
Why Philly?

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Why Philly?

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Artist Daniel Tucker, along with Lauren Downing and Ricky Yanas of Ulises, have compiled a selection of texts from an eclectic mix of artists, institutional leaders, and organizers. Developed in anticipation of the Common Field Convening, they provided a simple prompt for consideration: Why Philly? What is urgent to you? What are your concerns? What are your visions for the city?

Working with very little time, and a lot of generosity, these fifteen contributors offered a response. Here are their words, speaking for themselves, but by no means for everyone.

Denise Brown

I was at an event recently where folks were presenting about the upcoming 2020 census. The person making the intro began with this question...

“What does it mean to be counted?”

We were in a beautiful newly developed nature center in a section of North Philadelphia considered the “next frontier for developers” in one of the most rapidly gentrifying cities in the country. As I looked out over the water, it seemed to me that the place where I was sitting was not built for the current residents of this historic neighborhood, mostly low income people of color, but for the newer arrivals and those who would come later, after the developers and money mangers had realized their vision. And I thought,

“What does it mean to count?”

According to Keystone Counts, a statewide coalition organized around an effort for a fair and accurate 2020 census, Philadelphia is considered one of the priority counties, tier 1 actually, which means most at risk of being undercounted “based on the areas that experienced under counts in the 2010, along with growth in the historically undercounted populations of people of color, immigrants, and children under 18, low income households and people experiencing homelessness.”

At Leeway we have seen artists and cultural producers have an important role in developing cultural strategies that support issue based organizing campaigns and other on the ground efforts. Of the coalition members listed I counted fewer than five organizations that work explicitly in the realm of arts and culture and it struck me that there was an opportunity here, particularly since we know culture often leads policy and other forms of social change.

So, let’s ask ourselves, “What is the role of the cultural community (especially in Philadelphia and other tier 1 counties nationwide) in supporting efforts to get an accurate count?” and is it possible that through a coordinated effort in 2020 we can help reframe the answer to the question...

“Who counts?”

Denise M. Brown is passionate about using her skills and energies on creating, supporting and illuminating work at the intersections of art, culture and social justice. She is Executive Director of the Leeway Foundation (leeway.org) in Philadelphia, its mission it is to support women, trans and gender nonconforming artists and cultural producers creating art for social change.

Robert Blackson

These are 25 urgent reasons why Philadelphia is a unique place to develop meaningful work.

- Philadelphia is a very affordable city.
- Philadelphia is fighting the courts to provide the first safe injection site in the United States.
- Philadelphia's property taxes are rapidly increasing.
- Philadelphia is a very proud city.
- Philadelphia has the largest population living in the highest level of deep poverty in the US.
- Philadelphia has one of the largest urban park systems in the United States.
- Philadelphia has a huge litter problem.
- Philadelphia is a very walkable city.
- Philadelphia is struggling with gentrification in some of its oldest neighborhoods.
- Philadelphia is one of the most philanthropic US cities awarding millions to local arts funding every year.
- Philadelphia has a great can do attitude and a great go screw yourself attitude.
- Philadelphia is a bikable city.
- Philadelphia has an extremely segregated public school system, but it is improving.
- Philadelphia passed a soda tax of 1.5 cents per ounce. Proceeds from the tax pay for universal pre-k education, libraries, parks, and community schools.
- Currently three of Philadelphia's City Council reps are under investigation.
- Philadelphia has great art schools graduating hundreds of BFA and MFA students a year.
- Philadelphia has a militant parking authority.

You can rent a studio in Philadelphia for less than \$200 a month.

Philadelphia's adjunct professors are unionizing.

Philadelphia has one of the cheapest and best public transportation systems in the country.

Philadelphia has world-renowned art collections.

Philadelphia has a progressive mayor.

77% of Philadelphia's voting population is a registered Democrat.

Philadelphia's white and black population is decreasing slightly and its Latinx population is increasing and although our birth rates are decreasing, our immigrant population is increasing.

Philadelphia has a progressive district attorney who is not pursuing criminal charges of those caught with pot and is actively trying to reduce sentencing to mitigate unnecessary incarceration.

