



**Final Report on *Commotion*, a re-imagining of public art by
PECO, Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, and the University of the Arts.**



Compiled by lead artist and project director, John JH Phillips

September 10, 2012

The narrative arc of our public art project, Commotion, is rather like the biography of a person. It was conceived and brought to life by PECO, the University of the Arts, Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, artist John JH Phillips, and the neighborhoods of Grays Ferry, Point Breeze, and South of South Street

At its birth, the project art-team was comprised of artist/professor Phillips and 13 students from the University of the Arts. The project was unnamed and spent most of its waking hours imagining possibilities, listening and learning from elders in the public art arena, and exploring the new world of the project neighborhoods. As the issue of *where* to do the work became foremost, the project-child began school and became more focused— learning about property ownership, city protocols, insurance and permits. A viable solution to the site conundrum was introduced by PRA Director Ed Covington, allowing the student artist team to use vacant PRA properties in the project neighborhoods for temporary art works.

With the unflinching assistance and enthusiasm of the PRA's One Percent for Art Director, Julia Guerrero, the artist-team reached college age. The sponsors and administrators of the project gave final approval to our proposal of temporary art works from six art disciplines, each led by a professional artist who would engage the community through six months of workshops and showcase finished works of sculpture, video, book arts, theater, sound art and dance in a culminating two-week-long Festival. The art team chose interesting locations throughout the project area as sites for the events and tackled the complexities of producing a multi-faceted Festival.

The project found its identity and graduated from college with the name "Commotion," putting our "communities into motion," thus denoting our idea of public art as a shaking up of the status quo— moving away from permanent artworks and looking for new ways to collaborate among students, artists, and residents. Neighborhood participants helped create all the final projects, contributing video, sculpture, book images, as well as stories for the play, sound recordings, and historic artifacts for the dance performance.

The project-person had a robust adulthood! The following pages show the scope of Commotion. Many people put many months of effort into bringing this project to a successful conclusion. And I humbly submit it *was* a success. Students, artists and residents worked together to lay the ground work for the Festival events, each an unadulterated piece of fine art showing Commotion's commitment to giving the community the best artwork the city can produce, in their neighborhood, for free.

As director of Commotion, and speaking for all of us on the art-team, I would like to thank those without whom Commotion would not have been born and matured: Jeff Gordon, Manager, Corporate Relations, PECO Energy Company; Christina Kerrigan, Sponsorship and Event Manager, PECO; Julia Guerrero, Director, Percent for Art Program and the Advisory Board of Design, Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority; Sean Buffington, President, The University of the Arts; and Mira C. Zergani, Assistant Vice President of Development, The University of the Arts.

Many others were integral to Commotion, including all the UArts students who took the class and stuck with it in the face of numerous challenges, the lead artists, our production management team who kept us within budget, and, most importantly, the residents of the neighborhoods in which we worked.

The effect of our time in these neighborhoods is ongoing: the community garden Commotion helped build is thriving, barbecues are held between Commotion artists and residents and discussions continue between the artists and the community in unexpected ways. The idea of presenting fine art while interacting at deep level with the community has left a positive and profound impression on both artists and neighbors! Lives were changed.

Commotion timeline:

- August 5, 2010: first meeting of PECO, UArts and PRA. Approved to move ahead.
- January 21, 2011: UArts semester began, first Public Art/Commotion class.
- May 5, 2011: first UArts student project presentation to PRA.
- June 10, 2011: summer intern / UArts class began.
- July, 17, 2011: PRA review of project; redirected focus.
- September 1, 2011: PRA meeting - given final go-ahead.
- September 2, 2011: UArts semester began.
- December 1, 2011: contract between PECO, PRA and UArts signed.
- January 20, 2012: UArts semester began.
- January 21, 2012: Commotion Launch Event.
- February 11, 2012: Commotion workshops began.
- April 17, 2012: Press event at Dixon House.
- June 16 - June 30, 2012: Commotion Festival.
- September 30, 2012: Contract between PECO, UArts, PRA and Phillips will expire.

Commotion Project Overview:

Goals: There were three ultimate goals of this project, Commotion.

1. To provide the project area with a wide range of art works, each created by a lead artist with a national reputation for artistic excellence.
2. To educate a group of University of the Arts students about public art and give them the opportunity to create and produce this project alongside the lead artists.
3. To involve community residents in the creation of these art works.
4. To make the archives of Commotion available as a research source for all interested parties.

Principles: Throughout the process several guiding principles were followed.

1. Reach out to all in the project area.
2. Show respect for all community opinion and input concerning this project.
3. Strive for sustainability in both materials and process.
4. Freely share our art making skills with all.
5. Make all Commotion events free and open to everyone.

Participants and partners:

1. A changing group of University of the Arts students, totaling 17 who attended some or all of the Commotion classes held over 3 semesters.
2. 25 community organizations, schools, and agencies which were located in the project area.
3. Approximately 260+ residents who attended workshops and helped with the creation and production of Festival events.

Commotion activities in 2012:

1. Commotion Launch event
2. 22 workshops, held February through June 2012.
3. 11 Festival events produced by 7 lead artists. Approximate attendance exceeded 1100.
 1. Festival Kick-off event.
 2. Created 2 site-specific dance performances.
 3. Created a new site-specific theatrical work.
 4. Created 2 site-specific video installations.
 5. Created a locally sited sound art project for phones and/or the internet; produced a CD with the work of 13 sound artists.
 6. Created a book of photographs, all taken locally.
 7. Erected a two-story tall, student created sculpture with accompanying neighborhood music and art festival.
4. Consulted with PRA to commission a semi-permanent art garden to be installed May 2013.

