

# How Philly Moves: New Possibilities in Community-based Public Art

JJ Tiziou 17 May 2012

## The Framework

*How Philly Moves* began in 2008 as a personal photography project with big ambitions. Since then, through a collaboration with the City's Mural Arts Program, it has transformed the landscape of Philadelphia. During this process, it has also transformed my art-making practice in a way that hints at great promise for the future of our communities.

The premise behind the project is simple: Invite participants to dance, and photograph them all in the same light. Rather than posing them, allow them to dance as they see fit while creating images that capture the energy of that movement. Some are elders, some youth. Some are social dancers, some performers. Some only dance in their kitchens, while others do it professionally. All are perfect. The result is a series of images that celebrate our common humanity through a shared joy in movement.

## The Present

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2011 was a big year for *How Philly Moves*.

The 85,000-square-foot *How Philly Moves* mural at Philadelphia International Airport is one of the largest in the world, spanning six buildings wide and ranging five to seven stories tall along I-95. Visitors to the city are now welcomed through this gateway by massive images of 26 Philadelphians dancing. An accompanying permanent exhibit in the B/C baggage claim features 162 images from the series, providing context for the exterior mural.

Meanwhile, in conjunction with the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts, I collaborated with the Mural Arts Program to create a 'digital mural' on Broad Street. With the help of videographer Ellen Reynolds and projection expert Tobin Rothlein, this month-long installation allowed images of every single participant in the project to appear on the facade of the Kimmel Center at the same monumental scale as the painted images at the airport.

The most recent incarnation of *How Philly Moves* took place in the fall of 2011, when another round of community dance photo sessions included over 140 new participants in the project; the response continues to be overwhelmingly positive.

## Feeling Safe

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While viewers have all sorts of great things to say about the images, one of the most interesting responses to *How Philly Moves* is a recurring theme among the participants: the idea of "safety."

Over and over, the dancers thanked me and my team for making them feel "safe"—for creating a space in which they could comfortably be themselves. That this was so expressly noted begs the question: Do they not feel safe in their everyday lives? Do any of us?

We live in a culture that seems to place great value on celebrity and competition. The titles of mainstream TV shows are revealing: "American Idol", "So You Think You Can Dance?" and so on.

While there is value in a certain amount of healthy competition, we may be missing out on an important hidden cost when the celebrity mindset pervades our culture: For every idol that we raise up, for every "winner" that we declare, the rest are cast down as "losers."

From the beginning, I've made it clear that *How Philly Moves* is not a competition, but rather a celebration. There are very important subtle implications in word choice: the dancers are not "auditioning;" they are "participating." The project is not about any one of them "winning," but rather celebrating our entire community

and valuing the individual talents of each of our neighbors. If we are constantly bombarded by messaging that implies that the vast majority of us are "losers," then it is no wonder that we feel less than safe in our everyday lives. And that is why this project resonates so strongly with those who learn about it: in a world where the balance has tipped strongly towards celebrity and competition, *How Philly Moves* speaks to a thirst for community and collaboration. This is where public art has a role.

## **The Backstory**

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I began the *How Philly Moves* series in 2008, but its roots reach back to 2003, when my photography career began amidst the digital transition that revolutionized both the craft and the business of photography.

While the internet has tremendously changed all of our lives, few disciplines have been as profoundly impacted by digital technology as that of photography. Seemingly overnight, two big walls came down: barriers both to the technical creation of work and also the dissemination of it. Now photographers could more easily create independently of clients or editors, and share their work directly with their audience and community. Essentially, the digital transition enabled the practice of photography as public art. Now, with ubiquitous cameras and social

media, it is something that we almost all do in some way or another.

As this revolution dawned, it facilitated a creative frenzy as I launched full-speed into both my commercial work and a series of community projects. In 2003 alone, I created over 110,000 images. In 2004, I captured over 180,000 frames. This was more than most photographers created in a lifetime in the pre-digital era. In the process, I became aware of an important universal truth.

## **Everyone is Photogenic**

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Photography became a tool that opened doors to many worlds, and wherever I looked, I found beautiful people and compelling images to be made.

My experiences photographing the performing arts community in events like the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe introduced me to a wealth of exciting subjects on many stages. Equally compelling were the technicians working backstage, the administrators in the offices and the patrons in the audience.

More significant than just creating these images was the sharing of them. As images of the festival were displayed in projection installations and the entire archive was made

available online, the community found tremendous value in seeing itself celebrated through the lens. This thread has continued throughout all of my community projects since.

Photography has allowed me to connect to many communities both throughout the world and at home in Philadelphia. Throughout it all, I have photographed dancers, surgeons, protestors, lawyers, farmworkers, teachers, mechanics and more. Rich and poor, elders and youth, and everything in between. My archive now includes more than one million images, and I have yet to encounter a single person whom I did not find photogenic. And the most powerful impacts have been when the images were shared directly with the subjects of the images themselves.

*How Philly Moves*, at its core, is not about dance. It is about using dance to show that everyone is photogenic, and sharing those images back with the community. And this idea is merely the way that I use my craft to speak to the larger, deeper truth and beauty of our common human experience as we move together in this larger dance of life. That is the foundation of this work that resonates so universally and has led to the success of this project.