Robert Blackson is the founding director of Temple Contemporary at Temple University. At Temple Contemporary Blackson initiated *Funeral for a Home* (2013), *reForm* with Pepón Osorio (2014), *Symphony for a Broken Orchestra* (2016-2019), and *1000 Ways to Listen* (2019).

Vashti DuBois, Michael Clemmons & Ian Friday

Philadelphia has incredible artists, amazing public art and wonderful people; but she does not represent the interest or needs of all of her community members. Space, time, safety, liberation and resources are the core/urgent concerns, of our community. I cannot tell you that we do not produce without these things - because we - cultural producers produce. We produce to create the circumstances that we need in order to live and breathe. Producing without meeting such core needs is ultimately not sustainable. Cultural producers are not "just artist", everybody has a hand in producing that which we call culture. Crossing guards and parents, hair stylist and students, security guards, plumbers, teachers and painters.

Philadelphia attracts transplants who find this city affordable. Transplants like myself who are pushed out of cities like New York, D.C., Boston. We bring our pace, our taste to a city that has its own flavor its own beat, suffocating the very things

that drew us here in the first place. I worry that Philadelphia's indigenous working class and poor people have never found this city affordable, even less so now. What does it mean to call oneself a cultural producer in such circumstances?

The belief in the scarcity of resources creates the scarcity we fear. The fear makes it impossible to produce the kind of environments which call forth the best in all of us, which provide access to the sustainable workspaces, maker spaces, cultural centers, community centers and all platforms of artistic endeavors. Why Philadelphia? Because it's up to us.

A space which intentionally focuses on "holding up" Colored Girls contributions and stories from a Colored Girls home is both radical placeholding and a kind of guerrilla warfare. We created this space; as a means of mobilizing the cultural, intellectual, social economic, psychic and political resources necessary to address the exclusion of colored women and girls from policies, programs and discourse, which often cast us as less deserving. Colored Girls have a history of waiting to be recognized. To call attention to yourself is to be deemed arrogant, uppity, divisive or in some way make yourself a target for violence. We have learned to make ourselves invisible; yet, the violence comes just the same. The Colored Girls Museum stands as monument, fortress, and sanctuary; holding, protecting, caring and rallying colored girls and their accomplices locally, nationally, globally.

Vashti DuBois is the Founder and Executive Director of The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM) (Launched in 2015) honors the stories, experiences, and history of Colored Girls of the African diaspora." It is the first institution of its kind, offering visitors a multi-disciplinary experience of memoir, in all its variety, in a residential space. This museum initiates the "ordinary" object – submitted by the colored girl herself, as representative of an aspect of her story and personal history which she finds meaningful; her object embodies her experience and expression of being a Colored Girl. DuBois has held leadership positions at a number of organizations over her 30-year career in non-profit and arts administration, working primarily on issues impacting girls and women of color including: Free Library of Philadelphia, Tree House Books, the Historic Church of the Advocate, Children's Art Carnival in New York City, Haymarket People's Fund in Boston, Congreso Girls Center, and The Leeway Foundation. DuBois is a graduate of Wesleyan University, and a NAMAC Fellow. She is currently working on a book about the making of The Colored Girls Museum.

Michael Clemmons Curator/ Visual Artist The Colored Girls Museum In his art practice Clemmons uses a cultural palette creating mix-media paintings referencing timeless landscapes, West African and personal iconography ceramic sculpture and installations. Educated at the University of the Arts, Temple University and The Clay Studio in Philadelphia, his work is represented in collections internationally. With 30 years' experience in community engagement and project development from inception through implementation he builds and coordinates strategic partnerships, facilitates programming, while advancing the goals of community and mission of

the University. Mr. Clemmons is currently the Acting Director of Temple University's Center for Community Partnerships and Development.

Ian Friday is a Performance Curator and Associate Director of TCGM. Founder of Global Soul Music, Ian produces music that archives and uncovers ongoing black musical cultures connecting house, soul, afro beat, jazz and world music. As Associate Director of The Colored Girls Museum Ian leads the marketing for the museum's social media platforms he is also responsible for the performance and programming. Ian has been making an impact within the arts community since the early 1990's as the founder of a non profit arts organization called The Tea Party Inc., which provided a platform for emerging and established artists.

