are now just called working groups, which I like. But in the beginning they were called "working groups towards coalitions." Through the whole process, whatever organizational process was put on the table was actively scrutinized. I think that's something these containers of time do—they allow us to spend time to scrutinizing our relationships, our imbalance or balance, our different forms of thinking about this changing city. Sometimes these are very tough sessions to come to a value set we can hold.

DT: What would you argue would be the reason to hold a line on this being a cultural project versus a political one?

JvH: I do think it's political, because of the way I think about art and culture, that by its nature it is political. But it's not politics. It is by definition "culture" because it holds an image of our time, and it helps us see this image, and how it is constructed, and how people have a place in that image or not, or recognize themselves in the way that we create and collect images of the way we are now, portraits of our time. This project has asked me to revisit a lot of my own thinking. And that maybe has to do with the scale of it.

DT: Can you say a little bit about how the scale is different than other projects you've worked on and maybe why the concepts and the language you've been drawn to have had to shift necessarily because of that scale?

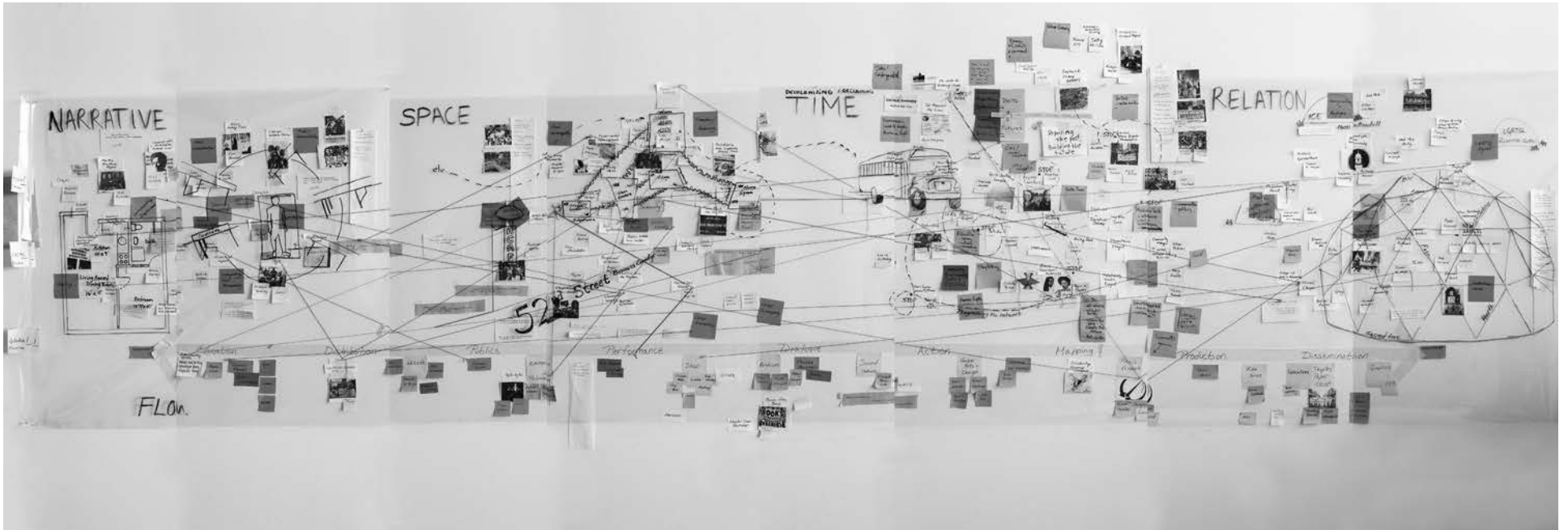
JvH: I don't think the concept had to shift necessarily, but I had to gain a much deeper understanding of them. Some of my projects are big, but their growth in time was organized differently. The Liverpool one started very small, with me having conversations like here, but smaller, and then it grew in different entities. This one from the beginning started not necessary with a larger landscape, literally. That scale also means something relational and it means something for methodologies, because scale and methodology have an interesting relationship. If you make one table or one hundred tables—there's something there about reproduction or about scalability, if it is even possible. Not necessary. I think it is more about the journey and who you meet and how you let this affect you.

DT: At a certain point, these ideas gestate and percolate in an imaginative safe space that is very careful and considered and held, and then they start to spill over and become politics and exceed the category they're operating in now. That has implications for the ideas and people involved and then for you on the scale of your practice.

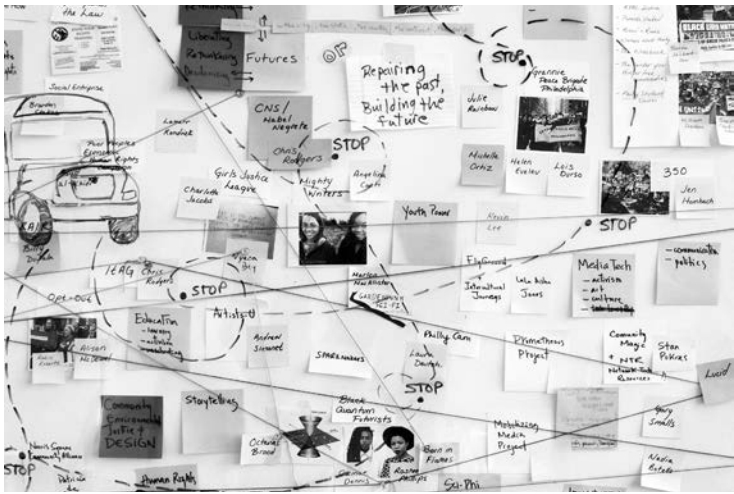
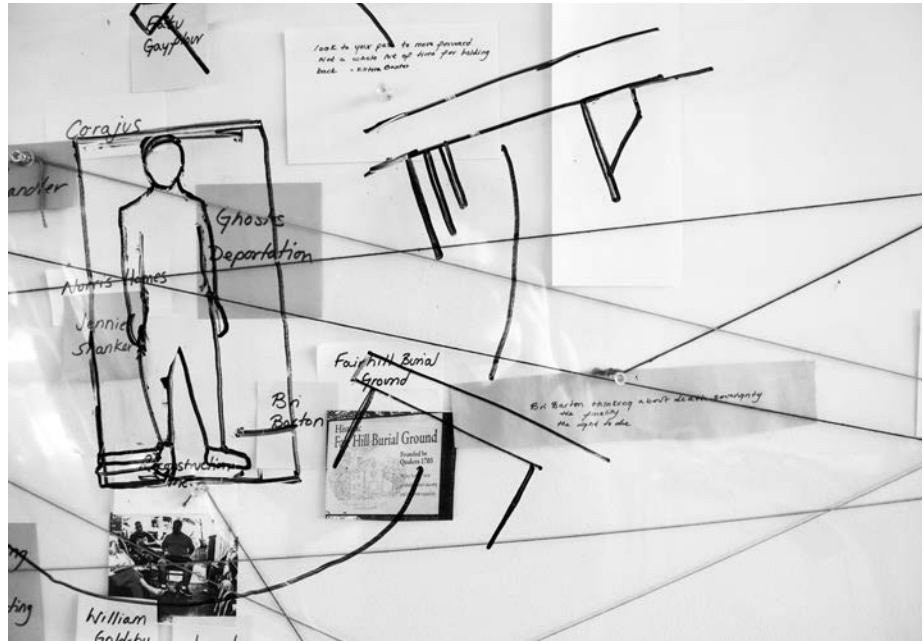
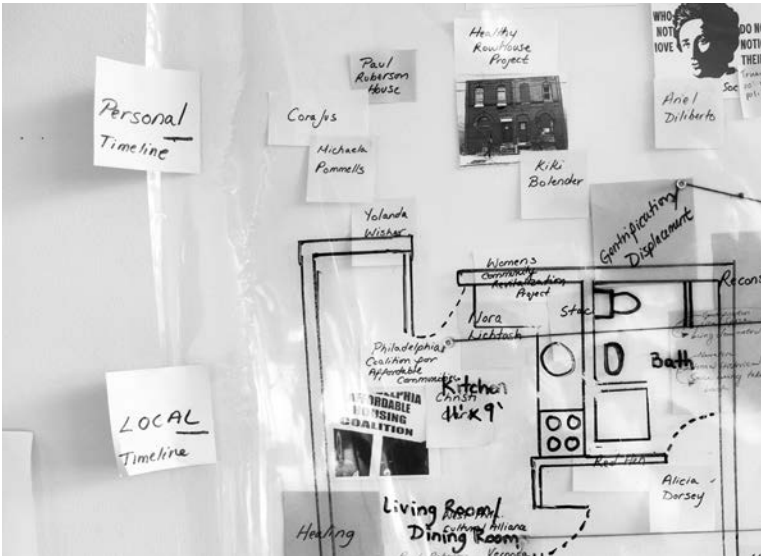
JvH: I could have played this one more safe, but where I am in my practice, I think about risking one's subjectivity as "risking yourself in the public in order to break things open." I couldn't do this in any other way other than really risking it all. If I would not risk my own subject position in this project, it would be a "dress-up". Knowing this is done in full view, not in the margins, I feel is a profound risk. But without it, we will not be able to move this project to a point that can be celebrated, because it might not get there.

DT: Do your collaborators share that risk?

JvH: Yes. And for that I am indebted and grateful.

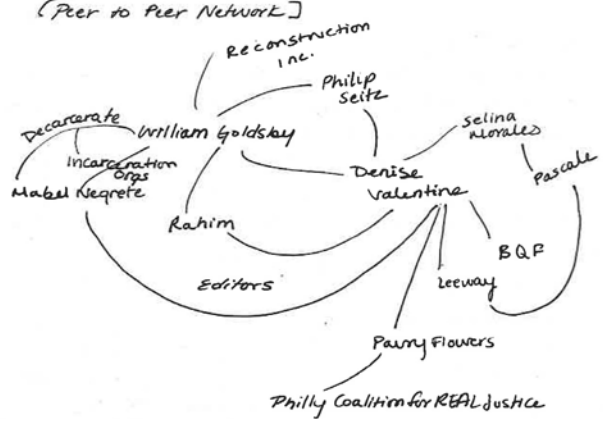


Philadelphia Assembled Network Map located in the workspace



PHLA Network Map in Progress

Datum/Date: Sept 30 continued
 William said some particularly interesting comments about the term memorialize.
 ↳ How one could re-condition their cognition/mental state to create space in a colonized mind.
 Also important to remember: Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome
 He would like this project to integrate into what they're already doing + to become something that folks from the whole org can get involved with.
 This project continues to grow exponentially.



Interview with Phoebe Bachman (PB), Kirtrina Baxter (KB), Shari Hersh (SH), Nehad Khader (NK), Mabel Negrete (CNS), and Jeanne van Heeswijk (JvH), May 8, 2017

At whatever point that the dominant society decides they want to acknowledge whatever has already been existing with the rest of us, that is for their personal growth and, hopefully that will help all of us understand how to be better humans.

—Kirtrina Baxter

Artistic Team, Philadelphia Assembled.



Daniel Tucker (DT): Let's talk about prehistory. I would love to know about some moment that catalyzed the work that you're involved with today. It can be as near or distant in time as feels appropriate. It can be something that you feel is important to share, that informs your work, in particular to your work with *Philadelphia Assembled*, but also more generally what you're engaged in that would be helpful for people to understand as fundamental to some of the threads and relationships running through this project.

Mabel Negrete (CNS): I came to Philadelphia in 2012. I had just graduated from doing my master's degree at MIT. A great part of that work was based on understanding the complexity of how the United States as a nation-state has been developing systems of social control to oppress Indigenous nations and Black and Brown bodies. This interest in part came from my direct activist work in opposing the prison industrial complex back home (San Francisco Bay area) and in part from my personal experience as an immigrant. As an immigrant who came from the region of Chile I had lived with the oppression that comes from being criminalized for being a colonized-mestiza-Indigenous-descent body, an issue that many people from many Indigenous nations and nation-states from the Americas are still addressing today at all different levels.

So, I was interested in Philadelphia because it represents the beginning of the "new," "modern" nation-state. Philly was the "Mecca" of the Industrial Revolution and it is here that one of the two "modern" penitentiary systems was born: the Eastern State Penitentiary, a model that came to be known and used worldwide by many new, upcoming nation-states.

