

# OUT OF PLACE

Tim Doud &  
Zoë Charlton  
(eds.)

Artists,  
Pedagogy,  
and Purpose

OUT OF PLACE



BEFORE YOU START TO READ THIS BOOK, take this moment to think about making a donation to punctum books, an independent non-profit press,

@ <https://punctumbooks.com/support/>

If you're reading the e-book, you can click on the image below to go directly to our donations site. Any amount, no matter the size, is appreciated and will help us to keep our ship of fools afloat. Contributions from dedicated readers will also help us to keep our commons open and to cultivate new work that can't find a welcoming port elsewhere. Our adventure is not possible without your support.

Vive la Open Access.



Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

OUT OF PLACE: ARTISTS, PEDAGOGY, AND PURPOSE. Copyright © 2021 by the editors and authors. This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform, and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or punctum books endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

First published in 2021 by punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.  
<https://punctumbooks.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-004-0 (print)

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-005-7 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0367.1.00

LCCN: 2021949029

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

Cover image: Joseph Kunkel, Northern Cheyenne Reservation, Tongue River, July 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

 punctumbooks  
*spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion*

**OUT  
OF  
PLACE**

**Tim Doud &  
Zoë Charlton  
(eds.)**

**Artists,  
Pedagogy,  
and Purpose**



## Table of Contents

Jordan Amirkhani, The Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought, New Orleans LA Foreword	15
Tim Doud American University, Washington DC + Zoë Charlton American University, Washington DC   'sindikit   Baltimore MD Introduction	23
<b>I. Artist-Scholars in Place</b>	
Alexandria Smith Royal College of Art, London, UK	33
Ken Gonzales-Day Scripps College, Claremont CA	41
Lauren Frances Adams Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD	49
Lisi Raskin Rhode Island School of Design, Providence RI	61
Michael Ray Charles University of Houston, Houston TX	75
Patricia Nguyễn Northwestern University, Evanston IL Axis Lab	85
Rudy Lemcke California College of the Arts, San Francisco CA + Tina Takemoto California College of the Arts, San Francisco CA Queer Conversations on Culture and the Arts	95

## 2. Inside-Out

Caroline Woolard Pratt Institute, Brooklyn NY + Susan Jahoda University of Massachusetts, Amherst MA BFAMFAPhD	107
Dan Devening School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago IL Devening Projects	127
Elliott P. Montgomery The New School, New York City NY Extrapolation Factory	141
Jen Delos Reyes University of Illinois, Chicago IL Open Engagement + Side by Side	149
Janelle Iglesias University of California, San Diego CA + Lisa Iglesias Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley MA Las Hermanas Iglesias	155
Roz Crews Portland State University, Portland OR The Center for Undisciplined Research	171
Wendy DesChene Auburn University, Auburn AL + Jeff Schmuki Georgia Southern University, Statesboro GA PlantBot Genetics	181
Stephanie Dinkins New York State University, Stonybrook NY	191

## 3. Artists and Place

Alexis Granwell Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia PA; University of Pennsylvania Tiger Strikes Asteroid	203
Pablo Guardiola San Juan, Puerto Rico + Tony Cruz San Juan, Puerto Rico Beta-Local	213

Heather Hart Rutgers University, New Brunswick NJ + Jina Valentine School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago IL Black Lunch Table	<b>223</b>
Carmen Papalia Vancouver BC, Canada + Whitney Mashburn Boston MA	<b>235</b>
Kenneth Bailey Boston MA ds4si	<b>245</b>
Antoine Williams Guilford College, Greensboro NC + Daniel Coleman University of North Carolina, Greensboro NC + George Scheer Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans LA Elsewhere	<b>253</b>
Christopher Robbins Purchase College, State University of New York NY + Maria del Carmen Montoya George Washington University, Washington DC Ghana ThinkTank	<b>267</b>
farid rakun Jakarta, Indonesia + Leonhard Bartolomeus Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Yamaguchi, Japan + Marcellina Dwi Kencana Putri Jakarta, Indonesia Gudskul	<b>283</b>
Jaimés Mayhew Baltimore MD	<b>299</b>
Joseph Kunkel Santa Fe NM Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative	<b>307</b>
Michele Carlson George Washington University, Washington DC Related Tactics + Art Practical	<b>317</b>
Noah Fischer New York City NY Occupy Museums	<b>327</b>
Risë Wilson Brooklyn NY The Laundromat Project	<b>341</b>

Ryan McCartney St. Louis MO The Icebox Project Space	<b>351</b>
Shani Peters New Orleans LA + Joseph Cuillier III New Orleans LA The Black School	<b>361</b>
Bill Gaskins The Graduate Program in Photography + Media & Society Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD Conclusion	<b>375</b>
George Cicle Baltimore MD + Tim Doud American University, Washington DC + Zoë Charlton American University, Washington DC Afterwords	<b>385</b>
Contributor Biographies	<b>399</b>
Project Biographies	<b>415</b>
Figures	<b>423</b>

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the late Professor Ron Haynie and Glenna Haynie who, through their collective insight and friendship, brought us together as collaborators. Zoë has deep love and gratitude to her mother, Lucille Charlton, a life-long educator. She was her first teacher who gave with an open heart to her family and her students. Tim gives gratitude to his mother, Eleanor Doud, who supported his pursuits and made it possible for him to go to college. She never said no to anything.

And we want to acknowledge the generous art activators who made recommendations of people to research: Amy Sadao, Former Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania; Professors Christine Tarkowski and Diana Guerrero-Maciá of the Fiber Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Damien Davis, Purchase College, State University of New York; Ellie Buttrose, Curator, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia; Dr. Jeffreen Hayes, Executive Director of ThreeWalls; Jesse Harrod, Professor at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia; Kathe Albrecht, our former colleague at American University; Nicole Caruth, independent curator and social architect; Ruby Lerner, the founder of Creative Capital; and Sanjit Sethi, Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

To our dear colleagues at American University in the Art Office, Jaylynn Saure and Fettlework Daley, who we value immensely for their insight, kindness, and expertise. Thank you, Joyce Scott and Michelle Grabner, for being exemplary models of artists with committed practices that extend beyond their studios into the communities.

Thanks also to the artists: Anne Wilson; Ashley Minner; Carole Lung with Frau Fiber; Fritz Haeg at Salmon Creek Farm and Larry Rinder; Jeremy Chen at The Moving Company; Juliana Huxtable; Joseph Lopez at Convergent Media Collective; Juan William Chavez at North Side Workshop, St. Louis; Kimba Thompson at Blak Dot Gallery, Melbourne; Sergio Muñoz Sarmiento at The Art and Law Program, New York City; Vanessa German at ArtHouse; Xandra Ibarra; Zanele Muholi, and their collective Inkanyiso in South Africa. We are grateful for your work with us and your collegiality.

It has been a profoundly beautiful experience for us to co-edit *Out of Place*. This book would not have been realized if not for the trust, commitment, and unwavering support from Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei and Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy at punctum books. *Out of Place*, like ourselves and all of the contributors, will take up space that has not always been made for us. Our personal and professional trajectories in academia contains proof that all folks must see themselves in the histories and narratives we are taught. Thank you punctum for including us in your family.

*We appreciate the many people who helped us work on our book, with heartfelt gratitude to our spouses (and part-time editors/opinionated chefs) Ed Ingebretsen and Rick Delaney.*

*We also dedicate this book to our professors, the late Ed Love, Françoise Baudoin d'Ajou, Lilian Garcia-Roig, Phil Hanson, Meg Olin, and the late Ray Yoshida. Through mentorship, they opened up the possibilities of what teaching could be, what it means to be collegial, and ways to give back.*



## Foreword

“No Church in the Wild”: To Seize From It What We Can, What We Are Able

In the 2013 radical treatise *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, the academic-activists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney unpack in a series of seven essays the consequences of neoliberalism on contemporary academic work and invite scholars of all disciplines to overcome their complacency in service of a more just and equitable university culture. At the center of their thesis of subversion and emancipation, Moten and Harney enlist “the undercommons”—the “maroon communities of composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologist professors, and feminist engineers,” or, those whose work within the university is often overlooked, undervalued, and thus deemed a threat to “business as usual”—to band together to create a university in active defiance against the forms of oppression that mark our current order. Anti-colonialist, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-hierarchical, a university run by the needs of the undercommons is a university working with a different set of pedagogical and research orientations where “improvisation and collaboration,” modes of “passionate refusal,” and, at times, abuse of the university’s hospitality, work in symphony with practices of resource-sharing, interdisciplinary squatting, and risk-taking, too.

While Moten and Harney do not mention visual artists specifically in their definition of the university’s “undercommons,” the duo’s musically-informed language and spatial poetics points to their belief in the resistant power of aesthetic expression and the “creative impulses that collectively and trans-historically produce something else, anew” in order to shape a path forward for radical pedagogical and research-based work. Art’s philosophical foundations and processes have always been deeply connected to the arts of transformation, imagination, alternatives, and,

in some cases, revolution, that is, the desire to create, interpret, and re-constitute anew is in many ways *a priori* to art-making. As John Berger once remarked, in an age marked by alienation and market values, art is a way of

undoing the world of things [in order to construct a] world that we want, that we must see, even when that labor fails, ... for, art is action and ideas, not achievement.<sup>1</sup>

Understood in this way, not only are artists insistently engaging in forms of cultural resistance antagonistic to market values, but their work also aligns with a history of radical politics and world-building where the possibilities inherent in construction serve as conduits for a range of collective emancipatory struggles across time and space.

By mobilizing the demands of Moten and Harney to improvise new modalities and consequences for academic work, pedagogy, that is, the very methods and practices of teaching others, becomes the apex of imagining what this new, better ground upon which to thrive might require. For pedagogy is an inherently communal activity, created and enacted within the relations of a committed group of learners to make and share knowledge, question habits of thought, and render visible the ideological premises upon which this work is done. At its best and most potent, it becomes committed to what Christina Sharpe calls the “wake work,” or a kind of gathering of ruptures and caretaking of consciousness that continuously centers the continuing disasters of capitalism, transatlantic enslavement, and mass incarceration within it in order to ensure that the work remains not only in service of social justice and democratic ideals, but for and by those most vulnerable and precarious within the systems we live and work, namely, Black people.