Community engagement and partnerships:

Overall project:

- Active engagement:

1. Grays Ferry Community Council; Margie McGrath
2. R.O.A.D., Residents Organized for Advocacy and Direction; Meeka Outlaw, President
3. Diversified Community Services; Cheryl Weiss, Director and Mitch Little, Deputy Director
4. SOSNA, South of South Street Neighbors Association; Andrew Dalzell
5. Managing Director's Office, City of Philadelphia; Ade' Fuqua: PhillyRising
6. Chester Arthur School, 2000 Catharine Street; Renee Musgrove, principal
7. Philadelphia Police Department, 17th District; Horace Gibson, Community Relations Officer
8. Point Breeze Homes; Claudia Sherrod, Director



- Discussions

1. Free Library of Philadelphia; Elizabeth Orsburn, Director of Public Service Support
2. St. Gabriel RC Church; Father Zagarelli
3. Overbrook Environmental Education Center; Jerome Shabazz, Director
4. Philadelphia Water Department; Deborah McCarty, Deputy Commissioner
5. Grays Ferry Partnership; James Helman
6. Philadelphia Horticultural Society; Travis Green

Artist-specific partnerships:

- Active engagement:

1. Christian Street YMCA; Michele Stevenson, Director
2. Shiloh Baptist Church: Reverend Edward Sparkman
3. Queen Memorial Library; John Crimmins
4. Universal Companies; Raheem Islam, Jr., Grants/Research Manager, Audenried Charter High School
5. Zion Hill Memorial Baptist Church; Reverend Howard
6. Schuylkill River Development Corporation; Joe Syrnick, Director
7. Walter G. Smith Elementary School, 1900 Wharton Street; Rachel Marianno, Principal
8. South Philadelphia Rainbow Coalition; Bob Wilbowe, President
9. Mitchum-Wilson Funeral Home, 1410 South 20th Street; Charlene E. Wilson-Doffoney, Director
10. Stephen Girard Elementary School, 1800 Snyder Avenue; Mr. T. Koger, Principal
11. MMP Productions; Dominic McFadden, Director, Wilson Park Recreation Center

Commotion Workshops:

As mentioned in the overview, the concept of having well-known artists commissioned by the Festival to work with project area residents was central to the vision of Commotion. Beginning February 11, 2012, these artists, along with University of the Arts students, began a series of 22 workshops throughout the project community. Some were better attended than others, but the impact was noticeable. Word spread during our time in the area and more and more residents became involved as the Festival neared.

- Lead artist Tim Fitts held 4 workshops helping residents create images for the Festival book, "46-45 Verandering." The workshops were held at Nabuurs Community Center, 2738 Dickinson Street and Zion Hill Memorial Baptist Church, 2702 Ellsworth Street. Total attendance was estimated to be 55.
- Lead artist John JH Phillips held 2 introductory meetings which led to 6 project-area residents taking a 3-month video production course at the Scribe Video Center, 40th and Chestnut Streets. There was no cost to the participants.
- Sound Places director Chris Forsyth organized a series of sound workshops each led by a well known sound artist(s):
 1. Prometheus Radio Project at Diversified Community Services, 1529 S 22nd St.
 2. Bryron Westbrook at Shiloh Baptist Church, 2040 Christian St.
 3. Maria Dumlao at Zion Hill Memorial Baptist, 2700 Ellsworth St.
 4. Eugene Lew at Crescent Park, 34th and Grays Ferry Avenue.Total attendance for all workshops was 42.
- Lead artist Ed Shockley led 6 workshops focusing on theater, storytelling and the collection of material for his Festival play. The workshops were held at Dixon House, 1920 S. 20th Street; Audenried High School, Room D100, 3301 Tasker Street; Queen Memorial Library, 1201 South 23rd Street; and Mitchum-Wilson Funeral Home, 1410 South 20th Street. Total estimated attendance was 65.
- Lead artist Jebney Lewis developed lower and upper school programs at Audenried Charter High School, Steven Girard Elementary School and Walter G. Smith Elementary School as well as after school programs at the Christian Street YMCA. These classes were taught by Jeb Lewis and UArts students. The youngsters created different body parts of the Festival's Super Creature of Energy and Power. Total attendance for these workshops was 105.
- Dancers Bethany Formica and Duane Lee Holland were brought into the project by the Shiloh dance project artists to run several weeks of summer camp dance classes at the Christian Street YMCA, as part of Commotion's dance program outreach to the community. Attendance at these workshops was approximately 35 children each session.

Images from several of the workshops:



Sound Arts with
Chris Forsyth;
creating sound
recordings in the
neighborhood:

Book Arts
with Tim Fitts
at Zion Hill
Memorial
Baptist
Church:





Video workshops at Scribe Video:

Jeb Lewis workshops at Girard Elementary School:



Summary of Commotion Festival Events:

Saturday 6/16:

Kick-off at Zion Hill Baptist Church, 27th and Ellsworth Street, 5-7 pm:

Attendance: 200 +

A large crowd gathered outdoors in the church park. Attending were numerous neighborhood residents and children, some public art leaders, UArts students, and artists, both of the project and not. There were these activities:

- Tim Fitts' art book, "46-45 Verandering," was released with the author present and signing copies for all. The book is a spectacular visual record of the neighborhoods and the important objects

shared by the people therein.

- "Sound Places," organized by Bowerbird, was up and running online. CDs with all the sound artists' work were given away. Demonstrations of recording techniques took place too. Sound Places was certainly one of the most elaborate sound arts projects ever produced in Philadelphia. Signs explaining how to listen to the pieces in the locations that inspired the works were placed, for the duration of the Festival, throughout the project area.