I was also looking at how the history of slavery and how the nation-state and the institutional systems of the USA were supported by eugenic thinking that was developed at the time, but also later gave rise to scientific fields like cybernetics and genetics. Back then Euro-American settlers were obsessed with trying to differentiate humans into types, into species, because many believed that some humans were inferior to them. That's what led to the justifications of identifying some humans as superior and inferior, and using people as disposable or trainable. This is the genesis of organized white supremacy as we experience it today institutionally—Manifest Destiny, all of that. That's why I also came to Philadelphia. I needed to understand the larger picture. In doing so, I have come to realize that this city is not only a Black city and a white city, but within that, it is a gray city. I call it "gray" because it is the city of the Indigenous peoples, the Lenape nations who are the original inhabitants of this land. But because of colonial assaults, they have been forced to relocate to near and far-away states like Oklahoma and Canada.

Within that gray zone we also have people who have come to live and settlers from other parts of Turtle Island, the Americas, and from other continents.

When I was first called to participate in this project, I was very skeptical. I was concerned about how things would develop. I have an anti-racist perspective and radical mindset that deeply believes that the voice of our people, who are directly affected, needs to be at the center of any decision and conversations. So, in part, my history with the project has been a little antagonistic because of the inherent oppressive institutional history of the Museum and the role it plays in the city. But also it has been an opportunity to exercise my organizing skills and see if it's possible to de-center the white supremacist values by re-centering Indigenous, Brown, Black, and all the other bodies that have been subjected to exploitation, abuse, dehumanization.

Nehad Khader (NK): I was born politicized, I guess, because of my Palestinian parents. Growing up in this country, I immediately had a cognitive dissonance, between what I knew to be true and what everybody around me knew to be true, specifically around my people. We became really visible in this country in 2000 when the Second Intifada started. That was when I could first name how a narrative gets constructed and what it does. I went to Central High School, so it was probably one of the more racially mixed and also financially class-mixed public high schools in the city, or among five or six of them. My peers were mostly three kinds of people: it was Black, white, and Puerto Rican—some Asians and some South Asians, but for the most part it was the three larger ethnic groups. I noticed that my white peers didn't believe whatever the hell I was saying about the Second Intifada, and it was really important to me. It was happening far away, but it was my people. It's a very important revolt in my history and the history of my people. And then September 11th happened right afterwards, it was the same kind of thing, where I felt if it wasn't for the kids of color in my school I would have gone completely crazy. Because then I realized, "Oh, there are people in this country who understand intrinsically that the narrative that's being told about you is bullshit."

That's where I came to with this project, and it's where I come with everything I do, the importance of narrative. I try to be as careful as I possibly can about the experiences of people who are also on the margins or on even further on the margins than I am. And I don't believe in the top-down thing, and that whole "ship" and that people are on the bottom of the ship. That's such a problematic construction for me. There is [the place] where the center gazes, and there are the margins. I think that the margins can be more powerful—definitely more powerful than the center. That's what I'm interested in.

Kirrina Baxter (KB): How I came to this project is interesting. Jeanne, during the course of her initial interviews, was going around and folks were telling her, "These are people you should talk to." I'm a community organizer, and I work with residents around the city who want to get access to land for greening or gardening projects. I'm also a national activist around access and preservation of Black land. A lot of what the project is about—resilience—is directly related to what I do. It made sense for me to be a part of the project. However, my time was limited.

But I think being that I'm a person of color—I'm a Black woman—and coming from and working with communities that have been impoverished and marginalized for such a long time, I see what's missing in my community. The folks that I know, that I've lived around my whole life, Black folks and/or Latino folks, are missing things, and need goods and services in their community, and my work has been to assist in the process of attaining what we need to thrive. Even me, being a community organizer, is happenstance. That's just my response to the community, to find out how I can be a bridge to resources. In the course of me doing that work people were like, "Oh, you're an organizer," and I was like, "OK, whatever. Anyhow, these things need to get done." I didn't have an academic-organizer background and I'm really thankful for that. Now that I know lots of organizers, I'm really thankful for having a different lens to look through, because the work that I do is very personal to me.

Me and my child were food insecure for a long time when she was growing up, and I'm sure when I was a child we were food insecure to some degree. I think about that because I have this thing about not sharing food that must come from not having a lot when I was younger.

My sisters and I used to tease each other about that. My family is very community-oriented. My dad's a pastor; he and my mother co-pastor now. All my life we were organizing in our community. That's just what we had to do. We served in the community in all different ways. People lived in our house consistently. Part of my life has always been taking care of the folks around us and making sure we all have what is needed—also working collaboratively. That's a huge part of the church, making sure everyone is working together. Things like sharing clothes—repurposing clothes is what we call it now—it was just a part of everyday life in communities of color. That's what we do; do we share stuff. If you're growing tired of something or can't fit into it anymore, you pass it down to the next person. You find a piece of furniture that someone doesn't want, you try to make use of it. Those were common things that are now the highlight of this "sustainable" movement that has been practiced in communities of color forever, right? It's so interesting to me.

That dynamic has been something that I've talked about throughout the years in my work in the communities, to remind folks that this is nothing new to us. This is real, and these are practices we've been doing for a long time, realizing and knowing that this is important. Just the act of quilting itself—it's been around for hundreds of years, but it's exactly that: putting together these pieces and old things to make something beautiful and new and warm and comforting.

Everything that I do is based around community. It's a little challenging for me to do, personally challenging, because there's no line, no divide. This is my life. I don't do this because I'm getting paid to do this. I do this because it's what I should be doing. It's what I've been raised to do. This project was interesting; we all didn't know what it was. And we're always challenged with outsiders coming in. The reality of bringing in someone from the Netherlands to do a project on Philadelphia was fucking ridiculous. I love you, Jeanne, you know that. There are so many art activists in Philadelphia. I have friends from all over the country who are artists who want to get to Philadelphia because of the art scene that's here. That made me really skeptical at first as well. For me it was like, I just want to make sure that I can steer this thing in a way that it's not imposing on people.

I felt like I need to be a watchdog for what's happening here, to make sure this wasn't something that is going to do harm to the communities they're trying to work with, and it's evolved since then.

NK: We've never talked about this, but that's the same reason why I wanted to come to the project. I spoke to Phoebe about it first, and I just thought, "I'm from Philly. I was born here, and yeah, there should be Philadelphians working on this project." I'll say about myself, I'm a really thoughtful person. So I felt like, if I'm on it, at least I can be thoughtful. I'm also not a person who believes in changing a system from within. I don't think this is a system to be changed. I'm not interested in changing the art museum in any degree at any level. I think they do whatever they do.

KB: I feel the same way about not changing institutions. However, I am about challenging institutions. The fact that we have challenged the institution, the museum specifically, in so many different ways, has been one of the things I can talk about to others that makes me feel good about this project. What I don't know is whether or not that's even going to matter in the future of the museum. They could go right back to how things have been. I have not gotten a sense of their commitment to any changes in the way they think and work within the community in the future. I don't see that. Maybe it's in different conversations that I'm not a part of that would make me feel differently, but right now I'm not getting that.

I also understand there are people we are working with, in the community, who choose to be a part of this project and I want to support them in doing that. There are folks who are artists, and cultural workers, who feel it would be good for their work to be shown in the Museum—that's a big deal for them. To allow access to this experience for them, to open that door so folks can have that experience, is important. How I feel about having my work in that institution doesn't matter, because I couldn't care less, but I think there are people who do care. I had to check myself and say, you can't take the way you feel and not want folks to participate, or create some sort of barrier to folks participating, because of your views towards the institution, allowing my personal and political views around it to stop the process of others being able to take part in something that's cool to them.

Shari Hersh (SH): For me, this goes back pretty far. I started the Art Education Department at Mural Arts in 1999. My big commitment has been teenagers. A few years ago, they moved me to just managing projects as opposed to running teen programs. It meant that I needed to evolve in my work with communities in a way that I was unfamiliar with. That was sort of an interesting shift for me, to learn how to shift capacity building to the community. Because I was with teens who were predominantly kids of color, my whole direction was to work with artists of color and to work in a particular way. I really believe that teenagers should get paid for their work, they should be the decision makers, and they should be at the table right from the beginning, and that has carried through in how I try to do my projects with community.

I had some key developmental things that also impact how I work. My daughter is a person of color. She came to us in 2003. Certainly Bella was a milestone, and I upped my game in what I was doing as a result of creating a family with her. I had read a lot about it, and knew that as a white mom, I needed to create a different space for her than I would if I had a white child.

I was also reading Grant Kester and going to the Creative Time Summit right from the first year, which gave me a whole new way to frame my work. I worked with these incredible young people that were at the E3 Centers. I was on the ground when they started the E3 Centers, which were designed for kids who were in court-ordered placement or who had previously dropped out of school. The centers were designed for education, employment, and empowerment in one setting. It was a comprehensive approach. What I found out about the young people was that at any given time about a third of them were couch surfing. And it was really the biggest impediment for them finishing their education or holding jobs. They would just disappear, and then we would find out that their living situation was unstable. It led me to a series of projects about housing. We took over a storefront and created what we called a "third space," where the housing insecure and homeless could come and learn from each other, make artwork to validate and share their experiences. They could be recognized for their expertise by speaking, advocating to law makers, and guiding other youth with the same issues.

The "art" was as much a forum for social interaction as it was for physical.

It was during that time that I heard from an artist friend in California that Jeanne was coming to Philly. Her project Homebaked in Liverpool was an exciting project to me and I was like, "She's my hero!" I sent her an email, cold, and I said, if you come to Philly, I'll take you around. I'll do anything to meet with you. She got here, and I took her and her partner all around the city. This was an amazing opportunity for me because I wanted to learn how to work more collectively. I needed, on many levels, to shift my work. And I got to connect her to lots of great people and a lot of them are in the project. I didn't know any of these people on the artistic team beforehand. I had a friend who was working with William Goldsby, and that's how Jeanne and I met William and Denise.

Phoebe Bachman (PB): I met some of you through Occupy. Because of my age I don't have the same kind of long history of doing this work or engaging in the city in this way. Transformative power and justice was something I was advocating for and spending time with. I ultimately came to it through feminist studies and queer studies, which led to anti-oppression and anti-racist work and thinking about collective organizing. Having grown up within a white family within a very white space, but there was definitely a sense of individualism and isolation. I think collective organizing was something new. I was particularly interested in feminist artists that were doing that across the country, across the world. I met a few different folks, one of whom introduced me to Jeanne. The initial aspects of the project were looking at those nascent forms of organizing, those new collectives that were forming, that led us to reflect upon the organizations and collectives that had been doing that work for a long time.

Jeanne van Heeswijk (JvH): I think me coming here and spending the time here, it's also not to look for something new, but to listen in to what is actually happening and where some of these resilience practices are housed, or hosted, carried through generations. I'm interested in how to build in daily exercises, ways in which people care for each other and try to imagine ways of being together.

For me that's always been very important. That is why I understand that in the beginning people would come on board because they actually wanted to make sure that their communities and struggles are taken care of and not appropriated. I find it important to have a strong group of people that are scrutinizing every step of the way. That's not always easy, but it is part of the process.

DT: I feel like this is also an occasion where you can talk about the qualities of relationships that you have found in *Philadelphia Assembled*, about what questions you ask yourself in the work, combining self-critical questions with what motivates you to participate.

NK: Regarding the relationships and the people involved in the project, when I think about priorities, in terms of what or who is the most important function or part of this whole thing, for me it's the members of the Sanctuary atmosphere. Not that other people are not as important in other atmospheres, but that's who I'm working with. For me, it's not the art that's most important, it's not the stories that are most important. It's really, am I being respectful as the person who is ushering this process? Am I being respectful of the fact that the folks on this project, including myself, are people who have been thoughtfully trying to engage with art and social justice, or just with social justice, for a really long time? As a person who is liaising between the people who are doing the sanctuary-based work in the city, and the people who are distributing the timelines and resources involved with this project—am I being as thoughtful as I can possibly be in terms of thinking about their time and their compensation and their work and their energy? If there's one thing that kept me awake at night, especially in the first part of this project—where I was having panic attacks, honestly—I was worried I would disrespect somebody and their work.

