

Delta to Delta:
Reclaiming The Fertile Republic of Our Imagination

Groundworks Conference, CMU, October 2005

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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 presenting 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 and the Tidal Thames valley, our home in England. We try to combine the arts and the social sciences - and occasionally we've involved the hard sciences. Currently there are twelve people employed, six fulltime, six part time. Of those 12, five come from arts backgrounds and seven from science backgrounds. Our financing likewise comes more or less half from the arts sphere and half from the environmental and human rights sphere.

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

The early 1990`s saw PLATFORM focusing particularly 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 - such as Hampstead Heath - rivers pour down and feed the great tidal swirl, the sea in the land. There are approximately 56 named rivers and streams in the Greater London. However all but a handful are buried, and 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 the London - could be unearthed. That the city could once again honour the rivers that enabled it to grow - providing as they did water for drinking and cooking, fishing and farming. That the city would honour the bioregion in which the metropolis sits. That the city could change.

A decade on, the rivers remain under tarmac. Apparently nothing has changed; art has had no effect. However we've noticed how something else is shifting - the buried rivers are getting mentioned in the press and magazines 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 in the installation reads: `Does the bed of the stream 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 may be part

of a wave of change that was too big for us to see when we began our exploration.

We have long tried to combine perceptual, metaphoric change with actual, concrete change. To combine the poetic and the pragmatic in our work. This latter strand is most easily represented by the project which arose out of *Still Waters*, named *Delta*. Working on the fourth river, the Wandle, that remains above ground, we decided to draw on both the river's spiritual past and its energy past. For this river, 9 ½ miles long, begins as a sacred spring, a holy well in Carshalton, and ends at the place of a Bronze Age 'deposition site' - a sacred site where objects of great value were thrown as devotional gifts to the river. Objects of bronze were once thrown into the place where the waters of the Wandle swirl into those of the Thames - the delta. And the river had a thousand year 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 decided to install a small water turbine in a disused sluice-gate - a micro-hydro - to generate electricity from the river's flow. The sluice gate itself we refurbished, painting it gold in honour of the Bronze Age devotion for the Delta, and we surmounted it with a carved stone architrave, in honour of the animals that lived in this place - Salmon, Swan, Otter, Heron, Eel. Hanging from the structure we installed a large former church bell - 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, and sun-generated electricity rang twelve strokes at the high tide and twelve at the low. The sounds of the tides, the North Sea, far in inland in this 'industrial wasteland.'

The power from the turbine ran along a cable to the nearby St Joseph's School, where it provided electricity to light the music room, at the heart of the new school buildings that were being built. The arrival of the electricity at the school, in 1995, 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, of 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.

Here was real, concrete change. The first micro-hydro in a 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 with the children for six years, the decade since has been a hard one. However 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, RENEUE, Renewable Energy in the Urban Environment, a separate organization spun-off from PLATFORM, established to create further renewable energy and arts schemes along the Wandle valley. This group then merged with another larger organization to become SEA/RENUe. SEA/RENUe has a staff of 22 and is busily installing solar hot water systems on homes, small wind turbines on tower blocks, creating a biomass fuelled community centre (slide) and solar photovoltaic powered schools. SEA/RENUe is working all the way across London.

Now ten years after the electricity came to the school from the Wandle, SEA/RENUe has begun a new project to refurbish and alter the micro-hydro and to install solar PV panels on St Joseph's. The groups annual report this year, illustrates this work with a photograph of the reworked sluice gate at the delta. 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 slowing unfolding process of ecological - and social - change in our city.

Since 1996, PLATFORM has been engaged in an initiative that runs parallel to the work on rivers and water, but directly connects to our work on renewable energy systems. Entitled *90% Crude*, this initiative explores both the way in which London contributes to climate change, and the role of the oil & gas transnational corporations based in the city play 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 & 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 home to one of the three world petroleum exchanges, and so on. The oil industry drives the financial heart of London - 20% of the blue-chip Stock Market is in oil - and thereby the economy of the city and 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 the nature of our city, both by reducing London's fossil fuel consumption - hence our commitment to SEA/RENUE - and by representing the web of companies and institutions that drive forward the oil industry in our city. We are working for their demise, their dismantling.

