

Disaster Response by Any Means, Methods, Materials Necessary

CONVERSATION MEL CHIN AND CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNÉ

No symposium on Catastrophe would be complete without something occurring that threatens a presentation. That has happened. Under doctor's orders, Mel Chin was not allowed to come to Mexico because of influenza and infection. However, under Mel Chin's orders to find a way for the show to go on, over the last 48 hours we have worked with him and his staff to proceed with the presentation with a surrogate that you must imagine to be Mel Chin.

CVF: Let's start with the introductory text of IX SITAC, I want to make special note of the following sentence to introduce my first question: "The notion of a catastrophe implies change, crisis or a definitive disaster, after which something will never be the same again: an event of the greatest transcendence for life or the system to which it refers, since it means its inevitable and irreversible transformation."

Mel, you made an animated film entitled "9/11—9/11" (2006) where you matched up Chile's September 11th, 1973, with Manhattan's September 11th. As a Chilean who lived through the coup, I know how personal loss can also engender empathy for the pain of others. Why did you find it important to draw a historical equivalence between two historic events that happen to share a really lousy date on the calendar? Was it to question or puncture that historically odious phenomenon that is American exceptionalism?

MC: Actually, it was an attempt to de-centre American preoccupation or obsession with 9/11, 2001. The United States has rendered it into a "nationalist" tragedy, which has become a major validation for the on-going wars. I remember approaching ground zero, with a friend, shortly after the event, and being emotionally unable to proceed towards the site. I was stopped by the postings of all the pictures of people who were lost. I was stunned by this more than anything, in the middle of the dust and everything else, and I turned to my friend and said, "Oh no, now hope must be eradicated somewhere else."

I immediately felt a need for a project, and feverishly penned a graphic novella under the pseudonym of Ignacio Moreles. A thousand copies were produced and I hit the streets of lower Manhattan in 2002, on 9/11 the first anniversary, passing them to anyone remotely interested. It was less about the coincidental dates and more about my belief in the catalytic potential of a fiction based on historical reality. I guess it stems from how my worldview was dramatically altered when I learned about your '9/11'. I had no knowledge of that until 1983, 10 years later.

A CIA document from October, 1970, mentioned how the American government's "hand" needed to be "well hidden" as we conducted covert operations that led to the overthrow of Allende. In response, I wanted the Chilean hand to be shown, and I recruited an animation team from Santiago. The idea of creating a love story, rather than a documentary, was to provide a fiction to be questioned and to be a basis for investigation. If the film makes someone curious enough to look up 9/11, 1973, which is easy in the age of Google, they will own this historical perspective from which to base their politics and opinions.

The target audience was the young people who would be the next generation of voters and decision makers.

It's important to understand the climate that allows these situations to happen.

CVF: (Here we make a break. Mel becomes a kind of newscaster; imagine you are seeing Mel in the evening news.)

MC: Good afternoon. My name is Mel Chin. We begin with a fair & balanced report from November 28, 2008.

This is January 27, 2011; we bring you this SPANISH EDITION:

REVIEW and UPDATE of Operation Paydirt and the FUNDRED Dollar Bill Project. The Project is not DONE, it is not over, and we urge your participation if you have not drawn your contribution.

The fury of Katrina left many, including myself, inadequate to apply a creative response.

Returning many times to conduct research, many layers were discovered.

It was concluded that the magnitude of the disaster required a response of equivalent scale.

Operation Paydirt and the Fundred Dollar Bill Project were conceived on September 29, 2006 after reviewing this red lead map with 86,000 properties contaminated above 400 ppm (parts per million). 400ppm is the EPA threshold where there should be no childhood, bare-hand contact with the soil. It indicates that New Orleans is one of the most polluted cities in the US.

Such statistic in human terms supports the tragic reality that lead is also in the blood of 30-50% of the inner city childhood population. And their lives were compromised even before the storm.

Informed of an estimated cost of \$300 Million to safely transform the entire city, and not a single dollar available to support the alleviation of this crisis, it was decided that the money would have to be made. That it would have to be exchanged for a solution. That it could not be the work of a single artist but made by all people affected.

That it would need an outreach of national scale to match the spread of people uprooted by the storm.

And it would need to be delivered.

The Fundred Dollar Bill Project was started as a top-secret operation. The chief operatives were Elementary and High school teachers.

Escalation increased.

Now it is no secret, the millions are being made in 1000s of schools participating across the country from Brooklyn and Washington DC, Madison, North Carolina, to San Diego, California.

Many now have a chance to be a Fundred Dollar Bill Facebook Fan Friend... forever.