The future for this kind of radical pedagogy is difficult and requires an equal investment in creation, care, and, in some instances, complete fugitivity from the traditional demands of university culture. For the state of our world is in a kind of emergency, and it is the university itself that connects to many of our social and public crises, specifically, white supremacy and capitalism. Universities are now million-dollar businesses, students are now customers, and aggressive marketing strategies and branding campaigns that continue to espouse the university as a common good, accessible and available to everyone, functions now more as mythos than fact. Precarity runs wide and deep through these managerial organizations from rising tuitions that have not accompanied increases in wages, unprecedented accrual of student debt—most significant for Black women who hold the most student debt and those seeking to become professional artists—divestment in educational and faculty in-

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*, ed. Tom Overton (London: Verso Press, 2018), 210.

frastructure for million-dollar administrative, leisure, entertainment, and sporting campaigns, the shattering of arts and humanities departments, and alarming rises in adjunct and zero-contract hour employment at the expense of benefits and job security. As Frederic Jameson reminds, the university is a bastion of “Enlightenment-type critiques and de-mystification” projects, as a way to deflate true social transformation “in order to clear ground for unobstructed planning and development.” How to survive them, or to work within them and against them, requires a kind of cunning, secretive, even criminal-adjacent activity. Teaching, the university’s greatest commodity is where this work takes place, and the classroom and pedagogy is the battlefield by which the work of privileged professionalization is challenged and new equations for artistic pedagogical goals can be articulated.

The incredible constellation of voices and essays gathered into this tome, *Out of Place: Artists, Pedagogy, and Purpose*, is a critical reader for those who teach or have been taught in a university art program, for those who care about how art is transmitted into cultural and critical discourse, and for those who are eager to test what it means to place social justice in conversation or confrontation with the goals of a contemporary liberal arts education. I stress conversation and confrontation as a way to acknowledge the historical tension that being an artist in the university has always contained. Since the collapse of the atelier and conservatory systems for visual artists in the second half of the 20th century, the artist’s migration and assimilation into the traditional research, pedagogical, and professional demands of higher education have been one of negotiation and conflict. As in the past, these conflicts revealed themselves in the areas of one, research production: Is a painting like a peer-reviewed article? Can the making and production of a film be evaluated using the language and assumptions of academic originality and individual achievement?; two, politics: What does it mean to teach courses on Marxism in elite private universities? Can I be a radical and still depend upon adjunct labor? Is my labor being put to use to incur actual change, or sustain the status quo?; and three, pedagogy: Am I doing enough to critique the Western, white, patriarchal assumptions of my discipline? Am I creating a space where a diverse, underrepresented range of voices, geographies, and perspectives are centered? Am I interrogating my own assumptions as a teacher and meeting my students where they are at in the classroom, economically, culturally, geographically?

My own time in academia was fraught with these questions. Whether teaching and working in regional state universities or elite private academic institutions, in small cities or major metropolitan centers, the techniques of finding and shaping a pedagogical practice stayed very much the same. Across each iteration, what it took was finding a community both inside and outside the institution where risk-taking and critical questioning of how and through what means a more equitable space of learning could be enacted. It took saying no to patterns and inherited values in my discipline that perpetuate systems of exclusion and oppression, it required qui-

etly refusing to negotiate historical truths in my classroom and in the conference room, it took a lot of listening to Black women and my students of color about their experiences in the university and the harms they have suffered, it took yearly and monthly revising and revisiting my pedagogy in communion with other stewards of change inside and outside the university. It took consistent and constant re-teaching of myself for the benefit of others. Sharing resources, power, and solidarities, creating avenues for exchange across disciplines and within my community; providing mentorship and care to fellow peers and students of color, my queer and non-binary academic network; acknowledging women toiling away in grand excess of their male peers across all university systems; figuring out how to split funding and grants seventeen-thousand ways; learning from generations that came before; figuring out how to do it in a rapidly collapsing architecture; and doing it together, but sometimes alone, and telling my students the truth. These pathways are present in abundant forms in this text. In order to shape a pedagogy of purpose, improvisation, and collectivity is required.

The range of writers in these pages speak to pedagogy as a kind of testing ground in which play, provocation, and care are as crucial as political commitments and refusals—a timely set of conditions in light of the ongoing consequences of a worldwide pandemic and racial reckoning in which predominantly white institutions are being held to account to address, dismantle, and reform practices that perpetuate white supremacy, elitism, patriarchy, corporate greed, and hypocritical forms of solidarity with radical social movements. My own time in academia made visible to me that just as the “woke” work demands a kind of continual reminding and improvisational flexibility, so too does the work in our classrooms, studios, and in collaboration with one another inside and outside of the university’s domain. It is here, in these texts and assemblage of strategies, that teaching and pedagogy grow loose and mutate, bind together, connect with an outside, stretch and queer themselves, become wild.

—Dr. Jordan Amirkhani, Brooklyn, New York City, June 20, 2021

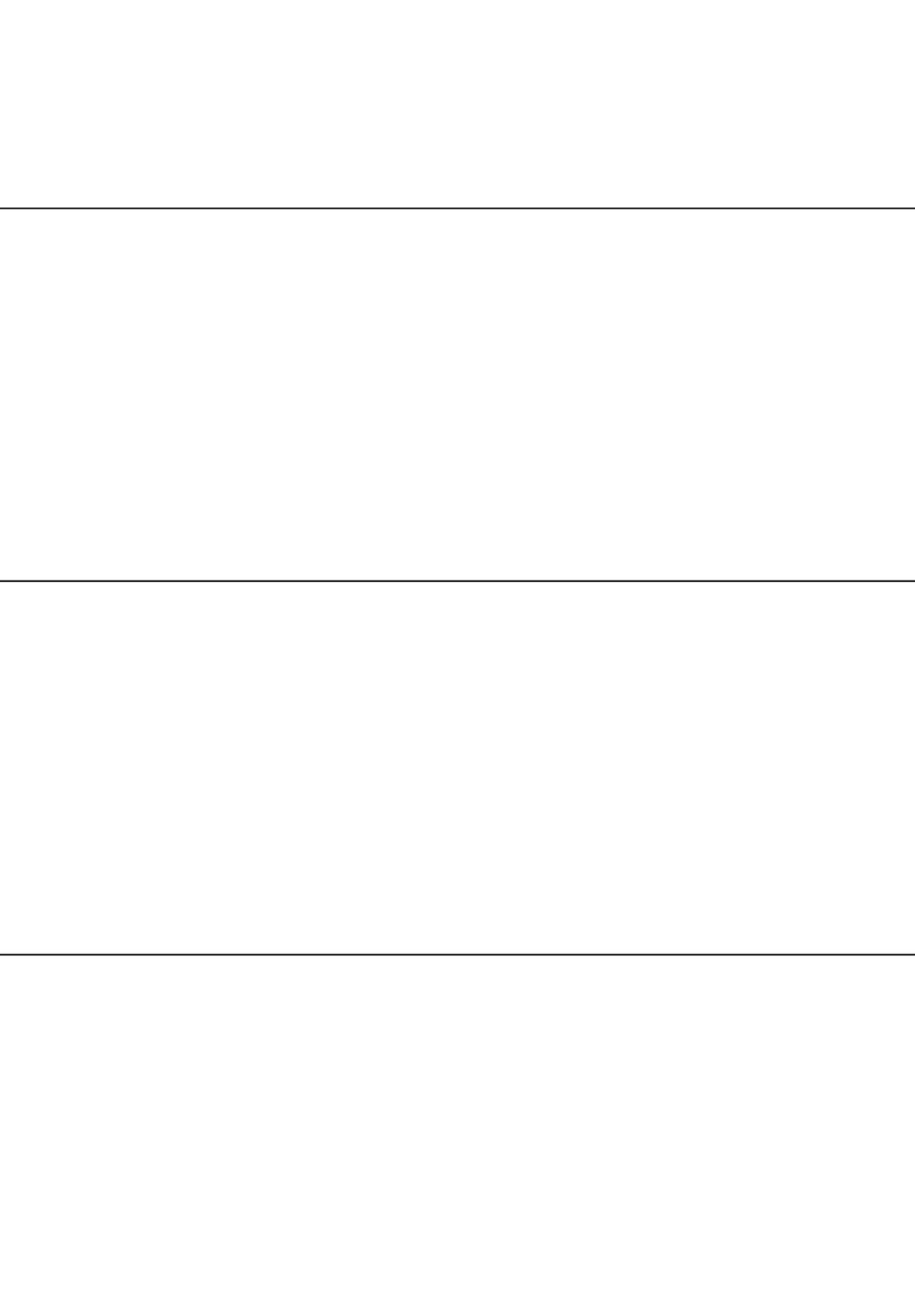
**OUT**

---

**OF**

**PLACE**

---







Tim Doud American University, Washington DC +  
Zoë Charlton American University, Washington DC  
| 'sindikit | Baltimore MD

## Introduction

The academic landscape is broad and fickle; academic fields, disciplines, and teaching perspectives always shift and change. In these academic places, identities, and communities overlap and work together. This book holds space for identities that are often undervoiced in academia. The perspectives of the contributors serve as models for how artists work within communities through solidarity, equity, and creativity. The editors, Zoë Charlton and Tim Doud, are faculty at American University in the Department of Art. Our current academic positions reflect the changing times in which we matured as educators and as artists. Our positions also reflect the generational expectations of families who did not gain entrance into this place, academia, because of the entwined pressures of gender, race, class, and educational background.

As individual faculty members and exhibiting artists, we found entry into academia marked by political struggle. We contended with socio-political structures that differed from our expectations and homelives. Our family backgrounds shaped our choices, and it is within those constraints we made our way into the academy. It is a truism about every contributor in this book. They speak to their experiences in the ways that best serve themselves and the communities in which they create, serve, and work, and speak to their relationships to pedagogy.

