

# **Delta to Delta: Reclaiming the Fertile Republic of Our Imagination**

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*Can artists create or manifest social change in their work?*

*If this is possible, how can it be done?*

## **1. Delta**

Delta is the outpouring of a river. It is also the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet, a triangle, and the classical symbol for ‘change.’ How great the change that has come about where the river that passes through this city – the Ohio – pours out into the sea, the Mississippi delta.

I’m speaking to you today as part of PLATFORM. PLATFORM is an interdisciplinary group that has focused on social and ecological justice since 1983, mostly in London, in England. We combine the arts and the sciences. Currently there are twelve people employed at PLATFORM.

I was directly employed by PLATFORM from 1991 to 1994, and in the decade since have been closely involved in the evolution of the group.

In the early 1990’s PLATFORM focused on the exploration of London as a city of rivers, beginning with the project *Still Waters*. For London is a water city. It lies at the inland end of the tidal reach of the Thames, indeed at the very limit of the delta of the Thames. Here from the hills that surround the city, rivers pour down and feed the great tidal swirl, the sea in the land. There are approximately 56 named rivers and streams in Greater London. However only four rivers remain above ground. Like the Ohio here in Pittsburgh, the Thames is shorn of so many of its tributaries.

The intention of *Still Waters* was to celebrate four particular rivers – three of them the Effra, the Walbrook and the Fleet, almost entirely buried from source to mouth. We celebrated the rivers through performance, exhibitions, education projects, and political intervention. Our intent was to bring into the imagination of the city the possibility that these rivers – passing through the heart of London – could be unearthed. That the city could once again honour the rivers that enabled it to grow – they provided water for drinking and cooking, fishing and farming. The possibility that the city would honour

the bioregion in which the metropolis sits. The possibility that the city could change.

A decade on, the rivers remain under tarmac. Has nothing changed, has art had no effect? We've noticed how something is shifting – the buried rivers are getting mentioned in the press more and more often. Last year a tourist brochure talked of the Fleet, and two books have recently been published on the hidden waters. It's as though the rivers are slowly bubbling up again in the imagination of the city.

As a line from poet Adrienne Rich reads in the installation in the Gallery: "Does the river, once diverted, mourning, remember wetness?"

Now I'm not saying that all this is a result of PLATFORM'S work. Rather, we hope that PLATFORM may have contributed to a wave of change. Indeed that we may be a part of a wave that was too big for us to see when we first began our exploration.

We have long tried to combine perceptual, metaphoric change with actual, concrete change. In other words, we have tried to combine the poetic and the pragmatic. The project which arose in 1993 out of *Still Waters*, named *Delta*, did just that.

The fourth river of that project, the Wandle, remains above ground and we decided to draw on both that river's spiritual and its energy past. For this river, 9 \_ miles long, begins as a sacred spring, a holy well, and ends at the place of the Bronze Age 'deposition site' – a sacred site where bronze objects of great value were thrown as devotional gifts into its fertile delta. And the river had a thousand year long history of milling – of driving mill wheels from the Saxon period to the mid twentieth century.

By the early 1990's there were no working mills on the river, and the waters were heavily polluted with oil and littered with rubbish. The delta was a post-industrial wasteland – though not on the scale of what Tim and Reiko have had to deal with here.

We installed a small water turbine – a micro-hydro – in a disused sluice gate to generate electricity from the river's flow. We refurbished the sluice gate itself, painting it gold in honour of the Bronze Age devotion for the delta, and we mounted it with a carved stone piece in honour of the animals that

lived in this place – Salmon, Swan, Otter, Heron, Eel. We also installed a large former church bell to hang from the structure itself. It was inscribed with the words “I am rung by the tides.” The bell was connected to the micro-hydro, itself affected by the movement of the tides. The water-powered bell rang twelve strokes at the high tide, and twelve at the low tide. The sounds of the tides, from the North Sea, heard far inland in this ‘industrial wasteland.’

The power from the turbine ran along a cable to a nearby school, St. Josephs, where it provided electricity to light the music room. The arrival of the electricity at the school, in 1999, was celebrated by a musical performance created by the children, just as the opening of the micro-hydro had been celebrated by a night performance, a walking sound piece, a contemporary score specially commissioned for the event. You can hear a recording of this score on the headphones in the installation in the exhibition.