Our website, fundred.org, is the main resource. We have developed educational resources, including a dozen lesson plans and teacher testimonials.

You can download a worksheet and print yourself, or, order the new eco friendly half-page template.

You can celebrate pets and inscribe new mottos like “ooh la la!”

You can draw peeps,

Or MLK, or one CHE and the many different faces of Obama.

Or you can comment and reflect on the agony of your personal history.

SAFEHOUSE was dedicated to serve as a functional iconic presence in one of the most crime ridden, flood wrecked, and lead polluted neighbourhoods.

After private preview and introduction to the neighbourhood of the 8th Ward, St. Roch, New Orleans, we culminated with a street party with DJ Baby Boy.

We publicly introduced the project on Oct. 31, 2008, with a national press conference, introducing the art, medical, scientific teams, and our intentions.

Safehouse was open for visitors and locals and eventually filled with Fundreds. Whether you were Uma Thurman, who, as expected, posted way up high in the house, or Devion Charlot of St. Roch, all Fundreds are treated with equal importance and value.

Safehouse, now decommissioned, has spread as an iconic representation of the project to Houston, to Atlanta, and Philadelphia.

We have assembled a team of landscape architects and environmentalists to develop the pragmatic citywide soil lead recovery program. We have refined the scientific protocol to transform the lead in the soil into a stable, non-bioavailable form, so that it can no longer harm the blood, bones and brains of the young.

And it will all be delivered. 3,000 kilos of creative currency, protocol and method of city wide transformation, by armoured truck, fuelled by school cafeterias, running on straight vegetable oil.

We are committed to the presenting the democratic voice each drawing represents, from the young of Beverly, Massachusetts, to the old, like 92-year-old Rosina Woolfolk Ward of St. Louis, Missouri...

When we have the FULL load of drawings, we will deliver for the people to the steps of Congress, and expect an exchange of funds to put into action the community capacity to end the threat of toxic lead in soil.

But the simplicity of the solution: draw, trim, send, collect, load, deliver, present, exchange and transform, must engage with the complexity of transforming cynicism, disbelief and mobilizing political will.

To meet this challenge, I have preached to the Kindergarten through 8th grade congregations.

We have met with members of Congress, and will continue to initiate the path for other Congressional leaders, like U.S. Representative Eljiah E. Cummings—of the 7th district of Maryland, to support this exchange of human expression for non-symbolic funds and real action.

The project is not about me. It is about the commitment to 3 million artists in cities like Providence, Cleveland and Detroit, Denver, Oakland, Portland; all lead-affected cities. It is the beginning of the celebration of drawing by the people and the eventual delivery for the people.

As a sign of real commitment to our student constituents who believe in our mission, the 18,600 mile pickups started in the State of Louisiana, where the Truck has met students bathed in spiritual light, students in joyful celebration of the project, and students offering their best *bon voyage* to the truck loaded with their generosity.

Mr. 100 Dollar bill himself, Benjamin Franklin, has given the project his blessing. We have Malcolm triple X philosophy to deliver—the voice, the science, the method for the physical transformation of New Orleans—by any means,

material, action necessary. Now, 358, 283 drawings later... We have seen love in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee. We've eaten that love, presented that love in a guitar case full of 7328 Fundreds.

Our driver, Tory Tepp, has been encouraged without racial bias to "Bring it ON " by white girls in Mississippi and Latinas of San Antonio. "Odelay", by Children of Immigrants in Arkansas, and pre-profile Arizona with bags of hand-drawn cash.

We have had Notoriously bigger Baltimore Fundred Boys with talking bout "de hundreds o' Fundreds". We have witnessed Home-style Media coverage from Provo Utah, & Fundred fashion and passion in Monarch High, Coconut Creek, FLA showing up strong with 10,497 Fundreds serious delivery by ROTC in Beverly Mass and guards in training Casper, Wyoming, to Baltimore MICA guards making practice runs to DC.

Wait... regarding D.C... WE have BREAKING NEWS.

We can report that directors and curators of the Hirshhorn Museum of Sculpture and Painting were presented this study of 3 Million Fundreds in Washington, DC... and have agreed to pursue it's acceptance into the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution upon it's delivery 2011.

More Breaking News. From EPA Region 9 Emergency Response. From Oakland, Ca. on Oct. 16, 2010.

Administrator Lisa Jackson, director of the EPA and Barbara Lee, head of the Black Congressional Congress met with Operation Paydirt on the heavily lead polluted residential sites the West Oakland, CA.