- There was a children's art and crafts workshop conducted showing the youngsters how to make kaleidoscopes.

- Pitruco Pizza served over free 100 pizzas during the event.

- The "Video Wagon," by JJH Phillips and UArts students, hit the streets after dark when the kick-off ended, touring the project neighborhoods until 1 am.



Wednesday and Thursday 6/20, 6/21:

Dance at Shiloh; Shiloh Baptist Church, 21st and Christian Streets. 6-10 pm:

Attendance: 150

Both shows, in the midst of a sweltering heat wave, were sold out. Seating was limited by the site to 75 people per night. Dance company Subcircle's immersive site-specific dance/installation took the audience through fascinating areas of the historic church. A healthy and tasty (and free) dinner was served on communal tables in the church's dining room where project artists, members of the church congregation, and audience





conversed before viewing the evening's second work, Team Sunshine's "Wonder Wave." It was an amusing and touching dance-drama about disaster, cultural impact and friendship. Ice cream was served afterwards while informal discussion of the performances continued between artists and audience.



Friday and Saturday 6/22, 6/23;

**The Greatest Life That Never Was; Wilson-Mitchum Funeral Home, 1400 South 20th Street, 7:30-10 pm:
Attendance: 285**

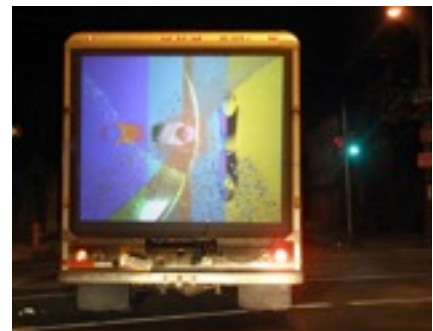
The first night's show took place during a major rain storm, but the crowd was a respectable size and very enthusiastic about this new play by Ed Shockley. In attendance were media reporters, neighborhood



community leaders and residents, and of course theater lovers from all parts of the city. The second night's show was packed - an estimated 200 + people filled the funeral home and responded with even more enthusiasm than the first night. Videotaped interviews focusing on residents' stories took place after the play ended.

**Tuesday 6/26:
Video Wagon's second night out; all over project neighborhood, 8 pm-midnight:
Attendance: covered 35 miles of project area**

JJH Phillips' truck-with-live-video, the Video Wagon, made another evening appearance driving through the area from 8 pm until midnight. Either when stopping occasionally to engage with kids as they interacted with the live camera, or



slowly cruising, the Video Wagon was met with amusement, curiosity, enjoyment and some wonderful impromptu dancing in the streets. As before, UArts students helped prepare the truck and mixed the video live while on the street.

Wednesday and Thursday 6/27, 6/28:

Dance at Shiloh; Shiloh Baptist Church, 21st and Christian Streets, 6-10 pm:

Attendance: 150

As before, each day's performance was sold out. Seating was limited by the site to 75 people per night. Excellent dinner between shows and ice cream and talk afterwards.

Saturday 6/30:

Super Creature of Energy and Power; Point Breeze and Fernon Streets, 1pm - 8 pm.

Attendance: 300 +

Saturday 6/30 was a fitting finale. Hot temperatures created lots of happy sweat for makers and audience alike. The 20 foot tall sculpture created by Jebney Lewis, 3 UArts students and many school children was incredible! The



afternoon included the creation of a new community garden, an art show by 4 local artists, kids' art activities, 10 local musical acts, free food, community organization tables, the attendance of Deputy Mayor Rich Negrin and PhillyRising representative Ade' Fuqua, and, of course, the mighty Super Creature of Energy and Power! Several hundred people enjoyed the event. Jeb and his UArts students pushed the boundaries of what was possible and pulled it off.



Saturday 6/30:

Night Ferry; Crescent Park, 34th Street and Grays Ferry Avenue. 8pm - 12pm.

Attendance: 250 +

JJH Phillips' "Night Ferry" in Crescent Park also succeeded in engaging several hundred people, the majority from the neighborhood, in an alternate world of sight and sound. It was a



complex collaborative effort comprised of 9 video screens, 4 video artists and live music, that set the scene for an energized but peaceful evening of dancing, smiling, running around and through the video piece, and just standing still before the changing images and weaving music.



A local Native American joined in the dancing. There were lots people still arriving and hanging out at midnight when Night Ferry, and Commotion, officially ended.



To be completed in the Spring of 2014:

Landscape architect and artist Keith VanDerSys will create a sustainable transformation of an Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority property at 3014-22 Wharton Street.

Wharton Street lot currently:



An earlier VanDerSys project:



Commotion personnel:

Management:

Project director / lead artist: John JH Phillips
Project manager, festival producer: Dustin Hurt
Assistant: Tulissa Parsons, (UArts sculpture, class of '11)

Festival events:

Book: "46-45 Verandering"

Lead artist: Tim Fitts
UArts student assistants: Tyler Bailey, silkscreens, workshop facilitator; Aimee Goldsmith, transcripts; Derek Scull, photography technician, lighting; Maxwell Van Hook, workshop facilitator; Andrew Zahn, book design

Dance: "Shiloh Dance Days"

Project manager: Anna Drozdowski
Production manager: Meredith Sonnen
Technical and catering: Austen Brown, Robert Davis, Annie Heath, Makoto Hirano, Julian Karlen, Evan Leigh, Jesus Muniz, Meredith Rainey

Subcircle: "forget me...forget me not"

Choreography and performers: Paul Struck, Christy Lee, Scott McPheeters, Niki Cousineau
Music; Rosie Langabeer
Installation design; Jorge Cousineau

