

PLATFORM



PLATFORM promotes creative processes of democratic engagement to advance social and ecological justice.

Catalysts for Change

harnessing the power of art, the commitment of campaigning, and the energy of education to unleash citizens' creative and democratic potential.

Individuals not Representatives

creating unique spaces – communities of interest – where people from different backgrounds and perspectives come together in an atmosphere of trust to discuss complex issues.

Practical and Poetic

using a variety of strategies from research to performances, from walks to renewable energy systems, from publications to discussion – feasts.

Interdisciplinary Creativity

developing distinctive projects by consistently combining the skills and experience of people from many different disciplines—economists to artists, psychologists to environmentalists.

Here & Elsewhere

evolving long-term initiatives that embody a deep commitment to London's ecology and peoples while at the same time exploring the city's impacts on the wider world.

Infectious Visions

feeding innovative ideas into the bloodstream of society like a benevolent virus.

The above was written through consensus by PLATFORM's five collaborators in summer 2002. It is our most recent "statement of aims" and by far the most succinct so far (1983, 1987, and 1995), which is perhaps a sign of aging +/- maturity (along the lines that it takes much longer to write short things than long...). We are a deliberately small group, concerned with long-term working and building a depth of relationships to people, issues, and place over time. We take a very long time to work a subject out, and strive to take an extremely long view, disciplining our thinking by imagining and researching both backwards in history, and forwards to the time of our generation's great-grandchildren and beyond: the communities of the dead and the unborn.

What follows lays out some theory about the importance of integrating vision and art with a practice dedicated to social and ecological justice – or as Tim puts it, (Paraphrasing from Pascale Jeannie) a belief that "the artists unorthodox approach can open doors, minds and solutions that would not have been considered or achieved through conventional methods or institutions." What follows is from our 1995 manifesto.

PLATFORM has been described as many things – an arts group, a forum for political dialogue, an environmental campaign – but, in essence, it is an idea, a vision of using creativity to transform the society we live in; a belief in every individual's innate power to contribute to this process.

Democracy/Ecology Creativity

A shared expression of feeling is the foundation of any change.

PLATFORM provokes desire for a democratic and ecological society. We create an imagined reality that is different from the present reality. For example, we have held up the image of a city with its lost rivers returned, or anticipated a very near future where an oil-based global economy is commonly seen as a bad dream, an act of suicidal and ecocidal folly. Seemingly impossible visions, but as people discuss them, write about them, dream them, believe in them, they gradually take shape and pass from the space of imagination and desire into reality.

We use art as a catalyst. This art is not primarily about an aesthetic – it is creativity applied to real situations: initiating a 168 hour forum of international dialogue; setting up a support fund for striking hospital workers; creating a 10-week performance in a tent that crossed the city; installing a turbine in a river to generate light for a local school; cooking a fair-trade feast for 70 people coming together to discuss the ethics and problematics of engaging – even critically – with the corporate sector.

All these acts we see as art—the process of molding form—all focus on physical and meta-physical change, change both in the tangible space of the material world and the intangible space of people’s hearts and imaginations.

Our working method is grounded in bringing together individuals from different disciplines, who then work collectively, developing an open space for dialogue and ideas. Since its conception in 1983 PLATFORM has combined the creativity of, among many others, economists, visual artists, psychotherapists, community activists and teachers. This method of interdisciplinary creativity encourages participatory audiences from equally diverse backgrounds, ranging from fishermen to commuters, environmental groups to schools.

Platform Is A Meeting Place For Desire And Acts Of Change

20 years of work, learning from failures as well as successes, have led us to understand our approach in seven stages. This is not to say that we slavishly follow these steps as some kind of formula, or that these steps necessarily follow the sequence outlined below, more that these stages are often key elements in the successful realization of projects. One other aspect should be emphasized here, which often causes some tensions when working with a certain kind of artist, funder, activist and/or campaigner, for us the end never justifies the means. The integrity of the process has always been more important than anything that may or may not result from it. Therefore, if we need to slow down, re-think—we will; if we need to solve conflicts—we’ll solve conflicts. While this is often very difficult, for us this goes hand in hand with long-term thinking and a commitment to people and issues over time, as well as a belief that the personal is political.

The Seven Stages

DREAMING

1. Approach “reality” in a radically different way. Be fearless about thinking outside what is considered possible. Have visions.

