rick lowe

COMMUNITY GENIUS

WITH THE ADVENT OF THE PUBLIC ARTIST, "SOCIAL PRACTICE," ALSO KNOWN AS "SOCIAL SCULPTURE," IS A GROWING MEDIUM FOR CREATORS OF PLACES, IDEAS, AND INSTALLATIONS, ALL DESIGNED TO IMPROVE THE LOT FOR THE REST OF US. IN NORTH AMERICA, RICK LOWE OF TEXAS IS ITS PATRON SAINT.

by CAROL KINO

photograph by ALLISON V. SMITH


Good Food
VICKERY MEAD

imagine

you hear of a neighborhood hidden in the heart of a city, a place so culturally diverse it's been dubbed a miniature United Nations. It's where people come when they're down on their luck or struggling to make ends meet, where refugees end up marooned and illegal immigrants can make themselves invisible. Imagine you can see the scores of lives that collide there, and gain insight into the individuals who inhabit them.

That's when you suddenly realize that a Mexican immigrant who cleans houses for a living knows a vast amount about a rarefied branch of Aztec dance, language, and culture, that the shy Iraqi refugee who hurries through the neighborhood covered in a head scarf is actually a loquacious former schoolteacher who can make wonderful flowers from colored paper and tells great stories about her homeland over tea. The guy who unlocks cell phones once had another life, too—one wherein he danced, juggled, and performed magic tricks in a traveling circus in his native Ethiopia. And then there's the homeless man who, throughout his troubles, has never lost his miraculous talent: the ability to restore any dying plant to life.

Even better, imagine that you are one of these people, and that you are suddenly walking through the world known for your gifts, rather than for your needs.

That's the power of Trans.lation, a project spearheaded by the artist Rick Lowe. Trans.lation has shone a new light on Vickery Meadow, an area in Dallas that's home to immigrants and refugees from more than 120 countries, including Burma, Bosnia, Ghana, Nepal, Peru, and Vietnam. It is said to be the most culturally diverse district in Texas, where more than two dozen languages are spoken, but the police know it for its high crime rates, and America knows it as the brief home of Thomas Duncan, the Liberian who became the only person in this country to die during the Ebola epidemic last year.

But since summer 2013, Trans.lation has slowly but surely set about making the neighborhood known for something else: first with a series of potlucks, talent shows, and craft markets that helped residents meet their neighbors, despite the language barriers, while also bringing in visitors from other parts of Dallas who'd never ventured there before. More recently, starting this past spring, Trans.lation has shifted shape to become a pocket-sized community center, where residents offer each other classes in subjects like drawing and painting, Ethiopian dance, Arabic, and English, with the aim of developing leadership skills and making connections in new ways. According to Carol Zou, an artist who lives in the neighborhood and currently manages the project, the aim is "to create a narrative of uplift, as opposed to a narrative of deficit."

Trans.lation has "raised awareness in Dallas of the existence of this extraordinarily diverse community right in its midst," says Jeremy Strick, the director of the city's Nasher Sculpture Center, about twenty minutes away by car but otherwise a world apart. "The wealth of talent here is something that has a potential to be a tremendous resource for the whole city. The idea was to create a form whereby people could demonstrate their talents and share them with each other and with the broader Dallas community."

What's truly surprising, though, is that Trans.lation isn't backed by a foundation or nonprofit or government entity: instead, it's an artwork, originally produced by the Nasher as part of XChange, an exhibition involving ten public sculptures sited throughout Dallas to celebrate the museum's tenth anniversary. As well as selecting ten different locations that would say something about the city, Strick says, "we wanted artists who could exemplify ten different approaches to working in public."

Lowe was an easy choice, for he was already well known for Project Row Houses, an initiative that saved twenty-two abandoned shotgun houses from demolition in Houston's Third Ward district, turning them into classrooms, galleries, and studios, and filling them with artist residencies and community programming. Begun in 1993, the venture now encompasses nearly six blocks and has been wildly successful in using art and the community it engenders, to revitalize the neighborhood.

Project Row Houses has also won Lowe many awards, including a seat on the National Council on the Arts in 2013 and a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 2014. He's now regarded as "one of the top social-practice artists working in the world today," says Noah Simblist, a professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, who invited Lowe to teach a class on the subject last year.

Vickery Meadow, Trans.lation (2013) ▸
photograph by ALLISON V. SMITH

White Cube at Vickery Meadow
photograph by STEWART COHEN

An art form that lies somewhere between sculpture, performance, public art, and activism, social practice is growing increasingly popular as the commercial art world booms. The category can comprise projects as diverse as Rirkrit Tiravanija cooking Thai curry in a gallery, Suzanne Lacy convening hundreds of people for a discussion of women's issues on a Brooklyn residential street, or the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn's 2013 *Gramsci Monument*, a plywood memorial to a Marxist philosopher erected in a Bronx housing project by the paid labor of its tenants.

Lowe is working more along the lines of Joseph Beuys's notion of social sculpture, which suggests that social relationships can be shaped and sculpted into new forms, much as one might model clay or wood.