Anthony Elms

For me, to answer "Why Philadelphia?" without questioning "Why?" is shortsighted at best. To boldly breeze through and answer why with any number of people, places, things or qualities is to shirk true responsibility. Why can be answered a thousand times to no affect to, nor effect for the people, the place, the things, the qualities. Every where has a why. The meaningful question is not and never is why.

How.

To instead "How Philadelphia?"

How is beyond why's top ten surface sheen draped sweetness. How does not yay and nay. How is ethics and qualities, rather than checkboxed list and subjective equivalencies. Why is different yet same in what anyone writes about anywhere—every local having its lovers and detractors. "I like the riverfront." Each and every place is the best place in the world to someone, and someone is always right. "I hate the humidity." The answers to why can never be disproved or really judged against any of the why nots for the same or any different place. Votes for and votes against registering equally. Some of the whys that made Philadelphia attractive to me in 2011 have already transformed or disappeared out of why. Other whys have come into being or been discovered. Yet other whys are soon to be discovered no doubt. Many gone whys are irreplaceable and mourned. These are not your whys.

Now how. Hows are not so patly answerable and subjective. Every why becomes why in how. Cities—their successes and failures and inequalities—are dynamic. Never the same how twice. How never ceases. Doesn't disappear. Doesn't get answered with a period. How has the potential to renew or sustain. How do we keep Philadelphia livable? How do we make Philadelphia viable for artists? How do we generate more attention, visitors, and participants in culture throughout Philadelphia? How do we make Philadelphia equitable? How do we build infrastructure in Philadelphia? I can engage with, and be critical of, anyone's how. Those who don't ask how and entertain the whys don't mind when some energies burn out; they'll be comforted by the next. As whys are always replaced. Think of gentrification. You move for the space and the mom-n-pop shop, you stay for that fantastic restaurant that opens and your friends who move in next door when the rents and mom-n-pops have been buried. Because almost every why can be substituted or forfeited without much pain. Simply a change of focus. And that very fact stymies those of us trying to generate some traction on the questions of how to live a valued life.

In this realism, for me, to ask why is at a level of consumption. How is a collaboration. I cannot really be interested in anyone's "Why Philadelphia?", I'm too distressed by all the hows I encounter that are dying to be answered while walking from why to why.

Anthony Elms is the Daniel and Brett Sundheim Chief Curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. He has organized the exhibitions *Endless Shout* (2016-7), *Rodney McMillian: The Black Show* (2016), *Christopher Knowles: In a Word* with writer Hilton Als (2015), and coordinated several other exhibitions and projects, including the 2014 Whitney Biennial as one of the three curators. He is also a writer and editor of the publishing imprint White Walls Inc

Alexis Granwell

As a founding member of the art collective Tiger Strikes Asteroid (TSA), I have supported many artists over the last 10 years. When we started TSA in 2009, there were very few galleries in the city to exhibit the number of amazing artists living here. There are even fewer commercial spaces now.

Given this reality, along with a small collector base, artists have little choice but to run our own collectives and develop our own projects to sustain a vibrant art scene. These DIY spaces nurture artists and teach us how to work together, curate, and follow our personal artistic visions.

Within TSA Philadelphia and our network of spaces in New York, Chicago and LA, we celebrate the work of the artist beyond just their monetary value. Artists can experiment and collectives can place their work within a specific context or lineage.

Throughout the process of developing programming with our members, we hope to build exciting dialogues and meet new artists.

The artist-run scene in Philadelphia is a true labor of love. Many of the artists who run these spaces are adjuncts juggling multiple jobs and family responsibilities. The challenge of sustaining artist-run spaces is real. I wish there were more local grants to support the DIY community. Additionally, I would like to see less of a hierarchy and more conversation between Philadelphia institutions and artist-run spaces.

