

Philly Field Conversation #3 - Notes

[Philadelphia Contemporary](#) | 7.18.18

A conversation with Rob Blackson ([Temple Contemporary](#)), Homer Jackson ([Philly Jazz Project](#)), and [Trapeta Mayson](#) (poet, formerly [Historic Germantown](#)). Facilitated by Philadelphia Contemporary's Nicole Pollard with an introduction by Common Field

Location: [Uncle Bobbie's](#), Peoples Education Center

Philadelphia Contemporary undertakes pop-up programming across the city through a range of partnerships with other organizations, communities, and individuals, which informs the prompt for this discussion. How are partnerships forged? How do relationships with collaborators and communities engaged in the process unfold over time? How is social impact achieved through collaboration? Philadelphia Contemporary's Nicole Pollard moderates this conversation with Rob Blackson (Temple Contemporary), Homer Jackson (Philly Jazz Project), and Trapeta Mayson (poet, Historic Germantown) to address challenges, scale, longevity, and the future of arts partnerships in Philadelphia.

→ INTRODUCTION

COURTNEY FINK: Hello and thank you; I'm the executive director of Common Field, a new emerging organization that is a national network of independent artist-centered organizations around the country. Thank you to Philadelphia Contemporary, Nato Thompson [PC Artistic Director], Nicole Pollard [PC Program Coordinator and panel moderator], and our brilliant speakers tonight. I want to tell everyone about Common Field and why we're in Philadelphia. We're a Los Angeles-based national organization that is a network of 600 artist organizations, and we're working on organizing a convening in spring of 2019 featuring dialogue, debate, and programming. The convening is about listening to you, and putting what you say in a national context. Events like these can be an opportunity for organizers in Philadelphia to think about the work you're doing, and how Common Field can help connect you — that's why we're here. Instead of doing behind-the-scenes planning for the convening, we've chosen to organize this series of open dialogues. This is the third of four [Philly Field Conversations] to ask what is critical to think about in the arts organizing work in Philadelphia. We're building an alliance of partners, toward a very open process for organizing the program. For instance, partners can propose a panel for the convening, and help organize evening tours, projects, and programs. We want to come up with longer-term question of why Common Field should be here — how can we help? And, I want to acknowledge my colleagues in the room: Crystal Baxley [Program Director] from LA, Maude Haak-Frendscho [Convening Program Manager] based in Philadelphia. We will be publishing notes available to all.

NICOLE POLLARD: I'm the Program Coordinator at Philadelphia Contemporary. To tell you a little bit about Philadelphia Contemporary, we are an art organization hosting different pop-up events in the city, very much based in this collaborative/partnership model we'll be discussing tonight. In the future, we hope to have a physical space to host events like this, to bring in additional partnerships. To preface today's talk, I'll introduce the speakers and give a rundown of the structure for tonight. I'll follow with questions that any speakers can respond to, and then I want to open up to Q&A at the end.

→ *PANEL DISCUSSION*

NICOLE POLLARD: All of you work in various forms of art media, and would inform this conversation in a diverse way. To start talking about partnerships and aspects of collaboration that appear in your work: what role do partnerships play in your work? Are they the driving force or a supplementary aspect?

ROB BLACKSON: Thank you for inviting me to speak. I come from a place in which partnerships are definitely a major part — Temple Contemporary, at Tyler School of Art. [In becoming the Director of Exhibitions,] I had to unlearn a lot of the hunter-gatherer stuff I knew as a curator; I was not some alpha male bringing something back from Milan [...] and Temple Contemporary had to be something more than one person. We started an Advisory Council of 35 members [including high school students, Temple students and faculty, and civic leaders] that check in with kids from the neighborhood, block captains. The Advisory Council comes together once a year to ask questions they care deeply about but don't know the answer to. Once you start with that — something you don't know what to do about — that's where you look for help. When someone says, "What do we do about the music education system in Philadelphia," and other people around the table agree, put up their hands too — that's how Temple Contemporary gets rolling. It comes from a sense of care, when people around the table put their hands up. That's where the sense of partnership comes, that's where we're anchored.