The essays in *Out of Place: Artists, Pedagogy, and Purpose* consider the different paths taken by artists as they navigated their way from formative experiences into pedagogy. Individual essays are meant to stand apart and have their own focus and interests. Each voice or set of voices is an entry into a pedagogical moment. The academy (the places and persons involved in post-secondary education) and pedagogy (practices of learning and instruction) are not fixed; instead, each adapts to meet the factors and historical conditions of the people and communities it serves. With this critically, historicist approach in mind, The Academy, and what happens in

it, is something to be historicized, studied, critiqued, revised, reframed, and questioned.

To reflect upon, and theorize, pedagogy itself, we cast a wide net in order to learn what artists were teaching, in what contexts, and what challenges they encountered. Our curiosity led us to artists working in the United States and in other countries and took us to interesting, and unexpected, places. Learning and teaching happens everywhere, and it was a difficult task to select the thirty-one essays in this volume from among so many. We developed three broad categories in which to invite participation: first, artists who challenge silos within academia; second, the artist-scholar who bridges communities with projects beyond their “school” responsibilities; and third, artists who engage pedagogy, in various forms, as initiatives separate from their private studio practices.

The first group of artists we considered for *Out of Place* reflect our own experiences as artists who work in academic institutions but whose social and pedagogical engagement extends beyond the walls of the academy, to build bridges between the divide of institutional schools and an evolving contemporary art scene. The artists, teachers, and pedagogists in this volume form an engaged community of artist-scholars. Some of the artists currently hold academic positions and maintain projects/pedagogical initiatives outside of their home institution. Elliott Montgomery, and his collaborator Chris Woebken, developed the Extrapolation Factory while working as an adjunct faculty member at Parsons School of Design. Elliott now has a full-time teaching job at The New School in New York. Wendy DesChene and Jeff Schmuki developed PlantBot ArtLab while holding faculty positions at different universities. Wendy and Jeff developed their project while going up for tenure and now hold tenured positions at their respective universities. Their informative essay speaks to the benefits, as well as challenges, of working within institutional environments. They also speak about the varying levels of support received from their universities.

Stephanie Dinkins developed Project al-Khwarizmi while teaching at The State University of New York at Stony Brook. Although at different points of their careers, Caroline Woolard and Susan Jahoda were jointly committed to pedagogy and to studying the efficacy of their own teaching and studio habits. Susan, a full professor, co-founded BFAMFAPhD with Caroline who has a BFA, her highest terminal degree. Caroline is now a tenure-track professor at the University of Hartford in Connecticut. Devening Projects, founded by Dan Devening, operates in the framework of a traditional commercial gallery. Dan has taught in academia for his entire career. Jen Delos Reyes founded Open Engagement as a project in graduate school. She credits this project turned national conference in helping to secure her full-time teaching position at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Jen’s new initiative, Side by Side, considers the possibilities and impact of local, community-forward, and integrative approaches to art, culture, and living in support of communities. Las Hermanas Iglesias’s collaboration explores hybridity, social participation, and transnational

identities. Their collective has fluidly evolved to include regular collaborations with their mother who never studied art. Theirs is a collaboration and an art project, but not in the traditional sense.

The second category of artists engage in pedagogical initiatives or forms of institutional critique that were established outside of an art school or university setting. For instance, Ghana ThinkTank, Black Lunch Table, The Black School, Design Studio for Social Intervention (ds4si), the Laundromat Project, Beta Local, Art Practical, Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative, Gudskul, and Related Tactics, are among the projects that utilize cooperative learning models to offer alternatives to traditional educational structures. Interestingly, some of the artists who started these projects now hold academic positions. This is not surprising as academia tends to institutionalize, even co-op or colonize, independent pedagogical initiatives.

Some contributors established their programs and initiatives as forms of institutional critique of museums, university systems, and the professionalization of art. Occupy Museum and Roz Crew's Center for Undisciplined Research fall into this category. Extending the practice of creative research beyond a traditional studio space—a "post-studio" space—is the focus of James Mayhew's LAB Studios (Life After Boring Studios). In his residency program, he provides artists with material, social, and emotional support to relearn and evaluate their participation in art world expectations and form new methods for engaging communities in their artistic practice. Finally, Tiger Strikes Asteroid and The Icebox Project Space were not founded as pedagogical initiatives. But nonetheless, each of these places have called into question the mechanisms and expectations of gallery and museum culture. Whitney Mashburn and Carmen Papalia address access, care, and ableist policies within institutions. Their essay functions as a manifesto and a pedagogical call to action. Elsewhere is a living museum and artist residency set in a three-floor, former thrift store grounded in research, exploration, and pedagogical impact.

The third category of artists in *Out of Place* are artist-scholars who are doing transformative and inter/transdisciplinary work within their respective institutions. Artists discuss practices and projects that redefine the academy, praxis, or their communities. Many of those artists commit themselves to working outside of traditional siloed departments. We invited Ken Gonzales-Day, a Professor at Scripps College, to recommend participants for this volume. We were so taken by his engaged response to our query that we invited him to write about his experiences in academia. Like Gonzales-Day, Lauren Frances Adams, Michael Ray Charles, Alexandria Smith, and Lisi Raskin all shape their pedagogy through inclusive practices and trans- and interdisciplinary research. Importantly, each critically questions the heteronormative, Eurocentric models of learning prevalent in university structures. Tina Takemoto, dean of Humanities and Sciences at the California College of the Arts (CCA) and artist Rudy Lemcke developed *Queer Conversations on Culture and the Arts* to address the lack of inclusion for queer-identifying students at CCA. Patricia Nguyễn's

Axis Lab community activism and studio practice within immigrant Chicago communities makes her a valuable, and crucial, voice that is needed in academia.

Artists enter the academy at different ranks, different contractual obligations, or job protections. Some artists hold BFA and MFA degrees. Some artists are tenure-track assistant professors, and others are tenured associate professors and full professors. *Out of Place* includes artists who hold three- to five-year renewable contracts, artists who are adjunct professors that teach at multiple institutions within a single semester, while others are adjuncts who hold rank but no tenure. Ranking systems and titles vary in each institution and so does job security. The hierarchies within academic institutions have similarities and differences. Artists may enter as adjunct faculty and have to navigate maintaining their positions. Dan Devening, for instance, is a Full Adjunct Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in a non-tenured position with no guarantee of the number of classes available to him each term.

Many of the contributor's concerns, particularly regarding white, hetero-normative, and Eurocentric pedagogical approaches, have touched our (the editors') experiences in academia. We are aligned with our institution's commitment to anti-bias, anti-racist, and decolonized curricula. Along with our students, colleagues, and coworkers, we are transforming the MFA Studio Art Program at the American University (AU) into a more inclusive place to study and teach. Through our collaborative art project 'sindikit, we form a bridge between what we do in our respective studios, in our communities, and at AU. We develop curriculum, jointly teach courses, and organize visiting artists programs in our Studio Art program. We realize the work that we do with 'sindikit can serve as an example of one way, not exclusively, that collaborative work within and beyond the academia shapes a relationship to The Academy. In 2016, we created 'sindikit to engage our creative research, which in our case has been impacted by gender, sexuality, and race. Our interest in the intersections of art, community, and education made it crucial for us to work both in and outside of the University system.

Not one of these essays is alike. And a value exists in their differences. Not everyone has the same access or life experiences. Even within a book about pedagogy, a narrow framework can frame what constitutes pedagogy or pedagogical thinking.

We provided contributors with four prompts to consider their relationship to pedagogy or academia. Each contributor had different strategies and energies around those prompts. Some artists talked more biographically, others emphasized their initiatives or artwork. Different lives make for different choices. Biographies are important; they help us understand the different paths each artist has taken. We asked contributors how their lives impacted their choices as artists and teachers and how those choices, in some cases, contributed to their projects. Through the facts of their lives, contributors convey how their philosophies of learning were shaped.

Some spent time to unpack their relationship to and experiences in their academic positions; while others gave institutional critique. We knew this specific topic, pedagogy, would generate broad responses, and we welcomed them. Teaching happens in many ways. For example, Ryan McCartney's essay lays out how his philosophy and pedagogical thinking was formed through his life experiences and his creative work with The Icebox Project Space. His role as an adjunct teacher did not include curriculum-building or shaping programs where he taught. His pedagogy was shaped elsewhere, as most good learning often is. He was inside and outside of the academy at the same time.

Pedagogy often happens when we are not expecting it. In the structure of the essays themselves, the contributors engage in forms of it. The reader gains insights into each contributor in the way their essays are approached. We see what leads each person or collaboration. Did they arrive at their pedagogical philosophy through biography, through community action, through recognizing what was missing in their education? Gudskul, the Black School, and BFAMFAPhD are good examples of the variety of approaches to these essays.

The essays in this book were written and edited between 2019 and 2021. During this time our communities were impacted by Covid-19, systemic racism, trans/homophobia, sexism, and the presidential election in November 2020. Life and job circumstances have changed for many of the contributors. For instance, Roz Crews now teaches high school in Florida; Lisa Iglesias is an Associate Professor at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts; Noah Fischer is living in Brooklyn again after teaching in Ohio for a year; and Ryan McCartney relocated to St. Louis, Missouri. The Black School moved from Harlem, New York to New Orleans, Louisiana where they will build their first brick and mortar school.

We elaborate on our work together in a conversational essay with George Ciscle. George is a curator, educator, and founder of The Contemporary in Baltimore, Maryland. Bill Gaskins, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Photography at the Maryland Institute College of Art, contributed the conclusion in *Out of Place*. He takes a meta-approach, framing the questions of pedagogy in a wider context of personal and institutional memory. It is fitting that Bill Gaskins brings closure to our conversations. Gaskins's essay looks beyond the politics of a contemporary, consumer-based educational model, while calling out many of the important social and political issues that animate academic discourse today.