Incidentally, our commitment to reducing fossil fuel consumption explains why I'm presenting this paper here alone today. Being a collective practice, it is usual for PLATFORM to give presentations such as this with at least two folks from the company talking, but in the past decade we've tried to radically reduce the amount of air travel that we take. For a tonne of CO2 released by a plane has three times the impact on the atmosphere that a tonne of the gas released at ground level does. And we've tried to create an installation in the exhibition which requires only a light movement of goods across the Atlantic.

2. To Delta

Now you know why the first word in the title of this talk is Delta, it is about imagination and water in the Wandle delta in London. But the title of today's talk also refers to the connection between the Wandle delta and the Niger delta in Nigeria. Delta to Delta. One of the panels in the installation reads:

`from the Wandle delta to the Niger delta`

Our thinking on this other delta, centres on the long history of oil exploitation at the mouth of the Niger, in the lands of the Ogoni, the Ijaw, the Itsekiri, and other peoples, shown in this slide. This map shows the oil fields - shown as blobs - and the oil pipelines running above ground - shown as 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, or only slightly larger than the state of Maryland, where I live.

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

For Shell has been, and remains, by far the biggest oil operator in the Niger Delta. So we can see in both these places, in both these deltas, that 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 10th 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. Since November 2003, we have been working to create a 'living memorial' to Ken in the heart of London. The initiative, entitled *Remember Saro-Wiwa* was publicly launched by Ken Livingston, the Mayor of London, and by Saro-Wiwa's son, Ken Wiwa, in March of this year.

In November we will organise a festival in celebration of Ken, and on 10th November we will announce the winner of an open call to artists to create a 'living memorial' to Ken. This sculpture will then be created and toured through the city for the next 3 years.

As part of these acts of commemoration, we're publishing a book, entitled *The Next Gulf*, available now on Amazon. The book describes the unfolding environmental and human rights abuses caused by Shell and Chevron's operations over the last ten years. It presents the long legacy of European colonialism in the Delta - the Portuguese, then the Dutch, then the British. The latter drawn by the trade in slaves exported to the Caribbean and American colonies.

And it describes the new attention being focused on Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea by the State Department and the Pentagon here in the United States. This attention is being driven on by a wide array of think tanks and lobby groups, illustrated in this slide. For in the aftermath of 9/11, the Gulf of Guinea (where the Niger Delta resides), with its oil reserves, is being widely touted as a counterweight to 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 U.S. national government?

This unfolding story brings us back to the triangular nature of the Delta symbol. You will recall that one meaning of Delta is triangle. For hundreds of years, there was a deadly triangle of trade, in slaves from Africa, and goods from the new world, that touched the Gulf of Guinea, the Americas and Britain. This triangle of trade is taught in standard American history classes.

But now there is arising a new Atlantic triangle - between the Niger Delta, London and Washington, based not on energy of slaves but on the energy of oil & gas. 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, and the future of the region being set on a path towards increased oil exploitation, increased environmental damage in the area, and increased CO2 emissions into the atmosphere.

These unfolding events in and around the Niger Delta, so many of them 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. And we fear that the Gulf of Guinea may be the scene of similar events in the future. The close interweaving between two allied unpopular governments: the non-elected, therefore probably illegal, one-party Republican government of the U.S., 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 so-

called democracies - prevent the US and British governments from invading Iraq in March of 2003?

I am originally from Washington. 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 19th British social reformer and writer Charles Dickens. Dickens was from Kent, near London, coincidentally the same village where two of my Platform colleagues Jane Trowell and James Marriott live. (In fact, just last April James Marriott and I walked to Dickens' home Gad's Hill.)

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

But while in Baltimore, Dickens admitted in a letter to a friend, a Mr. W.C. Mcready, that he was greatly let down by this country, which he felt he was beginning to understand. This is what 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 many now call it, the corporate media, is more than just "silly" and "disgraceful." The corporate media in this country undermines citizen attempts at democracy almost daily, because it has abandoned its primary responsibility under the 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 foreign travelers to the US 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 and the Constitution - have set idealistic standards for humanity, and have served as inspiration for many downtrodden peoples around the globe.

When Dickens returned to England and published his 'American Notes' he grew concerned that he would offend his American friends. So Dickens made a special dedication for the book:

"I dedicate this book to those friends of mine in America, who, giving me a welcome I must ever gratefully and proudly remember, left my judgment FREE, and who, loving their country, can bear the truth, when it is told good humouredly, and in a kind spirit."

And from the 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, because in 2005, other problems of "highest importance to the whole human race" begin and end with the US.