Casting Trans.lation as an artwork, however, almost seems to diminish its power; such a perspective suggests that the people who animate it are but pawns in some artist-as-creator's aesthetic game. Yet meet Lowe in person, and he seems so present and engaged—and so alive to the possibilities of others—that one comes away convinced.

"The point of this kind of work for me is not so much about me doing it," Lowe says, "but trying to structure the work in a way in which folks in the local communities can carry it forth."

So why call it art rather than activism? Lowe laughs. "If I were to give you the modern conceptualist-artist answer, I would say, 'Because an artist did it, and they said it was art.' " While that's clearly not where he's coming from, his aims are also different to those of an activist or social worker. Instead of a direct, specific goal, he says, "I'm trying to find the poetic relationships that might manifest themselves through certain kinds of activities and trying to figure out how to orchestrate that in a way that tells a story. What are the relationships that

NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

Midsummer Circles by Richard Long (1993)

THE TWELVE-YEAR-OLD NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER is renowned for its holdings of work by the likes of Picasso, Rodin, and Giacometti. It is also known for its glorious garden and its jewel-box-like Renzo Piano–designed building with barrel-vaulted glass and travertine bays. But from its origins, when founders Raymond D. and Patsy Nasher decided in 1965 to display sculpture from their collection in NorthPark Center, the high-end Dallas mall that helped build their fortune, its mission has always been decidedly public—and unconventional.

That mission was evident during the museum's tenth anniversary in 2013, which it celebrated with XChange, ten works shown throughout the city of Dallas showcasing the manifold manifestations of public sculpture today. They ranged from the material and monumental, like Liz Larner's *X*, two mirrored stainless-steel works erected at the University of Texas, to the ephemeral and evocative, like the temporary pavilion designed by Chilean-born Alfredo Jaar, installed in the Nasher's sculpture garden, that allowed visitors to hear the first cries of babies born in Dallas during the show's run. A social -practice sculpture, Trans.lation, by Rick Lowe, who became the Nasher's first sculptor-in-residence in 2014. "We felt that the field of sculpture had become so diverse," director Jeremy Strick says. "We wanted to highlight that diversity."

Most recently, the museum has announced another effort to advance sculpture's public profile: the Nasher Prize, which comes with a $100,000 honorarium. The prize is to be awarded annually, according to a news release, for "a significant body of work that has had an extraordinary impact on the understanding of the art form." The prize is open to artists around the world, the winner will be chosen by a jury of six curators, museum directors, and art historians plus one artist, the British sculptor Phyllida Barlow.

The aim is to do for sculpture what the thirty-six-year-old Pritzker Prize has done for architecture, making it "part of a broader conversation," Strick says. "Sculpture is doing so many things today. This offers the possibility that the kinds of issues that sculptors are thinking about can be discussed outside the art world."

by CAROL KINO

happen between the team members, or the people that are trying to use it as a vehicle? What kinds of things are revealed to people in that process? It's about focusing people's perceptions on things they wouldn't normally look at."

In fact, Trans.lation's first project manager, Sara Mokuria, isn't an artist but an activist and researcher at the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas who grew up in Vickery Meadow herself. Using art to effect social change, Mokuria says, "allows space for creativity, for imagination, for visioning," in a way that more traditional routes, restricted by concerns about best practices or getting votes, might not. "It's a discipline that allows for more risk-taking," she says. "Art is allowed to circumvent some of that thinking and just do."

Curiously, Lowe says he didn't arrive in Vickery Meadow expecting to focus on cultural talent. Instead, he explains, "I went in with the idea of trying to find some way to create a common link between people because so much of the neighborhood's identity was about crime. Oftentimes, crime stems from disconnection among different folks. So I wanted to figure out how we can create connections between them."

After weeks of walking around the neighborhood, choked with dilapidated low-rise apartments and traffic, and scant on public space, he noticed that the people who lived there did a lot of walking, too. They often congregated and held impromptu garage sales on Ridgecrest Road, a residential street. The idea of setting up a market there, under a lone oak tree he'd noticed, took root. Working with Mokuria and a steering committee of local artists and community members, Lowe began holding trial events there in June 2013.

The first was a potluck cooked by local mothers, whose planning sessions required translators fluent in at least six languages, including Spanish, Nepalese, French, Swahili, Hindi, and Arabic. Next came music jam sessions and a talent show, whose range was so broad—everything from storytellers to singers to dancers—that it left Lowe floored. "It went from an eighteen-month-old little Somalian girl dancing a traditional dance to an eighty-six-year-old white guy doing the hokey-pokey," he says, "and then in between you had people dancing to black gospel and Latino rap." It was also a revelation to realize how deeply culture was rooted in the residents' lives. "We often forget about that in the U.S.," he says, "because here cultural producers are usually specialists."