And this is even before the election. I feel like mainstream America kind of woke up when Donald Trump was elected, but we've always been awake. Our communities have been attacked and violated for as long as I can remember. I don't remember a time that I wasn't like, "Oh shit, my people are getting really hurt right now," my people and the people around me. And I don't mean Palestinians—I mean people who look like me. I just mean people of color. Everywhere I've gone.

You have to be careful that you're not helicoptering, and you also have to be careful that you're not demanding of people without ensuring that they're happy to some degree. And how do I even go above and beyond that and offer a little bit more? That's been difficult, too, because this is such a huge project. Before I could think of the next thing, it's like, did I take care of this other thing? Did I take care of this person? I'm asking this person to do all of these things; are they being compensated properly? How much time are they putting into this? And there are all these restrictions. But if you're going to be the editor on the project, you have to be that person. Sometimes I think that I'm willing to put the well-being of people ahead of the well-being of the presentation. And that's partly my big critique: it's so much. It's a lot of moving pieces. You have to choose what you want to be thoughtful about with a project this big. And then something will probably suffer.

KB: Yeah, everybody can't be happy.

NK: And managing relationships is really difficult, because you're bringing together people who are from totally different walks of life and are doing totally different kinds of work. All of it is so valid, and all of it is so important and beautiful, and made even more important by this surprise that was handed to us last November. I felt like it was a surprise. I know America is racist as shit—I just didn't expect it. I mean I thought like, "We'll elect Hillary Clinton and we'll have to fight her." Damn.

KB: I think the relationships that we've had and formed mirror a lot of what Nehad said about our working groups, and understanding how to work with people. One of the things I appreciate is getting to know people's process. Then it helps me know how to treat you; that for me is always a part of relationship building. In building relationships with anyone, part of the questions I ask is, how does this person process? So I can choose how I position myself in that space, to do less damage, or be most helpful.

For this group, the interesting thing for me has been, because we've been meeting continuously for over a year now, the relationships that we've formed through that, and also really getting a chance to see people's process.

It's not an easy task, figuring out someone's process. People don't always give you what you need to figure those things out. I consider myself to be a very strategic thinker in pretty much everything that I do, which is very much about my relationships as well. I very strategically go into relationships. This part of the relationship-building, with the editors and the folks we've been meeting with monthly, has been great for me because I get to know people and how they process fully. At first it was like pulling hair. Ah! I'm in a room full of artists and everyone has a completely different way of thinking about things and none of it makes sense to me.

Shari, in the very beginning, was pulling everything inside, and I was like, this woman is driving me crazy. Once I understood how she processed, the questions that she asked made more sense to me. She's very thoughtful in her process; therefore, she really asks very specific questions. It's interesting for me to be able to say that now I feel completely different about her because of this thing here.

Same thing with Mabel—I still don't understand how you process fully, but I think it has a lot to do with how you are changing as a person and as an artist. How you are presenting yourself to us in the space is constantly changing, which is another thing for me to grapple with. I enjoy the social aspect of people; I really like to know who people are, and what motivates people. What makes you do these behaviors here? That's me and my social experiment. Watching Phoebe as a very young person taking on so much responsibility, and seeing her move and change throughout the process—those are the things I really value.

Denise, I love her so much. And I think about how every week when we come in, this space is so comfortable for her and it's a place where she can come in and really just be herself. She's about ten years older than me. All the work that I do is embedded in very thoughtful communication. And this group is actually not my most comfortable collaboration. I have these two or three other collectives that I organize with, and it's amazing when we come together, and it's just family. So when I come here it can sometimes be really challenging for me. Although I've grown to care about the people in this group, we are not aligned as in my other groups. So Denise, she has a completely different experience as a Black woman than I do, in this space.

But that also makes me think, I wish she had more opportunities to have more collaborative experiences where she could be comfortable. That's what I think about. I wish she had that. I'm thankful and I'm blessed that I have been able to cultivate that in other places in my life. It's not an unusual experience for me here.

We definitely have a lot of love for each other, and it's very been challenging, very much like family to some degree. There's these dynamics that I appreciate about the human experience, of being with the people that I'm at this table with. There's so much I have garnered from Damon and our relationship. He and I were distanced at first and then we progressed through understanding each other as people, not him as his work institution. As well there is a bit of resentment for the museum bringing in an outside artist to do a project about Philadelphia. But I've learned to respect Jeanne and the way that she works and the reason she does this work. What I thought about you in the beginning and what I think of you now is completely different. Explaining what this project is, I always start off with, "Yeah, they hired someone from blah blah [the Netherlands]" and I always follow up with "but she's fucking awesome." For me, it's part of the story. The story doesn't get told with just "she's awesome." The story is told with, the museum is fucked up for doing that, however, they did bring this awesome woman to the project. I don't want to miss any of that in the telling.

PB: I remember early on, there was a moment where Jeanne and I had coffee or lunch after a lot of meetings in the city. We were just pausing in the middle of our six-meeting day to sit down. We were talking about what the relationship is between this project and the institution, and she was very seriously asking me if this is something I could take on, and is that a role I would want to inhabit, being a person who is both inside the institution and outside the institution. That was the original role, being in that kind of dual space. To speak to what Nehad and Kirtrina were saying earlier, all the antagonisms that you were bringing to the project, I brought very early on as well. I was like, yeah. I'm here. I want to do this with you. But there was antagonism from you, too, and always towards the institution. We had to figure out what that landscape looks like. What is this that you're bringing together? Is it worth it? Is it going to have an impact?

You can't answer those questions from the beginning by any means, because you'd have to answer them once you have those folks in the room. Every time we had a working group meeting, there was anxiety because it was like, "What is going to come out of this? What is that space going to look like? What are people going to say?" But you just have these kernels, these beautiful moments where all of a sudden someone had an idea and someone echoed it, and you just had this dysfunctional chorus coming together where people were actually starting to form something that was a little different from what they were doing before.

SH: Listening to you, I realized how different my motivation was. I think Denise and I are around the same age, almost sixty, so it's really different. For me, I always looked at it as salvation or something. I work in an institution. I'm not coming from community organizing without an institution. So this represented to me what decision-making with a group of people, what Jeanne used to call "dividing her body into eight," was like. I couldn't be happier. I work in a top-down institution, but I don't do top-down work. So how do I learn to work, re-learn, evolve an approach that is more collective, talk about it, and get funding for projects that are more ground-up. This seemed like a huge opportunity for me. I have so much respect for everyone in this group. It's just like, I would go to any person, any editor right now—I feel like I could go into the future with them, and go to them and do better in my work and in my life because of what they hold and their knowledge.

I also am deeply involved with "Freedom in a Carceral State," one of the Reconstructions atmospheres. The members of AEA [Alumni Ex-Offenders Association]—I can't describe it, but it's pretty much my favorite place to be. I love them intensely. I love the spirituality in the practice and what it answers for me, because I find it missing in how we do our work. I just feel like it's been really amazing to integrate spirituality.

Why I'm crying is because both my parents died this winter. Having this project where we're all committed to something, even if it's hard, is for me a very positive thing during all this loss.

It means so much to me. I think one of the questions I have, and something I don't think I'll sort out for a long time to come, is the promise of collectivity, the execution, and where we've fallen short, where we've done well, and even what it means. It kind of goes back to what Nehad was saying: you have to pick. You have to make choices about what you're going to be rigorous about, and what you just have to let go of. The support of an institution is an incredible gift. But then how we use that money and how it gets to communities, how they have access over the decision-making is very complicated if you can't articulate it. In this space where we're trying to articulate that, there are gray areas and there are issues because of the speed and breadth of the project.

There's also a process thing I live with, which is Jeanne's interest in being a mess, and not being super clear, and not being all charted out. What happens when you have a creative mess? The possibility and fruitfulness of a mess? It's like the soil versus hydroponic farming or something, where it's all clean. No messy soil. We got soil for real on this project. I don't feel a judgment about it. I am constantly challenged by holding creative space and holding power. How do you hold those two things and how, sometimes for expediency, do you move through something? It feels complicated because different editors and different collaborators do it differently. William Goldsby always says, "You've gotta rumble with it and hold contradictions." And that really helps me, because I feel like I'm constantly rumbling and holding contradictions in this project.

NK: My goals for the project have always been, in my mind, somewhat more manageable. I don't know if that's out of fear of what it might actually be, or—it's not going to sound very nice—I don't think institutions are as creative as communities of people. I don't know outside of urban settings, I only know cities really well. I think that what people do when they engage in art practice that reflects their lived experiences is always going to be so much more creative, so much more free, in the way that they're presented and in the process that they go through, than an institution can ever be. I don't think that's some revelation. But I think it's something I've accepted.

It's part of not being interested in changing institutions and I think it's also like my pushback to people thinking all the time that institutions are going to co-opt people, because it totally strips people in communities of all the agency that they have. So I also don't agree with straight-up victimizing narratives. Which is why, again, I don't think there are people on the bottom; I think there are people at the margins.

I've always been more interested in the networks that are going to transpire, both throughout the project and afterwards. None of us knew each other before. The way I see it is that the Art Museum had resources, and Philadelphia artists and Philadelphia social workers and activists were able to tap into those resources to create this project and to amplify the work that they had been doing all along. I think that we were very careful internally in these meetings to make sure that whenever something is written up and goes out that it's not the Art Museum taking credit for all of this incredible work that people have been doing. It's partly about building a network and seeing what happens afterwards now that people know each other. I'm really obsessed with organizers right now, and social movements. Who are the organizers that are doing this incredible work right now - and even before right now - who have always been doing this work? How do we allow ourselves to be organized by them? Just making more visible all the work that's already been happening, these resources being available now: I found that to be an empowering place to plug into.

DT: Building off of that comment, one of the things that I think about in observing this project—there is clearly a tension to coming to the table. Literally coming to the table and also thinking politically and critically about who is at the table: Who is at the meeting? As several of you pointed out, who are you representing or protecting or serving when you're at a particular table? The table is always this metaphor that's used in talking about power and talking a lot about representation. Who is going to be there? Who is represented?

I'd love to hear more people build on what was said about what the goals are when so many of the people involved come from a social movement culture and that is what people value.

That's a world that has many of its own limitations and strengths, just as any institutional culture does. I'm curious for people to say a little bit more about how the richness of lived experience, as Nehad pointed out, sits alongside your questions about redistributing or accessing institutional resources? How do you see the power and potency of social movement culture sitting alongside institutional culture and those different systems of value?

I'll bring it back to "redistribution and representation," because that's a point that feels important to me about the way I've understood this project to come together. There's a lot of attention being given to representation in terms of who is at the table. But then there is also the redistribution question: how are you going to get the resources that are available out? How are you going to manage that? And how does that relate to your own politics about redistribution of wealth or of power?

JvH: I think a lot about that question—not so much about who's at the table, but what the table looks like. We should question the table itself and the invitation it presents. That's a question that we keep forgetting to ask because we keep talking about the table. I think in that sense it's not always about representation, but what does the table present or hold? What should that table be like? Or should it even be a table?

DT: I have an additional layer to my representation and redistribution question that relates to *Philadelphia Assembled* collaborators doing what you already do. People are already organizing against mass incarceration, and people are already doing community gardens, and ACAF has been around for decades—so there's a way that much of this work, definitely all of it in spirit, is already happening in the city. What does it mean to put a frame around it within the context of this project? To say, this is what resilience looks like, or this is what the Philadelphia of the future could look like, or this is what our networks look like—what's the point in doing that? The point could be redistribution of resources from a museum to others, but it could also be recruiting and organizing, getting people involved. Those are two basic examples of what it could mean. For you all, what becomes the point to put a frame around this work that's already happening?

CNS: This is tied to things that were brought up earlier. I am not under any illusion that this is a completely equal collaboration. There are different relationships of power working simultaneously. This is why maybe it's about what we wish, what we want, but it's also that the relationships that exist that are important to recognize. For example, when we're talking about the table (as a meeting space, decision-making space), there are different kinds of tables happening simultaneously within this project. There are the tables on the outside of this project. There's the table that's at the museum. There's the table that's in this room. There's the ones in our atmosphere and so on. There are all these different ones.