My hope is that the artist-run scene will continue to grow in Philadelphia and across the US. There is an opportunity for these spaces to not only support artists but also mentor newer, younger spaces. We can work collectively to produce diverse, cutting-edge, and challenging arts programming.

Alexis Granwell is Founding Member and Co-director of Tiger Strikes Asteroid Philadelphia. Granwell has been exhibiting in the US and abroad for the last 15 years. Granwell is a Professor of Art and currently teaches at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and The University of Pennsylvania. Her work has been reviewed in *Sculpture Magazine*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Washington Post*, and *Hyperallergic*.

Amy Hicks

Philadelphia is a dissonant space. Splendor and decay, inclusiveness and racism, old money and poverty live next door.

When I first moved to Philadelphia in 2011, someone described the city to me as an English muffin; not much to look at—all craggy and jagged—but when you dig in, it’s filled with pockets of golden butter.

So, why Philly?

Because every block is different, around every jagged corner I still find something new. Because it’s fierce and real. It is diverse in a way that other cities I’ve lived are not. Because there is dissent, yet organization is still possible. Because, as an artist, it’s exciting to be in a place where you can afford spaces to live and create. Where there’s still room for trial and error. Where intentional artist-run spaces are sown from almost nothing.

Because the striking failures of liberal capitalism are evident. Decimated by a recession in the 1970s, another series of revitalization campaigns were initiated by a succession of mayors in order to bring middle-class people back to the city. Although the population increased, it exacerbated the wealth gap, the economic divide becoming increasingly evident from neighborhood to neighborhood, block to block. In 2018, The Pew Charitable Trust reported Philadelphia’s poverty rate at 26%, the highest rate for a big city in the US. Unfortunately, our city is another clear example of the dictionary definition of Gentrification.

In 2013 the Philadelphia School District closed 29 public schools. Around the corner from my home is one of them, over a few blocks another. Soon after, in 2015, two of Philadelphia’s neighborhoods were cited as the “hottest” zip codes in the nation. Mine is one of them. But, I don’t buy it. How is it possible to be hottest when basic social needs like access to education are not being met?

It’s time to consider how artists position themselves in this climate. What part do we play in revitalization? To what end are artists gentrifying spaces and places within Philadelphia? Is it possible to revive without displacing? Our problems are not new. Yet, for me, this moment, here, and now, feels like an opportunity to do something different.

Amy Hicks is an artist, educator, and member of the artist collective Grizzly Grizzly. Her films and videos have screened in museums, galleries, and film festivals around the globe and her collaborative projects have toured internationally. She is currently an Associate Professor of Lens Media at the University of Delaware.

Marissa Johnson- Valenzuela

Nuance! Complication! Conversation!
The generosity to give ourselves more.

In art and in everything, the singular genius exception model has not served us well.

Rather, we have increased inequality. And we are participating in a collective suicide.

The earth will be here without us, but if we want to keep creating—we must organize or die.

When I was young, I went through a whole phase of reading nuclear war novels. I am so far away from them now, in time if not space, still those fictional efforts to stay alive haunt me. The need for potable water and new growth. Early lessons a type of preparation.

I believe Philadelphia provides an opportunity for something other. Here we can coalesce knowledge and aspirations. To do so we must share and educate and repeat to remember, because in this moment, we need to understand what we are fighting for:

A new rich in redistribution. Dignity. Justice. Joy.

We must focus on the we
and a new approach to survival.

I believe in the collaboration. The hybrid. The remix. The trade. I believe we have the tools; the people we need. And that art, at its best, helps show us what is possible. We can look anew. We can do more than simply bear witness.

We must lead by example. Or be humble enough to follow whoever has figured it finer.

There have been some shifts, sure, but most have yet to reconsider our approach? There has been a lot of circling. A lot of time spent applying for grants. A lot of time thanking the financially well off. We cannot allow this to be the only model. Question success and failure.

We must respect, include, and listen to peoples who have been cast aside, who have been left out. Many cultural producers have benefited from something like luck and something like privilege, and with this comes responsibility—I honor those who are trying to take it.

Expose the top down fool fame model for what it is.

