

Artful Relief

After recent disasters, artists have been helping communities heal. Now they're ready to play an official role in disaster relief and recovery.

BY JON SPAYDE

A couple of days after Hurricane Sandy slammed New York City, Caron Atlas, director of the nonprofit Arts & Democracy Project, got a call from a nearby neighborhood city council member, Brad Lander. The two had worked together as community organizers; now Lander wondered if Atlas could arrange cultural programming for some 500 special-needs evacuees—mainly elderly and people with physical and mental disabilities—who were taking shelter in Brooklyn's Park Slope Armory. Anxious to help, Atlas agreed right away.

At first, Atlas says, she simply suggested some arts programming, but the shelter coordinators responded that “if I wanted to do that, I needed to create the infrastructure for all of the programs.” So she and her artist collaborators created what they termed a “wellness center” in the gigantic armory that offered religious services, AA meetings, scores of musical performances, film screenings, a knitting circle, arts and writing workshops—and simple conversation and friendship.





Marco Mendez, age 13, interviews a Coney Island resident for the Sandy Storyline project in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

The experience helped spark a desire in her to create an ongoing infrastructure run by artists and cultural organizers—her working title for it is the Arts and Wellness Relief and Recovery Corps—that could set up similar wellness centers in any emergency shelter in the city when disaster strikes.

The Corps is only an idea so far, but Atlas and her Arts & Democracy colleagues have been in contact with other artist-activists in disaster-ravaged places including northern Japan, New Orleans, and the Australian state of Queensland, which was hit by major flooding in 2011 and again in January. They're learning about similar efforts, past and present, that use the arts to help restore people's equilibrium after a disaster, to knit ravaged communities together—and to examine social problems that are laid bare when normal civic functions go haywire.

ARTISTS AS “FIRST RESPONDERS”

One common theme among such projects is the overwhelming willingness of artists to help after a disaster. “When we set up the wellness center,” says Atlas, “there were more artists showing up to help than we could accommodate. It was like booking a festival; we had four or five performances a day, and people dropped off art supplies too, and led workshops.”

This was no isolated instance. Yasuyo Kudo, an artist and designer who heads the Tokyo-based Art and Society Research Center, recalls that in the first few weeks after the March 11, 2011, earthquake and tsunami in northeastern Japan, visual artists, actors, musicians, photographers, and other creative people flocked to the disaster area.

“While the ‘real world’ relief work was progressing,” she says, “other relief work using the Internet was launched. In the month after the earthquake, many websites were built by artists and art-related people, asking for donations to help the victims, and exchanging information among the artists involved in relief work in the area. These activities emerged everywhere in Japan very quickly and spontaneously.”

WHAT'S THE ART PART?

With the wellness center established in Sandy's wake, a question arose—what sort of contribution could artists make as artists?

“We got into discussions about what kinds of work would be appropriate, what people would relate to best,” Caron Atlas recalls. It soon became clear that the artists who had the greatest success in the armory were the ones who, in Atlas's words, “could engage the folks there and relate to them as human beings.”

In other words, rather than merely providing entertainment or cultural uplift, the “art part” of the wellness center served to remind evacuees of their humanity. When jazz musicians played, for example, they also talked jazz history with the audience, many of whom possessed a depth of knowledge about music and art. “People got to remember for a moment that they weren't just victims,” says Atlas. “They were people who loved jazz.” Writing workshops helped

residents make sense of what they were going through. The wellness center also became the studio for a visual artist evacuee who got through the ordeal by painting every day.

The arts did many other important recovery jobs, too—down-town performance-art landmark Dixon Place hosted a fundraiser for flood relief, for example, and the Council on the Arts and Human-

ities for Staten Island has given continued technical assistance and moral and financial support to artists who lost homes, studios, or artworks to the storm. But the power of art to restore some wholeness to psyches and souls shaken by disaster has emerged as the major leitmotif in artist-led recovery efforts.

In Japan, this “soulcraft” included a project called the Yappeshi Matsuri (“Let's Do It!” Festival) in the hard-hit city of Ofunato, initiated by artist Ichiro Endo and Tokyo art collector Hiroko Ishinabe, a native of Ofunato. A Japanese festival is both a religious ritual and a fun-fair, and the Yappeshi Matsuri features traditional group dancing and singing, food cooked by volunteers, and an open-air barbershop. In May 2011, the first time this festival was held, 1,500 people flocked to the auditorium and grounds of the Ikawa Elementary School to enjoy themselves and remind themselves that their lives were larger than what they'd undergone. The festival will soon be held again, for the eighth time.

CIVIL CONVERSATIONS

Another important motif is the creation of “civil conversations” in the wake of disasters—discussions about community values that serve to bring the community together and to engage with issues that the disaster may have revealed or underlined.

One example is the Sandy Storyline project, which grew out of Housing Is a Human Right, a storytelling project about home, homelessness, and foreclosure, organized by Rachel Falcone and Michael Premo in New York. The pair had been experimenting with new technology developed at MIT that allows pictures, text, and voice messages to be gathered via an 800 number. When Sandy hit, the artists knew that they wanted to harvest stories about the storm with this new technology.