We are at a crossroads in academia; the reader will see the struggle in some of these essays. There is no one pedagogical approach. Readers will gain insight to the spaces between what the contributors were trained to think and do versus how their life experiences shaped their teaching. This brings us back to the Commons—where people meet. The Undercommons, made visible by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013) has been essential for many people in these conversations to engage academic institutions and *trans/gress*

them. The energy to move—beyond, beneath, around, across boundaries that stifle, trap, and eliminate—joins the contributors in this volume. *Out of Place* recognizes and values that pedagogical strategies emerge from specific communities, their experiences, and at times, moves them out of one place of learning into another.

*Out of Place: Artists, Pedagogy, and Purpose* offers a collective voice of individual contributors, an ever-expanding community of allies and co-conspirators, cultural activators, agitators, and beautiful people.

Warmly,

Us!

—Tim and Zoë, collaborators

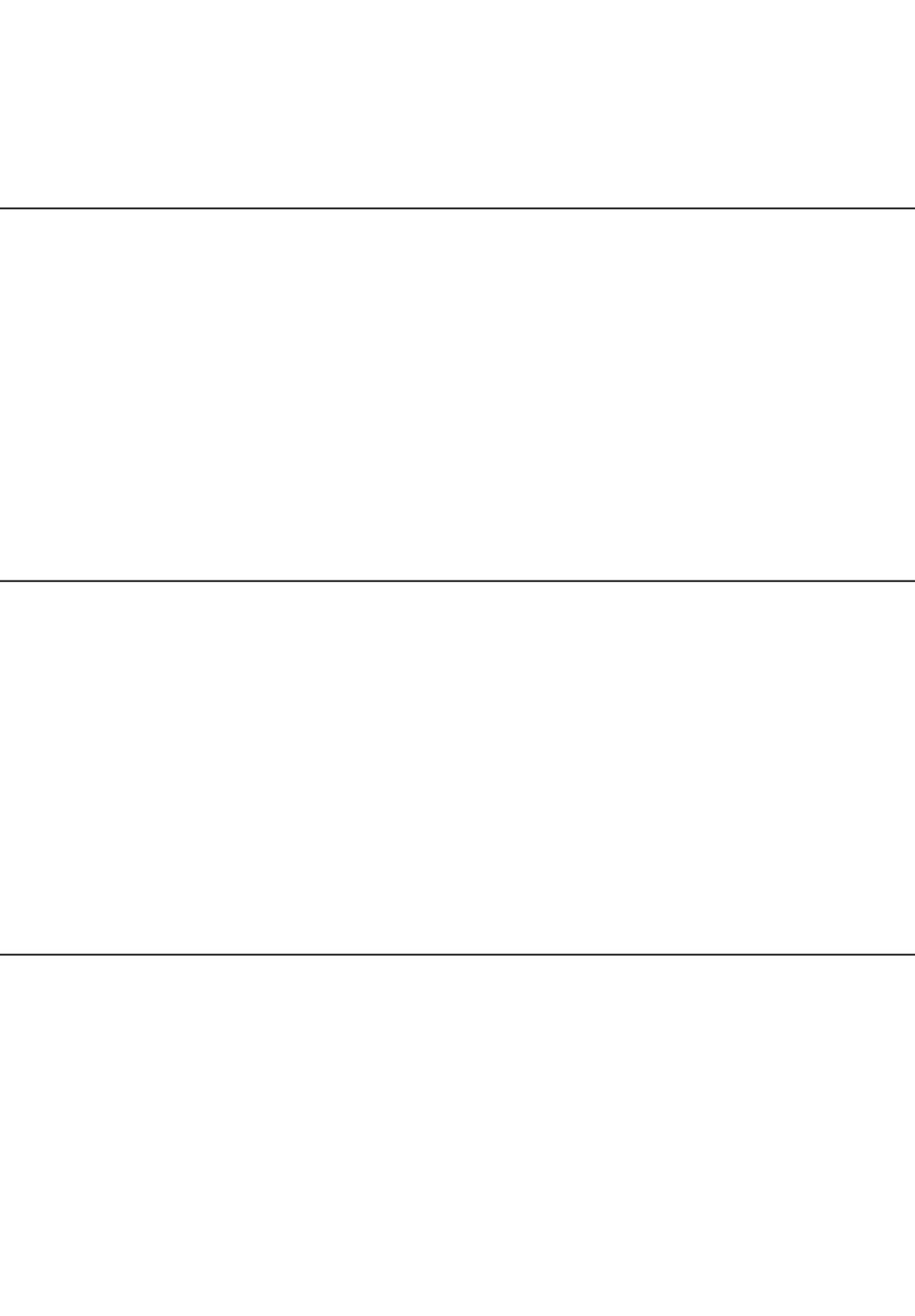
---

**ARTISTS-  
SCHOLARS  
IN  
PLACE**

---

**1**

---







I.

In late May of 2012, I had my first and only anxiety attack. I called my mother hysterically crying because I couldn't breathe. She is a registered nurse, and I knew that between she and my dad, who is a medical doctor, they would know what to do. I realized in that moment of talking to her, that I was miserable and had been for years. At the time, I was a high school art teacher in the South Bronx and had also taught middle school in East Harlem for nearly seven years, all the while pouring my everything into an educational system that didn't value the arts. Since my salary didn't come close to being able to support a separate studio space, my studio practice consisted of making work in my living room, in between curriculum-planning and teaching.

I was exhausted, and my body was shutting down. With the support of my parents, I was encouraged to finish out the remainder of the school year and to resign from the security of my teaching job. In the following months, I oscillated between immense joy that the misery of high school teaching was coming to an end and paralyzing fear that this would be a mistake. I did not have any savings, and no one in the art world knew me or my work, so I pondered:.

How exactly was this going to work?

Would I move back home with my tail between my legs?

Would two master's degrees and a whole lot of money go to waste?

Was I letting my students down by quitting?

Here I was a few years after graduating with an MFA in Fine Arts, jobless, and in a sheer panic because my naïve expectation of being picked up by a gallery immediately after grad school hadn't happened. Since teaching was so familiar after spending years dedicating my life to the profession, I submitted applications to various non-profit organizations as a teaching artist. My logic was that teaching part time would provide me with the necessary space that I needed to continue painting,

which brought me so much joy and balanced out my endless self-doubt. My only saving grace was that my teaching contract would continue throughout the summer, so I had exactly three months to figure my entire life out. Three short months! I'm shocked that I didn't suffer from additional anxiety attacks. Embarking on my own meant truly hustling.

## II.

The answers that I was seeking continued to lead me to the studio. Although my resources were limited during that time, I held steadfast to my practice. I rented a studio with a former classmate and showed up whenever I could. I invited people to my studio to discuss my practice, developed and cultivated preexisting relationships that I made during grad school and paid attention to the work that I was making. Paying attention meant acknowledging that my work was starting to tap into what it was that I felt in my gut, that feeling of exhilaration and contentment. It's a hard feeling to articulate, but it felt like I could breathe freely. The oil paintings and small collages that I made evolved into experiments with large scale charcoal drawing. I was concurrently working on multiple bodies of work, some of which made me feel immense joy and other work that confused me and shook me up because it was so far outside of what I was accustomed to. In hindsight, I know that the balance between working a job and creating in the studio truly kept me going; I hadn't given up on myself.

After a frugal summer making my money stretch and right before my bank account hit zero, I received an offer as an afterschool teaching artist for a non-profit organization in Queens for the 2012–13 academic year. While teaching part time, I continued to apply to various residencies and grants with all of the new work that I had been making while balancing a hectic work schedule. Eventually, I omitted much of my grad school work from my portfolio which was different from the current work that I was creating that walked the line between fantasy and reality, a skewed perspective that evoked surrealism, and a fusion of interior and exterior spaces through the medium of collage. My collages utilized my old paintings and drawings as source material. I would make multiple copies of my old work in different sizes, cut them up and then bring them back together as hybrid figures existing in fragmented spaces. Disparate elements were flattened and cohesive, which was what I was searching for through painting. My codex and language remained, but my conceptual interests were strengthened through this process. And more importantly, I was having fun.

I squeezed in living-room studio time in my Bed-Stuy apartment whenever I was too tired to make the commute to my Bushwick studio, in hopes that an opportunity would eventually sneak through. I stopped becoming obsessed with the quantity of work that I was making and instead started to appreciate the quality of my paintings

and collages. They were unique and eventually I stopped seeing other artist's influences in them. My work was starting to develop a language and mind of its own, and I could finally see it! I was excited by this work and that definitely translated in my grant and residency applications. The more I showed up in the "studio" and set aside my expectations of what showing up looked like, the more my confidence increased. I started to understand how my philosophy was forming alongside the visual development of my work. My work was about the young people I taught; it was about my childhood experiences and theirs. Ultimately, I realized that my work was giving them and us a voice, a loud one through a unique stylistic approach that felt different than anything I had encountered on gallery and museum walls.

### III.

Eventually, I received a phone call that literally changed my life. Thinking that it was a telemarketer, I almost didn't pick up, but my curiosity was piqued, and I answered anyway. The Visual Arts Coordinator at the Fine Arts Work Center (FAWC) in Provincetown, Massachusetts, was calling to notify me that I had been selected as a fellow for their seven-month fellowship/residency program. I screamed immediately, and when I hung up the phone, I dropped to my knees and cried. I'm sure this sounds incredibly dramatic, but deep down I knew that my time at FAWC was the beginning of the end of the suffering that I had endured for eight years. Of course, it wouldn't be the last time that my faltered career ambitions and expectations would lead to tears and self-doubt, but it did provide me with the beginning of developing an understanding of how I could navigate the mysterious inner workings of the art world.