Marissa Johnson-Valenzuela is a writer, recording artist, Community College professor & union organizer, abolitionist, founder @threadblanket & sometimes DJ.

Rana Fayez

What makes Philadelphia's art scene powerful? Its community. It would be easy to rattle off figures like cost of living and geographical conveniences, but those are all secondary to an art scene that truly thrives from collaboration.

YallaPunk was born almost three years ago here because we were able to build a meeting place for our community. The level of resource sharing and collaborative growth we have experienced is unapparelled to anything I have experienced anywhere else. Art cannot exist in a vacuum without a community and community is the heart of Social Practice.

As a city that is as diverse in its population as it is diverse in artforms, Philadelphia has been ripe for YallaPunk's growth over the past three years. It's a city that rewards experimentation.

Rana Fayez is the founder of YallaPunk, a multidisciplinary arts organization based out of Philadelphia that is redefining the narrative for Southwest Asian and North African individuals. Fayez teaches at Drexel's Interactive Digital Media and Entertainment and Arts Management departments in addition to performing under noise moniker, Tagine Dream.

Farrah Rahaman

Our duty as cultural workers, is to reassemble cultural memory into pleasurable, active and fungible grounds. In a city that is marked by the ongoing violences of dispossession and criminality, it is to create and make way for imaginative expression about how our urban spaces could work outside of capitalism and containment. We owe it to those who've come before and those who will follow to do this honestly, formidably.

It should come as no surprise that one of the earliest and most exemplary forms of a non-Indigenous land acknowledgement that we have in cinema would come from a Black woman cultural worker attending to the matter of state violence against Black people in Philadelphia. The potential for political solidarity located in cultural work is boundless.

"The original people who blessed the land were the Lenni Lenape or Delawares, the eldest nation of the Algonquian confederacy. They call the area Karakung, place of the wild geese. They called it home. Others would come to rename it Karakung Creek, Cobbs Creek- would claim it with their guns and their plows, their dreams. Africans came too- captive, but with dreams of their own." - from *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*, Toni Cade Bambara, Scribe Video Center, c1986. (TRT 58 min.) : sound, color with black & white scenes.

We cannot deny that cultural work is fundamental to Philadelphia's liberation. We cannot assume that in its current configuration, arts and cultural production in this city will or should be at the center of its liberation movement.

How do we buttress the particular concerns of communities working in similar intersections of social difference, while collectively holding our own urgencies?

How are we working to build transformational power from our identities, instead of using them for occasional concessions, granted by the same extractive structures which set the terms for our marginalization?

What heights could our collective power reach, if we were to use cultural work from a place of getting free rather than from a place of performative inclusion?

We must hold ourselves accountable to these concerns.

Because like Toni Cade reminds us, “Cultural work ain’t all arts and leisure.”

Farrah Rahaman is the Program Assistant at BlackStar, being part of the festival team since 2015. She is a 2018 Leeway Foundation Art and Change recipient and an incoming PhD student at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

Theresa Rose

On November 8, 2016, I drove my neighbor Gloria to the polls. She voted for Trump. Over the 10 years leading up to the election, Gloria and I became quite close. Gloria, now 80, has lived on our block all of her life. We have standing Tuesday coffee dates, and when I am in a pinch, she will babysit our 5 year old son Elias. This kind of relationship is not an anomaly in our densely populated South Philadelphia neighborhood. On Wednesdays, I watch our 11 year old neighbor, Gianna, for her mom, Angie and Gianna in turn keeps our only child occupied while I make dinner. We walk Ziggy, Jim’s dog. Jim recently lost his wife and so we help out with the dog while he provides us with the perfect pet, one you can love without much responsibility.

Gloria may never change her political position (I am not trying) but I am certain there is a great significance in connecting deeply with others. And I see it often. I see it in the work that Rob Blackson generates at Temple Contemporary, through projects like *Funeral for a Home* or *Symphony for a Broken Orchestra*. I see it in my sister’s attempts to reconnect with a family member who has emotional challenges or in the earnest president of our civic association who treats everyone’s opinion with the utmost respect. For me this is the future and the urgency- to care deeply for others, including and especially for those with differing alignments and affiliations. Can the way that we connect be the thread that sews up our divided country? My idealist calculations lead me to believe that radical caring can break down political, racial, economic and cultural divides revealing our humanity and

leading to greater exchange, sharing, openness and maybe even change.