The resulting stories, many of which have been posted on the project's website, include the harrowing, like an account of ambulance drivers in Hoboken, New Jersey, struggling to reach injured people through flooded streets; and the personal, like a young man's tale of celebrating his eighteenth birthday by candlelight during the power outage.

These expressions are cathartic for the tellers, of course, but sharing them also “builds community by getting us out of the closeted spaces of our own heads,” says Premo. “Whenever an extreme event happens, as we saw on 9/11, there's a need to come together. For Rachel and me, the issue in all our work has been how to use stories as a jumping-off point for a deeper understanding of a shared experience.”

Falcone and Premo plan to display the stories “in sculptural

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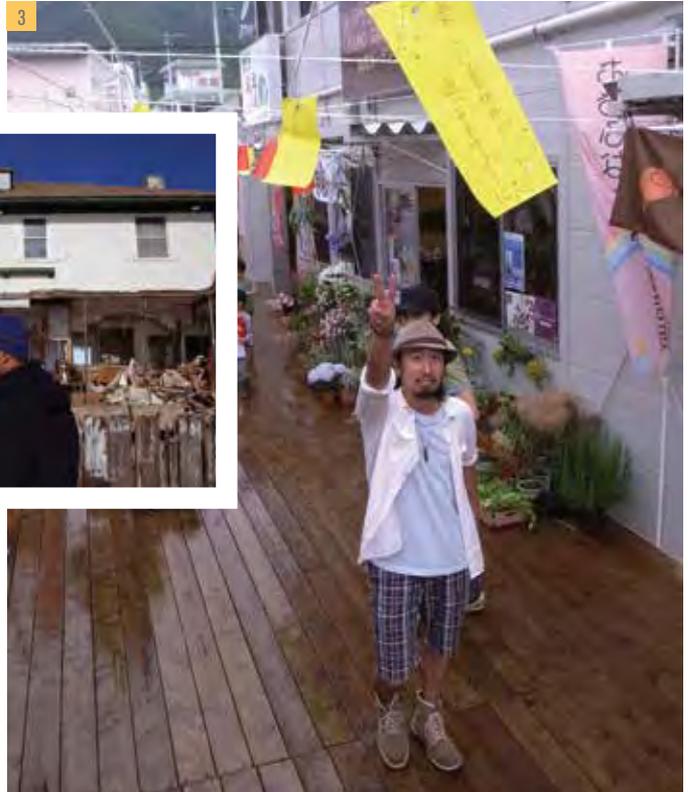


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1: At **Yeppeshi Matsuri**, a Japanese festival after the March 2011 tsunami, this outdoor play park began with the removal of glass and debris. Grass, toys, and a bridge were installed on the day of the festival so children could again play outside.

2: Local elementary school children shared their handwritten hopes for the future by tying them to bamboo trees .

3: Artist Shotaro Yoshino has been part of the festival planning committee since the first Yeppeshi Matsuri was held in May 2011.



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4: Mel Chin learned about pre-existing lead poisoning after Hurricane Katrina and created the **Fundred Dollar Bill Project** to raise awareness. *Safehouse* served as a repository for the project (fundred.org).

5: Chin invited the neighborhood to visit the project before anyone else.

6: Derek Prince, who lost his home and belongings in Hurricane Sandy, was interviewed for the **Sandy Storyline** project. Here he walks in front of another destroyed house in Brooklyn, New York.

7: Artists created a **wellness center** for evacuees at the Park Slope Armory.



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8: As part of the **Creative Recovery Pilot Program** in Queensland, Australia, artist Birgit Grapentin worked with children to create a sculpture called *The Tree of Happiness*. The pilot program was created by Arts Queensland and the Australia Council.



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installations set in interactive spaces in unconventional locations,” says Premo, to construct spaces where people can gather, see the stories, share their own, and engage in dialogue about issues that the stories raise.

CRESCENT CITY CONVERSATIONS

Other projects use art both to unite people and to ask important post-disaster questions. Such was the case in New Orleans, where artists launched a many-sided response to Hurricane Katrina, and New Yorkers like Atlas and Premo have paid close attention to the work of Crescent City initiatives like Transforma.

This project came together about a year after the hurricane, when the Catholic archdiocese of New Orleans wanted to sell off some storm-damaged buildings it owned, and the artist Robert Ruello, then based in New Orleans, contacted Rick Lowe, whose Project Row Houses had transformed two rundown blocks in Houston into a flourishing art center.

Lowe had no interest in reprising the Row Houses project, but he did suggest that a big, unstructured initiative be created to address post-Katrina questions. He invited multimedia artist Sam Durant and California-based arts administrator and consultant Jessica Cusick to join him.

“We worked really hard not to decide what we were doing beforehand,” says Cusick. “We wanted to let it evolve and morph as an open-ended support system for artists who wanted to help in the recovery.” Their initial organizing meeting attracted some 100 local artists, and the final shape of the nationally funded project involved three larger pilot projects; a group of mini-grants for smaller initiatives; and a series of forums, both live and via social media, in which artists and community members could share ideas and problems.