Team Sunshine Performance Corporation: "wonderwave"

Director: Alex Torra
Performers: Benjamin Camp, Makoto Hirano
Scenic/lighting design: Oona Curley

Theater: "The Greatest Life That Never Was"

Writer: Ed Shockley
Director / actor: Iary moten
Actors: Shelli Pentimall Bookler, Carlo Campbell, Aisha Goss, Jerry Puma, Denise Shubin, Damion Williams
Artist: Theodore A. Harris

Sound Art: "Sound Places"

Project managers: Chris Forsyth, Dustin Hurt
Artists: Claire Niebergall, Nick Krill, George Korein, Toisha Tucker, Daneil Perelstein, Laine Godsey, Murmuration, Brenan McGeehan, Team Hungrymonsters, Maria Dumloa, Jesse Kudler, Newton, Byron Westbrook

Video: "Video Wagon"

Project manager / technical design: John JH Phillips

Video artists: Matthew Barnes (UArts Animation, class of '12), John JH Phillips, Derek Scull (UArts Communications, class of '13), Yvonne Yon, Andrew Zahn, (UArts MFA, class of '13)

"Night Ferry"

Project manager / technical design: John JH Phillips

Video artists: John JH Phillips, Dejha Ti, Derek Scull (UArts Communications, class of '13), Andrew Zahn, (UArts MFA, class of '13)

Music: Tim Motzer, John JH Phillips

Ritual movement: Gray Owl Thundercloud

Technical support: Kevin Farrell (Visual Infinity), Austin Litteral, Ahing Huang, Vincent Erhard, Evan Cohen, Dani Duncan

Sculpture: "Super Creature of Energy and Power"

Lead artist: Jebney Lewis

Event production managers: Amy Kiota, Sarah Chandler

Young artists from Audenried Charter High School, Steven Girard Elementary School, and Walter G. Smith Elementary School.

UArts student artists:

Treyson Dunlap - Audenreid HS electricity arm assistant teacher/ Creature Build Coordinator

Aimee Goldsmith - Smith Elementary plant leg assistant teacher/ Community Garden Coordinator

Olivia Diehl - Diversified Community Services after-school inflatable head assistant teacher/ Youth Activities Coordinator

Creature Construction Staff: Jesus Muniz, Bethany Formica, Makoto Hirano, Nick Reed

Community Art Gallery Coordinators: Alan and Faye Carter

Community Garden Neighborhood Partners: Lindel and Florence Dixon

Music Stage Coordinators: Dominic McFadden/MMP Productions, Tanja Dixon, and Hollie Stain

University of the Arts students with John JH Phillips at Commotion's April press event:



Compilation of Press Coverage:

1. ABC Action News, video report, evening news, April 17, 2012
2. Philadelphia Tribune, "Public Arts Festival Raises Some 'Commotion,'" by Kimberley Richards, Wednesday, April 25, 2012
3. Philadelphia Weekly, "upcoming events," June 6, 2012
4. HiddenCity website: "New Directions For Percent For Art Program," by Jennifer Liebert, June 14, 2012
5. Yahoo Finance, and Morningstar websites: "Art Comes Alive With "Commotion," June 17, 2012
6. Philadelphia Metro, "The Art of the Neighborhood," by Shaun Brady, June 21, 2012
7. Newsworks.org: "Living it up at funeral home: Play celebrates Philly lives cut short," by Peter Crimmins, June 22, 2012
8. Philadelphia Inquirer, "A Commotion of free community art; The Percent for Art festival in South Philadelphia presents provocative theater, video, more," by Julie Zauzmer, June 24, 2012
9. Broad Street Review. "Commotion Festival: The city as a work of art," by Professor AJ Sabatini, June 26, 2012
10. Artblog website: "Commotion Festival June 16-30 – The Redevelopment Authority's Risk-Taking Temporary Public Art Project," by Andrea Kirsh, June 27, 2012
11. HiddenCity website: "Jebney Lewis and the Commotion Festival Super Creature," by Lee Tussman, June 28, 2012
12. Philadelphia Daily News, "Causing a Commotion in Grays Ferry," by Amanda Wagner, June 29, 2012

Website:

<http://commotionphilly.org>

This site will now serve as an archive of the project and is funded through 2016.

A Selection of Press Reviews:

Broad Street Review. "Commotion Festival: The City as a Work of Art," by Professor AJ Sabatini, June 26, 2012

The city you thought you knew

AJ SABATINI

The Commotion Festival commenced calmly on Saturday evening, June 16, with free pizza and a talk-with-the-artists-and-neighbors event in a nondescript lot beside the humble Zion Hill Memorial Baptist Church on 27th and Ellsworth Streets. The sundown get-together, which featured a book signing and preludes to the sound and video projects to come, highlighted a view of the pale blue-grey-smokestacked PECO Substation III facility angled forbiddingly on the west side of Grays Ferry.

The mirrored facades of the blue-grey Center City skyline provided the backdrop. Traffic was light, the company was local, and the friendly conversations flowed casually. It was a moment to savor another slice of Philadelphia's variegated cityscape.

June 16, as readers of James Joyce's *Ulysses* know, is Bloomsday, and I spent part of it listening to readings from the book at the annual event held in front of the Rosenbach Museum and Library on Delancey Street. Before he went blind, Joyce was a dedicated urban walker, and he attempted to cram all the lives of the city dwellers he knew, along with allusions to the plot and the structure of Homer's *Odyssey*, into his noisy, smelly, argumentative and linguistically exuberant novel so that people could read it to each other once a year and feel verrry literary and somewhat Irish.