When it comes to redistribution, what's interesting about this project is that it is very stratified. For example, what is communicated through the press, media, website, all of these things has been worked out with the initiating artist and team members who have been assigned to do so. In this case, the Movement atmosphere and the museum's marketing team have had a big role to play in the message that is communicated citywide. So, there's definitely no direct control over that—that's a big table. However, as an editor my role has been more about recommending, advising, and making sure our messages of those participating directly within my atmosphere are communicated in the correct way.

Besides how the project gets to be marketed and represented, I'm most interested in the experiences that are happening outside of that frame. For example, as much as I like the posters that were designed by the Movement team, many are on this wall behind us [in the work space], what I am also interested in are the experiences happening in between, those which we are not able to see, talk about, or feel because we cannot put them inside a video. We cannot put them inside some kind of text. We cannot put them in anything. That part of it to me is far more interesting.

Then, in a weird way, as a counter narrative, I like to see that our atmosphere is a porous space and so it is hard to discern. This is where things start to percolate, where things are coming together, where people are starting to feel like "we can do this" or maybe "we cannot do this" or "we can be honest with each other about how messy or imperfect this project is."

Mobile Futures Institute, Futures bus,
parked in front of the Perelman Building.



I like what is happening in my Futures group—there is even room for a certain level of failure. Not because of what we could have done, but when it comes to ownership...for example, we don't own the bus. It's owned by the museum and it is supported by the initiating artist, for good reasons: our group is very poor, and we don't have the money to own it. If it breaks down, we won't be able to fix it. For the time being, it's a convenient relationship. It's cool that when it broke down right at the beginning of the month of May, Jeanne [and the Museum] helped take care of it. But I feel that my ideal situation would be awesome if all of us who are in Futures and living in Philly who put so much time in thinking about it, if we could own it, figure out what to do with it, how to raise funds for it, and take the steps to get to there. However, for that to happen, we definitely need the time and money to build our internal capacity.

KB: I didn't know the bus broke down. I'm sorry. Any that's very symbolic of society right now.

NK: The future bus. [Laughs]

KB: And that sense of failure when it doesn't live up to your idea of utopia—that's what I was thinking about, how that keeps coming up.

SH: Can I ask you a question, Kirtrina? When I think about that question, doing what you already do and putting a frame around it, I think the frame changes what people already do.

I wanted to ask you specifically, because you more than anyone went to the sites and said, "Do what you already do." But that changed it because they're not doing it separately; they're threaded together. I don't think it's just a frame around what you do. I think the frame is somehow where the art is, and that's something that shifts it. I think we should be answering this question next December or January, or maybe next March. To me, it's not just representing. I think there's something catalyzing or different about it. Do you think it's what you already do or do you think the frame is something additional?

KB: I'm glad you brought that up because I was thinking that. Throughout the project, listening to everyone else's description of what's happening in their atmospheres, I guess at some point I was like, am I doing this right? But also, I was realizing that this just felt like redistributing money. And that's a normal thing that happens in the non-profit world. So and so gets the big grant and we work to make it stretch amongst us all to do the work that we have to do. This isn't any different. I didn't go in any different directions on the piece about land. There are nonprofit organizations who are doing this amazing social justice work in their communities and I wanted to make sure that their work got highlighted in the museum, so that a larger audience can see the art of what we do in community. But I don't want to ask you to do anything differently. We didn't have enough money to ask people to go out of their way to do something different. So I'm not going to come to you with \$3,000 and say "make something new," because we consistently challenge funders to not do that. So I was not willing to do that to the folks I was working with. In the Economic Sovereignty side, I think that is where there's more diversity happening with regard to what they normally do, and what they're doing for this project. I'm also seeing how much stress it puts on those folks and it bothers me. Now the organizations that are working with us are going through so much, because they're doing things they don't normally do. That doesn't feel good at all, and I'm just hoping that something concrete comes through for them from being a part of this project. And I'm still not sure about that.

I don't think there's a frame that captured what we do. This is what we do. For me, it's a blessing to share and for others to be able to take part

and to understand what it is we do in our communities. So that when you come for those three months in the Museum, however we represent that in the Museum, you are seeing a jewel by being able to come and see what's actually happening on the ground, because I experience this jewel every day. I'm in the trenches with the folks doing the work and am thankful consistently. Someone else being able to experience that—I hope they get the same sense that I do just being there.

JvH: That's also the continuous balancing act that is thinking about these different things: sometimes highlighting, sometimes framing, sometimes not framing, sometimes letting it go, sometimes allowing for the beautiful things that happen in between to stay in between and not become over visible because sometimes that would not be a good thing to do. To allow it to just do, although the time might not always be there. For instance, the Museum has no intention to keep the bus. They're just holding the bus for the project because they're the ones who can hold it temporarily. But hopefully the bus can go somewhere where people can hold it afterwards.

I just said to a friend back home, "The only thing I think I can do justice, if I can do justice at all holding some of the responsibilities for this relationship, is to risk it all in relation to that institution." To risk it all is to not give them the immediate answers you're looking for. To not give them that frame set in stone, but say, you have to deal with multiple frames, the multiple ways different communities frame their narratives, and that they might overlap, that they have gray spaces, that some of them fail dramatically, some are utopian, some of them are dystopian. All of that needs to be able to be there without being all like "happy clappy." It's not some kind of, "Look at us being united act!" Because it's [PHLA] not Philadelphia United. It's not that heroic stance. But it creates anxiety because it is a very complex exercise. It's that exercise of letting go, while at the same time building capacity, while at the same time trying to care, while at the same time allowing for things to not be set or to stay what they are while they're happening, and still knowing that it's important to amplify certain things because it's important that people get to see those jewels.

I think it's a constant, active, reframing rather than a fixed frame. That's something we have to keep thinking about. The lenses we operate are political by nature. I hope if this project can do anything, it's to show that these lenses are frames worth hanging. I like what Denise [Valentine, editor of *Reconstructions*] said when asked about why she wanted to be involved, She hoped that if we can do anything, the narratives of the enslaved, the incarcerated, the displaced, and the disenfranchised are held in as high esteem as Eurocentric ideas about art, history, and culture." It's that different lens, that different face. And it's something to keep in mind that it might not be the "best" exhibition in Contemporary Art terms. I'm very open about that!

KB: I don't really care for approval from the establishment. I hear Denise saying that she hopes the stories of the dispossessed get respected. I'm like, what the fuck ever. I am valuable because I am. Period. Not because you established at some point that because my work is displayed in this institution that now you're going to pay me some attention—that shit is not even how I work in my life. They don't define who we are in our communities. At whatever point that the dominant society decides they want to acknowledge whatever has already been existing with the rest of us, that is for their personal growth and hopefully that will help all of us understand how to be better humans. Because Black and Brown folks—we exist, and we're going to continue to exist as wonderfully and beautifully as we always have. I don't think in those terms, because I just can't. I never see myself through a white lens. That's just not in my frame of reference. This thing is going to be awesome for us, because we're going to be doing it together at the Art Museum. That is what it is and who gives a fuck what the Art Museum thinks about it.

NK: I agree completely. And also I'm really excited about this kind of takeover. The Sanctuary atmosphere is doing story gathering and story collection. It's difficult to capture in some kind of visual artform the history and long resistance practices of people who are creating their own sanctuary. And that's across the board. There's a lot of attention to immigrants right now, but we're also focusing on active drug users, and sex workers, and hopefully vets and people who are at the intersections of all of those identities.

You're queer and migrant, you're trans and a sex worker—all of those kinds of identities that exist and have their full realizations and lives. The problem is policies are very violent and they come in and destroy people's lives. Those stories are important. If you want to know what's happening in Philadelphia, these are people's stories, for real. This is what people have been doing for all of these years. But also, it's not like one of us, or me, for example, is going to Prevention Point and asking questions. No. People have been doing that work for years and they themselves have been gathering stories. So unless it's going to come from a person who knows that particular community really well and knows what kinds of questions should be asked, those questions shouldn't be asked.

We were trying to be very careful about that. Something we have to talk about and figure out, is "How do we transport everybody that's worked on this project to the Museum so that they could see their work there?" I'm also not that enamored with the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It's not like now they're going to value all of this work. But I think it does mean something pretty dope for people to be able to go there and be like, that's my shit right there and it's here in this super expensive building. I think that's really dope and I'm here for that.

PB: I think one thing I want to bring up that I was trying to say earlier is that I was all about villainizing the Museum in the beginning. I hated having to go in there and sit at a desk and work there. But I think there was this process by which I got to actually know people and be like, "Oh right, you're human." I think there's this whole other aspect that there are people who are at the Museum who have been trying to figure out transportation, who have been petitioning SEPTA to get more buses to go through there for access, who want to do more "Pay-What-You-Wish" things, who wish that it was free every day of the week, who want to use the language of "free," not "Pay-What-You-Wish" It is really easy to villainize an institution, especially this institution in Philadelphia that is literally on a hill, that is expensive as fuck to get into, and has a very visible history of showing Eurocentric artwork.

But I think when we can get into a place where it's not about hating, it's about negotiation, and maybe we'll transform the institution, but there are also people in the institution who want to transform it themselves. We're carrying it with them. If we could also be champions for those people to be like, "Yes, this is a possibility; yes, these are options." I think seeing this exhibition, I know, in many ways, people are saying, "This is my chance to see this place where I work, where I am spending all of my time, as a different place than it was before." I think that's very cool and powerful. And it's not going to be overnight by any means, but you guys hold a very particular exciting space to make that a reality for those people as well.

NK: Don't make me not hate institutions. I need to villainize something! [Laughs]

JvH: I think the villainization is OK. I think what you said is also very powerful and very poignant, that, like you said, all the people get to see those beautiful jewels. Because that's also a function of that place: people visit it to look at things. People get to look at those things that we feel are important at this moment in time.

SH: When you say beautiful jewels, what are you referring to?

KB: I'm referring to the work happening in the communities: the gardens, the growing, community building, all that. Beautiful jewels.

CNS: Referring to beautiful jewels in the museum phase, coming from Futures atmosphere, we've been talking about this tension. The future is always "in tension." We use that as a double word for "intention." Part of it was like, "What are we going to move from this phase [the Citywide phase] to the Museum phase?" There were a lot of conversations around, "Maybe we could use videos and take pictures of what collaborators do in the bus, or bring collections of things to display." Others were talking about, "Well, to be honest, a lot of the things that we're doing are so abstract they will be hard to represent." Things that never will be able to be recorded. So when I think of beautiful jewels, I think, "What about the things that are between the messiness, the things that people don't want to see and don't want to share, or the things that are sacred?"

I understand that sometimes exhibitions are expected to be very beautiful and clean. But they can also be messy, uncomfortable, the parts of our work and life that are not as clean and clear as we want them to be.

KB: I don't think that can't happen. I think it's just about figuring out how. I've really been telling myself, "You don't have to figure that shit out, that's why you work with a group!" Because I don't have a clue how to do that. So I'm going to bring together that group again and be like, "What do you think?" Maybe—because this is how the world works and I'm excited about the fact that we work collaboratively,—through that process, people will come up with ideas for how to represent these things. Folks who are way more creative than I am, or way more thoughtful than I am in these different ways. It might be a timeline; there are many ways it can be represented that I just can't think of. So I'm going to count on the group that someone or something will be able to bring that out. Hopefully that's going to be true across the board, with all these awesome people being a part of it, that we can figure out a way to represent all these different things that I can't even conceive right now. That's what I'm hoping for.

JvH: And those can be the beautiful things but also the messy things, uncomfortable things.

KB: That's what I'm saying! Not just the beautiful, but the messy too.

SH: Encountering some of the content, some of the conversations, some of the speakers, I think some of the messiness and also the difficulty will be in actual interaction when people confront things they're not used to confronting. A lot of it is a lived thing.

KB: As people go through the museum?

SH: Well, if they come to an AEA meeting, you know what I mean? If they confront some of the content, it's going to shake some stuff up. The complexity will be there, the messiness and some new interactions will be available and people and ideas to interact with. It's not like a show of paintings; it's experiential.

JvH: It will stay a shifting frame.

Interview with Jeanne van Heeswijk (JvH), Damon Reaves (DR), Amanda Sroka (AS), and Denise Valentine (DV), July 5, 2017

Everything was built in this process together.

—Damon Reaves

Daniel Tucker (DT): Meetings are an important part of this project. I'd love for you to tell me a little about what actually happens at these meetings.