Living the residency life became my mantra for the next three years. I was gifted with the time and space that I thought would never come. My work and I deserved it, and I would continue reminding myself of this over and over again until this very day. It sounds like something out of a fantasy novel—that someone hands you a studio space, an apartment, and a check every month with no strings attached, simply because they believe in the power of your creativity. The FAWC residency was my first introduction to a shared love and dedication to something intangible. The arts community corralled together every year to ensure that twenty artists and writers received this gift. During those two consecutive years as a fellow at the FAWC, I committed my practice to finding a way to bridge the gap between the need for accessibility within the contemporary art world, my desire for community engagement, and my independent studio practice. I didn't have a blueprint, but I did have a lot of examples that I would soon discover years later.

Initially I was naïve and lacked understanding when I embarked on a career as an artist. My dreams and vision outweighed my understanding of exactly what it meant to be an artist. There were no artists in my family, so I was walking a road less traveled. I also think it's important to note that I did not come from a conventional

fine arts background. I spent my undergrad years at Syracuse University in New York where I was an Illustration major. I attempted to broach that commercial industry post-graduation but soon realized that making work for other people was not my forte. I wanted to rebel and lose myself in the studio rather than be imprisoned by other people's aesthetic and conceptual expectations. My decision to pursue my MFA in Fine Arts after already acquiring an MA in Art Education proved to be incredibly difficult. I was the only Black American student in my program, and I didn't know who the hell Baudrillard or Foucault were. Their writings were quite dry and cold, and, to be honest, they clearly weren't speaking to me. When I was introduced to their writings and many more like them, I was reminded of the elitism and impenetrable nature of the field I had decided to become a part of. Alternatively, I decided that I would use my knowledge of art history and contemporary art to find my personal aesthetic while uplifting the people that I rarely saw represented in museums and galleries all over the world—Brown and Black women. It became apparent that the gift bestowed upon me wasn't for me and me alone; the gift was for everyone, and I had to do whatever it took to make sure that it reached the masses. I could use my own voice, creativity, and intellect to amplify the voices of the marginalized. The question then became, how would I do that?

I was terrified when I made the decision to return to the classroom and continue my teaching career in academia. I realized that I am most fearful when I am faced with a great responsibility. That fear initially drove me into my life as a visual artist and that fear then drove me to say yes to Wellesley College in Massachusetts and accept a position as Assistant Professor in Studio Art. Entering an elite, predominately white institution and town and being plagued with imposter syndrome overcame me at times, but I channeled it into positive action. Having the opportunity and the support of a prestigious institution meant that I could impact what was being taught in the classroom and shed light on voices that were left out of the curriculum. It also meant that I would enter spaces that were inaccessible when I was only a full-time artist, and it was important that I knew what I wanted my purpose to be in those spaces. I became hyper aware of the fear of hearing my own voice, but I also recognized the weight and power that it possessed. I shifted my perspective on the fear and came to realize that my voice was powerful. I used that fear to motivate myself and others. I called into action the absolute need for things to shift at a traditionally women's college and the art world as a whole. Tapping into the why behind the fear helped me determine how I'd show up.

#### IV.

My teaching pedagogy and studio practice began to build concurrently. During my first year at Wellesley College, I became co-organizer of a collective called Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter. (We altered our name a few months later to

Black Women Artists for Black Lives so as not to be confused with the Black Lives Matter movement.) In the midst of a culture of mounting unchecked police violence against our community, Simone Leigh, a prolific sculptor, thinker, and activist, invited over 100 Black women artists in a private Facebook group, to use the space of her residency and exhibition at the New Museum in order to convene a series of meetings and work towards a public action. On September 1, 2016, we occupied the New Museum with performances, screenings, and interventions, and we distributed materials. The following year, we expanded outward to include convenings in London and Los Angeles and mounted artistic interventions at the Brooklyn Museum in New York and Project Row House in Houston, Texas. We became an independent, non-hierarchical collective, but in 2018 we shifted focus to our individual studio practices.

I learned a great deal from my experience as a part of BWA for BL Collective. Many aspects of our manifesto have entered into my independent practice and into my current role as Head of Programme in Painting at the Royal College of Art in London. Two aspects of our mantra in particular have become a part of my own personal philosophy:

We believe in the interdependence of care and action, desire and possibility, visibility and invisibility, and vitality and self-determination as strategies to disavow and resist pervasive conditions of racism.

We recognize that we have structural power as a group independent of institutional constructs that erase and exclude us. In coming together, we commit to our collective liberation, centrality, and value.

I continue to wrestle with how to resist monotony and conformity and how to utilize and leverage institutional resources as an educator and artist, with the intent of instigating social change on a global scale. I don't believe that I have figured out the correct formula, but I believe that operating from a "we" and not a "me" perspective will channel our actions closer to that change. I am constantly reassessing my vision and asking myself the difficult questions that make me incredibly uncomfortable and sometimes call into question my character. I intend on continuing to do this well into my elder years because I have much more to learn, and I welcome those future lessons with open arms.







I.

I am an artist, author, and Professor of Art at Scripps College in Claremont, California, where I have taught all levels of analog and digital photography, art theory, and courses in the Interdisciplinary Humanities Core program for the past twenty-three years. Scripps was founded in 1926 by newspaper entrepreneur and philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps and is one of about thirty-five women's colleges in the United States. It is also a member of the Claremont College Consortium, which is located just over thirty miles east of downtown Los Angeles. LA has quite a number of museums, private collections, galleries, and some of the top-ranking art and film programs in the country. As a result, it's a pretty unique place for thinking about art and pedagogy. It is also one of the first cities and counties in the US to turn majority non-white. Higher education is facing challenges on many fronts, and diversity continues to be a major issue on College campuses nationwide. Scripps, like many liberal arts colleges, is located outside of an urban center and is about a ninety-minute drive from the major international airport LAX.

Many people of color grow up being asked "What are you?," which is usually followed by, "What are you really?" It is a classic micro-aggression that is intended to elicit an "admission" of one's racial or ethnic background. White privilege is difficult to explain, but I think the idea of performative identity hints at the complexity of whiteness. There is also agency in self-naming. I self-identify as a queer Latinx artist of mixed ancestry. According to widely cited statistics, Latinas/os of any race, make up about 4 percent of all tenured professors in the United States, and it seemed important to locate myself within academia in order to share a little of how I came to pursue this particular "creative life."

My family moved often. We lived in various cities in the East Bay near San Francisco before moving to Nampa, Idaho when I was in seventh grade. We had cows, sheep, and lots of chickens, and to this day, I imagine my dad built the only solar

dehydrator within a five hundred-mile radius. The move to Idaho was both formative and traumatic. The following summer my parents informed my brother and I that they expected us to start looking for summer jobs and my mom dropped us off at the local unemployment office where we filled out index cards with our names and phone number. The lady at the unemployment office found us jobs at a farm just outside of town. The job was to hand move pipe irrigation, which entailed carrying thirty- to forty-foot aluminum irrigation pipes from field to field. I think I weighed around 120 pounds and the pipes were just too heavy for me to carry with much control. I remember falling back in the mud when my boots got sunk in the trenches and just lying there as the cold wet mud soaked into my clothes. Trapped under the weight of the pipe I just waited for Michael, my big brother, to pull me up.

“How are the little spics doing,” I heard the farmer ask another field hand when we stopped for lunch. We packed our lunches in brown bags and wrapped soda cans in aluminum foil. We somehow imagined that would keep them cool. It did not. I watched the owner drinking from an ice-cold drink through the house window. I can still hear his voice and remember the metallic taste of warm Coke in my mouth. We never went back.

A few days later we were hired by a local farmer and started work at 5 a.m. It was still dark out. We would punch a hole in black garbage bags and slide our heads through. We wore the bags over our clothes to keep them from getting completely soaked by the cold morning dew that clung to the long raspy leaves on the corn stalks. Our job was to walk down the rows and “de-tassel” or extract the corn silk from each ear of corn. This was a common form of pollination control that allowed for cross-breeding between varieties of corn. We made it through the summer, and I think we were both thankful when school resumed in the fall.

A few months into the school year my art teacher, Mr. Fonny Davidson, encouraged me to join in with a number of his best students for voluntary lunchtime drawing sessions. He set up old, bleached, cow bones and polystyrene balls of varying sizes beneath the clip-on lights in a dark classroom. Some weeks we took turns modeling for one another. Looking back now, I think it was his attitude that art was not something mysterious but something that you just did every day that has stuck with me. It took practice, repetition, but it was work that anyone could do. I was recently in touch with him via email and was pleased to learn that he remembered me and is still painting after all these years. I wrote him because, in trying to write this essay, I realized I wanted to thank him for his unexpected encouragement and advice all those years ago.

For those not familiar with my artwork, it often deals with difficult subject matter, historical depictions of race, lynching, and other contested or traumatic histories. I am sometimes invited to speak on critical race theory, whiteness, and the challenges facing students and faculty of color on college campuses. I thought I would take this opportunity to share one strategy that has been particularly effec-

tive when trying to help institutions identify pedagogical or institutional challenges around diversity. I usually begin by asking the audience to imagine that I am a new hire at their college and that I will be pitching a “new” course to the faculty and staff present as a way of workshopping their particular institutional challenges as a group. I encourage the audience to identify as many potential institutional obstacles as they can. For example, how might the institution identify or number a course listed in one discipline, but which draws from multiple disciplines? How might critical thinking be taught and assessed in such courses? I try to foreground the ways that the proposed course will introduce students to critical race theory by drawing examples from the history of art and museum display but also by sharing my experiences from a queer Latinx perspective.

## II.

In California there are publicly-funded universities and private colleges of every shape and size. There are research universities and liberal arts colleges as well as community colleges and junior colleges. There are specialized academies and conservancies, technical schools, distance learning programs, and online courses. One of the issues that impacts teaching can be the type of institution itself. For example, teaching at a liberal arts college can be very different from teaching at a research university. Teaching and committee work at a liberal arts college can eat up valuable studio time, but teaching, mentoring students, and having a voice in shaping the educational goals of the institution can also be fulfilling. In my own case, the guidance and support of my colleague and faculty mentor, Professor Susan Rankaitis, helped me keep on track, as I prepared for the tenure review process. As a young professor I often felt isolated and have since learned that is a common experience for many, due to the small size of departments at liberal arts colleges. We are often highly specialized but also wear many different hats in maintaining our research, teaching, and service records. Like many faculty of color, I also remember serving on a panel and having a community member comment afterwards, “you speak English so well.” Such behavior is now widely recognized as a form of micro-aggression, but back then, that and other experiences may have contributed to my feeling of never really being seen as fully a part of the community. Today, I see junior faculty facing a wide range of experiences and try to help them overcome their sense of isolation or frustration.