The consequences of the 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 feeds and stimulate that dependency. Not only because the fossil fuel lust is a key motor in

foreign policy, a policy which leads to debacles such as that in Iraq. But also because oil & gas consumption is the great driver of climate changes.

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 learned 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.

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 (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 really couldn't understand the Democrats. Why hadn't the true winners of both elections - Gore and Kerry - set up shop (either in DC or in a different city for symbolic purposes) and declare themselves open for business as the people's government, for both domestic and international policy decision-making? After all, we have burning issues in this country that desperately need to be addressed.

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 artist, a poet, and a teacher, I found myself eagerly seeking the republic of my imagination. The nightmare that is the Bush administration started me on this quest, but I found no answers among the Democrats.

Fortunately, I have discovered that I am not alone in this desire, that other Americans have had similar thoughts. And there are now two groups collaborating on this important imaginative exercise, The Progressive Government Institute, and the Backbone Campaign, where I am now working.

For the Backbone Campaign, I now co host and co produce a webcast radio interview series with talented Americans in a range of fields who have been nominated to serve in the Executive Branch of a progressive parallel administration. This series is called Conversations with the Cabinet. Anyone is welcome to join the calls and the recordings can be listened to afterwards, as podcasts, free of charge. We now have a growing online series of inspiring recordings about the republic of our imagination.

Speaking of artists and social change, the founder, director and visionary thinker of the Backbone Campaign, Bill Moyer, is a musician. For this new group, Bill has designed effective - and humorous - political tools and tactics, creatively using the metaphor of the backbone, both to hold cowardly politicians accountable and to award and support brave politicians for their courage.

It seems that we are taking our inspiration from Charles Dickens, as we reclaim the republic of our imagination.

I also draw inspiration and encouragement from my friends in England, for PLATFORM has long taken a keen interest in US foreign policy, but the work on oil has intensified this. The work on Nigeria - illustrated in the book *The Next Gulf* - leads us to understand that arguably the place where change most dramatically needs to take place in order for the situation in the Niger Delta to improve, is, in fact, in Washington.

What might such a change bring about? As I imagine the Republic of My Imagination, and drawing from the understandings I gain from PLATFORM and the Backbone Campaign, perhaps I can begin to articulate a Republic of Our Imagination.

The republic of our imagination immediately abandons its historic role as empire builder, and instead, creates livable, local and bioregional businesses and communities 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 truly democratic elections wherein all votes are recorded on voter-verified paper ballots and are counted by hand.

The republic of our imagination begins immediate reparations dialogues and actions in conjunction with Native Americans and African-Americans: reparations that adequately address past thievery and human rights abuses in the name of the US government.

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

The republic of our imagination moves rapidly away from the automobile as the main transportation source and provides affordable mass transit for all its citizens.

The republic of our imagination provides sustainable living wages, decent affordable health care, quality public education, effective job training, and safe, livable communities for all who reside in our country.

The republic of our imagination welcomes all Americans - including academics, who have much to contribute to the common good - to join in the democratic political process.

The republic of our imagination permanently breaks political and financial ties to massively 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 thousands upon thousands of trusting and patriotic soldiers to their deaths or ruined lives.

The republic of our imagination addresses the real root causes of terrorism directed against wealthy nations - growing global poverty, destroyed communities, and 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 truly non-partisan Supreme Court and Attorney General have determined that a range of illegal actions in the name of the US government have originated from the White House.

The republic of our imagination has a truly independent press that represents the best interests of the people.

4. Conclusion

This may seem like hopeless fantasy, but the role of the arts in change, we feel, is to imagine, articulate, and concretely work for seemingly impossible visions. London with its rivers unearthed, London drawing its energy from renewable resources, London a city without oil and gas transnationals. Today, we gather together in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the U.S. 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 a so-called Gulf of Opportunity Zone, wherein racist corporate plunder just continues on. Could something different be created here? Is there another possibility for the Mississippi Delta?

In looking for the republic of his imagination while on his visit to the U.S., Charles Dickens helped us to see our inconsistencies. He also helped us to 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 also have a history of encouraging us to live up to our professed ideals.

Sometime just before 1862, around the time of our terrible, bloody Civil War, the great American poet Emily Dickinson - a contemporary of Dickens - 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 first found Dickens' Baltimore letter,
and then read it aloud to us in 2001.*