Here was real, concrete change. The first micro-hydro in an inner city, bringing back the rivers into the lives of citizens and school children.

Although the school has gone from strength to strength selling itself as an eco school, and PLATFORM maintained an annual teaching project there for six years, for the Wandle, the decade since has been a hard one.

Maintaining a sufficient water flow to enable the micro-hydro to generate meant a long, long battle with the local government authority, and in 2001 we lost.

Not everything is lost though. *Delta* inspired a further project, *Renue*, Renewable Energy in the Urban Environment, established to create further renewable energy and arts schemes along the Wandle valley. This group then merged with another organization and is now *SEA/Renue*. They have a staff of 22, and are busily installing solar hot water systems on homes, small wind turbines on tower blocks, creating a biomass fuelled community centre, and solar photovoltaic powered schools. *SEA/Renue* has begun to refurbish and alter the micro-hydro, and to install solar PV panels on St. Josephs.

Once again we’d in no way claim that all this came from the work of the artists in PLATFORM, but we can see that we’ve made a significant contribution to a slowly unfolding process of ecological – and social – change in our city.

Since 1996, PLATFORM has been engaged in another initiative, linked to our work on renewable energy. Entitled *90% Crude*, this initiative explores the way in which London worsens climate change, and it examines the role of the London-based oil and gas transnationals in the maintenance of the fossil fuel empire.

For London is not only a water city but also an oil city. Just as the water is hidden, so too is the oil. When we think of an oil city, most of us would cite Houston, or Kuwait City. But London is arguably the most important centre for the oil and gas industry in the world. Its Stock Exchange is the primary location for two of the three ‘super-majors,’ Royal Dutch Shell and BP, London is the home to one of the three world petroleum exchanges, and so on. The oil industry drives the financial heart of the city – 20% of the blue chip stock market is in oil – and thereby the economy of the city and the nation. Some consider sterling to be a petro-currency.

Yet, like the rivers, this is all hidden.

Our aim is to alter this part of our city, both by reducing London’s fossil fuel consumption, and by exposing this web of companies and institutions. We are working for their demise, for their dismantling.

Incidentally our commitment to reducing fossil fuel consumption explains why I’m presenting this paper alone today. In the past decade, we’ve tried to radically reduce the amount of air travel that we take. For a tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> released by a plane had three times the impact on the atmosphere than does a tonne of gas released at ground level.

## 2. To Delta

Now you know why this first word in the title of this talk is Delta; it is about imagination and water in the Wandle delta in London. Today’s talk also refers to the connection between the Wandle delta and the Niger delta in Nigeria, along the Gulf of Guinea. Delta to delta. One of the panels in the installation reads ‘from the Wandle delta to the Niger delta.’

There is a long history of oil exploitation at this delta, the mouth of the Niger river, in the lands of the Ogoni, the Ijaw, the Itsekiri, and others peoples. This map shows the oil fields, the blobs, and the oil pipelines

running above ground, the lines, in the Niger delta at the time of Nigerian independence in 1960. This map shows the same area today, a land utterly dominated by one industry, a densely populated area the size of Belgium, slightly larger than Maryland, where I live.

By the way, part of the Wandle delta was dominated by a Shell oil depot, whose tanks leaked contaminants into the once-fertile soil there. For much of its eighty year life, the petroleum products of that depot were derived from crude oil extracted, in part, from Nigeria.

And Shell is by far the biggest oil operator in the Niger delta.

In both these deltas, then, there is a mixing of oil and water.

World attention was drawn to the appalling environmental impacts of Shell in the Niger delta, and the plight of the Delta peoples, by the campaigns and death of Ken Saro Wiwa. On November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1995, Saro Wiwa was executed by the Nigerian military government, hung for his campaign against Shell and Chevron. His death had a devastating effect on Platform, and essentially inspired *90% Crude*.

Now, a decade later, we're creating a project to honour Ken's life and his struggle for justice. The initiative, entitled *Remember Saro Wiwa* was publicly launched by Mayor of London Ken Livingston, and by Saro Wiwa's son, Ken Wiwa, in March of this year.