(Some years ago, after a Bloomsday indulgence, a few friends and I tried to drink to Joyce at local Irish pubs. The bartenders, patrons and few Irish descendants there had no idea who Joyce was or what team *Ulysses* played for. Well, at least they served Guinness and Jamesons.)

If Joyce had high tech

Unlike the recent **Odunde Festival**— an annual, heavily attended joyous street celebration of food, crafts, clothes and music in the cross-section of streets around 23rd and South— Commotion pointedly focuses on the Grays Ferry, Point Breeze and South of South Street neighborhoods and their daily life, as engaged by a cohort of artists and members of the community brought together by the festival's director, the sound artist John JH Phillips (from the University of the Arts). The events in the Commotion, all free, are meant to emphasize specific sites, including the Shiloh Baptist Church and the Grays Ferry Crescent at Schuylkill Banks. (The project is sponsored by PECO, an encouraging demonstration of a big utility's interest in the neighborhoods in question.)

Joyce, the consummate novelist and language lover, would have savored the poetry of neighborhood names like Point Breeze, Grays Ferry and South of South Street. And were he around today, along with laboring on the nuances of words and sentences, he would likely make use of video cameras, audio recording technology, advanced photographic processes, book making, electro-kinetic sculpture, live projected video, interactive theater, installation art and dance performance, websites, Google Earth and air conditioning— all of which, except for the A/C, are part of the Commotion Festival offerings.

Neighbors' boxing gloves

The kickoff event at Zion Hill Memorial Baptist Church was the occasion for handing out two works: a CD with 13 ambient and processed compositions by Philadelphia musicians and sound artists, and a 72-page color and black-and-white photographic collection by University of the Arts teacher Tim Fitts, titled *Verandering*, a Dutch word that roughly translates into "change" or "the act of revising or altering."

In that mode, a third of the book's photographs are complexly textured images of surfaces (peeling paint, cherry

blossoms in puddles) or tinted long shots of the power substation. These are juxtaposed with stark black and white studies of objects— a baseball, a tool belt, boxing gloves— owned by people from the neighborhood.

Similarly, the *Sound Places* CD consists of layered sounds and voices recorded from the neighborhood, most invoking the infinite subtle variations of fluttering bass traffic noises, wind scraping steel and concrete bridges, muted voices on short walks and unexpected birds on flight through the soundscape. As you might expect of a neighborhood that's a jumble of warehouses, industrial sites and railways, the recordings reveal the pulse of lives enmeshed amidst the constant wash of mechanical rhythms and only incidentally musicated hums.

Dancers as ghosts

By contrast, the Historic Shiloh Baptist Church at 2040 Christian Street stands in the midst of a completely residential neighborhood. The Church has a storied past (dating back to 1842) and an aging interior with multiple spaces, hallways, gathering rooms and turning staircases whose wooden footfalls show its wear and tear.

Shiloh's devoted congregation is part of the Shiloh Dance Days events (June 20, 21, 27 and 28). Two dance companies, Subcircle and Team Sunshine, have constructed works that will vary each evening (the programs include dinner with congregation members).

Subcircle has been based in Philadelphia since 1998. The partners, choreographer and dancer Niki Cousineau and designer Jorge Cousineau, are a near-magical realist pair whose smart, dazzling dance technology works often engage themes of distance and enchantment.

For their work, *forget me...forget me not*, the audience members were led, in groups of 15, on a tour of the old parlors, back stairwells and haunted rooms on the building's second and third floor. Four dancers— like ghost reenactors— served tea in a faded dining room, performed rituals in darkened shower stalls and created an atmosphere fitting the authentic 19th-century Philadelphia surrealist set.

Prior to the tour, audiences viewed a live screen projection, by Jorge Cousineau, of images of one-time parishioners; if you looked closely, you noticed the people sitting next to you as well— and yourself, too.

Disaster intrudes

A second work, *wonderwave*, was performed by **Team Sunshine** and danced, with earnestness and poignancy, by Benjamin Camp and Makoto Hirano. They set themselves up on stage in front of a makeshift wall with panels and cabinet doors, allowing them to open one or the other and play with food, a fish tank, a window. They kept the crowd amused with guy-on-guy mimicry and parodic movement riffs cued by waving their remotes at a sound system.

Paul Simon's bouncy music dominated about half the performance. But Makoto let everyone know he was from Japan, and that country's last natural disaster physically and psychically intruded to undo the guys' playfulness and darken even Paul Simon's upbeat tempos.

The Commotion Festival— which also includes a play by Ed Schockley, a sculpture raising block party (by Jebney Lewis), interactive media installations by John JH Phillips, and more dance and sound works by Bowerbird— will play out through June 30.



[Respond to this Article](#)

Artblog.org website: "Commotion Festival June 16-30 – The Redevelopment Authority's Risk-Taking Temporary Public Art Project," by Andrea Kirsh, June 27, 2012

Commotion Festival June 16-30 – The Redevelopment Authority's Risk-Taking Temporary Public Art Project

By [andrea kirsh](#)

June 27, 2012 · 0 Comments

Commotion is a six-month project directed by John J. H. Phillips for [University of the Arts](#) (U Arts). Funded under the [Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority](#) (RDA), it involved a course for U Arts students, seven professional artists in various art forms (including writing, dance and theater), workshops with residents of Grays Ferry, Point Breeze, and South of South Street, two artists as workshop leaders and a large number of technical staff. The funding for *Commotion* was generated by PECO's construction of a power station in Grays Ferry; following legislation in 1959, any private developer who obtains property through the PRA must devote 1% of the construction budget to art. Those funds can be used in various ways to bring art to the community, but this was the first time it was devoted to temporary, community projects. A step into the dark.



