“For the Common Cause of This Nation”



Rick Lowe, *Black Wall Street Journey*, 2018–present, Multimedia installation. Installation view, *Toward Common Cause: Art, Social Change, and the MacArthur Fellows Program at 40*, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2021.

Photo by Michael Tropea

A conversation with artist, community organizer, and 2014 MacArthur Fellow Rick Lowe

Artist Rick Lowe, influenced by Joseph Beuys’s formulation of “social sculpture,” works closely with individuals and communities, identifying myriad ways to exercise creativity in the context of everyday activities, using it to explore concerns around equity and justice. For Toward Common Cause, *Lowe is*

working with a team of researchers drawn from the University of Chicago and beyond through a fellowship at the Neubauer Collegium along with a number of local artists and surrounding communities. With the Chicago team, he has developed a project that spawned in response to the 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma Race Massacre and the Centennial event in 2021 featuring Lowe's Greenwood Art Project. Chicago's sister project, titled Black Wall Street Journey*, aims to positivity highlight and generate conversation surrounding the economic health of African Americans in Chicago and beyond.* Black Wall Street Journey *poses questions and solutions as a "economic conversational hub" at Urban Juncture, the Smart Museum of Art, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago using information sourced from the perspectives of residents, project data and grassroots artists' contributions.*

For *Black Wall Street Journey* and *Toward Common Cause*, you worked with a team of UChicago researchers. Can you tell me what that process was like?
The project intends to uncover some of the lesser-known things about the Black economy and so we're tapping into Chicago's vast research resources. The researchers I worked with helped me understand a bit about how to think of the valuable, real-world information out there, often available but not necessarily researched and looked at.

There are faculty, people like Kathleen Cagney in Sociology. There are graduate students and PhD candidates, and then there are folks from the Mansueto Institute, researchers from there, researchers from NORC… So it's a wide range of folks

who were looking at different things. Some were looking to identify existing data, some were looking at how to collect data on the street level. Some were looking to elicit questions and solutions. We had a wide range of approaches.

As an artist working with scholars and researchers, what is the relationship there like?
For me, it was mostly about learning. I'm not a research person, and I came to this idea with the desire to know stuff, but not knowing if it exists—if the information that I was looking for existed. And so for me, I was trying to express to the experts what I was interested in and then allow them to help me understand what information was available, what was not available, and how to get it. And in the best way.

Generally I'm working more with folks who are experts in their own neighborhoods. But it is my process to try to find people who likely will have more knowledge about things or more knowledge about how to get to the crux of the issues that I'm interested in. So I rely heavily on those people and try to make the process as collaborative as possible.

For this project, you've worked with three partners: the Smart Museum of Art, the School at the Art Institute, and Urban Juncture. Can you tell me about the experience working with three different organizations?
In my mind, they each play a specific role and I try to tap into the role they play for their audiences. The Smart Museum has been a really great partner for me because, as I said, when I work on these projects, for me it's most important to think of them as collaborative. And the team at the Smart has been very

active and collaborative in their involvement with the project, which is really great. And that's in terms of all kinds of decision-making about what would be in the space and how we treat the space and all that stuff. It's really important to have multiple voices in that conversation.

At Urban Juncture, there was the opportunity to work more with community-based artists. And so having Natalie Moore and Dorian Sylvain be artists who were helping to anchor the *BWSJ* installation there, that was a big part of the experience. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago—they're a big entity themselves. And so it was really kind of nice to be able to just step back and allow them to work. We gave them the designs of how we wanted it installed and just let them go with it. And they've done an excellent job with that.

How would you trace your trajectory from your MacArthur Fellowship in 2014 to today? How does the *Black Wall Street Journey* exhibition and *Toward Common Cause* fit into your oeuvre?
I got the MacArthur Fellowship because of the recognition I had received for the community-based work that I'd been doing for some years. And so I had a presence in that world—I won't necessarily say that the MacArthur Foundation elevated me in that way. However, there were some things that the Fellowship did for not only my work, but for the kind of work that I do in this field. People were really inspired by the fact that I was able to get a MacArthur producing work that is nontraditional. And it was a sign to people—many people on social media were commenting about that, how it's amazing

that the MacArthur Foundation looked at the arts and artists in a way that was inclusive of folks who weren't necessarily working in the traditional art sector and art forms.

How does *Black Wall Street* continue your creative trajectory? How does it fit into what you're working on and thinking about now?
I don't know if it was a coincidence but getting that award in 2014 was around the time I had started thinking about the importance of entrepreneurship in Black neighborhoods for sustainability. And once I received that award, it gave me more time to think about that. Another coincidence was that the invitation to the 1921 Tulsa Massacre Centennial Commission was coming out and I was invited to participate in that. And that's what led me to *Black Wall Street Journey*. So I would say that having that time in that moment, in the five years of receiving the support from the MacArthur Foundation for the fellowship, was an opportunity for me to dig deeper into something that I had already been thinking about.

What is the resonance of presenting *Black Wall Street Journey* now and in Chicago?
As I researched the whole idea of Black Wall Street—what I was looking for, the whole question that drove the project, was, "What would Black Wall Street look like in the 21st century?" And so then the task was to find places that could be representative of that. And so in my early research, looking at different cities, different communities, and considering which has that kind of presence, Chicago surfaced. It has historically played a huge role in terms of prosperity for African Americans.

And there are connections between Chicago and Tulsa in that many people actually migrated from Tulsa after the massacre to Chicago, including a great-grandfather of a local Chicago businessman, John Rogers, Jr.

How would you describe the significance of your work to this particular moment?
One of the things I was intrigued by in my exploration was that historically, you can find that since Emancipation there had been so many efforts directed toward dealing with the question of how to economically integrate African Americans into American society, from the Freedmen's Bureau to state-sponsored Black banks and all kind of things that were community-driven. And that all came to a close, as far as I could tell, in the 1970s, and was completely gone by the '80s.

And after that there was no talk about the importance of the African American economy. The discussion about African Americans shifts from African Americans being victimized to African Americans being the victimizers, with the drug war and welfare moms and that kind of stuff. And to me, this is an important time, it's important that we make this shift now, particularly with the heightened racial awareness that's going on in our country. People are seeking solutions to deal with racial problems. And it became obvious to me that those problems are deeply rooted in the economics of our country. So this is an important moment.

How has the thematic focus of *Toward Common Cause* on "the commons" and shared resources informed your work?
The title of *Toward Common Cause* basically embodies the

essence of the work that *Black Wall Street Journey* is about. And it's important for people to understand this, too: that while we're talking about Black Wall Street with a focus on Black people, it's for the common cause of this nation. Just like the civil rights movement of the first half of the 20th century—Black people were the focus of it, but everybody was benefiting from a progressive civil rights movement. And I think it's important that people know that things like Black Wall Street are part of the common cause, it's not something that's separate from that.

This interview has been edited and condensed for publication.

For more information about Black Wall Street Journey, visit blackwallstreetjourney.com.

Written by Ellen Wiese
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Related Artists

Rick Lowe

Related Events

Black Wall Street Journey: The Economics of Black Chicago
October 20, 2021 5:30-6:30pm

CHOP IT UP: Black Wall Street Journey
June 9, 2021 5:30-7:00pm

CHOP IT UP: Black Wall Street Journey
July 8, 2021 5:30-7:00pm

CHOP IT UP: Black Wall Street Journey
August 12, 2021 5:30-7:00pm

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