In trying to think about some of the factors that have shaped my own approach to teaching and research, I am reminded of many of the ongoing challenges faced by Latinx faculty, who, like myself, may have been called, a “spic” or a “wetback” growing up and see the current separation of children from their families and the incarceration of thousands along the us–Mexican border as only the most recent example of the ways that brown bodies are devalued in our nation. Hispanics and

Latino/as are disproportionately underrepresented in Washington, DC, higher education, contemporary art museums, and commercial galleries. Even in California, Hispanic and Latino/a professors only make up about 5 percent of professors in the University of California system. This may be due in part to the legacies of settler colonialism and in spite of the fact that Hispanic and Latinx populations continue to rise. So how are we to evaluate the contributions of such a small population when considering the “Academie and the Arts” and what criteria might we use when comparing a professor at a leading research university with one teaching at a liberal arts or community college?

Pressured from all sides, faculty, students, and administrators all face new challenges in academia as they strive to create a more equitable curriculum. Having served on many search committees in our consortium, I have witnessed situations where a prospective candidate who went to an Ivy League school was given preference over one who went to a community college. I have seen greater value given to research published in a peer-reviewed journal over work published in a popular blog. Even if the committee were to choose a disciplinary outlier, what are the chances that such an appointment would lead to tenure? And could such an appointment negatively impact the college’s ranking, alumni donations, student application pools, which leaves many of us wondering if looking for social equity in academia is ever achievable? All this while students worry about skyrocketing tuitions and families increasingly question the viability of an arts education.

One of the reasons I chose to go to University of California, Irvine (UCI) for my MFA was because, at the time, they had two Latina/o professors, Daniel J. Martinez and Judy Baca. It was there that I imagined, dreamed of, a life of teaching, and it was Daniel who gave me some of my earliest opportunities. I know that they have both led through their art and teaching and changed the lives of many for the better. However, I believe, the absence of Latinx voices in higher education and elsewhere has contributed to the under-representation of us Latinx voices in academic publications, gallery exhibitions, museum collections, and in the histories that get told. To give one example, throughout most of my professional life, Latin American Art scholars excluded us born Latinas/os from consideration, but today, Chicano, Native American, and Indigenous artists are increasingly being reimaged under the rubric, Art of the Americas.

### III.

Perhaps because of these changes, when I was approached for this publication, I expressed both my appreciation and apprehension that I not be the only Latinx voice. The editors felt that my experiences might speak to others and encouraged me to address how such systemic “invisibility” informed my own practice as an artist and a teacher.

I often address my own search for historic representations of brown bodies in museums of all kinds, and while many contemporary scholars advocate for the abolition of whiteness, I must ask them to consider what that might look like in terms of those communities that are not well represented in major museum collections. Consider, “Greek Slave” by Hiram Powers, which was said to depict a white, Christian “Venus” being sold into slavery by her Turkish captors. Removing the work from the art historical canon would effectively reduce the idealization of whiteness, but it would also remove its contributions in raising support for the abolition of slavery among white, Christian women. Museums are filled with much more nefarious objects, and we must ask ourselves if every work deemed offensive, racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, or that is otherwise objectionable should be removed, destroyed, amended, or transformed. And what of objects created under duress, stolen, or unethically acquired? These are just a few of the questions being faced by museum professionals, artists, and the communities they serve in our own time. I would like to believe that my teaching, writing, and art-making are derived from, and contribute to this ongoing conversation.

In the above-mentioned lecture/workshop, I often show difficult and historically controversial works of art because even though many such works are widely recognized in the art world and have been collected by museums, they may not be familiar to administrators and staff. Perhaps most importantly, critical responses to showing such works may in turn create, or be perceived to create, an unsafe space for LGBTQIA+ and faculty of color who, while trying to engage critically with difficult historical material, might feel unsupported by audience responses to the work or issues raised. For example, I have shown images from Robert Mapplethorpe’s X portfolio, which includes photographs depicting explicit sexual acts that include fisting, watersports, and gay BDSM. I have also shown work by photographer Sally Mann, like “Jessie at 5,” which depicts her five-year-old daughter posed topless and staring directly into the camera. Mann and Mapplethorpe were both at the center of the anti-censorship controversies of the early 1990s and remain important to the fields of art and art history but may also push at the boundaries of a given institution.

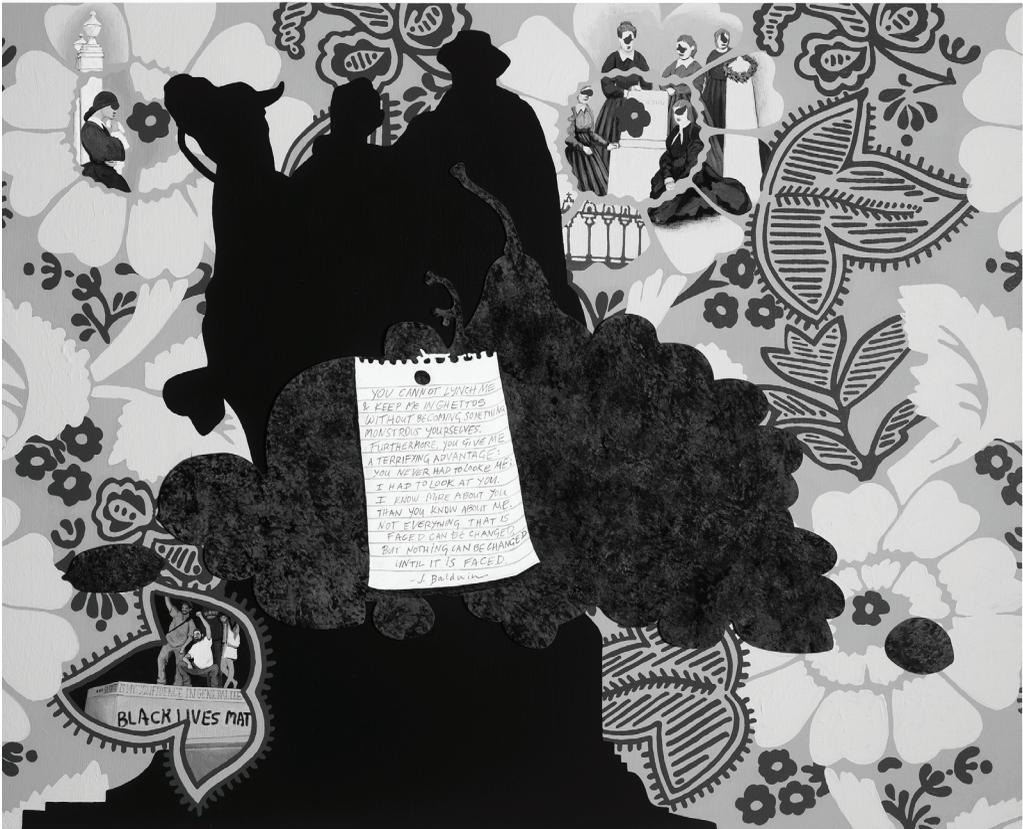
I also show images and artworks, including my own, from the history of lynching in the United States. No artwork can address the horror of lynching in the United States nor the lasting trauma of lynching on African-American communities and families across this nation, but my work was created in solidarity with scholars on the history of racialized violence in the United States, and because I was frustrated that Latinas/os continue to be underrepresented in historical accounts of this history. I conducted my research by reading everything I could find, including daily newspaper published in California between 1849 and 1880 and recorded all the cases I discovered in a monograph entitled, *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935* (Duke University Press, 2006). My practice allied with efforts to raise awareness of the lynching of African Americans in American history being undertaken at that time.

## IV.

When I started my project, the lynching of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States was not a history most people had ever heard of. It wasn't taught in public schools nor at the universities I attended. As a visual artist, writing a history was never enough, and the research naturally had to find its way into the work. One of the benefits of this interdisciplinary work has also been to raise the awareness, beyond the fields of art and art history, of the lynching of African-Americans, Chinese, Filipinos, Latinas/os, Native Americans, Jews, and men believed to be gay, and my work is regularly taught in history, Africana, American, Asian, and Chicano studies.

It was after this project that I began to do work on museum collections themselves. During a residency at the Getty, I tried to escape the trauma of the lynching project through curving, white-marble torsos, and I began to see the connections. Was there a relationship between all that white marble? And where were the black and brown bodies? How does one teach whiteness? After all, one of the roles of the museum is to educate. I understood that museums were shaped by their collections, but who shaped the collection? And what could we learn from seeing the collector, the art dealer, and curator, as active participants? What might an object's provenance tell us? And could these same works be used to tell different stories? What of the collections themselves? And should objects that were acquired under questionable or unequal circumstances be returned? Just think of all the artists who never saw even the smallest portion of the profits made from selling and reselling their works. Unlike the film industry and publishing, the artist doesn't get royalties or residual payments.

Whether looking at images or historic collections, working across disciplines has helped me to fill the holes in my own education and to recognize the ways that privilege is built into our disciplines and our institutions, which directly impacts my teaching. If we want to change what gets taught, faculty need the support of, not only the students, but also staff, administration, and the board because, whether seen through the lens of art, or the academie, we need to hear from a lot more voices.





I.

My grandma Geraldine still, to this day, remarks on “how long I was in school.”