Commotion's Video-Art Wagon

Commotion culminated in a festival running June 16 – 30, to present the results in a series of free activities and events in South Philadelphia; from what I was able to attend during the first week, before I left town, it proved worth the risk, a successful undertaking according to multiple standards. This can certainly be credited to selecting Phillips to direct it, his choice of highly-competent fellow artists, and the free hand that all were given. I came away from the festival with a book, a cd, and memories of new places and

people, good food, a lot of creative activity, enthusiastic students and one particularly stunning performance.

In the work for which he is best known, Phillips collaborates with Carolyn Healy on site-specific multimedia installations that are a hybrid of sculpture, video, and sound. They created a terrific installation at Disston Saw Works as part of Hidden City Philadelphia, which I wrote about on June 17, 2009; it was as good as any site-specific project I've seen, and the artists put a lot of effort into relationships with the Disston workers and neighbors. Phillips chose the artists

participating in *Commotion* based, in part, on their experience teaching and interacting with the general public. This is more and more demanded from artists, but it's hardly part of the traditional job description. The *Commotion* artists are: playwright **Ed Schockley**, a Point Breeze



native and pioneer in community engagement theater; **Jebney Lewis**, a musician and visual artist trained in technical theater production; choreographer **Niki Cousineau** and designer **Jorge Cousineau**, who, as *Subcircle*, specialize in activating a variety of spaces through a combination of installation, dance and dramatic elements; *Team Sunshine Productions*, a collaborative that creates original physical theater grounded in everyday life; and **Tim Fitts**, a writer and teacher who also works in photography.

Tim Fitts demonstrating screen printing at a community workshop



Commotion-sponsored students learn how to create video at Scribe Video Center

Many of the artists employed the U Arts students and each involved the community in his own way, without Phillips' direction, although I imagine he was regularly contacted for technical help; multiple artist projects don't just come together on their own. The *Commotion* project was remarkably free from a unified rhetorical or theoretical position which sometimes accompanies both public art and community-based activities. Phillips told me his priority was that good art should come out of the project rather than a feel-good, community activity. It did. And quite a

bit of community involvement as well as some remarkable pedagogy; this experience will certainly be among the more memorable of the students' courses .

Fitts led workshops at Zion Hill Memorial Baptist Church and the William A. Barrett Nabuurs Center where he photographed personally-significant objects that the participants had with them and used some of the photographs in a silk-screening workshop(above) conducted with each group. All of this was incorporated in a book, 46-45 *Verandering*, using some of the workshop-generated imagery as well as Fitts' photographs (many are details) of the surrounding neighborhood, where derelict public fixtures and vacant property abut very modest, old housing and the occasional new, publicly-funded construction. Fitts describes his interaction with the neighborhood and its residents in a short text, but the title is a mystery to me.

The community participation with *Commotion's* dance component was as guests at performances by **Subcircle** and **Team Sunshine**, with a meal served in between and ice cream as a finale. They were held at the historic 1824 Shiloh Baptist Church, and the chance to see rooms beyond the sanctuary of the neo-Gothic structure was worth the trip – even on one of the hottest evenings of the year. *Subcircle* seated us in the church balcony opposite a large screen where we saw a live feed of our own presence layered over photographs of what I assume were congregants from earlier times. Then they lead us up stairs, around corners and through a series of intriguing spaces where performers in vaguely 1920s dress interacted with the rooms, props, each other, and occasionally with us, miming a story we were never quite privy to. Still, their purposeful and coordinated actions and the movement through the rooms, appointed variously with vintage items, was an intriguing if puzzling first course. Next we were served a perfect summer meal at tables small enough to generate conversation; the people I met over dinner were either related to the artists or art followers from outside the neighborhood (we all had to pre-register for the free event). The next stop was a raw space in which *Team Sunshine* performed a humorous but slightly protracted piece, essentially a mimed story with captions and a consciously, low-tech set constructed largely of cardboard and tape. I enjoy that sort of theater, but couldn't discern any relationship with the setting; perhaps that wasn't the point. The event will be repeated on June 27 and 28, but I understand it is sold out.

The Greatest Life that Never Was is a new play that **Ed Shockley** wrote, based on stories told by South Philadelphia residents. He conducted neighborhood workshops on acting, storytelling and performance, and readings of the play, which was performed with professional actors on June 22nd and 23rd at the Mitchum-Wilson Funeral Home, chosen because of the play's subject of lives cut short. The stories may have come from the community, but the storytelling was Shockley's, and he's a master. It was a work in progress that at its high points was some of the best theater I've seen in Philadelphia. The actors thoroughly inhabited their roles, and the connection with the audience was palpable. Shockley is still developing the script, and hopes to arrange future performances.

Participants in a workshop for 'Sound Places'

Commotion's sound component included several workshops on recording ambient sound and a virtual sound art project, *Sound Places*, by **Bowerbird** that will run during the festival, with compositions created from sounds recorded at a dozen locations within the *Commotion* project boundaries. They are intended to be accessed via smartphones (or downloaded from the web or used with an iPod) at those same locations. I wasn't able to experience them *in situ*, but did listen to the pieces on a cd as I sat at home. They contain a wonderful range, from traditionally musical to electronic-generated sounds and ambient, urban noises. I find the idea of a sound piece (may I call it *music*?) written to be heard at a specific location a delightful one. Site-specific sound. I wonder if it will induce any of the audience to take off their headphones on the next walk around Philadelphia and try living to a live, as opposed to a prerecorded soundtrack.