Example

Imagine London again as a Water City - the city of 21 rivers it once was.
Still Waters, 1992

RESEARCHING

2. Develop an in-depth understanding of the issue being dealt with, through researching and working across disciplines and communities.

Research conducted on the trans-European trade networks involved in the production of electric light—copper, coal and bulbs—in conjunction with an economist.
Homeland, 1993

SELECTING

3. Be pragmatic. Choose whatever strategy and medium is most appropriate to the aim of the work - it might be a water turbine in a river, a newspaper for commuters or a discussion on a boat.

Publication of 26,000 copies of “Ignite” – 2 free newspapers detailing impacts of oil companies distributed to commuters across London.
Ignite, 1996 + 1997

FORMING

4. See the ideas moving into form as a process like sculpture - molding, changing, experimenting.

A series of experimental walks through the City of London.
Freedom in The City, 2002 -

FEELING

5. Engage with audiences –our “communities of interest” –in the most intense and moving way possible. Move beyond the rational alone. Engage the soul as well as the mind.
- The experience of participating in a 10 hour event, combining performance, music, lecture, discussion, meal and a boat.
killing us softly, 2000-

CONNECTING

6. Through the work, connect our audiences in London with the wider world; enable individuals to understand their own power and ethical responsibilities.
- A publication detailing the role of a British oil corporation and its employees with a potentially devastating pipeline project from Azerbaijan to Turkey.
Some Common Concerns, 2002

LOOKING LONG

7. Work long-term. A commitment to place and people over time. Parachutes are only useful for war, escape, emergency or stunt.
- A 15-year relationship with the River Wandle, its watershed and its peoples. Music, a turbine, a school, walks, links.
Delta, 1988 - 2003

Sharing Methods And Strategies

This is an area where we have perhaps been so involved in doing the work itself that we have not paid enough attention to amplifying the work through effective communications to a wider grouping than those immediately targeted (This can be illustrated, for example, by our reticence at the value of creating a PLATFORM website). Aside from presenting ideas to conferences, educational work, and publishing for journals and books, we have perhaps focused too much on the immediate aims of the work, with its small-scale strategic audience approach, and not the potency of wider ripples. However, we have come to see that this is inconsistent with other aims, such as fostering broad debate on political intention and methods, encouraging new practitioners, creating new networks, servicing the needs of students and researchers, creating a social and political dynamic in our own language, and last but not least maximizing the potential for stable financing of the work.

We may have justified this reticence partly because the pedagogical side of our practice has formed a third of our work for many years: working formally and informally with groups of pupils, students, NGOs, activists, business people, voluntary groups etc. A strand of this which we would like to pursue further is encouraging a far more critical and discursive environment for practitioners in the field than currently seems to exist (in the UK at least), and we support the work of organizations such as Littoral and Helix Arts (in the UK) in the various events they have created to do precisely this.

The need for blunter exchanges came home to us when we offered to run a “True Confessions” workshop for the 1998 Littoral Conference, held in Dun Laoghaire, Ireland, organized by Critical Access and Projects Environment (Littoral). Our session was supposed to be a small-scale experiment in bringing together a group to discuss failure, to share where work had actually made things worse...but in an atmosphere of trust. We anticipated 15 - 20 people, but the workshop room was filled to overflowing - perhaps 80 people showed up - which indicated the need for such a dialogue. Educationally, the session was not a great success in our terms, but clearly much more needs to be done on this. Our fear is that in events organized by arts organizations, there is an easy slide into the promotional rather than the critical (conventional Euro-influenced art history monologic promo artists “talk”). This is not helped by “pioneers” in the field often only talking in terms of the successful aspects of their work and never the failures or doubts. You would not find this in equivalent gatherings of ecological or social justice activists/campaigners, (or if you did people would be deeply and vocally critical) and we would like to do a lot more to encourage a spirit of honesty and complexity in this field.

The pedagogical side of our practice will be further embedded through the pilot project, “The Body Politic, Social and Ecological Justice, Art and Education” undertaken in collaboration with the Faculty of Continuing Education, Birkbeck, London University from Jan - Mar 2004. This is a 36-hour course over 12 weeks, for people from the arts, education, human rights, community activism, environmentalism, cultural workers who are committed to investigating methods of interdisciplinary working towards social and ecological justice. We will be tracking this course carefully and writing up our findings with the students, an experience which will result in publication on our new website and in hard copy, and further development of the course, perhaps extending it to a year’s study and involving a number of collaborators.