Theresa Rose lives and works in her beloved hometown, Philadelphia, PA, as an artist, educator and arts organizer. Her passion for the city fuels the content of her studio and curatorial practice. Her mixed-media works on paper pay tribute to the complex beauty found in the urban environment. Rose earned a BA in Art Education from Tyler School of Art, Temple University and MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Her work has been part of exhibitions at Fleisher Art Memorial, Institute of Contemporary Art, The Print Center, Little Berlin, Crane Arts and Seraphin Gallery. She is the founder of Philly Stake (2011- 2016), a micro-granting dinner event that funded creative, community-engaged projects. In 2016, Rose curated a public art project with Jon Rubin in collaboration with the Mural Arts Program called the *9th Street Stock Exchange*. In 2017 and 2018, she curated community and research-based projects for the West Park Arts Fest, commissioned by the Fairmount Park Conservancy. Currently, she teaches in the Graduate Socially-Engaged Art Program at Moore College of Art and Design and serves on the Board of the Passyunk Square Civic Association.

Meredith Sellers

Philadelphia is a city both hailed and denigrated for its DIY art scene, plethora of collective spaces, and lack of commercial influence. It's a city of dualities; home to multimillion dollar corporations, esteemed cultural institutions, and a booming real estate market, Philadelphia has also long held the title of being the poorest large city in the United States—with a poverty rate of about 26% out of our 1.5 million residents—and is deeply mired in America's opioid epidemic. It feels, at times, like a layover on a destination to somewhere more glamorous for your ambitious friends and acquaintances.

But Philadelphia is ripe with possibilities. Though gentrification continues its steady march, the city remains relatively affordable and rent prices low enough to make New Yorkers drool and write biannual articles proclaiming Philly to be some equivalent of a "sixth borough" (enough to make

any true Philadelphian's blood run cold). With rows of empty storefronts along major transit lines, few models of how we might define success, and no looming expectations of commercial profit, the city is, in some ways, a great open wilderness.

The grit that makes Philadelphians throw snowballs at beloved holiday figures and climb Crisco-greased telephone polls is the same grit that can allow us to cast aside stale models and shape opportunities in our own image, outside the shadow of that metropolis to our north. Philadelphia is not New York. Or Los Angeles. Or Berlin, London, Milan, or any other luxuriant megalopolis. Philadelphia retains the ability to surprise, to reshape, to experiment, and, importantly, to sometimes fail. There is a freedom that comes with a lack of expectations.

Artists in Philadelphia must seize this moment and ask questions of our current models—how do the collectives that constitute much of the art scene contribute to the larger community outside of their membership? How can Philadelphia move past insular pay-to-play models and seek longer-term goals that are more diverse, more inclusive, and better serve their artist members? How can larger institutions support emerging artists? How can the city support critically engaged platforms and create curatorial opportunities to feature outside voices and perspectives? The beauty of this city is that there are no bounds of capital tying us to models that fail us, the only limit is the bounds of our imaginations.

Meredith Sellers is an artist, writer, and educator based in Philadelphia. She is an editor for *Title Magazine* and has published in *Hyperallergic*, *ArtsJournal*, and *Pelican Bomb*, among others. She has exhibited at ICA, Lord Ludd, Vox Populi, Icebox Project Space, Pilot Projects, and more, and has curated exhibitions at Crane Arts, Pilot Projects, and Esther Klein Gallery.

Li Sumpter

We live in violent and uncertain times. The fate of humanity is inextricably tied to the sustainability of the planet and its complex ecosystems. The future of our global society is

directly impacted by individual efforts and community action to envision and embody the (r)evolutionary change this world now requires to survive. Humans, by instinctive nature, when facing existential threats, are compelled to fight for life.