I was the first woman in my family to graduate from a four-year college and the first of anyone in the family to get a master’s degree. To be a descendant of generations of white farmers from a rural area and go to art school was not preordained. There was a dearth of career-driven, female role models in my family. Education was underfunded in Greene County, one of the poorest counties in a state with many poor counties. I was placed into “academically gifted,” public school classes of mostly middle-class, white children, reinforcing class and race segregation in a county that was demographically half-Black and half-white, which began shifting in the late twentieth century as migrants from Mexico came to work in the fields of eastern North Carolina.

My dad did most of the physical work on the farm while my mom handled the accounting and childrearing. Mom gave me my first watercolor kit. My parents supported my application to the public arts high school three hours away, North Carolina School of the Arts. I met other talented young artists, and it was a rigorous curriculum.

The pressure to rid myself of saying words like “y’all” and to downplay my accent, was spurred during my college years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After being teased for smelling like a pig farm when I was younger—despite the fact that many of those same bullies themselves worked on farms—I had internalized the belief that a southern accent was a marker of ignorance. It took a conscientious effort when I was older to reclaim what this represented. I joke now that the names of various obscure breeds of cows and pigs have been replaced with the names of obscure painters.

In undergrad, I came of age when institutional critique was being taught. My professors elin o’Hara slavick, Kimowan Metchewais McLain, Jill Casid, and Tammy

Rae Carland introduced me to the art of feminism, queer theory, installation, and Native American art. The contrasting lesson was right on campus in the form of a commemorative landscape of Confederate statues and buildings named after the enslavers who founded the university. The movement was palpable inside and outside the classroom. We protested the Confederate monuments, organized against anti-Muslim violence and the United States war machine post-9/11, protested the rise of public university tuition, and marched on Washington for environmental justice. When a few of us students and professors made two art shows in a textile mill, I learned how site-specificity, collaboration, and DIY motivation galvanized artistic agency in opportunity. The collectivity and public nature of these events were a critical intervention into the structured curriculum of my undergraduate education.

I am grateful I left undergrad with no debt, thanks to my parents paying my in-state tuition. Pig farming was profitable at that time, and my parents' prosperity exceeded that of my grandparents. For many generations, my family had access to financial security and education, even at the most basic levels. Since the eighteenth century, my father's family held several hundred acres of land deep in eastern North Carolina. By the time they logged it for cash in the new millennium, that wealth had trickled down to me in the form of college tuition, a car, and an invitation for my family to attend the debutante ball (which I had agreed to attend as a dutiful transaction, in exchange for the aforementioned family scholarship).

In college, the support by my professors at my big, state school was key. I received a competitive internship with a well-respected mural painter. I was awarded a scholarship for two months in Mexico with a backpack and my sketchbook to study the historic murals. A post-BFA fellowship afforded me three months in Europe, my first time across the ocean, where I saw and studied Okwui Enwezor's documenta. I eked out longer trips by working on farms in exchange for board in Chiapas and the Czech Republic. My reward for being open to the occasion was a learning opportunity for greater sensitivity to cultural differences and first-hand exposure to global art movements.

## II

When I applied to MFA programs, my family proffered no financial assistance. I figured since I wasn't in love, I'd better aim high before I got pregnant and my options narrowed. My undergrad professor, elin slavick, once remarked that teaching was the last socialist job left in America. That offhand remark traced an outline of a way of thinking about academia as a career, values that have shaped my trajectory as an artist and professor. It is beyond ironic to me that I was trained at public schools up until grad school and that I have only taught at private colleges, perhaps more of a sign of the economic and cultural squeeze on higher education than anything else. But I needed my MFA to teach, and teaching would be my ticket to supportive col-

leagues, inspiring students, libraries, equipment, and a paycheck—the booster to make my work independent of extreme market pressures.

I attended Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where the interdisciplinary environment with a strong public art curriculum attracted robotics and new media artists. It was a rich time for experimentation beyond traditional paradigms in painting. I began in earnest to make works that engaged histories of political injustice and social struggle, influenced by the history of union-building and union-busting in Appalachia. I developed a commitment to working within the traditions of the Pattern and Decoration movement, like my professors Susanne Slavick and Pat Bellan-Gillen and alum Joyce Kozloff. In grad school, the revelations I had about the ways in which the status quo is enforced in academia were garden-variety replications of the biases of the critic, lessons on the myth of meritocracy.

In St. Louis, my partner Jake Peterson and I started a gallery called Cosign Projects, building on the small gallery I had run in Pittsburgh for two years in my former tailor-shop live- and workspace. Cosign was two years old and had hosted over eight projects when we mounted our most impactful project, House Coat by Leeza Meksin. Working with her family, some neighborhood folks and some of my students, Leeza wrapped hundreds of yards of spandex around the entire 2,000-square-foot house. The project attracted the attention of local media, garnered a major national public art award, and solicited some of the best commentary on art I have ever heard from the many passersby who registered their admiration and curiosity.

Creating alternative, non-commercial platforms for artists is necessary, syncing with the 2000's DIY gallery movement, which I had been exposed to in Chicago. In 2013, Leeza invited me to form a collective gallery, Ortega y Gasset Projects in Bushwick, New York City. Our model was that half our members lived in New York and the other half lived around the country in order to promote exchange. I had never wanted to live in New York, but I liked having a pinky toe in the game there. We took turns curating shows, paid monthly dues for rent, and planned logistics in biweekly video meetings. At times it seemed impossible: our collective was far-flung but required a physical presence to gallery sit, mentor interns, spackle walls, and pack artwork. Together, we questioned the sustainability and alternative model potential of the space. Were we in danger of replicating the rarefied, white cube of the bluechip market? What was our role in promoting artists whose careers were sustained outside of New York? What does disruption look like in primarily white art spaces? Are artist-centric values inherently in conflict with commercial goals?

Soon after I secured the full-time teaching job, fifteen hours away by car, my mom and dad were both diagnosed with cancer. My mom survived the cancer after years of treatments. My dad passed away in late 2010. I was at an artist residency in Paris and was about to mount a major installation at the St. Louis airport. My father's demise was swift, and I didn't have the emotional and professional tools to step back from work to be present with him. I learned that this balancing act meant sacrifices

incompatible with the normative pressures of being a full-time artist and professor. These struggles convinced my partner and me to move nearer to our families. After three years of strategic applications, I secured a professorship at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. I had applied to MICA for college, but my parents had, at that time, refused to pay for it. Here I was, now a professor at the very same school I wasn't able to attend as a student.

In 2015, my sister died from sepsis after a routine surgery as I was in the middle of my first sabbatical, coming off a residency in New Orleans at the Joan Mitchell Center, and starting six months of residencies in Europe and Brazil. I got the call as I was biking away from the studio to meet Jake at the river ferry, toward the parish courthouse to sign marriage paperwork. For months afterwards, I would spend my time in residency studios in unfamiliar cities, pouring my grief into my paintings, my sister's death having compounded the entrenched sadness from losing my father five years earlier. I ambled through dozens of museums in Europe, Brazil, and the United States, hungry for solace and relative quietude offered by artists of the past.

Making art is an ameliorating activity. Painting is therapeutic, simultaneously stimulating brain activity and engaging the body's physicality. The work and research of the artist can be immaterial labor, unlike my family's work on the farm when I was growing up. But this connection with the long tradition of art has helped me create meaning in my own life, especially in times of difficulty. Art helps me cultivate vulnerability into a powerful, proactive state. I was grateful for the solitude to process my grief, and I recognize the importance of empathy in my work as a professor, which reinforces the need for compassion in facilitating student learning.

Soon after I got my first full-time teaching job, Occupy Wall Street formed in reaction to the 2008 economic recession. The conversations happening at the intersection of art, class, and market institutions were confirmations of the reality that academia and the art world can be handmaidens of destructive capitalist and neo-liberal policies. Then came Black Lives Matter, coalescing into an urgent national movement. I was living in Baltimore when Freddie Gray died from injuries suffered in police custody. These movements were concurrent with my own personal revelations about my commitments to social justice. I have devoted my art practice to challenging American myths of freedom, democracy, and "the common good," illustrating that the personal is political.

### III.

Only recently did I discover evidence of slave ownership in my own family's history. My ancestors who acquired thousands of acres in eastern North Carolina on the lands of the Iroquoian-speaking Tuscarora were also enslavers. My amateur genealogy work is to query the spotty, cultural narrative I inherited, that my "luck" was the direct result of generations of hard-won prosperity. I know that my family's comfort,

like that of almost all white people in America, has come on the lands and backs of Native and Black peoples. This fact of my own privilege has become a powerful opportunity for constructive work.

Knowing better doesn't mean I automatically do better. Dismantling and un-learning require consciousness in an active process. I have been developing a pedagogical mission around being more than just an ally (passive) into being an accomplice (active). From within an institution and as an art professor, I must diligently audit my own complicity in white-patriarchal dominance of institutional spaces. I am now a full generation older than my students entering into college. I have the privilege and security of a full-time job, despite my institution being a non-tenuring one, where the reality that the protection of tenure seems to be eroding rapidly in the past decade. Speaking truth to power is easier said than done because academia is, after all, a site of tension between the reality of the status quo and the desire for radical disruption through critical inquiry. One of the biggest disappointments of entering art academia as a refuge from the vicissitudes of inequity and the hegemonies of the mainstream hustle is to realize how rotten the root can be. The conditions are dangerous because many in the art world believe that they are somehow insulated against racism or sexism simply because they are artists. My students tell me it feels like a betrayal to encounter the individual micro-aggressions, white fragility, bigoted pedagogy, and inequitable structural policies on MICA's campus. I agree with them. I attempt to bring these critical issues into my relationships with my students. Artists are not neutral, pedagogy is not neutral. There is danger in replicating our own tastes and being a gatekeeper for the status quo.