Damon Reaves (DV): Well there are several different kinds of meetings. We have editors meetings, we have working group meetings, and then we have collaborators assembly meetings. And they're all very different; they all have a different purpose.

DT: Walk me through those different spaces.

Group exercise during a Sanctuary atmosphere group meeting at the Workspace.



First Collaborators Assembly



First Collaborators Assembly



Denise Valentine (DV): That kind of depends on where we are in the process. I'll talk about the working group meetings. In the very beginning, our purpose was first of all to get to know each other. Some of us were meeting for the first time; others had been longtime associates. We wanted to get to know one another and the work that each of us does in Philadelphia. At our first meetings, we did a kind of "collaborator spotlight." One or two collaborators would present a few minutes about the kind of work that they do, so we could assess where everyone fits in the process. At that point we still had no idea really what the project was about. That was our first order of business—getting to know each other.

Our second order of business was to define the terms of our atmosphere. What does Reconstructions mean to us? What does "atmosphere" mean? The urgencies that my working group [Reconstructions] chose were mass incarceration, gentrification, and displacement. So we also had to define those in terms of our project and our own personal work. Then we came up with a set of guiding principles that we would use to unify the disparate work we were doing. We're all coming from different places, focusing on different things. I tried to come up with something that would keep us focused. We call these our "guiding principles."

The next thing we did was to organize field trips and teach-ins to educate ourselves. We had field trips to places like the Lest We Forget Slavery Museum and America's Black Holocaust Museum. We visited our potential public sites that we identified as spaces that would host and amplify our work and conversations as a working group, the first of which was William Goldsby's house. And then, since our atmosphere was called Reconstructions, a lot of us automatically associated that with the historical period of Reconstruction. So we decided to ground ourselves in the history and legacy of Reconstruction. We invited Dr. Allison Dorsey, a professor from Swarthmore to give a lecture on "The Legend of Mustapha Shaw." It was very enlightening for us. It accomplished just what we'd hoped for in forming a new understanding of the historical legacy of Reconstruction and why that's important, and what that has to do with mass incarceration and gentrification today.

Then we went about choosing our public sites. That was a very long process. It took us a few months to agree on which public sites we would feature, to understand which site best held the conversations of our working group. And we ran into a lot of roadblocks. Some of the sites that we wanted to use we couldn't because we needed a permit, or the community was not supportive of these issues for various reasons. We were finally able to land on two locations. Once we chose our locations, we had to figure out what we were going to do at those sites.

We also tried to make these working group meetings fun and interesting. We call them working group meetings, but they were also a way of nourishing each other, not just for the work we're doing with *Philadelphia Assembled*, but also as a way to go back out into society and do the work we're doing in the midst of the social or political turmoil that is going on in the city and in the country.

DR: Every working group had its own process. It was sort of up to the editors to establish what the initial form of the gathering was going to be. With five different editors from five different backgrounds, everyone took their own approach and brought their own expertise and skill set to the conversation. Not every group followed the exact same path, in the exact same way. Running parallel with that, we had the editors meetings, which took place before working groups even started meeting, offering an opportunity for the different editors of each atmosphere, including those in the Movement category, to come together. It had two parts. In the beginning, it was a lot of the same thing—a chance to "get to know you," an opportunity to establish how we were going to communicate with each other, to know how we were going to hold space for one another, to interact, and to understand what was going to guide us in terms of our collective work. Everything was built in this process together, down to the point of what time we were going to meet, and how often. But over time, these editors meetings have shifted to being a bit more of a logistical space, where there's the nuts and bolts of things, trying to make sure we're all on the same page and what deadlines are coming up and all of that stuff. But then at other times we try to find spaces where we can be more creative and playful.

It's definitely a group that morphs, depending on not just the time period of the project, but also the needs of these editors in their daily lives, who are looking after the needs of these larger groups and their own constituencies.

Amanda Sroka (AS): That responsibility to hold those weekly editors meetings was important—integral—to our work, even if just to check in for logistical reasons, because this is a project that's collectively held. It is living life together. We have an editor (or at some points in the process, two editors) for each atmosphere. That means that no single one of us from the artistic team is responsible for everything, all atmospheres. We hold each other accountable to say, "Hey, Denise, how's Reconstructions doing?" Or "Hey, Kirtrina, where's Sovereignty at with this or that?" The editors meetings are an opportunity for us to check in and see how we are doing in the midst of holding over one hundred collaborators in a multi-year journey. But it is also a check-in for each other, for our relationship as a collective body as editors. As Damon said, we all have different methodologies of coming together, of organizing, of thinking creatively, and we all approach holding our "community agreements"—and the many ways in which we define them—from different spaces of understanding. It wasn't until after two years of meeting together that we landed on our core values as an artistic team. Something that is incredibly important for these editors meetings, these working group meetings, and these collaborator assemblies is space, time, and access. In order to create this space, time, and access, we offered transportation for our collaborators to get there; we offered stipends for those who needed it; and we had food on the table. Food—it's so important for your work, Jeanne, but also for—

Jeanne van Heeswijk (JvH): Nourishing each other.

AS: Yes! There was this moment one of the editors meetings, where it was like, "Okay, we're just going to have everybody bring their own lunches, because it's this 12 o'clock to 2 o'clock meeting and we need to just focus, and get down to work."

We tried this bring-your-own-lunch model for one week, and it was very clear that having food on the table when everyone arrived was important for us to be able to do our own work for the project and prioritize. I also want to say that having this workspace, this table, was integral for the genesis of the project. In addition to all of the other spaces in which we work, the workspace at 5th and Brown truly became this almost neutral territory. Well, no, it's not that it was neutral—it was a space incredibly charged with emotions, challenges, and also joys, but it became a space where we could come together to form something different. In refraining from meeting on one of our own "turfs," we formed something altogether new, and established, together, how we wanted to build, form, and shape this project—this network. Having this starting point for that durational process of building was incredibly important.

JvH: I think the workspace was more than neutral ground—it offered a way, a place, to start building. It was an address, also for other groups to meet that are related to this project. At some point, every night, someone had a meeting there for some reason (related or not to the project). It became a kind of vessel that we all started to use, even to stay overnight. I think having a relatively autonomous space was very important. The editors meetings, in the beginning, had more structure. Having a check-in at the start was a very important thing, understanding where everybody was in their life, in their work, or where their communities are and how that affects their thinking as individuals on this collective journey. This time together—whether at a meeting or otherwise—was important. Especially after the elections, when things became more precarious for a lot of people, it was keeping each other in check, asking why we were there, but also trying to form an understanding—together—of where the intentions of the project should lie. That is an ongoing process with this project. We needed to be mindful that the time each one of us spends on this project, this was time that could not be spent on other work that needed to be done in the city. It required a careful balance.

DR: I would disagree with you slightly. I think that the workspace didn't remain a neutral space, but it started out as a neutral space.

I actually think that's super important, particularly for a project in collaboration with the Museum, because meeting at the workspace meant that we weren't meeting at the Museum. We weren't meeting at Urban Creators. We weren't meeting at Norris Square Neighborhood Project. We weren't meeting at other institutions. Very specifically, it was a place that (as much as possible) had no background or outdoor context.

JvH: Northern Liberties! In a loft.



Futures Atmosphere Meeting at the workspace.

DR: Exactly. The history of that place, and that quickly changing neighborhood, it's all there, but as a space for all of our organizations and collaborators to meet—that was the best we could do. It was a space for us to infuse energy.

DT: Talk a little bit about how idea generation happens. For instance, how did the Lighting of the Bridges procession in Nicetown/Tioga come from a meeting?

DV: It was a very long process. Essentially it came from the needs of the community, the needs of everybody involved in the working group. For the Lighting of the Bridges, we wanted to do an action that was meaningful, symbolically, but also one that had practical use for and in the community.

In Nicetown, there are underpasses. They are very strategically located in the community. For instance, in order to reach William Goldsby's house, which is only two a few blocks away from the Alumni Ex-Offenders meeting space, you have to go under one of the underpasses. These underpasses are also places that, in talking with the community, are seen as very dirty, very dangerous, and facilitate a high crime rate. We knew that one of the solutions would be to light them up. The physical lighting of these underpasses is something that the City or SEPTA is responsible for. We knew we couldn't actually light them. So what could we do to light them symbolically in a way that we could also make them a kind of path to William's house? And also in a way that sheds light to this path we're on? We were on the path of principled transformation together. That's kind of how that idea came about and then it developed in close partnership and collaboration with William, AEA, and community members.

JvH: A part of William's community capacity-building for AEA, as part of Reconstruction Incorporated, are these three principles: path, light, bridge.

They were meaningful symbols for them to guide the development of this idea. Light is a meaningful symbol.



"Lighting of the Bridges" procession, May 2017.

DV: Also, the community where this procession took place was in Tioga. Tioga is a Native American word that means “the meeting”—the “meeting of rivers,” or “the meeting of paths.” We wanted it to symbolize a meeting together or coming together as a community to work through the issue of mass incarceration and its impact on those in the community and their families.



Reconstruction Inc.

JvH: Although that was a symbolic lighting, at this moment a person from the Museum is in conversation with SEPTA, the City, and with AEA to enact a more permanent solution. As part of this public phase, what we’ve been doing in the working groups is working together to ideate and amplify work that is already being done across the city. This is not a series of public sculptures, a public festival, or simply scattered events in neighborhoods across the city; this is building towards a collective growth and strengthening. We are literally lighting up Tioga in order to amplify their community and this conversation around mass incarceration.

AS: Part of that amplification, and that growing, is about getting other people to amplify and grow alongside you so that they, too, can learn new strategies for working, holding, and building together. You talk about that in your work and as part of your practice, Jeanne, and we talked about that as a project when you get people

to the table who hold fundamental differences and value sets. After the Lighting of the Bridges program, we now have a Museum staff member who is able to work with us, with AEA, and with the Nicetown community members, at the table together. In this case, it’s not just amplification, but it’s also about the legal ramifications for this work—it’s asking a city (and sometimes the Museum) to change for this. That’s a huge part of what these actions, workshops, programs, and teach-ins across the city are doing—they are changing and also growing who has access to a seat at the table. And in some cases changing that table entirely.

To speak to another program, I remember being in Broad Street Ministry for one of our Sanctuary working group meetings. This was after months of meeting together as a working group. Sanctuary collaborators had already identified that they wanted to have “mobile sites” partnering with various organizations, which would then lead up to a larger, fixed site. This meeting was specifically dedicated to programs: their scope, their scale, and their structure. There was this deadline for all the *Philadelphia Assembled* public programs that we were working towards. At this meeting, we had a really long conversation about story gathering and storytelling. And then we had this moment where we, as a group, had to stop, step back, and ask ourselves, “What does it mean to hold, host, carry, and share Sanctuary? How does story fit into this process?” At that point, everyone reflected around the room, sharing about storytelling as a practice, and coming to the understanding that the person whose story is told, and the person who tells it, are vital to how stories and communities are shaped—offering a layered understanding to what sanctuary is, and can be.

This then led to a conversation about the *Philadelphia Assembled* Sanctuary Stewards program. It was first imagined as a way for individuals within the Sanctuary working group (and beyond) to train with folks who hold sanctuary in different ways across the city, whether it’s in relation to immigration and migration, or harm reduction, or to LGBTQ youth and homelessness. It was about both being trained and training one another.

How the stewards program looks today and how it will look during the Museum phase is shaped by these very working group discussions about how we offer and receive sanctuary and the many ways in which sanctuary is manifest. Now one of our project publications will serve as a “stewardship guide” of sorts, allowing these trainings to reach within and beyond the *Philadelphia Assembled* network. That’s just another example where this amplification that we speak of doesn’t—necessarily—result in a program, but instead, the amplification is about building capacity, and infrastructure, for this work to continue beyond the project, beyond us.

JvH: It’s important to note some of these programs are also not about spectacle. I think the Lighting of the Bridges was spectacular, but it was not to create a public spectacle, like the fireworks yesterday [on July 4]. It’s about collective amplification. For example, with the Sanctuary Stewards, that’s a smaller group, but it’s still 25 people altogether who train with each other, learn from each other, and build that guide or curriculum. To me, that alone is enough of a group, enough of a public happening, for it to be worth the journey that we’re on. This journey is one of capacity building, knowledge building, and learning collectively. In Tioga-Nicetown, with the Alumni Ex-Offenders Association, it’s building towards some of these things—that continuity of building together in working groups, exercising thinking together, “training for the not yet.” Training for some change that we would like to see happen even without fully understanding what form that change needs to take. It’s not something that is clear-cut. I think that is something that’s been the most frustrating. You have to constantly shift gears, every day.