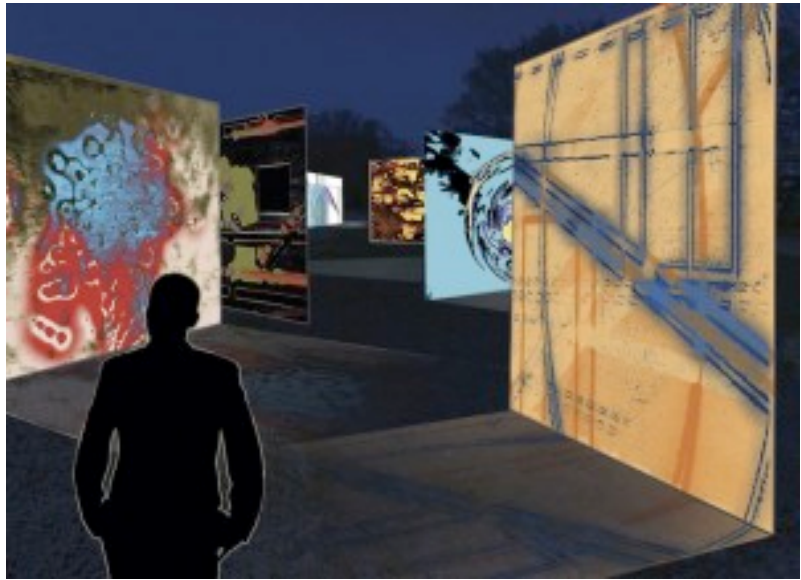
Jebney Lewis working on the creature that will be assembled at the June 29th event



The remaining projects include the debut of a huge sculpture created with the participation of many school groups, directed by **Jebney Lewis**, and **Phillips'** large-scale, interactive sound and video art installation (below). Both can be seen on June 29, and his other project: a mobile, video-art wagon (above), that Phillips created with help from neighborhood youth, who attended classes at Scribe Video Center; it will make periodic, night-time tours of the neighborhood. The **June 29th**

event is billed as a **community block party** featuring live music from local musicians, a gallery of artwork from neighborhood artists, kids' arts and crafts, food, and an outdoor movie suitable for all ages; all the events are described on *Commotion's* website.

Commissioned artwork always involves risk; the work may turn out to be disappointing. For art commissioned with public funds, it's more likely than not that someone in the community will object to it and



invoke the taxpayer's right to voice an opinion. But commissioning an undefined project that will leave no permanent object behind is a far greater risk. Having worked for a percent for art program, I very much favor temporary projects. They don't require on-going care, and artwork sited outdoors or in highly-trafficked locations demands constant upkeep, and look dreadful if neglected. Temporary projects are often more suitable for the budgets available, whereas major permanent art requires budgets that resemble construction budgets rather than art budgets. But I favor temporary work primarily because the artists can be more adventuresome, since public objections can be mollified by the understanding that within a finite period, the work will be gone.

It's not easy to determine the audience for a project such as *Commotion*: local residents, the U Arts students, the greater Philadelphia cultural community, the participating artists, PECO or the PRA. *Commotion* offered something for each of them, which is quite an achievement indeed.

Philadelphia Daily News, "Causing a Commotion in Grays Ferry," by Amanda Wagner, June 29, 2012

Causing a commotion in Grays Ferry

FOR TWO WEEKS, the Commotion Festival has brought site-specific art events to neighborhoods around Grays Ferry. This Saturday, it wraps things up with "Night Ferry," which invites audiences to wander through a maze of projection screens as artists create images of shadow and light, set to live music at the new Schuylkill Banks Crescent Park.

Video artists John JH Phillips, Dejha Ti, Derek Scull and Andrew Zahn will bring life to nine large screens by projecting shadows and mixing footage of the surrounding neighborhoods with abstract clips. Tim Motzer will supply the soundtrack.

Phillips — a University of the Arts professor and an intermedia artist — had spent nearly two years planning, workshopping and holding community meetings to develop the festival, which began June 16 and premiered seven site-specific events by Philadelphia artists and University of the Arts students working with Grays Ferry, Point Breeze and South of South Street neighborhood residents.

Commotion aimed to serve both artists and the community. "We came up with the idea of getting seven lead artists, and their job was to do the best work they could in our three neighborhoods. That's been accomplished," he said. "The second, equally important part was those lead artists would work with people in the communities through different kinds of workshops."

That's been ongoing since January. "We were not just throwing something down and saying, 'Look at our art work,'" Phillips said. "We are saying this is how it's made, help us make it, be a part of this system, and enjoy the talents that people have."

The project came together through a partnership with Peco, the University of the Arts and the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority's Percent for Art Program. After constructing a new electric substation in the Grays Ferry section of the city, Peco provided \$250,000 to share a public art project with the adjacent neighborhoods. The project may serve as a template for more public art efforts involving those entities, Phillips said.

The Commotion Festival has been sharing a series of interactive activities, encouraging the public to think outside the frame and experience, explore and engage Philadelphia's art scene.

Events ranged from a collaborative student-community sculpture and communal dinners to dance performances, physical theater and an interactive play.

"Night Ferry" promises a whimsical experience to be shared with friends and family under the glow of translucent screens and abstract images, surrounded by the sounds of alternative experimental music — and maybe even the buzzing of mosquitoes.

Night Ferry, 8 p.m.-midnight Saturday (rain date Sunday), free, Schuylkill Banks Crescent Park, 34th Street Access Point, 267-603-1648, commotionphilly.org.

Art Attack is a partnership with Drexel University and is supported by a grant from the Knight/NEA Community Arts Journalism Challenge, administered by the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance.