We discussed the importance, of this first urban demonstration of Operation Paydirt in the country... as a further update... The Laboratories yielded POSITIVE results in locking up the toxic lead. We can officially report that the SOLUTION is on the Way.

The violence found in Chicago is the same violence of New Orleans, Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx, and Manhattan.

These maps show a correlation between high levels of lead and low-test scores. Other layers show correlations of crime and incarceration. The educational deficits of New Orleans are the educational deficits in Chicago, St. Louis, Oakland, Cleveland, and Philadelphia. And they are linked by a common threat in the soil.

We hope that this will be a future New York Times front page.

And we conclude this report with a few observations:

There can be no social change until there is a physical change in the environmental health of our cities. There is no project without the drawings of the people we now hold and will continue to collect. They move us; give us meaning, and purpose. The value of human expression will be honoured, protected and delivered for exchange you can believe in.

CVF: I would like to ask some questions. In 2006 Mel Chin visited New Orleans after hurricane Katrina to evaluate creative solutions to treat the aftermath of destruction as result of the storm. Once there, Chin kicked off Operation Paydirt to attack a serious problem which predated Katrina but which proved equally fundamental: the high levels of lead contamination in the soil of the city of New Orleans. To assist the funding of Operation Paydirt, Chin implemented the Fundred Dollar Bill Project in schools across the United States to symbolically raise \$300,000,000 dollars which he would later propose to Congress for an exchange of real dollars.

Mel, the Fundred Dollar Bill Project is essentially one where you ask children in schools around the country to draw their own hundred dollar bills, their own symbolic 'Benjamins', that you later plan to exchange with Congress for actual cash/greenbacks. Correct?

MC: Yes, that is true Christian, so far we have 358,283, but this collection, by the people to be delivered for the people, is still building. As artist converted to deliver man, I'd love to bring in the whole 3 million Fundred Dollar Bills. But aside from the exchange, there will be an additional gift. That gift will be a scientifically verified method of transforming the lead in the soil into a non-bioavailable, hence, non-toxic form.

CVF: Can you tell me how you came up with the idea of the Fundred Dollar Bill Project and how that symbolic exchange has gone?

MC: Well, we're still collecting and promoting Fundreds. We are warning or notifying certain members of Congress that delivery will eventually happen. The concept began with hearing contrary stories from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the great environmental justice group, the National Resource Defence Council (NRDC). The NRDC had mentioned that Katrina had brought in extremely high levels of toxic metals to New Orleans, whereas the EPA simply said, "it did not get worse." I met Dr. Howard Mielke, a toxicologist/pharmacologist, working for more than 20 years on the soil conditions in New Orleans. To my surprise, Howard said the EPA was correct.

So I had to ask the follow up question, "Then how bad was it?"

He said if not the worst in the country perhaps the second worst and he then produced the red lead map. The red lead map showed 86,000 properties with lead

levels higher than 400 parts per million—the threshold unacceptable for children to come into contact with. Those numbers are relative to other countries; for example you have about 70 ppm in the Netherlands, 100 ppm in Canada, and zero tolerance in Norway.

But then I heard this contamination was part of the reason 30 to 50% of the inner-city childhood population was lead poisoned and no funds were being allocated to address this.

The response was a second of outrage then thirty minutes of thinking “then what do we do?” I told Howard, “We will have to make the money and we will have to deliver it along with the solution to the problem.” I emphasized “We” because I knew it would have to be the voices of children, the ones most threatened by this mess in cities all over the US. And in this case, the artist would have to take an evolving role: from conceptualizer, organizer, and negotiator, to delivery person, as needed. By the way, human creativity and expression on a Fundred is worth 100 real dollars in my opinion.

CVF: The amount you decided that you had to raise to clean up the lead from the ground in New Orleans was \$300 million USD. How did you arrive at that figure?

MC: The scientist, Dr. Mielke, had already established a number for one solution that did not involve treatment that was the “covering” of all affected properties with 6 inches of clean Mississippi river sediment that has very low levels of metal contamination. His numbers came up to \$250,000,000. In my conversations with Howard, I added the \$50,000,000, as I felt it was appropriate to treat and transform the lead. The treatment will be the additional and necessary insurance that the solution would be required once, and be generationally stable.

CVF: The Fundred Project, in a lot of ways, is very much indebted to one of your first activist, ecological artworks, Revival Field (1990). In this landscape art project, you worked with a scientist, Dr. Rufus Chaney, and used plants called hyperaccumulators that are known for their ability to draw heavy metals from soil (these include plants like sunflowers, hydrangeas and barley). The initial project took place in the Pig’s Eye Landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota, and lasted three years. You want to tell us a little more about Revival Field? How did it come about? What led you to this idea as a method of making art?