DR: Several times a day. [Laughs]

JvH: Backtrack, change direction—that’s super exhausting for everybody.

DV: It’s also not the way the Museum is used to working. I think that is very frustrating for the Museum, I’m sure.

DT: I want to continue with this thread and discuss event production. There’s an issue of pacing with event production, but there’s also a way

that it does or doesn’t quite fit in with the existing infrastructure and tools. If you’ve got a museum that is mainly about objects and a certain approach to education or public programming, and then on the other end, you have community organizations or activist groups where, when they think about events, maybe they think about a fundraiser, or they think about a protest, or they think about a meal together, but that they’re not—on some level—necessarily spending their energy thinking about how to organize events in the manner that this project has asked people to. I just want to hear you all talk about the sort of things you’ve done to balance the logistical part of the event production with the content and values.

DR: I want to reframe the context a little bit from the beginning. It’s very easy to create two pockets for these conversations and sort of have the Museum as “the institution”, and then “the community”. It’s far too broad to simply put “community” in this bubble. First of all, from my personal experience, we are really communicating with individuals who each hold different communities, different parts. Several people are attached to many different community organizations and institutions. And within that, I can’t think of any two groups that approach what it means to do a program, or an event, in the same way. I just want to reframe the context for the question because I think it’s a disservice to say that “the community”—as a whole—organizes in one way, and the Museum in another.

That being said, one of the most complicated things about planning within the context of a project like this, with 150 some odd individuals that you’re trying to bring together to think about any sort of event or moment, is both beautiful and incredibly challenging. On one level, it’s about the formation of a concept, or idea, in which case I think each of the atmosphere working groups held a different method for organizing those conversations. I know Futures, for example, really wanted every collaborator in the room to come forward with a specific program that they wanted to see enhanced by the project and their fellow collaborators in some way. Essentially, it was like, “Everyone’s going to propose their own individual programs and then we’re going to try and figure out a way to do everyone’s program.” I know in the Sovereignty working group, it was more about what we could create together.

It was about having all the different people at the table to think about what, and how, we come to an understanding of sovereignty. In this case, they ended up landing on a marketplace festival. But that decision took some time, that took a lot of moments in which we were weeding this thing out together and that marketplace idea rose to the surface. And then we turned to questions like, "What's this thing actually going to look like?" So there was the conceptual side of it, and then there were straight-up logistics. These, I think, were a different kind of challenge in terms of knowing and keeping to timelines, and understanding our own limitations and capacities.

As an internal organizing team, we tried to streamline the process as best we could. For example, knowing that when it comes to permits, the City has a process they go through, especially if you're going to get a street blocked off. In this case, we tried to work out how we could use relationships that already existed within the City and also make as much space for those things to not work, just in case.

We are also trying to hold space for the fact that not everyone works on the same timeline. I think that's where we ran into some of the most complicated moments. There were moments where it really synergized when we would all quickly get on the same page and then move forward. Then there were other moments where we were butting heads, trying to figure out how it was all going to work. Basically, it took a lot of communication. I think we interjected different techniques at different times to try to help with that. There were moments where we came up with a checklist to help, but it wasn't a "how-to" in the sense of, "everyone has to do it this way," but it was an attempt to offer momentary structure amidst, what sometimes seemed like, chaos. I think various people brought structures they were familiar with and comfortable with and tried to see if that could help hold the whole project and its different parts.

JvH: Communication has been the Achilles' heel of the project. How do you, especially in the production phase, communicate all the different organizational things that are happening across everybody and everything? That's a big one. At the same time, how do you combine so many different organizing styles and speeds? Part of what's also happening in the project is that people often do things in the way they are used to.

So sometimes this means questioning how to make it less of a protest and find other forms of imagination. But there is also capacity building that needs to be done, where people are not used to organizing in a certain way or holding this scale of a project. Different groups have different styles of doing it. Like AEA meets two times a month, and for a whole period, they dedicated at least every Monday to talking about this project. That was part of their way of internalizing this thing. Other people, like Urban Creators, were more like, "We have this, we do this all the time, we can hold this, no problem." For other people, it takes figuring it out. The day the Sanctuary dome was installed at Thomas Jefferson University, the project's Sanctuary Stewards were not ready yet. Talking about holding a space and then having to run it and run it well is a different thing.

Toward Sanctuary dome launch at Thomas Jefferson University, Lubert Plaza, June 2017.



I think across the project, all these different styles is what reminds me of something, if I can quote you Damon: "At moments it's magical and it's like mind-blowing and beautiful, and at other moments it's like a fucking clusterfuck."

DR: I can be quoted on that! That's what's amazing about it. I love your comparison of Urban Creators with AEA. AEA has, from what I know (not having been in several of those meetings but listening to others talk about it) this wonderful and very specific way in which they interact.

How do you let them be true to that? How do they get to hold what they do and be true to this thing they've developed over time? Then, at the same time, how do you allow for these other collaborators to come in and participate in a project that is, by design, much larger in scale, but still cherish the intimacy by which they work? How do they generate a path forward that allows them not to lose who they are, but be open to other possibilities? I think that's what everyone had to do in this weird way. How do you stay true to who you are and what you do, but allow the space to also be open to new conversations and ideas? That's not always easy.

An interactive meeting with the Alumni Ex-Offenders Association and Reconstruction Inc. in the Framework for an affordable house, at the Perelman Building.



JvH: To give an example, we had a good meeting last Friday on 52nd Street at the African Cultural Art Forum (ACAF). After the event we all worked on together, the whole ACAF family was sitting there and said, "How do we make this Sovereignty Marketplace, a Sovereignty Day, an annual event?" That was amazing because all of our conversations were very honest, and up until this day they [ACAF] always kept saying, "We don't trust this..." That was the hardest part. The fact that they, as the host organization, didn't trust it. And then suddenly the whole family is there saying, "Hey, in this collaboration between all these different groups, maybe there is something for us also." But that takes a year and a festival.

Sovereignty Atmosphere Meeting at ACAF, 52nd Street.



DR: To build off of that, being from this larger institution that has experience with large-scale event planning—not just through my job here but through other jobs I've had—and also my background in theater, the festival became a really great space where we could exercise these muscles of production, grant writing, and communication, and talk about this festival as something this community wants to be able hold again, where we, as a larger institution, could potentially offer some insight. That was great to find this space in the festival that allowed us bring our own unique skillsets to the table and create something that's much bigger and better than any of us as individual people and individual organizations could do.

AS: To step back from some of these more particular examples, event production throughout the project means all of those things that you, Damon, just described. It means being able to hold a protest, a street-wide marketplace, and a shared meal with the same weight, the same value, the same worth, even though those events might manifest differently. Speaking from the Museum side of things, these varying scales of what an event is and can be affect things like support capacity, marketing, access, and attendance. In this way, this project is really testing all of us and our preconceived understandings and definitions of durational work and programming.

Can we support an intimate, ten-person AEA meeting in the same way we support a large-scale, street-wide marketplace like our Sovereignty Marketplace on 52nd Street? There is legacy in both of them; there is investment, relationship, community. We needed (and need) to be able to understand that each of these examples has very different production implications, but that we're holding them both in the same kind of way—as events, as meaningful moments, with impact on this growing network that is *Philadelphia Assembled*.

And on a really practical level, in terms of production, we had to hire additional people. We had to hire a site manager that we didn't, necessarily, anticipate for this project when we set out. We had to hire someone specifically for the marketplace to do some of the logistics and permitting. We had to hire someone [Jessi Koch] for outreach for sites like our Reconstructions location at 4th and Master Streets, given the sensitivity around conversations of gentrification and displacement in that neighborhood. And Jessi has been integral to building on those relationships. There are many ways in which we're actively working towards and establishing an organizational form, which, in this case, means that the production aspect needs to hold space for a lot of different things, for different people, different events.

We fall victim to the same fault in terms of production, as other large-scale institutions as well; we have this tendency (although it's changing) to hold public programs to a different standard, and with different values, than artworks or exhibitions. In some instances, this is absolutely valid, but the conditions do change when one is working in time-based and durational work, in work that asks for a choreography of events to take place across the city as opposed to the installation of a singular object. I think we're working on developing a better understanding how we relate to the changing scale and manifestation of our projects: "we" as in large scale institutions. It goes with any kind of durational practice—the time that something takes to realize, and the time that is invested in that work, is equally as important as the time one experiences it.

When talking about event production within the context of this project, it's important to recognize that we're all a part of its production team.

JvH: You drop things while doing that, and there's also some comical things happening. The Futures dreamt up a bus, with almost nobody [in that working group] having a driver's license. That's the reality of organizing. There is this dream in what we want to hold together, and then it comes to reality: "What can you hold together? How can you hold the space together? And what do you need for that? What kind of skill sets do you need for holding together? Who is bringing the coffee?"

A project on this scale, at some points, is going smooth and at other points, definitely not going smooth. I'm very open about that. That's an interesting element, especially if you work with time and collective ideation and learning and unlearning together and building together. If you want to have that friction-free or picture-perfect project, it cannot be a collective exercise. Picture perfect can only be if you cleanse an event of any unwanted or undesired friction. That's also why I've been very precise and honest in saying that. Our public phase is not a series of nice public installations with an opening and a buffet. It is training together to ideate what the groups wanted to do and to look at how we can hold that. And that is not all picture perfect.

AS: The project is also not something that you can experience as a whole unless you're someone on the organizational and management side of it (and even then, it is still in parts). The fragmentation—or porosity—of such a project that manifests in sixty-plus programs in various locations across the City is all part of creating a layered understanding of the whole. You're not meant to go to each of these programs and say, "Oh, now I 'get' Reconstructions and now I can leave." If Reconstructions sits with you and you want to stay in that space of complexity and learning, you keep going back. Maybe, instead, you decide to go to a Sanctuary event. Reconstructions all of a sudden has this other lens to it. All this to say, it's not meant to be that you go to sixty programs and then, all of the sudden, you "get" *Philadelphia Assembled* and the work of these collaborators. In fact, in attending and participating in these public manifestations, you then join the journey as a visitor and contributor to the project's network.

DT: You all brought up a lot that is relevant to documentation and storytelling, in particular the way this is a fragmented multi-site project with varying layers of intimacy and privacy and publicness. I'm curious if you can say a little bit about the different kinds of documentation and storytelling. Those are not synonymous with one another, but just to say a little bit about the ways that some of the experiences and the moments of this project will live on, and will be shared.

DV: I'll give the example of the part of the Reconstructions working group that was working on gentrification and displacement. Very early in our process, we discovered that we did not necessarily feel a part of, or welcome, in the neighborhood in which we chose to enact our public site at 4th and Master [Streets]. We had a very hard time trying to get input or collect stories from community members in a way that we felt would honor and respect the community, both the existing residents and the displaced community. So, what we decided to do about that was to make the site itself about collecting those stories, about story collection and documentation. It would be about documenting the process of us becoming neighbors in that community. Essentially, we were moving in. That even brought up the irony of "we," as artists, becoming gentrifiers ourselves, moving into a community that had some reservations about us coming, about our intentions and our activities.

Eventually some of the community members came to embrace us, but we also saw some segments of the community that expressed that we were not necessarily welcome there. We chose to document it, especially since this working group was small, in a way that acknowledged how each of the collaborators has had a personal experience with gentrification and displacement. In looking across the project, we realized how many collaborators were, or had been, homeless, how many of us suffer from illness, how many of us were living these urgencies that we were working on. At the same time as trying to produce this project, we're living these issues. We asked each of the artists to give their own interpretation through the art that they made for that particular site. For instance, Mona Washington is a playwright. She expressed how she feels about gentrification and displacement through a series of plays. Staci Moore, who is on the board of the Women's Community Revitalization Project (WCRP), she herself was homeless at one point.