YAHOO! FINANCE

Art Comes Alive With “Commotion,” A Groundbreaking Philadelphia Public Art Festival; \$250,000 PECO-funded project connects local community with UArts-led art projects



Press Release: PECO and UArts – Tue, Apr 17, 2012 3:00 PM EDT

PHILADELPHIA--(BUSINESS WIRE)--

A partnership between PECO, the University of the Arts and the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority (PRA) is taking a revolutionary approach to PRA’s 53-year-old Percent for Art program. The approach has resulted in the creation of an innovative series of hands-on community art workshops focusing on visual art, sculpture, dance, drama, music and sound installations in Grays Ferry, Point Breeze, and neighborhoods south of South Street.

PRA’s Percent for Art Program, the first in the country established in 1959, provides developers with the opportunity to enhance communities with original works of public art throughout the city.

The Percent for Art Program requires redevelopers who build on land acquired from and assembled by the PRA to budget at least one percent of the total building construction costs toward the commissioning of original public art, now inclusive of public art programming.

As part of a project to construct a new electric substation in the Grays Ferry section of the city, PECO provided \$250,000 to support the development of the public art project to be produced in collaboration with area residents.

The funding was used to develop an undergraduate class, led by John Phillips, an intermedia artist and visiting associate professor at the University of the Arts. This new class focuses on the history and impact of art in local communities and culminated in the development of “Commotion,” a six-month-long community-based public art experience.

“We wanted to bring a new approach to this project by providing both an educational opportunity for students while engaging the local community to get them involved in the experience,” said Jeff Gordon, PECO manager of Corporate Relations. “We are extremely pleased with the results of our partnership with the University of the Arts and hope that it helps future participants look for opportunities to collaborate.”

“Commotion” has brought together seven noted local artists working in a variety of media to collaborate with residents and area schoolchildren in a series of workshops and hands-on arts activities. The work will be shown at a festival in June at various sites within the community.

“This is an entirely new approach to public art that engages student artists in the process of conceiving and creating new work in, with, and for a community,” said Sean Buffington, president of the University of the Arts, “Our students—under the guidance of an experienced senior artist—collaborated with residents of the neighborhood to devise an authentic and meaningful community arts experience.”

“The Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority’s Percent for Art program has created works of art that inspire, engage and sometimes even define communities across the city,” said Ed Covington, executive director of PRA. “This experience continues the tradition of the Percent for Art program and takes it a step further by partnering with some of the city’s exciting writers, dancers and visual artists to provide local residents with hands-on art making workshops, as well as access to original works of public art.”

Newsworks.org: "Living it up at funeral home: Play celebrates Philly lives cut short," by Peter Crimmins, June 22, 2012

Living it up at funeral home: Play celebrates Philly lives cut short

June 22, 2012

By Peter Crimmins



Rate This: ★★★★★ (3 votes)

[Ask a question](#)



Playwright Ed Shockley takes notes as he watches a dress rehearsal of "The Greatest Life That Never Was." Shockley based the play on real people from his neighborhood whose lives were cut short. (Emma Lee for NewsWorks)

"If you got a do-over, do you know which moment you'd choose?"

An actor, teetering on a tragic mistake, calls out from the stage, "A roll of the die that changes everything, for everyone, for ever after. This is my moment."

The line recurs through the seven vignettes that make up "The Greatest Life that Never Was," a play that will be performed in a funeral home. They are all about death — by crime, by accident, or by negligence.

"Make the wrong decision — you don't get out of the car, you get into the car, whatever — your life is changed," said playwright Ed Shockley.

Shockley culled stories out of extensive interviews he conducted with residents of Grays Ferry and Point Breeze. Taking cues from W.E.B. DuBois' edict that African-American theater should be "by us, about us, and near us," Shockley's theater company, Mosaic, is staging the play in the Mitchum-Wilson Funeral Home on 20th Street in Point Breeze.

The play is the theatrical portion of Commotion, a two-week festival focused on Grays Ferry and Point Breeze.

The levels of morbidity lay thickly on the proceedings, as acts about South Philadelphia death are played out in a South Philadelphia room where people mourn the dead. The plays are like tiny, very dramatic funerals, benefiting the living by remembering the dead.

"When you have a funeral, people come who haven't talked to each other for years, coming together, maybe getting back in touch," said director Lamy Moten. "Why not do that in a space where people normally come? It's a greeting space. It's an opening space, as opposed to a closing space at the end of life."

There are no theaters in Grays Ferry and Point Breeze; the largest rooms available are funeral parlors. "Greatest Life" will be staged in Mitchum-Wilson's largest hall, an awkward split-level, L-shaped room that can seat 400 people.

Culturally, the play is standing on the history of the black funeral home. Shockley said longtime residents of the neighborhood remember when, in the 1950s and 60s, jazz musicians would come after hours, push the seats and caskets aside, and play.

"The whole be-bop movement in South Philadelphia was either at the [American Legion] — those places for survivors of foreign wars — and the other was at funeral homes," said Shockley. "They put sawdust down for some reason — maybe there was blood on the floor — and would just come in and party like crazy."

After the Commotion festival Shockley would like to take "The Greatest Life That Never Was" on tour, to funeral parlors in neighborhoods all over the city.

[« More from Arts + Culture](#)

[Support local journalism. Make your gift today. Become a member.](#)

Comments

Living it up at funeral home — L.T. Woody 2012-06-22 10:07

Ed Shockley is another of Philadelphia's home-grown (but unappreciated) treasures. His work has been celebrated and recognized all over the USA for many years. I hope the hometown folk will come out and support another unique effort by this very fine playwright.

[Reply](#)