In November we will organize a festival in celebration of Ken, and on the 10<sup>th</sup>, we will announce the winner of an open call to artists to create a 'living memorial' sculpture to Ken. This work will tour the city for three years.

We're also published a book entitled "The Next Gulf," available now on Amazon. The book describes Shell and Chevron's unfolding environmental and human rights abuses over the last ten years. It presents the long legacy of European colonialism in the delta – the Portuguese, the Dutch, then the British. The British traded in slaves who were exported to the Caribbean and American colonies.

The book also describes the new attention on Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea by the State Department and the Pentagon here in the United States. A wide array of US-based think tanks and lobby groups are showing a new interest

in this region, illustrated in this slide. In the aftermath of 9/11, the oil reserves there now have greater appeal than the Persian Gulf – hence our book’s title “The Next Gulf.”

Let us consider for a moment the following question: how weak would transnational corporations be without their majority control of the US national government?

You will recall that one meaning of the word delta is triangle. For hundreds of years, there was a deadly triangle of trade, in slaves from the western coast of Africa, and goods from the so-called ‘new’ world, that transformed the Gulf of Guinea, the Americas and Britain. This triangle of trade is taught in standard US history classes.

Now there is arising a new Atlantic triangle – between the Niger delta, London and Washington. It is based not on slaves, but on oil and gas. There continues to be resistance to this. In the Niger delta itself, a growing number of civil society groups are calling for the end to all oil exploitation. But US and UK foreign policy is – as is well known – driven by a lust for oil reserves, and companies such as Shell and Chevron are driven by their need to maintain production levels. The voices of the delta are being drowned out. The future there appears to be about increased oil exploitation, increased local environmental damage, and increased CO2 emissions into the atmosphere.

These unfolding events around the Niger delta – hidden from view yet linked to our thirst for oil – illustrate that close interweaving between the British and American nations that we also saw in the run up to the invasion of Iraq.

We fear the Gulf of Guinea may be the scene of a similar conflict in the future.

These events also remind us of the close interweaving between two allied unpopular governments: the non-elected, one-party Republican government of the US, and Tony Blair’s recently re-elected New Labour government in Britain.

### **3. Reclaiming the Fertile Republic of Our Imagination**

Back and forth, across the Atlantic, we ask ourselves: how did it happen that the radical right wing has high-jacked the US government? How is it that, even though Tony Blair is so unpopular, there were no other politicians to choose from in the recent election in Britain? From the citizens of one country to the citizens of another, we ask each other: why didn't the people – in these supposed democracies – prevent the US and British governments from invading Iraq in March of 2003?

I am originally from Washington DC. But I moved to Baltimore from London ten years ago. Two days ago, I arrived in Pittsburgh, having coincidentally followed a similar path of that great 19<sup>th</sup> century British writer Charles Dickens. Dickens was from Kent, near London, the same village where my two PLATFORM colleagues Jane Trowell and James Marriott live.

In the winter of 1842, Charles Dickens first visited the US for a publicity tour, and he visited Baltimore. Then he headed to Pittsburgh, where he too stayed for three days.

But while in Baltimore, Dickens admitted to a friend in a letter that he was greatly let down by this country. He wrote:

“I am disappointed. This is not the republic I came to see; this is not the republic of my imagination....Freedom of opinion? Where is it? I see a press more mean, and paltry, and silly, and disgraceful than any country I ever knew.”

Sadly, today's press in the US, or, as so many now call it, the corporate media, is more than just “silly” or “disgraceful.” The corporate media in this country undermines citizen attempts at democracy almost daily, because it has abandoned its primary responsibility under our Constitution's First Amendment, to be free, to speak truth to power, to be the voice of the people.

While we consider Dickens' remarks, let us keep in mind that literature written by travelers to this country has often expressed disappointment. After all, the expectation of America has historically exceeded the reality.

Furthermore, our almost sacred written documents – The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, The Bills of Rights, and Lincoln's

Gettysburg Address (delivered just east of here in 1863, at a site where about 50,000 soldiers died in one battle alone during the Civil War) – have set idealistic standards for humanity. They have served as inspiration for many downtrodden peoples around the globe.

Incidentally, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is of particular relevance today not only because of Gettysburg's geographical proximity to Pittsburgh, but also because many now believe that our country is in an equally terrible crisis.