In October 2013, Trans.lation officially launched its monthly pop-up markets, which combined performance with goods for sale, such as paintings, paper flowers, jewelry, crocheted hats and blankets, appliquéd bags, and up-cycled shoes. There were also tropical plants on offer, courtesy of a local homeless man known as the Plant Man, who for years had kept body and soul together by collecting dying plants from a nursery, resurrecting them, and hawking them from a shopping cart.

By December, the market had galleries, too—three rolling exhibition spaces dubbed White Cubes. The attitude, says Darryl Ratcliff, the project's artist-in-residence during its first year, was basically, "Why not? Why couldn't there be really well-curated, really interesting art exhibition buried right in the middle of a place where there weren't cultural facilities?" One of the first exhibitions was devoted to an installation by the Plant Man, who now goes by his given name, Jonathan Harris. "We wanted to monumentalize his daily activity inside the community," Ratcliff says, "because we were thinking a lot about how a gallery can make people notice things they might not always pay attention to." Harris now works for the nursery that used to give him dying plants, and he recently showed one of his plant installations in a curated exhibition in Detroit.

Dianne Solís, a reporter who covers immigration for *The Dallas Morning News*, feels the Trans.lation project has been successful. "[Trans.lation has] been terrific in raising the positive profile of the community and getting people to think about its assets rather than its problems," she says. "They came in and saw Vickery Meadow for the cinnamon that it is. They saw the pathos, the problems, the potential, and its bounce. They hit on universal themes of struggle and victory and saw individual stories propelled by all kinds of characters."

OPENING GATES

by KELLY ROGERS

Dorchester Projects by Theaster Gates in Chicago, Illinois
photograph by JOE MCCUNE

Chicago-based conceptual artist Theaster Gates has a reputation for revitalization. Founder of the nonprofit Rebuild Foundation, an entity focused on cultural redevelopment, Gates has restored unused spaces through art since 2005. His work is driven by a desire to see more cultural and artistic programming in his hometown of Chicago.

Referred to by *The New York Times* as "Chicago's Opportunity Artist," Gates, who is director of Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago, uses an approach known as large-scale urban intervention. By focusing on the cultural foundations of underinvested areas, Gates has expanded the idea of what art is, and what art can be: philanthropy, redevelopment, and transformation.

One of his many projects, the Dorchester Artist Housing Collaborative, turned an empty housing project into an arts complex for mixed-income housing that was completed in November 2014. Gates describes this art-centered residential community as a "cultural institution."

"At the end of the day, it's not just about housing," Gates told the *Chicago Tribune* in November 2014. "It's about the city as form and sculpture. It's about how artists see things differently and as a result can make much more complicated considerations of race, class, gender, space and culture."

Most recently, Gates' has gone from the street to canvas and clay. This summer at the London gallery, White Cube Bermondsey, the *Freedom of Assembly* exhibition featured a new body of work by Gates, in which he explores the concept of assembly via large-scale tar paintings and sculptures. He has transformed materials from his Chicago renovations into politically charged pieces, his theme of freedom referring to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which protects the right to peaceably assemble.

An art class at Vickery Meadow (August 2015)
photograph by STEWART COHEN

They approached it, she adds, "sort of like journalists."

Yet Trans.lation yielded unwanted attention for Vickery Meadow, too, from real estate developers and other entrepreneurs who brought in other craft markets and began raising rents. By the time XChange ended in February 2014—just before Ebola cast its pall—Lowe knew he'd have to reconfigure it somehow. Later that spring, acting as the Nasher's first artist-in-residence, he reopened Trans.lation in a small storefront on a commercial strip as an unmanned community center. It took about a year to figure out what to do next. But a few months ago, he took on Zou, who started out by recruiting people from the community to offer classes.

"If you put up a 'We're Hiring' sign," Zou says, "people just come up to you with all sorts of things that they can teach."

That's how she learned that the Ethiopian cell phone salesman next door once danced in a circus, and that the Eritrean man working two shifts at 7-Eleven across the street—who came to Vickery Meadow via Egypt and Florida—is a wonderfully talented drummer and singer trying to record his first CD. (The former now teaches Ethiopian dance at Trans.lation, and Zou is hoping the latter will help her start a music jam session.)

Zou has regular visits from another neighbor, too: Sahra Mohammed, an Iraqi refugee who has been with Trans.lation from the start. When she first arrived in Dallas six years ago, Mohammed says, "I know I escape from the danger. But I am all the time sad. I remember my family. I am homesick. And I see people are not like me, especially as I have a headscarf." Once a primary-school teacher, now retired and caring for her ailing husband, Mohammed was also at something of a loose end. But at the first Trans.lation potluck, she learned that her long-dormant knack for making paper flowers was something others in this new land regarded as a gift. Soon, she was teaching her neighbors to make them, too—selling them at markets, making new connections.

"I am happy not for the money, but because I see people like my flowers," Mohammed says in a Skype call, her face beaming. "Now I have many friends: American, Ethiopian, from many different cultures. They love me. They visit me. They come here to drink tea with me. When I meet my friends from Trans.lation, I am happy."

"That's the Rick approach," Zou tells me later. "You assume everyone is an artist, and you just give them a little nudge and see where they go with it."