Considering Other Methodologies Of Working Not Yet Acted Upon

Since we began working on 90% CRUDE in 1996 - PLATFORM's ongoing investigation into the underlying culture and environmental/human rights impacts of transnational corporations - we have prioritized working, in an in-depth manner, with a deliberately small, usually invited, audience. So all three "live" projects - killing us softly, Unraveling the Carbon Web and Freedom in The City (respectively a 10 hour performance and boat journey investigating corporate psychology, an analysis of oil transnationals Shell and BP, and a walk around the invisible history of the East India Company) involve audiences/groups of between 6 and 20 individuals. These people have predominantly been targeted to participate in events, often selected to maximize the strategic impact of the work, and to reflect the strong commitment to inter-disciplinary working that has always been at the heart of our practice. So, for example, a typical audience for a killing us softly event (9 people) might consist of: a corporate psychologist, an environmental activist, a Holocaust historian, a writer/ critic, a chief executive, an artist, a performance studies student, a journalist, a management consultant. While we have found such an approach, of invited audiences, to be highly effective - particular in terms of commitment to engage and discuss complex and disturbing subject matter, often over a period of many hours—we also recognize that there are problems inherent in this strategy, most notably a possible charge of elitism and lack of openness.

In our desire for what we internally call "intimacy" (i.e. having the kind of eyeball-to-eyeball contact that is only possible with small group working) we have possibly blurred the distinction between intimacy and integrity, feeling that working on a more mass media level would inevitably result in compromise and a dilution of our message. However, in a survey of our supporters carried out in Summer 2002, it emerged that the vast majority of them felt frustrated at the disparity between the perceived high quality of our work and the lack of media "reach" and thus political impact, as referred to earlier. This has led us to fundamentally reassess our methodologies, particular with reference to communications. We now feel that while there maybe compelling arguments for keeping developing work relatively small-scale, this does not mean that, at a later stage, the work cannot change in its form, thus enabling a project to have a far greater impact. For example, aspects of all three projects are currently being published in mass print form, and beyond the academic or specialist press. This, together with our website launched on 1st October 2003 will enable PLATFORM to connect with a more mass audience for the first time.

Connected to the above is the issue of having dialogue and impact with the mainstream political process. Traditionally PLATFORM has reveled in its "recalcitrance"—the inability of people to "pigeon-hole" what we do. We've often referred to our work as "hovering in a space between art, political activism and education", but though we have felt liberated by such self-definition - and many people from arts backgrounds have also appreciated our indefinability—we are only recently realizing that such an approach also has downsides. The most problematic being that many organizations working within the political mainstream might tend to regard us as "mavericks", instead of recognizing the seriousness of our research and our intent; this has disabled us from making critical alliances and having a greater impact on national and international political debate.

Finally, we have traditionally felt extremely puritanical about having any kind of relationship with businesses, companies, industries whose activities are inherently at odds with our ethical finance and relationships policy, and especially with any company that is working in the interest of the fossil-fuel industry. We are extremely critical of reformist approaches, of the dangers of cooption, and of companies' capacity to inoculate themselves against their critics by being seen to be in dialogue with this or that campaigning organization or "ethical" consultancy. We won't take money or accept sponsorship in kind from businesses whose activities we disapprove of, even if they are showing signs of investing in corporate social responsibility, ecological auditing etc. We want to get in to dialogue with individuals from such companies, but not if they are sent as representatives, only if they come in their own time - a kind of search for the doubters, the whistleblowers etc. HOWEVER...not only is this approach a quick road to poverty, it is also open to accusations of naivety about how finance works (as General Booth, founder of the Salvation Army said when asked about "tainted money" - "the problem with tainted money is that there aint enough of it"...), and political ineffectiveness in the "real world" where one company changing one policy can lead to a snowball effect, for example. The internal debate is whether PLATFORM is interested in this "real world" change (a boom area in the UK by the way), or whether there is a greater power and impact in talking up the vision of a post-corporate capitalist world...and leaving the reforming to others better suited to it. At present, this is a source of creative tension, but there are unresolved issues here for all people engaged in a deep critique of corporate capitalist impacts on human rights and ecological justice.