She created this beautiful series of handmade cards. In her card art she incorporated comments from something we called a "Just Neighbor Survey." We went around and talked to people in that community and other communities that had experienced displacement, and she incorporated their comments into her card art. Betty Leacraft is a textile artist and she created a beautiful quilt called *Kensington Memories* that showed the changes in the Kensington and Northern Liberties neighborhoods over many, many years.

Reveiling Betty Leacraft's 'Kensington Memories' quilt, during "Kensington Memories, Neighborhood Histories" at the Blueprint for a Just Neighborhood site.



I'm a storyteller, so I brought in the research that I've been doing about the history of neighborhoods that are displaced when new communities come in. That's part of a series called the "Master Narratives," based on street names and monuments in Philadelphia. We each had a very personal way of documenting and telling the story of what's happening in the community, and we all supported each other's efforts.

JvH: I like this part of *Philadelphia Assembled* because it is the opposite of what one might think of in terms of "community art," where it is the community of a specific area that takes the lead. In this case it is a group of people from various places that think together about these larger issues, a group that actually uses that opportunity to start a conversation. It's almost the other way around. And there is friction there. It puts the finger exactly where it hurts most, pinpointing and unraveling the wounds.

It's also about stories being lost, and about certain narratives prevailing. Kensington in its gentrification is having more and more white people move in, pushing people of color out. At first instance it was a project from the Museum and it was like "the Museum versus the community." When it turned out that many of the artists that started to work and bring their own stories were people of color, it changed the dynamics. There's some very interesting things happening there that are speaking to some of these issues in a very profound way. Bringing your personal stories from everywhere to this site, saying that this is both site specific, as well as exemplary of a larger trend that is happening. We are all the community and we are all implicit in this process. What is our own individual complicity in this kind of narrative in the city? I like that one, because it's almost the opposite of what you would do to work with the community to create something. That's why I said the atmospheres are so different from one another.

DV: Yes. And we weren't afraid to be honest about that process. We didn't try to make it something that we knew it wasn't. And the community responded by coming to our events and sharing their stories. One of the artists, Tieshka K. Smith, is a photographer, but she also did a podcast series called *Taking Our Stake Out of the Ground*. At every event she interviewed people from the community, people just walking by. That was very enlightening for us. It confirmed a lot of things for us, but it also showed our own misconceptions, our biases. It's been a learning process for all of the artists and I think for the institution, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as well as the community members. We really saw a change as the process was unfolding in the way that they related to us. I think they really came to see this, for the most part, as an asset in the community. When you think about gentrification and displacement, you think, "Now that's going to make that area more desirable to developers, it's going to make it an artsy hotspot for developers." But Jeanne is right. We weren't afraid of the conflict. You cannot say you're doing a radical project and not expect for there to be conflict. You have to expect and anticipate that you're going to provoke some people. I love the way we worked out each and every conflict by developing a personal relationship with that person.

JvH: And we did that across the project in terms of the conflicts—for each one, we picked it up, hashed it out, held it.

Sometimes that hurts—it can hurt a lot—but we knew we needed to do it. We still do.

AS: In a way, you already said it so beautifully, Denise, we're living these urgencies. Storytelling is a medium where—whether through textiles, words, postcards, or a live-broadcast podcast—we can talk about the very lived realities of these urgencies, which, more often than not, are only understood when theorized or philosophized about in a larger context. But this brings them to a place of life—of the lived. I think every single collaborator for that Reconstructions site brought that life to their storytelling—a life that felt true to their work and current reality. The idea of living these urgencies through storytelling can also easily fall into this other place of narrative or fiction. But it's important to know, to share, that these stories are lived. They are passed down in words, in memories, in our skin.

JvH: Through *Philadelphia Assembled* we are sharing that lived experience and highlighting, again, that with a subject like gentrification, it's not only a new story about a neighborhood that is coming into being, but also, in doing that, another story gets erased. And that is ongoing.

Museum employees/Philadelphia Assembled Collaborators at the fourth Collaborators Assembly.



DT: As part of this project, there are a bunch of different organizations and individuals, and as Damon pointed out, they're certainly not monolithic.

One of the constituencies is people who work here at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I know from going to meetings that there are people who have some role in the institution that may not directly have anything to do with public programming but have accepted an opportunity to be a part of this as a means to enjoy their job more, to meet some people, to do a number of things which I can only speculate about. I'm wondering if you just could say a little bit more about what you have observed in terms of the project's impact on the internal culture or internal constituency of the museum, and to what extent an aspiration or goal of the project is to shift that culture at all?

DR: To break down the category, there's multiple ways people from the Museum are engaged. There's people like myself, a collaborator [on the artistic team], who are directly involved in the project. Then there's people who, by nature of their job at the institution, overlap with the project because they're part of the Editorial and Graphic Design team for instance. There's multiple ways people engage. Just like all the other collaborators in the process, it's both really exciting and challenging. On the institutional level it is posing a lot of questions about how we work and the time and structures we talked about earlier. We have a process when we create a program. We have a process when we create an exhibition. And that doesn't hold true to the kind of work that's being done and the sort of collaborative conversations being had through this project. Where are the adjustments being made? How do you adapt your normal process to really respond with the urgency and importance that a project like this should get? That's happening on the institutional level.

On a personal level, and I'm going to talk about myself as a collaborator on the project, it's eye opening. I have friends who are involved in various happenings in the city and I'm still meeting a massive amount of new people. I didn't know Denise before this. I'm learning more about what she does; not even what she does but what she cares about, what drives her. I think a lot of people are having that experience. I'm not sure it's possible to have that experience and not be impacted personally, and in turn, effect how you work and how you approach the things that you do. If nothing else it's exciting to simply know what else is happening around your space.

Likewise, it's exciting to know what's happening around the institution. When you work in a place with four hundred people on staff, it's easy to get siloed in your own section and not be connected to all these things. When you live in a city of neighborhoods, it's easy to get stuck on your block and not know what's happening two neighborhoods down the way. That's been really eye opening and exciting for me. I think it's making people ask the question, "Why do we do things the way we do? Why are these processes in place?" Sometimes I think there's been some interesting processes, where it seems to validate how we do things. "We do it this way because it anticipates these six other problems that might happen." At other times it's like, "We do it this way, but it really doesn't need to be that way at all! There's this whole other way that it could work. We could learn so much more from this."

My hope, in terms of my own personal ambition, is that the real soul searching and conversations hopefully do influence the culture. I'm all about the small things. A project can pull off the big things, but it's the small things that shift culture and stick with you. I hope we identify those and keep talking about them, and we make those push us in other directions to think about how we communicate with each other or interact or think about a process or ask things of people that we work with. That's a big thing.

AS: Damon has been a big advocate in meetings with Museum staff to really claim and emphasize the fact that this isn't just a project that we're "hosting" or organizing, but the Museum is a collaborator on this project. Integral to this is inviting Museum staff to be part of the working groups and the editorial team, like having Damon as one of our Movement editors. Part of growing the fabric of this project is involving Museum staff, at both personal and practical level, whether that's in editing our publications, or engaging someone with an investment in the history of Reconstructions. How exciting is it that the Museum is opening that up to them? We had a series of meetings introducing the project to Museum staff when we first started, an open call to staff members who might want to learn about what *Philadelphia Assembled* is. At first it was a very strange thing to do because often an exhibition is already planned out and set in stone.

To invite certain individuals to be a part of that journey required having the time and capacity. A lot of those [PHLA] meetings happen in the evenings or on the weekend. There are also those, as Damon was saying, who are just learning about certain aspects of *Philadelphia Assembled* and just joining the journey. So there's those layers of learning that are still happening in the same way they're happening out in the city.

This is a project that asks us to think about exhibitions differently. It asks us to think about objects and space and time differently. It also asks us to think about the duration of an exhibition differently. This project is living - it's out in the city, it's going, and we're still building.

JvH: Which they [the Museum Marketing team] found very difficult to understand. They have to market the process around the exhibition as opposed to just the exhibition itself, and they just kept not getting their heads around it.

AS: It is to say that the exhibition is not just the "city phase" and it's not just the "Museum phase," but it is the totality of what happens between the invitation to Jeanne in 2013 and the relationships that follow. That's a long time for a team of hundreds of people who are part of an exhibition team. We've had more work meetings with the exhibition design team than they normally have, but it's because we're still figuring out what's coming back to the Museum in three weeks. The pacing of *Philadelphia Assembled* is sometimes "go, go, go," and the Museum isn't always able to operate at that pace. At other times, there are beautiful moments where these two tempos are aligned. Regardless, the process requires transparency with our staff internally and amongst collaborators about where we are, and we're heading - even if that means having project collaborators at internal Museum meetings and visa versa. It requires a sensitivity both inside the Museum and beyond our walls.

And that's not a responsibility held only by the curator of the project. In *Philadelphia Assembled*, that's divided amongst at least ten of us, if not more. It's important to make that clear.

With PHLA we are attempting to build into the very fabric of this institution a sense of flexibility and also co-learning, which won't happen with one exhibition, but hopefully can happen in projects with the museum staff going forward.

We've grown our network, too, of future collaborations, who we can work with, as well as ways in which to work. We are building a toolkit of methodologies right now. The more people from Museum staff we can get at the table, the better, so that we're all pulling from the same toolkit.

JvH: We've also seen that a lot of people who work at the museum, and signed up to be a part of working groups and are following it closely, are people who have a vested interest in the fact that some of these processes in the Museum are changing, which is normal. Among them are people of color or people that feel like there are different ways that this museum might need some shaking up or shifting. They're not necessarily people who are in charge.

AS: Almost never.

JvH: I think Amanda and Damon have been very good in asking permission from all the Dept. Heads for those people to work on this project. Now when we sometimes come to things that are fractious —I feel there is a growing support in the Museum. You walk and people say, "Yes, *Philadelphia Assembled*," or they wear the button. There's this whole network in the Museum that carries *Philadelphia Assembled*. Maybe that network is not always strong enough to push it through, as there is the way in which the institution defaults to what it does normally, what is already inscribed as a process, whether that's payment, or communication, or general infrastructure. It's very hard at the moment when you hit that block. It needs some pushing. Some head-banging.

AS: I think that's because this project does all of those things you just mentioned. It challenges the way that we communicate internally, externally, and everything in between. It challenges our timeline for paying people. It challenges our timeline for building an exhibition and programs. It challenges our marketing timeline.

Every single department has a pressure point in this and has a stake in it. I think that this is a project that does challenge, for better or for worse, every single aspect of the way that the Museum works. It allows us to see where those pressure points are. One exhibition cannot solve all of those things. It can maybe make some of those things more visible. It can allow us to have things that we work on into the future, with an understanding of how to grow ourselves and our own capacity. But, for the very reason that it does touch upon all of those things, it absolutely cannot—and doesn't seek to—"resolve" all of those things.

JvH: It also, as a project, didn't set out to solve, let's be honest.

DV: That was one of our guiding principles. We looked at the one thing that unified us. The unifying factors were the city of Philadelphia and the Museum and how they're seen in the city and in the world. The city of Philadelphia is the birthplace of democracy, the birthplace of America, and it's known as the city of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection. The Museum itself is seen as this citadel on the hill, or even this temple of art and culture and history. And what kind of stories, what kind of art, are held in esteem because they're in the Museum? I wanted to see the stories of the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the people who are normally left out of the story, or they're on the periphery of the story. I wanted to see them raised to the same position as European ideas of art and culture.

DT: You've all alluded to this in different ways, what sort of influence the project might have on your work in terms of process and collaboration. Could you say more about that?

JvH: I'm going to go into painting. [All laugh.]

DR: I think for me it's reinforced some things I had been thinking about our approaches, both externally and internally. I try to think about these things both because they're a personal passion but also professionally. I've been thinking a lot about the dual job that needs to be done of carrying the weight of the baggage and context and the history of this institution when you go out—all the positive and negative, and especially the negatives.

How do you acknowledge the problematic areas of the history of this institution, while looking internally and allowing individuals to be individuals. I'm thinking of a colleague who is working with public programs. These concerns are her passion. This is what she does in her life, in her normal process. She also loves art history and works here. What's the balance for her as an individual trying to bring these concerns in, but also knowing that she bears this weight going out? How do we take a really hard look?

DV: I'm not sure if the way I do my work will change. I think I finally understand myself as an artist and I have more confidence in myself and how I work, because things kept coming up where I got to put it into practice. And I love my city! In spite of everything, I love the city.