The highest-profile pilot project is undoubtedly Mel Chin’s ongoing Fundred Dollar Bill Project, in which he asks children to draw

“I’d like to see artists on every board in the city administration.”

— Jessica Cusick, cultural affairs manager, Santa Monica

their own money, which he then delivers to Congress to raise awareness of New Orleans’s dangerous levels of lead contamination. “The storm may have brought me to New Orleans because I wanted to help,” says Chin, “but the project is a response to another disaster that pre-existed it.” Chin is now working to raise awareness about childhood lead poisoning—and its resulting brain damage, behavioral violence, and increased levels of crime—in industrial cities across the nation.

A Transforma project that affected Arts & Democracy’s Caron Atlas deeply—she visited New Orleans and had a small role in developing it—was HOME, New Orleans?, an ambitious alliance of local universities, art centers, schools, community organizations, and community organizers. This many-faceted project involved a whole galaxy of discussions, classes, and art projects addressing the city’s needs—a smorgasbord of the various roles that art can have in disaster recovery, from history-oriented bus tours to theater workshops to pointed discussions of social inequities.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, OFFICIALLY

Jessica Cusick is cultural affairs manager for the City of Santa Monica, California. Her experience with Transforma underlined the roles artists can play in making cities better after crises—and in general.



After flooding in Queensland, Australia, teens in Ipswich were asked to define resilience. Their responses were projected on walls for the Writing’s Off the Wall project, part of the Creative Recovery Pilot Program.

“Artists are often anchors in their neighborhoods,” she says. “They’re the kind of people who remember the quirky little restaurant or shop that was destroyed; they have a feel for what makes neighborhoods vital and individual, and they can help restore the color, liveliness, and balance of everyday life. And they are very good at working with limited resources, which is a plus in this era of reduced municipal budgets. I’d like to see artists on every board in the city administration.”

Cusick says she has had an initial conversation with Santa Monica’s emergency preparedness manager about making artists regular contributors to disaster planning. That idea, like Atlas’s Arts and Wellness Relief and Recovery Corps, is embryonic. But half a world away, in the state of Queensland in northern Australia, artists and other arts professionals, working with the state and national government’s arts organizations, have taken a few further steps by creating a pilot project to explore how artists can help in disaster relief and recovery, and how the arts can be seen as one of the industries that ought to be shored up after a disaster.

It all started after a devastating cyclone and massive flooding hit Queensland in the Southern Hemisphere summer of 2010–2011. An insurance company created a recovery fund, and a group of local arts organizations, intending to apply for a grant as a group, went to Arts Queensland, the state arts agency, for a letter of support.

Coincidentally, after the flooding, Arts Queensland had launched discussions with the national art-support body, the Australia Council, about ways that arts organizations could help in recovery. “What came out of that was the Creative Recovery Pilot Project, a partnership across all of those organizations,” says Scotia Monkivitch, manager of the project and director of Helicon, an organization in Melbourne that does arts-focused community development. “We asked the question, what role does art and culture play in a community’s recovery after a natural disaster?”

The project set up and documented a series of arts-based disaster-response projects across three hard-hit regions in the state. These projects included, among others, Coral Harmony, a community choir drawn from the badly hit Cassowary Coast; an alliance between a Melbourne circus and a new circus school in the Lockyer Valley; and The Writing’s Off the Wall, a project in Ipswich in which teens were asked to define resilience and their responses were turned into wall projections.

The pilot culminated in a year-end report that included recommendations for enlisting artists and the arts in disaster recovery—and how to assist artists and arts institutions in their own recovery efforts. “We haven’t had any response,” says Monkivitch. “We’re in a difficult period financially; the Queensland government is new as of this year, and has made some vicious cuts to arts funding. So it’s an interesting time to be trying to work within these frames.”

But Monkivitch points out that Queensland was hit again by flooding following torrential rains this year. Time will tell if Mother Nature can become the best advocate for Creative Recovery, and other artist-led disaster-recovery plans, in the halls of power.

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Artists Needed

Nine good reasons for cities to call on artists to help with disaster recovery

- 1 Artists have proven their willingness to help in many ways, from rubbish removal to performance, by volunteering in massive numbers after disasters like 9/11, Sandy, Katrina, and the Japanese tsunami.
- 2 They are often media-savvy and can set up effective online resources to connect people and coordinate local relief and recovery efforts, including handling volunteerism.
- 3 Clichés about elitism, dreaminess, and disengagement notwithstanding, today’s artists are generally “plugged into” their communities; they know their neighbors and are good sources of information about their needs.
- 4 They usually know and value local institutions—especially the quirky, offbeat, and colorful ones that add value to communities—and will advocate for their restoration.
- 5 They’re resourceful and usually know how to do a lot with limited financial and other resources.
- 6 They’re creative problem solvers, used to thinking outside established paradigms.
- 7 Artists not only entertain and amuse dislocated and relocated people, but they inspire people to see themselves as fully human, not mere victims of the disaster, hastening psychic recovery and supporting the optimism needed for rebuilding.
- 8 Artists can help restore a sense of community and common civic purpose by connecting people through story, song, and other arts.
- 9 Artists can help underline civic problems revealed by a disaster and initiate creative conversations about solutions. —J.S.