MC: First of all, sunflowers do not pick up lead, and the plants you mentioned are not hyperaccumulators. Revival Field was about proving that certain plants can and will pickup certain metals. Here’s a short video of the concept. I know lead is mentioned but again, no plants have been found that will uptake lead. The metal we were after in Revival Field was cadmium/zinc. One is very bad for humans and the other very bad for plants.

It came about after I had completed my first one-person museum show at the Hirshhorn in 1989. I’ve told the story often, going down the museum elevator, I asked myself what I loved about being an artist. My internal voice responded, I love doing the research that resulted in ideas, creating objects to represent these ideas with my hands. But another voice within me said, “Stop”. So I did. I returned to my studio in New York, and for maybe 6 months made nothing. Instead, I spent the time following a previously self ordained mantra, “to research and destroy my previously conceived notions.”

Because of this free-range research I came upon Terrance McKenna’s essay in the Whole Earth Review, claiming plants could remove toxic materials from soil. The green light came on.

I started to think about the polluted wastelands as sculptural material, and plants as the perfect sculpture tool. I was probably a pain at New York art parties then, especially as I advocated plants as the next greatest medium. You know that Dustin Hoffman film, *The Graduate*, I was the guy, who instead of promoting plastic, I was promoting plants, in a similar way. But, there was a problem; the more I researched the plants that ethno botanist McKenna had determined would be able to clean soil, the more I found that there was no evidence of such a thing.

By luck and perseverance, I found Dr. Chaney, of the U.S.D.A (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture) who had shelved his research postulating his concept of green remediation in 1983. Because of the conservative climate that continues to this day in the U.S. in terms of ecology his project was not supported. When I first contacted Dr. Chaney and asked about McKenna’s choice of *Datura*, he said, “That will get you high, but it won’t pick up any metals.” I felt that my contribution to this science would be to help make it happen. Revival Field more than anything else, was a replicated field test, the first in the U.S., to verify the science of phytoremediation. It became less important to me whether it was art or science, but that it was something that just needed to be done. I remember people would come to my studio, while I was on the phone negotiating with some polluter, and question me, why was I not making art? And I would say, “This is art.” I also felt that certain projects, like this, might need collaboration to an intense degree, and their completion might be after my death. This also freed me. I was willing to lay the groundwork, to be part of something truly transformative, and not regulated by cult of personality or sales.

CVF: Revival Field was clearly not an artwork devoted to formal artistic values as we normally understand them but instead about the conceptual realization of scientific/social process brought forth through art. Other Revival Field sites have been located in Palmerton, Pennsylvania and Stuttgart, Germany. This project materialized science,

technology and art, while eschewing art's more conventional object making functions. Did you say a goodbye to formalist art, art with a more formal spine, with Revival Field? Has the symbolically redemptive potential of, say, drawing, painting or video, become insufficient for you/for art from that point forward?

MC: No. That is a misconception. A lot of people believe because of the art hysterical focus on isolating signature work, it probably excludes other efforts that have continued. Since most of my objects and projects are concept driven, the forms that they take can be anything. In fact, I see using formal aesthetics as a valuable tool in political work, used to lure the audience into giving it a chance.

CVF: Of course, one could argue that formal values do exist in your art, but from a more metaphysical approach. Revival Field, for example, could be said to be a sculpture—you sculpted a living ecology out of a dead one or one that was dying. There is beauty in that. There is real poetry in these hyperaccumulators, these plants, leaching out toxic metals from a poisoned soil. These are not just words, mind you, they provide a context for levelling critical art which is indeed beautiful, in a way that is metaphorically similar to paintings and sculptures that might be equally so. The Deleuze and Guattari quote used to buttress the introductory text of this year's SITAC brought me around to trying to make these equivalences: it says "Art struggles with chaos, but it does so in order to render it sensory, even through the most charming character, the most enchanted landscape."

MC: I appreciate your assessment. Pragmatism and poetry is a great mix. I really don't think about struggling with chaos as a good job description for what we do. I think of it more as certain drastic conditions compel creativity to come forward because there is no option other than to do something. In the wake of so much tragedy and horrific reality, applying a different method of engagement is not just a struggle; it is a challenge to find a path to take me away from the hell. I tell many people that I don't go around looking for disaster to find meaning, or to be inspired by disaster or political trauma. In fact, I'm not inspired: I'm compelled into action.

