



Thursday, September 29, 2005

get involved

The Laundromat Project

posted by [Justin Ed](#) on 7/8 12:52 PM

Laundry. To everyone except dry cleaners, the word typically conjures up feelings of dread and obligation. To Risë Wilson, laundry represented a priceless opportunity. In 2004 Risë, along with Takema Robinson, won the prestigious Echoing Green fellowship to launch [The Laundromat Project](#), an art center that will be based in a working laundromat in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Art and laundry tend to be at opposite ends of the spectrum of human activity: laundry's a chore we have to do; art tends to be a pleasure people seek out in their free time. The Laundromat Project was created to change both experiences by making a visit to an art exhibition a built-in part of the recurring chore of doing the wash. The profits from the coin-operated machines will help support the creation and showing of the artwork. But above all, the hope is to make art more accessible and relevant to communities who may never visit a gallery otherwise, creating programs and exhibitions that encourage people to engage more with the arts, education, and other civic activities. Thanks to Echoing Green, The Laundromat Project has the opportunity to complete its planning process and start searching for a location for its first laundromat-based art center. We spoke with Risë recently to find out a bit more about the origins and future plans for The Laundromat Project.

SparkNotes: Why did you choose Bedford-Stuyvesant as the location of your first laundromat gallery?

Risë Wilson: Many reasons. Although art and laundry are its vehicles, this project is ultimately about building community and sustaining culture in historically black neighborhoods that are under-served by larger, mainstream institutions. Bed-Stuy is NYC's largest and oldest black community, with all the features of an urban area whose history is marked by inadequate social services, a hard-core HIV/AIDS epidemic, under-funded schools, and significant unemployment.

But there are many neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy across the country, so an equal factor was starting The Laundromat Project in a place where we could make a genuine commitment to developing lasting relationships. I am personally invested in Bed-Stuy. Although I grew up in Philadelphia, Bed-Stuy is where my family first moved from Barbados at the turn of the century. My great-grandfather started a local dry cleaning business here, which allowed him to send for his siblings and help them get started in the U.S. My uncle has maintained small businesses here for decades. Now I have an opportunity to help retain the deep hues of this neighborhood's cultural fabric, while positively contributing to its economy.

SN: What led you to believe that even a passive engagement with art could lead to social change? How has your experience with The Laundromat Project convinced you that it does?

RW: One of the goals of the project is to change the way art is experienced so that it is a much more active, dynamic process. I want exhibiting artists to create work that can be hung from the ceiling, painted onto the floor, screened onto the machines, or any other process that defies expectations so that viewers have the opportunity to poke at the art, talk back to it, add to it, own it. The goal is to make people curious, not only about the artwork itself, but the fact that they discovered it in one of our neighborhood laundromats instead of a museum or gallery. I want my neighbors, especially those who are directly affected by the many social challenges we face as a community, to be able to see their everyday surroundings through new eyes. It is difficult to make positive life changes, whether on the individual or community level, if you are stuck in the belief that what you are facing day in and day out is all that there is. Before you can make lasting change, you have to know firsthand that there are extraordinary possibilities in even the most mundane and bleak circumstances. The Laundromat Project will use its exhibitions as prompts for those extraordinary possibilities-as invitations to get further involved via art classes and public programs we will offer in the building. Furthermore, our pilot programs have been designed to highlight the parallels between art making and social change, from risk taking to problem solving to turning dreams into tangible realities. The project is still in its earliest stages, so it is too soon to point to proof that all of its theories are correct when put into practice. However, the vision for The Laundromat Project was crafted and refined for six years, so it is supported by a great deal of research and practical experience in the art sector.

SN: Who will create the art that you will show in your space? What types of art do you show? Can anyone submit work?

RW: The project's programmatic goals emphasize a genuine dialogue between artists and communities, and encourage collaborative projects between them, which can be put on display for an ever wider audience. We are particularly interested in working with artists whose backgrounds reflect those of our neighbors. Part of breaking down the barriers to participating in art making, visual literacy, and civic engagement is to feature art that has cultural relevance.

The laundromat as a gallery space requires exhibitions that are site-specific, which simply means the work is created and displayed after taking all the unique features of the building and audience into consideration. This kind of art making requires people who aren't afraid of a challenge and who are comfortable with making something that may only exist temporarily.

SN: Thousands of laundromats operate across the United States. Do you foresee applying your concept to locations beyond Bedford-Stuyvesant? What are your ultimate goals for The Laundromat Project?

RW: Absolutely! Our ultimate goals are to directly contribute to the vibrancy and health of underserved communities of color across the globe, but first we want to create a solid foundation here in New York. The kind of change that we hope to see requires deep, personal relationships; sustained engagement with creative practices; and a considerable

amount of time. We aren't relying on the novelty of the concept to make the impact we seek.

SN: What influences inspired you to become a social entrepreneur?

RW:I have always felt a personal responsibility to use my life in the service of a greater good. What I was confused about was the role of money in that process. When I was younger I thought "giving back" required a pool of wealth that could only be acquired through a soul-killing corporate job or some other stiff, professional stint. I learned a great deal from working in the corporate sector, but fortunately I realized fairly quickly that I did not have to trade in my dreams in order to support my life's goals.

This project started with a mission to make art more accessible to black audiences as a tool of cultural autobiography. I had all kinds of ideas of what that could look like. But when someone asked me how I planned to pay for all those lofty plans, that was when the real work began. The challenge was to figure out a way to make money to support the mission, without passing on the expense to the people I hoped we would serve, and without compromising the goals of the mission itself. I didn't know that what I was creating was a social venture until after I blueprinted The Laundromat Project.

SN: What advice would you offer to young people considering careers in social change?

RW: Ask yourself: What are you passionate about? What would you do for free? Get excited. Daydream. Keep journals to capture all the marvelous possibilities of the change you can bring into the world if you committed yourself to this work full-time. Revel in your ideas. Congratulate yourself for your commitment to pursue an inspiring vision. And when you are at the zenith of your enchantment with the phenomenal possibility of *what* you can do, roll up your sleeves and dig into the key question of *how*.

Keep in mind that change doesn't happen overnight and neither does learning everything you need to know in order to accomplish its work. Give yourself time to get clear about the contribution you want to make, as well as the preparation required to do so. Practical experience in your area of interest will help greatly. Not only can it provide the information and hard skill sets you need to do this work, but it should also aid your own professional development. Even if you are doing grassroots work that is all about informality and breaking down rigid barriers, you should still think of yourself as a professional who needs to practice certain habits to be an effective leader. From priority-setting to compassion to problem-solving to humility and being open to all sorts of feedback (even the kind that stings), have the courage and commitment to develop your own character as you pursue a life of bringing change into the world.

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Yummy [specialk4489](#)

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Give it up for Risë Wilson. I'm all about it. Brilliant.

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