TRAPETA MAYSON: My medium as artist and writer is as poet. Looking around now, I can say there are ten individuals in this room that I've worked with, and we've built community together; though sometimes writing can seem like a very individual art form. In working for Historic Germantown [as Executive Director], and the Philadelphia Folklore Project [as Project Manager], I can say it's very important to be an active person in the community. It touches on survival, as many artists and organizers in the room can attest to; you need to be fueled by the energy of others. Partnerships are just a given. How you choose a partnership, who you allow to come into your space to partner with you, is key. A lot of what I'll be talking about tonight is individual artistic work [as work] *with* other folks in the community

HOMER JACKSON: Although I am the Director of Philadelphia Jazz Project, I'm not a jazz musician. I'm a visual artist, an escapee from Tyler [School of Art]. I always wrote, so somehow my visual work and writing came together in the form of postcards. I was so broke in grad school, I didn't even have money for supplies, so I was just making it up. These postcards were imaginary scenes from films. So my writing became storytelling that eventually became video, installations, performance. Back when I was at Tyler I was on WRTI, the jazz radio station. A young guy would call, and a friend of mine Richard Nichols [manager of the Roots] said he was

a millionaire — true, it was David Haas, who holds up the William Penn foundation. He called me and invited me to see Wynton Marsalis, who presented this talk on the value of art education — it had me crying. After, David said, “Would you like to do something to reinvigorate jazz in Philadelphia?” So, I am now 2.75 million dollars into that work. All to say, collaboration is a core component of all of my work. I don’t see that this is that different from *Celebration of the Dark*, a festival of performance I organized — it’s all the same work of tackling this idea that Trapeta spoke on, of how you create the rules of engagement for your collaboration.

NP: In working with various forms of art media, have you found that different media lend themselves to collaboration more so than others? Describe these experiences, and how you might move forward with that wisdom, that understanding.

TM: I haven’t found it that difficult to collaborate as a writer, teaching artist, community person — there are so many points of connection. From the writing part of things, there’s such a wide range — like working with youth, homeless shelters, prisons — collaborating not only with other organizations, but also with other artists — visual artists, musicians. I’ve been able to capitalize on that and create interesting projects.

RB: I would say the more, the better; it’s less easy to create collaboration when people are worried about being right. Things that lend more to the relationship...

NP: ... and more people can bring their expertise to the table.

HJ: For me, it’s about: what is the idea, what are you trying to get to. An artist in New York I worked with, Lloyd Lawrence — he and I called that stone soup. The whole story: “We got the stone, now, anybody got some onions?” It’s about creating that space for interpretation. People bring their own thing to your thing, and it changes. That’s been a key part of my experience. At the Jazz Project, we come up with the key part, the vessel, and other people drive off.

TM: I want to add something about being selective. There are a few artists I will collaborate with on personal project. It has to do with work ethic, how that artist presents themselves; and the intent — we might not share that, so I don’t want to be in anybody’s way. There’s a certain amount of respect and trust. I don’t want to call anybody out ... but with Yolanda Wisher [former Philadelphia Poet Laureate and Curator of Spoken Word at Philadelphia Contemporary], for instance, who’s in the audience, there’s such a natural rhythm. I know this person sets a high bar and I want to reach that level. On an organizational level, you want to use that same logic. Who are they employing? Who’s the executive director? The stakes are greater, so these are the questions I ask.

NP: To protect your own interests and your own goal, to make sure they align and are mutually beneficial. I want to get into scale as something to be aware of, especially with all your work to create some kind of social impact. In order to protect these interests, how does scale inform that in planning?

HJ: In my current role as Director of PJP, I’m more interested in economic than social impact. Part of the role of the Jazz Project is to create more opportunities, to help folk be able to continue to function as artists — to be paid — which spills over into other areas and mediums. Scale is the name of the game. It’s another name for audience. As an artist that emerged in the

90s, audience was a bad word in the arts. Because everyone wants to get paid and knows they need to, that dynamic is shifted. Everyone is interested in how we can move dollars — economic impact is important. It's about getting money, not necessarily how much. Many of the people I work with just worry about being paid through the weekend, that's critical.

TM: One can lead to the other right?

RB: I can see how the economic and social need to be intertwined on multiple levels ...

HJ: This comes out of a project we've been scheming — the Jazz Walk. One of the folks who wrote the text for me said, "Imagine if Chinatown lost 75% of its restaurants. What would happen?" That's what happened to jazz in Philly between the 60s and 80s. That jazz [and its spaces] was in North Philly, Germantown, and we lost that. That's social and economic impact, that's what we're talking about.

RB: When there's a topic around the table that gets a lot of heart, we try to make sure that through-line can be evident in the final outcome. The outcome can be a concert, installation, poem, but it has to have a through-line I can feel my core resonate with. That's a one-to-one scale. If we miss that, then there's no scale.

HJ: Your broken orchestra project! That's what we're talking about: scale.