If there is an art to survival, Philly has made an epic opera of resistance and resilience. Some say, Philly folk have fight in our blood. In times of peace and prosperity, the warrior spirit can be seen as problematic. But this is not such a time.

Historically, Philadelphia has been fertile ground for those known for making a way out of no way, for lighting up the darkness, for radical imagining. It is a sanctuary city bearing scars of sacred passage for those who sought freedom at all costs. The land under and around it is in alignment with cosmic ley lines that make Philadelphia a place of high planetary power and significance. From the National Constitution to the Book of Revelation, Philly is a city of monumental beginnings and apocalyptic endings. It is a place that also exists in the mythic realm, beyond history, time and space.

Philly is home to trailblazers, visionaries and futurists. We are home to the Lenape Nation and Sun Ra who celebrate cosmic lineage and our destiny to take root among the stars. The spirit of Philadelphia is the stuff ancient myths and future legends are made of... the soil from which urban gardens grow, the soot Phoenixes rise from transformed.

To gather with intention in Philadelphia is to align with an archetypal field of birth, death and rebirth and to feel the creative power of the crossroads that is undeniable. Some might say, that's where we are in the road map of the human race. We stand at a major existential crossroads. Our next collective step forward could literally mean the world—its death or rebirth. In times like these, survival depends on our ability to imagine, create and innovate. Times like these need art, hope, intentional community and luminous vision. What better place for artists, thinkers, makers, doers, dreamers, designers, healers to convene?

Plus, Philly got soul.
Soul for days
...the End of Days...and new beginnings.
All Day. Ev'ry day.
Welcome to Illadelph.

Li Sumpter, Ph.D. is a mythologist and multidisciplinary artist based in Philly. She employs strategies of world-building, D.I.Y media and gameplay to cultivate eco-awareness and community action around the “art of survival”. Her research explores the anatomy and aesthetics of contemporary apocalypse myths and the role of feminine archetypes in End Time narratives across multiple media platforms. Li's artistic practice and collaborative design initiatives address existential issues of diverse ecologies through speculative tools and sustainability projects that illuminate patterns and power of change. Li was the 2017 Artist-in-Residence for Haverford's Urban Ecology Arts Exchange and recently completed her term as the 2018-2019 Leeway x NextFab Art and Technology Artist-in-Residence. Currently, Li teaches curatorial studies and Afrofuturism at Moore College of Art and Design, directs

MythMedia Studios and the Escape Artist Initiative, and is an active member of the North Philly Peace Park, Health Ecologies Lab at Slought/UPENN, and The Truth Telling Project and Common Field national collectives.

Nato Thompson

Freedom is just another word.

What has always attracted me to art is not the discipline of art itself, but the promise of art. Freedom. I want an art that takes the rules and throws them out the window. We can do whatever. And with that possibility comes the opportunity to consciously, actively, rewrite the rules of power. Whether its race, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism, or other forms of power not as obvious, art can offer a mode by which we upturn the dominant narrative.

Doing so, frankly, requires also throwing out the rules of art itself. Not accidentally, art is embedded with historic codes of power that must be actively resisted. There need not be any art that is sculpture, video, painting or installation. We can mix things up with people speaking, selling, trading, being, dreaming, and living. We can engage the world in new forms of activity. We can move across racial lines by new forms of collaboration and display. We can activate a new gender with new presentations, communities and sights. We can make new worlds.

I would encourage all of us to actively rewrite the rules of the arts. Let us find and act on exciting, non-obvious collaborations and communities to work with. Let us veer toward an active resistant bold failure rather than a professional tucked in success. Let us always mix non-art with art. Let us mix music culture and sculpture. Let us recognize that many of the interesting things in the city of Philadelphia happen outside of art. Let us mix poetry and video art, radical fashion design with anti-gentrification movements. Let's be international in scope and locally wild and open. This city has everything and more if we just open our door.