## **The Creative Commons vs. The Media Market**

## **The Creative Commons vs. The Media**

# Market

Images and other media are not neutral. They amplify the power of their subject matter, allowing it to transcend time and space and reach a larger audience, creating ripples of impact throughout our culture. What we see shapes our choices.

A quick scan of a "year in pictures" compilation online will reveal a series of images of conflict, pain, disaster and destruction with a few celebrities sprinkled in. Lacking are images of joy and celebration, of engaged communities working for positive change in the world. Our media landscape under-represents the very things that we need to inspire us.

It is this discrepancy that public art seeks to address, and it is for this reason that sharing positive imagery is particularly important. It is in this space that creating and sharing projects like *How Philly Moves* are significant.

I've long been drawn to the idea of Creative Commons. The Creative Commons Foundation, founded in 2001, provides a "global infrastructure for sharing." Creative Commons (CC) licenses allow media-makers simple ways to share their work while clearly stipulating whether users can make commercial use of their work, create derivative works, and whether the original content creator must be attributed. A simple code like "CC BY-NC-SA" allows a photographer to share their images with their community

without needing an army of lawyers. And yet, I've yet to embrace CC licenses.

If creating and sharing positive images can be so easy and powerful, why do professional photographers not do it more?

The answer is complex, but can maybe be summed up like this: Everyone is photogenic, but not everyone has a photography budget. Professional media-makers, needing to sustain themselves and their families, are constrained by the realities of the media market, even if that market's priorities don't seem to match their social and artistic goals.

And so, just like in other realms of the arts, funding is the big issue. Digital cameras, web publication and Creative Commons licenses have allowed for an ease of sharing, but only in one direction. CC licenses include a term for "attribution" but lack one for "contribution."

Photographers can invest in creating work and then give it away easily, but exposure and photo credits don't pay the bills.

Projects like *How Philly Moves* are so resource-intensive that they simply don't make sense in any of the existing business models for working artists. Photography as public art simply did not seem sustainable. Or, at least, until now.

# The Crowd-Funded Future

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Since 2003, I've known that the internet had the potential for two-way sharing, that the same people who appreciated my work could invest in it. A small section of my website had a Paypal donation button, encouraging visitors to chip in. It was only recently that two significant changes have begun to transform my practice.

The first was a simple change of framework. Projects like *How Philly Moves* simply don't fit into the models that I'd learned from other corporate and editorial photographers. My epiphany was realizing that this kind of work only really made sense in a public art model. This realization allowed me to clarify the importance of this kind of work, and to begin real fundraising efforts to support it sustainably. Now, a small but growing pool of sustainers contribute monthly to support my non-commercial work, and *How Philly Moves* exists in part thanks to them.

The second significant shift was the arrival of new tools to facilitate crowd-funding of projects. The 2011 community photo sessions were funded via a Kickstarter campaign, allowing over 600 backers to pool together to raise over \$25,000 to continue the project. This, for me, is the second half of the digital photography revolution, where art that serves the community can be directly supported

by the community.

Here is where my story comes full circle to the transformation of Philadelphia.

The *How Philly Moves* mural, along with the rest of the Mural Arts Program's amazing work, helps to transform our visual landscape with positive imagery. However, these images have a lot to compete with: the majority of the media out there continues to be top-down commercially oriented imagery and, as we know, media amplifies power.

My friends at the Media Mobilizing Project like to say, "Movements begin with the telling of untold stories." Now, new crowd-funding tools like Kickstarter allow every media-maker in the city to derive support for the stories that they want to tell themselves, and these new images can catalyze change in the communities that they document and promote.

Every bit of crowd-sourced support allows me to allocate more of my time and energies towards the public art realm, and away from the mainstream media market as it currently exists. Every step in that direction helps reshape the media market, which in turn has potential to reshape society. This is significant in my own work and in the region at large, as we use these new tools to help bring about the world that we want to live in.

Next time that you're driving by the airport on I-95, you

might catch a glimpse of that massive mural. Of course, I'm quite proud of it. But I'm even more excited that among all of the billboards on the highway, the biggest one by far is now a celebration of Philadelphians and the culture that we create. With new tools like Kickstarter at our disposal, I can't wait to see what we create next.

**Jacques-Jean "JJ" Tiziou is a photographer specializing in portraiture and movement documentation; he has never encountered an unphotogenic person in his life. His images are used both in corporate and editorial contexts as well as arts and activism. Based in West Philadelphia, JJ uses his work to celebrate the beautiful people around him who are working to make the world a better place. Some samples of his work can be found at [www.jjtiziou.net](http://www.jjtiziou.net), [www.HowPhillyMoves.org](http://www.HowPhillyMoves.org) and [www.EveryonesPhotogenic.com](http://www.EveryonesPhotogenic.com)**

Video by Ellen Reynolds

**How Philly Moves: the images**

**How Philly Moves: the images**

Selected images from JJ Tiziou's community dance photo sessions. Anyone who self-identified as a Philadelphian who loved to dance was invited to participate. No directions were given.

**For more about the project,  
visit [www.HowPhillyMoves.org](http://www.HowPhillyMoves.org)**