NP: It was very large, it filled the [23rd Street] Armory, right? Moving to the length of a project: long- vs. short-term. I'm interested in nitpicking the challenges that might be faced in long-term/sustained projects, what you've learned that might alleviate these challenges?

TM: It depends on end-goal. There was a time I wasn't into one-off things. When I was with Historic Germantown, I would get calls from people involved in the community of Germantown who just got a big grant. What is not said is you're African, you're an immigrant, you're a kid — at some times, that was a turn-off. You have to make sure that you'll be compensated on some level — financially, with other benefits — and ask, is this [project] something that'll help community in the long run, will it recognize grassroots leaders in community? So these [one-off projects] can be useful, and sometimes they want you to be a partner [...] because you're Latino, a woman, etc. A couple months later, folks are gone — and you start this process of not trusting. Now that I'm older and wiser, you know that you can take advantage when you can. Call people, hold them to it. You've got to deliver when you say you will. Sometimes there are longer-term projects, [to which I might respond] you know I don't know this community very well, I won't be here forever, this is one-off for me — but how can I help? There are levels, but just be honest with it. Everybody knows what it's about, just be transparent.

NP: One of the main problems that is not addressed, that creates problems like in Kensington, is a swoop-in swoop-out situation. Making sure everyone has the same expectations is important. Compensation is important.

TM: People know what they want, and given the resources and technical support, they can realize that in their communities.

HJ: Everything is temporary. To me there are no long-term partnerships. Because the people who can do long-term planning [are privileged in several ways]; most individual artists don't get the opportunity to do five-year plans — we're day-to-day, weekend-to-weekend. But you can have a long-term vision, objective, but not necessarily be able to sustain a partnership with some other parties. Everybody's about trying to get their thing off the ground. Larger organizations will give you, like, a bible of what our rules of engagement are — everything is already laid out. Recently I worked on a project, I did a curatorial piece for another institution. I did it for free, because it creates opportunities for the people we support. But then they wanted me to produce the event as well — so I gave them a budget, and we proceeded. But they continued to cut the budget, said you really should contribute [in these ways]. But this wasn't even in my vision! So I had to let it go. I got paid thru my regular work at PJP to give these artists these opportunities, but if I wasn't in this position, that'd be a different story. Everyone has their goals, their language, their everything, and quite often you're not on an equal playing field. I think most of my collaborations are 60-40 or 70-30, but I still think it's win-win because some people get that opportunity ...

AUDIENCE: and get paid!

HJ: Of course you get the bible [i.e., larger-scale institutions' rules of partnership engagement], and you barely get an opportunity to pull out your three sentences. Folks in the room can testify to these behaviors. So partnerships are very temporary.

NP: There's this hierarchy between institutions that you've identified ...

HJ: What is our endgame? We have to really be conscious of what our goals are. You can and will get played if you don't have an agenda. How do you get what you need? Five minutes [is long-term] — longer than that and you play yourself.

RB: I'll throw out something else. I'm talking about long-term. One of our advisors [on TC's Advisory Council] Destiny Palmer asked [at a meeting], "Are we listening? Are we listening to those affected by the elections?" What will this become? 1000 Ways to Listen. We're starting up this project by selecting a thousand people throughout Philadelphia, asking them to fill out a questionnaire, and pairing them up into five hundred pairs based on their answers. Nicole, if you and I were strangers, we would agree to go to an empathetic listening workshop; and then on a designated day, I'll go to your house, where we'll be prompted by a radio broadcast on WRTI, and we'll have a conversation. The next year, on the same day, we'll do this again, at my house. Again, for ten years. If I were to die, our relationship would end; you don't get paired with someone else. We're trying to think through the long-term and its outcomes. Hopefully this is about listening to each other, and through that connection, other things can be possible. Long-term without the idea of a project — how could that be?

NP: I think it'd be helpful to share, too, about the broken orchestra project; would you?

RB: Symphony for a Broken Orchestra came out of the Advisory Council process: there are over a thousand instruments in Philadelphia with no potential and budget for being fixed. Teachers of Philadelphia were stockpiling instrument graveyards. We made a promise to them that if you bring these instruments to us, we will fix them. How stupid we were. They came on a designated day, we got a thousand instruments, and we are still in the process of repairing them.

Thankfully, we raised enough money from people who adopted instruments that, if we can't repair, we can now replace. This resulted in a performance in December, a symphony composed by David Lang, who was there. We want to create a foundation, by the same name, so that this model can be followed in other cities.

NP: To bring up something Homer has touched on in terms of everything-is-temporary, but also what Trapeta has said, that everyone is in the room — do you think past projects have informed future? Were there strategies when these projects were active that have helped sustain them after completion?