When Dickens returned to England and published his book 'American Notes,' he grew concerned that he would offend his American friends. So he dedicated the book to them, and wrote the following in his preface:

“...Prejudiced I am not, and never have been, otherwise than in favor of the United States. I have many friends in America, I feel a grateful interest in the country, I hope and believe it will successfully work out a problem of the highest importance to the whole human race.”

Dickens was no doubt referring to the problem of slavery. This book was written almost twenty years prior to the Civil War and it greatly disturbed Dickens to see human ownership of other humans, keen social reformer that he was. Yet this comment has relevance today as well, because in 2005, other problems of the “highest importance to the whole human race” begin and end with the US.

The consequences of US dependence on fossil fuels are a matter of the “highest importance to the whole human race.” Not only because our dependence hands immense power in our country to the corporations who then further encourage that dependence. Not only because the fossil fuel lust is a key factor in foreign policy, a policy which leads to wars, such as the US occupation of Iraq. But also because oil and gas consumption is the great driver of climate change.

This brings me to my creative work here in the US.

In 2000, in the aftermath of the first stolen election in this country – before we at Platform knew of the republic of Charles Dickens' imagination – I thought that we needed a people's government, a shadow government, here. After all, our Constitution says that our government is meant to represent the

will of the majority of the people, and the people had chosen Al Gore as President.

Perhaps I had been influenced by living in Britain in the first half of the 1990's, influenced by watching the debate-hungry opposition party (Labour) challenge the party in power (John Major's Conservatives) at every turn, over almost every issue. The British knew that there were at least two clearly articulated perspectives on the burning issues of the day: that, come election time, they had real choice between parties in government. I had also, by the way, grown accustomed to a vigorous and independent press.

So when the Republicans orchestrated the second stolen election eleven months ago, in 2004, I was enraged and devastated. I really couldn't understand the Democrats. Why hadn't the true winners of both elections – Gore or Kerry – set up shot (either in Washington DC or in another city for symbolic purposes) and declared themselves open for business as the people's government? Yes, both elections were close, but the Democrats won.

Thus, in spite of my previous lack of interest in the messy world of national politics, in spite of the fact that I see myself primarily as an environmental artist, a poet and an art teacher, I found myself eagerly seeking the republic of my imagination. And even though the Republican nightmare that is the Bush Administration started me on this quest, I certainly have found no answers among the Democrats.

I discovered that I was not alone in this desire, that other Americans have had similar thoughts. I now work with a new Washington state-based group called the Backbone Campaign that has set up an online process for nominating people to a progressive parallel government. I co-produce weekly conference calls with talented Americans who are nominees for positions in our shadow government. The calls are recorded and are available free of charge from our website. This project is called 'Conversations with the Cabinet.'

Our most recent Conversation took place on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus Day. We were honoured to speak with Winona LaDuke, founder and director of White Earth Land Recovery Project and Honor the Earth. She is a recipient of many awards and an author of several books, including her most recent book entitled 'Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming

and Claiming.” LaDuke is a three time nominee for Green Party vice president who, from her home on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, is actively promoting specific proposals for sustainable energy and living, in addition to reparations and healing for Indigenous Americans.

Speaking of artists and social change, the founder, director and visionary thinker of the Backbone Campaign, Bill Moyer, is a musician.

Bill believes that percussion, musical improvisation and composition offer good preparation for effective political activism. Percussion adds rhythm, color and texture to help give definition to a musical idea where it is needed. Musical improvisation is about paying attention to the environment, about recognizing its complexity and changeability, and then about adding the necessary elements to create a sense of musical wholeness. And composing can be seen as, a) a response to a musical need, b) a way to define musical space and time, c) the refusal to let others choose sounds, and, d) to create what sound is needed. For Bill, then, the Backbone Campaign - with its grassroots focus, its accountability tools and awards for politicians, with the choice of the strong biological metaphor of the spine, and with the shadow government project - is “a theme in variation and composition.”

Now PLATFORM has long taken an interest in themes in US foreign policy, and our work on the Niger delta has intensified this. PLATFORM is gradually coming to realize that, along with London, Washington DC, the U.S. is a place where change really needs to occur in order for the Niger delta to have a chance to be fertile once again.