Denise Valentine hosting a workinggroup during the fourth Collaborators Assembly.

AS: I think this project will influence the way I work alongside others. I've learned a lot of different methodologies, and this has blessed me with new ways in which to work alongside people. That kind of co-learning, co-unlearning, co-creating—I think those practices what we're gained and tested with this project will carry forward. To your point, Denise, about what kind of narratives this institution tells, this perspective on time and power is incredibly important to my work here and will continue to be, *post-Philadelphia Assembled*.

Yet, now I have an amazing network of people who I can think through these ideas with who understand what it means to step into this Museum and thoughtfully and critically engage with what we hang on our walls, the conversations that echo in the halls, and the food that sits on our café tables. All of these things affect our communities and the very city that we claim as our own.

JvH: On that point, I probably won't go into painting. I know institutions. I've worked with institutions before. I know the city. I've work with cities before, I've worked with communities before. A lot of these things and a lot of methodologies that are at play here are things I came across at some point in my thirty years of doing this kind of practice. On this three-year journey, what's been interesting for me, but also a big challenge that is still provoking my thinking, is how we merge these methodologies. We talk a lot about education and unlearning, and now it's very popular for people to talk about decolonizing, but how profoundly difficult it is to keep working, keep challenging, and keep learning across different styles of organizing, but also ingrained patterns and ways of doing things.

Even in the institution, with siloed departments—between Engagement and Education, Contemporary, and Visitor Services. But also the city, with siloed neighborhoods, and different ways of organizing. We still have a hard time coming together to challenge our own perceptions of how and why we do what we do. How can we backtrack our own understanding and learning? How do we understand ourselves by unlearning some of our default positions? For me, this has been a very hard time because I think I relived every painful moment, every conflict, in all my works over the last thirty years in this project. "Damn! I've been there!" I had to backtrack every "lesson learned" and had to learn that I just didn't learn them. I thought I learned them, but I really did not re-work them. In my understanding of, and acting in, the world, I say "training for the not yet" because it's important to talk about the fact that we are in constant training, and we have to continuously learn and unlearn without necessarily knowing that we'll get there or where we are going. Although I preach that it doesn't mean I am good at it and it also means that work will not stop.

That constant scrutinizing or breaking and rebreaking is something you have to keep doing. And also knowing I'm very tired. It's interesting and it's shown me a lot.

AS: It might require speculation. Part of training for the not yet is, exercising the imagination where you have these moments of speculation and these moments of arrival. Speculation is a huge part of how all of us train. It can be incredibly painful and at the same time, exhausting. It can also be really nourishing joyful, and celebratory, but it's not always that. You don't know when or where that end point is, the finish line isn't in sight.

JvH: No. What will be the afterlife of *Philadelphia Assembled*? I've always said if you take this journey through, you should not preinscribe the afterlife because then you already work towards something. We have been working towards something, but we are actually inscribing it now together. There might be another place where we pick up the conversation of whether or not our meeting can be an annual event, which is the most simple way of continuation, or it might have a longer effect in the Museum, or we might move forward in a different way. I think we need the next months to figure that out as a group. And maybe we will come to the conclusion that this journey of three years that we made together was enough. Or we might decide that the project needs to take on another form for the journey to continue into the future—it is still to be seen.

Interview Participants

Jeanne van Heeswijk is the initiating artist of *Philadelphia Assembled* and is an artist who facilitates the creation of dynamic and diversified public spaces in order to “radicalize the local.” Her large-scale community-embedded projects question art’s autonomy by combining performative actions, discussions, and other forms of organizing and pedagogy in order to assist communities to take control of their own futures. Van Heeswijk’s work has been featured in publications and exhibitions worldwide, including the Liverpool, Shanghai, and Venice biennials. She received the 2011 Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change, the 2012 Curry Stone Prize for Social Design Pioneers, and in 2014 was awarded the inaugural Keith Haring Fellowship in Art and Activism at the Center for Curatorial Studies and Human Rights Project at Bard College. She lives and works in Rotterdam and Philadelphia.

Nehad Khader is editor of the Sanctuary working group, as well as a writer, curator, and image-maker. She is the managing editor of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, a quarterly academic publication. She is also the co-curator of the DC Palestinian Film and Arts Festival, founded in 2010. With a background in Black and Palestinian literature and media, Khader has published critical articles about narrative and the politics of art in *Al-Jazeera*, *Huffington Post*, and *Jadaliyya*, as well as interviews with Palestinian luminaries, including filmmaker Elia Suleiman. She serves on the staff of the Blackstar Film Festival.

Phoebe Bachman is an artist and community organizer based in North Philadelphia. She/They maintains a practice where research, activism, community organizing, and theory intersect and animate inequities felt among a variety of publics. Bachman regularly participates in community organizing with those already performing acts of resistance, with particular attention paid to

gender justice, queer politics, and anti-racist work. In the past she/they has worked as a research assistant for Paul Chan, and as a project assistant on Suzanne Lacy’s performance “Between the Door and the Street.”

Shari Hersh is a community artist and organizer. As Senior Project Manager and Founder of the Restored Spaces Initiative at the Mural Arts Program, Hersh researches and develops innovative projects in the public sphere. In partnership with artists, activists, youth, and communities, Hersh facilitates a collaborative model of practice that emphasizes art and creativity as essential vehicles for catalyzing dialogue, building relationships and making decisions collectively. Her projects convene communities in collaboration with artists to create palpable positive impacts in neighborhoods and to affirm citizen rights to shape and use the city’s public spaces. Her work addresses the question, “How can we reknit social fabric through reshaping our communities, our environment and ourselves?” Her recent efforts focus on socially engaged projects with youth, community, and interdisciplinary collaborations that address issues such as housing, sustainability, and access and right to

green spaces. Hersh holds a life-long interest in textiles and hand-work, seeing them as documents of women’s creativity and social endeavor. She recently initiated a project called Home Studio Lab that uses needle arts to initiate conversations about racism and white privilege. Combining insights from trauma informed care with the recent surge in theory and action for racial equity, Home Studio Lab seeks to create safe spaces for challenging dialogue and reflection on urgent issues of equity and connection.

Kirtrina M. Baxter, M.A. is editor of Sovereignty working group, and a dedicated mother, drummer, urban farmer, food justice activist, community organizer, and Afro-ecologist. Baxter is currently the community organizer for the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia where she works with gardeners around the city to gain access to land and other resources, and co-organizes Soil Generation, a Black and Brown-led coalition of urban agriculture advocates, environmental and food justice activists who work within a racial and economic justice framework to help inform policy and provide community education and support to gardeners in the city.

Though certified in permaculture, Baxter identifies with agroecology as a more politically informed way to practice her land work. As well as being an urban grower, she has volunteered to help create and maintain various community gardens in Upstate NY as well as Philadelphia. In Ithaca, NY she co-founded the Ithaca Youth Farm Project, a youth-run farm CSA that engages students from culturally different backgrounds and the Congo Square Market, an outdoor summer cultural market designed to offer opportunities for start-up entrepreneurs of color to build economic means. She is currently the farm manager and a board member of Urban Creators, a board member of Mill Creek Farm, a member of the Black Dirt Farm Collective, The Seedkeepers Collective, and the National Black Food and Justice Alliance. In 2008, she received her M.A from Union Institute and University in Cultural Studies.

Counter Narrative Society (CNS), a.k.a. artist and activist **Mabel Negrete**, is editor of the Futures Atmosphere Working Group. CNS was founded in 2007 and is an artistic-research unit that works to initiate counter narratives about bio-power, urbanism, culture, and technology.

Currently they are based in Philadelphia and their work focuses on creating multifaceted projects that strive to build community and counter the *invisible punishing machine*. CNS is the founding member of SPARKmakers, and co-founder of Philly with Standing Rock / NoDAPL, Indigenous 215, The Mobile Futures Institute (MFI), and other social organizations.

Amanda Sroka is the Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Sroka joined the Museum in 2014 following the completion of her Masters Degree in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London where she focused on global conceptual art practices. Recent projects at the Museum include *Yael Bartana: And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2018); *Philadelphia Assembled* (2017); *Word, Image & Domestic Dissent* (2017); *Unlimited: Painting in France in the 1960s and 70s* (2017); *Jitish Kallat: Covering Letter* (2016/17); *'Plays of / for a Respirateur' An Installation by Joseph Kosuth* (2015/16); and *Into Dust: Traces of the Fragile in Contemporary Art* (2015). Forthcoming projects include exhibitions with Martine Syms and Sean Scully (2020).

In 2012, Sroka served as the Performance Coordinator for *Dancing around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*. Prior to that, she assisted at Pilar Corrias Gallery in London, conducted research for the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, and served as an assistant to the curatorial team at the New Museum in New York on exhibitions including *Ostalgia* (2011), *Carsten Höller: Experience* (2011/12), and *Spartacus Chetwynd: Home Made Tasers* (2011).

Damon Reaves is the Associate Curator of Education for Community Engagement and Access at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He has a background in visual arts and theater and in 2008 was awarded the Locks Postgraduate Fellowship. He was previously the director of community engagement at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and has also worked as a teaching artist for the City of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program. He received his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 2008.

Denise Valentine is editor of Reconstruction Working Group. Valentine is a storyteller of forgotten and neglected African and African American Histories. She worked closely with Reconstruction Inc., where she helped formerly incarcerated men build storytelling skills grounded in concepts from African and African American storytelling traditions in order to provide a cultural context for navigating new or difficult knowledge. Valentine's storytelling performance illustrates the power of story to transcend differences between people, transform negativity, and inspire hope. Denise is a proud member of Keepers Of The Culture, Inc., and the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. Denise is also a historical performer and has portrayed Sojourner Truth and Phillis Wheatley. The storyteller is a lifelong resident of Philadelphia and a long-time activist for peace and social justice. In 2013, she founded The Philadelphia Middle Passage Ceremony & Port Marker Project and Ancestral Remembrance Day to raise awareness of Pennsylvania's role in the slave trade and to advocate for a historical marker at Penn's Landing in honor of African ancestors who disembarked there.

Abigail Dangler worked as an intern with the Philadelphia Museum of Art focusing on *Philadelphia Assembled*, and recently received her BFA in Fine Arts and Curatorial Studies at Moore College of Art and Design. Her studio practice currently consists of drawings, performances, and sculptures that attempt to construct narratives about natural history and her personal history. She has previously assisted with exhibitions (*Organize Your Own at Kelly Writer's House* and *Twisted Path III* at Abbe Museum) in which artists explore identity, self-determination, decolonization, and environment.

Daniel Tucker works as an artist, writer, and organizer developing documentaries, publications, exhibitions, and events inspired by his interest in social movements and the people and places from which they emerge. His writings and lectures on the intersections of art and politics and his collaborative art projects have been published and presented widely. Tucker recently completed the feature-length video essay *Local Control: Karl Hess in the World of Ideas* and curated the exhibition and event series *Organize Your Own: The Politics and Poetics of Self-Determination Movements*.

He earned his MFA from University of Illinois at Chicago and BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He recently completed Rockwood Institute's Art of Leadership training and since 2014 has been the Graduate Program Director in Socially-Engaged Art at Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia.

Miscprojects.com

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Thank you to collaborators:

Elisabeth Perez-Luna, Michael O'Bryan,
Sheldon Abba, Chris Rogers,
Karina Wratschko, Mark Strandquist,
Courtney Bowles, Bri Barton,
and Megan Voeller for discussion
about this project as it has
unfolded and for sharing ideas
at public programs.

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Philadelphia Assembled is a project initiated by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk in collaboration with stakeholders from across the city and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The views expressed by individual participants or in materials developed as part of *Philadelphia Assembled* are representative of the project's collective conception and production and are not, necessarily, the views of the Museum or any other individual involved.

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for Arts
& Heritage

Philadelphia Assembled is made possible by the William Penn Foundation, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, The Daniel W. Dietrich II Fund for Contemporary Art, Wyncote Foundation, The Arlin and Neysa Adams Endowment Fund, Nancy M. Berman and Alan Bloch, Lynne and Harold Honickman, Mr. and Mrs. Milton S. Schneider, Constance and Sankey Williams, the Mondrian Fund, Lyn M. Ross, and The Netherland-America Foundation.