TM: I want to disagree slightly with Homer's feeling that things are temporary; these are relationships that have been ten years or longer in the making, sometimes dormant for a long time. There are people I haven't worked with in a while but should the occasion arise, I would collaborate with them again without hesitation. [As with] The Colored Girls Museum — I was one of the artists presenting [...] Nurture these relationships, build them. And with Elephants on the Avenue, a workshop in Germantown — and there was a community breakfast — around topics of race and class. A lot of the people who came out weren't traditional audiences. Picking super great artists who are dedicated to and have respect for community work [is key]. There are artists that really know how to go in and get the work done. Other strategies that work: I'm very anal about planning; people have ideas that artists are all over the place. No, I'm very structured, those memorandums of understanding [are important]. [Homer] mentioned that big organizations have bibles. I think stopping and pausing — don't wait 'til projects are over — to reflect — is this working for you? we can reconfigure if we need to — is something that works. But you also have to put your knee on the ground. I'm sitting and coming to your reading, your community meeting, your barbeque, and saying, by the way, can you show up to mine? It's a mutual relationship.

AUDIENCE: And humble.

TM: These are things that work, and I think that's what made that project particularly successful.

HJ: I agree with you. I always have to put on two different hats. A personal hat, as an artist, and an institutional one. My network of collaborators has expanded over the years, and I have access to a great number of people who are great at doing all kinds of stuff. I was a visual artist, a printmaker, an audio and video artist; I produced other artists. That interdisciplinary kind of thing with PJP allows us to touch anything. A few years ago, I did something with Joyce J. Scott, who won the MacArthur Genius Award, at The Free Library. Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, it was called Feathers — it brought jazz and theater people together, and this collective created that piece. I had the germ of the idea, the germ with the stone. I see the partnership thing as a continual thing for me, how I want to connect with other people to get what I want.

NP: So the projects are temporary, but the people are [long-term]?

HJ: I think so

NP: Do you have a vision for arts organizations in Philadelphia, separate from your organization?

RB: I think PC has a great model. I think the end goal is the museum [i.e., the physical space], but I don't think the ethos will change once you have it. A moveable piece that doesn't center the institution, but centers the conversation.

TM: I agree. I'm thinking about models that are self-directed. Artist organizations that are tired of hearing no, you can't do it, will do it themselves. I'm thinking of The Colored Girl Museum, and Chester Made, which created theaters, art galleries, and a coffee shop from abandoned buildings, [initiatives that didn't take a top-down approach] — and then the funders came in. Of course you want the support — there are wonderful funders here — but more artists, cultural producers, just have to do it yourself. If you wait for someone to knight you, you'd be dead in Philly. You've got to build that hive.

HJ: It's so important for folks to learn the steps to make it happen themselves. The information is there. How you produce yourself is a critical component. There's a woman from Los Angeles, Jacki Apple, who wrote on how to produce your own performances, your own events, in the 1980s. That's some of the work we try to share with the artists that we work with. So many jazz musicians don't have electronic press kits, social media knowledge — you're just backing yourself into a corner. If you wanna get paid, you gotta package it up.

TM: That's why collaboration is useful. If you don't know social media, you can lean on someone else to help you out. Two friends and I started these accountability groups. We made goals at our first meeting — these are things we want to accomplish: my goal is to finish my manuscript, and how are you doing on that? This is a thing you can do, so that when you meet with other organizations, you're not coming with just three sentences.

NP: After we get out of networks like that that are exciting — school, for example — we don't know how to motivate ourselves. Creating these environments sounds like a great idea.

→ *QUESTIONS & ANSWERS*

NP: Let's open it up to the audience. Does anyone have a question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1[Maude Haak-Frendscho]: You've all touched on these ideas of capacity-building — like packaging, how to bring folks into the conversation. Can you talk more about the relationship-building process, and how it becomes part of the capacity-building conversation?

HJ: You know earlier, during the last question, Theaster Gates came to my mind. Taking advantage of an opportunity, and spinning that thing. Theaster is brave enough — most of us tend not to be — to put all of his chips in, and gamble. He's been able to do amazing things, because he's willing to risk it all. We'll take that 20 or 10% that we can get at the big table; but he hooked up businesses for artists here, with artists even people here wouldn't work with. If we can do that for others within the small spaces we can get in, that leaves room. It's the breadcrumbs of your experience. You don't have to do it all, but your breadcrumbs will be there. Symphony for a Broken Orchestra — some young kid that got an instrument [through the project] could do who-knows-what in twenty-five years.