And so, let us return to music – to creating a resonant sound each of us at PLATFORM need to hear. What might a transformed Washington, a changed United States, sound like? Or, to paraphrase Charles Dickens, what is the Republic of Our Imagination?

*The republic of our imagination immediately abandons its historic role as empire builder. Instead, it creates livable, local and bioregional economies that promote sustainable practice at all levels of government. Our republic has a Department of Sustainability that functions as the center point of this government.*

*The republic of our imagination holds democratic and voter verifiable elections.*

*The republic of our imagination begins immediate reparations with Native and African-American communities: reparations that adequately address centuries of thievery and human rights abuses in the name of the US government.*

*The republic of our imagination completes the unfinished business of the civil rights struggle. It permanently dismantles apartheid-like segregated public education and housing, instead providing integrated, high quality public schooling, and safe, clean communities for all. The republic of our imagination thereby halts and reverses the catastrophic schools-to-prison pathway in our poor communities of color.*

*The republic of our imagination abolishes the death penalty.*

*The republic of our imagination immediately outlaws civilian ownership of guns, acknowledging that the safety of all our children and restored public health on our streets are of greater importance to our lawmakers than are wealthy lobbyists' dollars waiting to line politicians' pockets.*

*The republic of our imagination exists with minimal use of oil and gas, because it has promoted conservation, and has developed renewable energy opportunities for all Americans.*

*The republic of our imagination moves rapidly away from the automobile, and provides convenient, affordable mass transit for all its citizens.*

*The republic of our imagination provides sustainable living wages, decent, affordable health care, and quality job training for all who reside in our country.*

*The republic of our imagination warmly welcomes all Americans – Native Americans, African-Americans, European-Americans of all religions and ethnicities, Asian Americans, Hispanic and Latino Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, Academic and Artist Americans – to participate in the democratic political process.*

*The republic of our imagination permanently breaks political and financial ties to massive destructive transnational corporations whilst working closely with allied nations to end our current wars now through its Department of Peace.*

*The republic of our imagination does not illegally invade sovereign nations for corporate profits, for oil and for a lie, sending untold numbers of soldiers and civilians to their destroyed lives, or to their deaths.*

*The republic of our imagination addressed the real root causes of terrorism – growing global poverty, communities torn apart, concurrent hopelessness and rage – by generously sharing its vast resources worldwide.*

*The republic of our imagination immediately impeaches and then imprisons pretenders to the Presidency when a non-partisan Supreme Court and Attorney General, and a non-*

*corrupt Congress have jointly determined that a range of illegal activities in the name of the US government have originated from the White House.*

#### **4. Conclusion**

This may seem like a hopeless fantasy, but the role of the arts in change, we feel, is to imagine, articulate, and work for seemingly impossible visions.

Perhaps artists and those interested in social change are less able to keep the veil drawn between the self and the other. Perhaps there is a permeability of skin, or experience, that artists and activists have in relation to what goes on around us. But this hyper-empathy, this shifting of perspectives or forms, this identity trading, can work to our advantage.

London with its rivers unearthed, London drawing its energy from renewable resources, London a city without oil and gas transnationals, the Niger delta fertile once again. So why not America as a new republic?

Delta is the outpouring of a river. It is also the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet, a triangle, and the classical symbol for 'change.' How great the change that has come about where the river that passes through this city – the Ohio – pours out into the sea, the Mississippi delta.

In the delta of the Mississippi, there is now appalling devastation and despair. Bush has proposed the creation of an ironically titled "Gulf of Opportunity Zone," wherein corporate plunder continues on. (Why do I feel certain that he is unaware of this irony?) Is there another possibility for the Mississippi delta?

In looking for the republic of his imagination while on his visit here, Charles Dickens helped us to see our inconsistencies. He also let us understand how our actions influence other parts of the world.

But we must also look to proud traditions originating from this country, because American artists, too, have a history of encouraging us to live up to our professed ideals.

Sometime just before 1862, around the time of our bloody Civil War, the great European-American poet Emily Dickinson wrote the following untitled poem:

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of Eye –  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

***We dedicate this paper to Jon Acheson, who read aloud to us Dickens'  
Baltimore letter in the summer of 2001***