Nato Thompson is a curator and author and works as Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary, a mobile contemporary art organization in the process of creating a non-collect-

ing museum in the city of Philadelphia. Previously he worked at the New York-based public art organization Creative Time as Artistic Director which he joined in January 2007. Since then, Thompson has organized such major Creative Time projects as *The Creative Time Summit* (2009–2015), Pedro Reyes' *Doomocracy* (2016), Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014), *Living as Form* (2011), among others. Previously, he worked as Curator at MASS MoCA, where he completed numerous large-scale exhibitions, including *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* (2004), with a catalogue distributed by MIT Press. He has written two books of cultural criticism with Melville House Books, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century* (2015) and *Culture as Weapon: The Art of Influence in Everyday Life* (2017).

Ulises

Artists work for the future.

These words were stamped onto a piece of mail art by Ulises Carrión. As the owner of an art bookshop in Amsterdam during the 1970s, Carrión established a cultural hub for publications and programming alike, a model we admired and hoped to have in Philadelphia.

We later asked ourselves, “why not start our own art bookshop?”

Such an idea would likely feel far-fetched elsewhere, but Philadelphia has a long history of artist-run spaces with an engaged audience and committed community.

It's a city where doing it yourself isn't understood as a limitation, but a proposition.

Because what's lacking in Philadelphia was never interest, nor initiative. The arts community in Philadelphia stands ever-resourceful and zealous. Perhaps scrappy, but no doubt passionate.

Where basements, warehouses, and living rooms are often regarded as the most interesting venues in town.

Because where there is a will, and a will to work, there is a way.

And a city that promotes this kind of possibility provides hope for a better future.

So when asked, “Why Philly?” we in turn ask, “Why not Philly?”

Asking “why not?” was our first step in working for the future we wanted in the arts and in Philadelphia.

Ulises is a bookshop and curatorial platform dedicated to artists’ books and independent art publications. Performing the model of a quarterly periodical, each curatorial season invites contributors to present publications, workshops, lectures, artworks, and collaborations in response to a given theme.

The name **Ulises** is a tribute to the work and legacy of **Ulises Carrión**, a Mexican-born poet, conceptualist, and avant-garde artist who was an early pioneer and theorist of the artist’s book, and the founder of the Amsterdam based bookshop **Other Books and So** (1975–79)

Ulises was founded in 2016 by **Nerissa Cooney**, **Lauren Downing**, **Joel Evey**, **Kayla Romberger**, **Gee Wesley**, and **Ricky Yanas**.

Carol Zou

When I arrived in Philadelphia after living and working in Dallas, Texas, it seemed that Philadelphia had realized so many possibilities unimaginable in Texas. Overlooked by New York City market forces and buoyed by public funding, artists turned their attention towards alternative art spaces, arts education, and other forms of community engagement. Activist coalitions elected a district attorney known for his defense of Black Lives Matter protesters, and who began his term by ending cash bail for a number of offenses. This was the horizon that I looked towards and dreamed of during my years in a deeply privatized and conservative state.

When we run towards the horizon and reach the edge of the ocean, however, we learn that the horizon is always stretching before us, that it is not a solid line but rather millions of hazy crepuscular particles. The closer we get, the more complicated things appear, and the hallmark of any aspirational horizon is to be forever shifting and out of reach.

For all its progressive values, Philadelphia remains a deeply unequal city. Neighborhoods and public schools are disinvested, then razed, to make way for new development. Immigrant families are incarcerated at Berks Detention Center just outside the city core. Philadelphia is simultaneously a utopian model of how much is possible and a dystopian reminder of how much more is needed.

I've heard both Marxism and Afrofuturism cited in the Philadelphia theoretical landscape, and to paraphrase dialectical materialism and Octavia E. Butler, "the only lasting truth is change" (1). Our civic and radical imagination cannot content itself with murals, but must rather continue to interrogate the inequalities that persist, the horizons that constantly remake themselves. For those of us who are gathered at this point, and who feel the sun calling us towards a new dawn, we might ask ourselves: what next?

1) Butler, Octavia E. (1993). *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Four Walls.

Carol Zou is an artist, writer, educator, and cultural organizer who has worked for over a decade on the relationship between arts, culture, community, and activism. Notable projects include Yarn Bombing Los Angeles, Michelada Think Tank, and Trans.lation Vickery Meadow.