AM2 [Nato Thompson]: [I'm thinking about] the bible versus the notepad, and [the question therein of] racial composition. If you just did it with 501c3s [formal non-profits], it wouldn't reflect the true cultural production of the city; how would a network emerge that more adequately affects this city, and who's making [the network]?

HJ: A powerful statement.

TM: Can there be *one* such network?

AM3 [Vashti Dubois]: I don't think it's one of anything. There are several points of entry. As soon as you focus on the one, you block other entries ...

AM4 [Foster Child]: I want to reference something that Homer mentioned. I am a musician, from North Philly. I started honing my skills in Philly, and for my first gig as a leader, I put up posters all over Germantown, over the village gate. I talked to the owner, and he let me have the venue. I got my friends and relatives to spread the word, and we filled the place. So I think for Philly jazz artists, the problem with getting paid is that we can't get from here [gesturing from one side of head to other] to here. Gig after gig, you build your brand. Look up Foster Child and the Runaway Band — we started playing near Elaine's, which used to be called the Red Carpet, two, three nights a week. I'm all about guerrilla marketing. Never talked to organizations because it took too long. It all starts with thinking, step-by-step. Now, with social media, I could be a millionaire. So after building a reputation, people start asking you for engagements — banquets, corporate gigs. The other part is, you can't be afraid to ask for the money. You have to say that, and most people are afraid to, most people want the gig more. As far as sustaining, musicians move around. I would have 3 nights booked, a different band every night. It's a transitory thing, impermanent. Most artists are dealing out of a mindset of desperation.

AM5 [Kathryn Pannepacker]: I wanted to interject, because I'm so excited about this conversation about collaboration, as an artist from Germantown. I just want to point out, I'm so proud and excited to be part of a project addressing a big problem right now — numbness around the opioid epidemic. How do we take action with it? The Kensington Storefront, in the thick of the problem, is a collaboration between Prevention Point, NKCDC (New Kensington Community Development Corporation), Temple Contemporary, Mural Arts — it figured out a way to open up the conversation. How can we take something and make it greater? What Rob and his team have done is partner with Mural Arts and said, I believe in what's happening here, and sponsored them to work with my colleague Lisa Kelley and I. We have Textile Tuesdays, and work with folks in Kensington in this sanctuary studio. Our goal is to make sixteen textile pieces, for the student lounge and other spaces. I bring this up because it's a way of collaborating with bigger organizations as an individual working in a small studio. How can we ask those questions and make a difference? We're propelling ourselves into a larger vision of hope and possibility. We often think of the Nike [slogan], "just do it." Years ago, as an artist, I needed that to change to "do it anyway." Just figure out a way to keep on target, then you become a magnet for all these wonderful partnerships.

TM: You can really leverage yourself as an artist with collaborators, and to say there are other artists thinking about these things will strengthen that. Then you have people who can share in creating something to address that.

HJ: PJP is working on a mixtape project called The Remedy, between jazz musicians who have been ill, and healthcare workers and medical professionals. Just as you said, when you share this idea, other people who have feelings around the same thing want to be involved, and participate.

AM6 [Renny Molenaar]: I run a small gallery [Imperfect Gallery], and one of the issues we have is that everything is monetized. What I'm trying to wrap my hands around is: how do I facilitate this type of work while *not* knowing how to monetize it? That's why am I here. That collaborative potential — as a small organization — how do I make sure that a small project that is not immediately monetizable [can exist]? How do we bring our muscles together to make something happen? I know not everything is about money — my food stamps ain't cutting it, but I have other values. This artwork is important to me, and I'm learning how to bridge ideas, and tie it into funding sources. Thank you for these answers.

TM: Until I went to business school, I was always the artist that thought money is bad news, capitalism is killing me. But I have to tell you, it's not a bad thing to want to survive, and eat. We tend to think of it [in terms of] I'm not into this capitalistic stuff, but it's [also] about how can I make magic happen. I believe that there are artists that are good at the business of art-making; maybe on your team, put together people that can do this. It doesn't have to be about a project. Invite these people to dinner, say, "I notice that you used to have a full-time job, now you're a full-time artist — how can I do that?" A lot of people at that table will share with you and give you good ideas, and it's up to you how to move with it.

AM7 [Courtney Fink]: These comments speak to what Common Field is about. Everything in this room is producing what makes this city important. You form the network. Just acknowledging that you are peers, and that you share in a desire to get this done, is extremely powerful. This larger group of producers in the city — these are your peers, your collaborators. Think about how we can support each other, and how people working outside of institutional frameworks can support each other, and make sure this layer of work is happening.