In academic spaces, I've often been the youngest person in the room. It's not unusual to be the only, or one of the only, women in the room. I have been asked to serve pizza to my mostly male colleagues or to take meeting notes. I have never been sure if this is because I'm a woman, because of my age, or both. Two years into my first full-time job, the dean called me into his office to alert me to the significant raise I would be getting. The national accreditors had reviewed the demographics and salaries of the program and had determined that junior, female faculty were underpaid. At MICA, I was interim chair as a sabbatical replacement for one semester, which was the first time in the nearly two hundred years of my college that a woman had occupied that position in my department; and there has never been a person of color in that role. As I write this, I am the only full-time, woman faculty in my department, which had over a dozen full-time faculty at its height about a decade ago, including a few women. After a wave of retirements and a trend away from studies in fine arts disciplines toward design degrees touted as "job ready," I have left my department with only about seven full-time faculty. I am often called on to represent my department "so a woman will be there."

I have been counseled by older, white, male colleagues to not spend too much time meeting with students outside of class because it will disrupt my studio work.

Often these requests for mentorship from students are to address the lack of instruction they are receiving relevant to their chosen conceptual discourse, especially in alignment with issues of cultural identity, where some professors are perceived to lack a cultural competency. Students decry the inability of many of their professors to facilitate nuanced group discussions around race, class, sexuality, and gender in critiques. My anecdotes illustrate the generous statistical data that being accessible and supportive primarily falls on women and faculty of color, and explicitly, on women of color.

Students find this marginalization, discrimination, and disregard experientially true as well. They want broader, more diverse representation in their classes, and they question the traditional silos. It is academic obstructionism not to teach the myriad perspectives and achievements of artists outside of the accepted canon. Students care about their faculty being diverse. They want recruitment and retention of non-white and non-American and Native American and queer and gender non-conforming faculty whose personal experiences and ideological politics shape their pedagogical methods and art practice. Students want faculty of all backgrounds who put in the work to cultivate a capacity for delivering feedback and professional support that is respectful and germane to the individual students' experience, as well as the complex postgrad world they are entering.

My non-white colleagues speak to what effective leadership in systemic change among white faculty working for racial equity looks like: white people self-educating, not being defensive, working to undo whiteness, walking the walk, naming and challenging anti-Blackness, amplifying and advocating for equity on campus, as well as evidence of this work elsewhere in their lives.

#### IV.

Being affiliated with prestigious institutions has been integral to conferring legitimacy on my career. Whenever I think that I was "lucky" to get some award or accomplish some achievement, I recall the path of my family and how it has contributed to my success. Affirmative action policies have overwhelmingly benefited white women. I offer transparency about what I've learned about how the system works and how to work within and against the system. In my work as a full-time faculty, I have direct evidence of the ways in which racism and sexism affect recruitment and retention of women and faculty of color. Institutional and individual bias, ignorance of protocol, unclear assessment rubrics, replications of homogeneity in recruitment, and the conferring of "quality" on a particular applicant's creative work shapes the gory post-mortem of serving on a hiring committee. Prioritizing quality or that other fuzzy subjection, "excellence," emphasizes safe trajectories and already legitimized knowledge. Quality becomes a red herring towards efforts to preserve the status

quo. Challenging these affronts to the integrity of diversity efforts has resulted in me being labeled, more than once, “not a team player.”

Learning about my own college’s history has been critical to understanding how white supremacy has shaped art-world academia. MICA was legally forced to enroll a Black student, Harry T. Pratt, in 1891 and then went to court to keep more Black students from admission, until the board of trustees reversed that decision in 1954. In fact, each catalog from 1897 to 1953 states that only “reputable white students” would be admitted. Newspaper accounts from 1891 indicate the only reason MICA admitted Pratt was because significant city funding would be revoked otherwise. In 1903, a Confederate monument was erected near MICA’s campus. Baltimore’s mayor ordered the removal of this and three other statues in 2017. The empty plinth is still visible out of my painting classroom window. Many would argue, because the plinth is there covered in red flecks of paint from recent protests, the commemorative landscape persists. I learned when researching about the Confederate monuments that one of MICA’s own alumni, who would have studied at the college shortly after Pratt, became the director of the prestigious Rinehart School of Sculpture at MICA and designed several Confederate monuments throughout the country. The legacy of white supremacy, in money and in representation, runs deep. Yet, some of the Black students that were part of the wave of admissions in the 1950s are still alive. Generations later, student artists at my school like Deyane Moses, who last year created the Blackives project, are doing important work to present and promote these palpable legacies.

Now, the specter of crushing student debt and economic uncertainty has made avenues to higher education perilous, even as admission and achievement by women and people of color becomes more possible than ever. Within my department, demographic statistics from the past few years show that about two-thirds of our students identify as women, and the college has not historically collected data outside of the gender binary framework. The data shows that about half of recent MICA painting students identify as white, with about a quarter of students identified as “domestic minority” and about 14 percent of students who are studying from abroad as “international.” Despite attention towards representation of minorities in the art world and academia, the data is bleak concerning success in the art market, particularly for women, people of color, and especially women of color, who are severely under-represented in the marketplace and in museum collections.

These aforementioned figures roughly track with the overall student demographics of my college. There is a critical urgency to calibrate an anti-racist, diverse curriculum. How are faculty being held accountable for maintaining care through the development of an inclusive politic in their pedagogy?

Further, how will colleges engage faculty in the shared governance of curricular programs and building a justice-oriented mission and vision? In what ways can faculty, students, and staff work together to steer the future of the institution to-

wards cultural and economic sustainability in the twenty-first century? Will the push for diversity, equity, and inclusion enable real change? Historically, these initiatives are not long-lasting and deliver splashy public notice without formidable structural transformation, engendering much cynicism about the “diversity and inclusion racket.”

Faculty understand that the board of trustees steers institutional decisions around mission development, financial security, tuition rates, endowment and capital investments, and upper administration staffing. At small colleges like mine, there are significant weaknesses in the tuition-driven model when backed by only a modest endowment. Costly tuition predominantly shuts out students from poor families. The board of trustees is advised by the chief financial officers of the college, who defend tuition raises outpacing inflation. The perennial head-scratcher is the logic that lowering tuition when other peer schools are continuing to raise theirs would contribute to a perceived decline in the quality of our school. Every effort being made to address racial, ethnic, and gender diversity must also be committed alongside support for the financially marginalized and exploited classes.

## V.

My concepts of labor and work were formed on my family’s farm and have been largely reshaped by the autonomous agency that I have as an artist and academic. As farmers, my family occupied a space of hard physical labor, yet, because they lived and worked their own land, they had control of their labor. For my dad, there was always a water pipe to repair or a grain bin to fill. For me, developing pedagogy with dutiful care is time-consuming. Has my preoccupation with academia hindered my career as an artist? Service is burdensome and the results of committee meetings can be fungible, more note-taking than action, with time for collective governance work coming at the expense of deep thinking in my creative practice.

Beyond this, my art career has been buoyed by institutional forces such as non-profit foundations and museums. Grants and commissions have often come at just the right time to support the work, but topical political themes are a difficult sell to the mid-tier or occasional collector and has not been readily welcomed in commercial galleries. Bureaucracy and hierarchies of power have in turn affected my interest in historiographies. Individual and collective practices of self-interested storytelling assert authority in attempts to control knowledge through the production of historical narratives. The history of American capitalism and whiteness, along with its archival silences, animate my creativity.

I find Baltimore a salve, a scrappy but welcoming place for artists to live and work. Baltimore is a majority-Black city, not quite North, not quite South, marked by generations of institutional redlining to enforce Jim Crow segregation and post-1960s resegregation. As a white woman, I am part of a demographic minority in

Baltimore, yet much of the art scene and academic institutions are white-dominant. After living in two other rust-belt cities still recovering from the aftermath of nineteenth-century industrialization, Pittsburgh and St. Louis, it hasn't been easy to build a new support system, basically starting over in my thirties for a third time. After paying MFA loan debt for over a decade, my partner and I saved enough money to mortgage a hundred-year-old Baltimore rowhouse. I see Baltimore as an ideal place for artists to live, a place where it is possible to shape and be shaped by the city's art ecosystem as an active participant. Plus, so much of North Carolina's cultural connections to Maryland's are historic and deep-rooted. I'm not back on the farm, but I'm close enough.

And if you're wondering, like my Grandma, how long I was in school, I'll tell you what I told her: I'm still in school.







I.

The major league of global art production and its farm team, higher education, are the aesthetic laundromat of the mechanisms of hegemonic power. Artists and educators provide its biofuel. Our free will and creative output have been recuperated to serve private interests. We see this imprint in cycles of gentrification and displacement; but often we don't acknowledge that when we move to a neighborhood in search of a cheap studio, we are increasing the real estate value of that neighborhood and performing a destabilizing role in residential dynamics. At every level of production of contemporary art—from the school and studio to the exhibition and collection, and across varying levels of engagement, from issues of representation to gentrification to cultural competency within art school curricula and teaching—the field reproduces the same forms of economic, race- and gender-based oppression we find across culture, writ-large. Collectively, these factors cultivate and maintain an illusion that the visual arts are a bastion of free expression, when in fact the small subset of people who have the means and contacts to access its tools must confirm ruling class vanity in order to remain relevant. The perpetuation of this system is only possible by the ignorant participation of those privileged with access and continues to sow distrust amongst those who are materially excluded.

What might it look like for us to veer toward alliance with structurally oppressed and materially excluded communities? What might it look like for us to call our collective critical literacy into action? For hundreds of years, activists and thinkers like Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. DuBois, Audre Lorde, Grace Lee Boggs, bell hooks, Toni Cade Bambara, Beverly Smith, Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, James Baldwin, and many others have pulled from their intimate knowledge of the

system and decoded it for their children and the rest of us.<sup>1</sup> It is incumbent upon us to stop being ignorant of the mechanisms of these systems and our own roles within them and to join the legions of people who work toward dismantling systemic oppression.

I am an internationally exhibiting artist who serves as a department head at a private art college. Taking intersectional organizing to heart has ushered in a radical reorientation toward love, community, and solidarity in my own life. This reorientation requires me to recognize an abscess of white supremacy at the core of my being, and to perform a loving, repetitive self-surgery. This self-surgery has allowed for my movement away from the apathy and isolation that often accompanies the conventional white, Western, liberal, postmodern, and critique-based orientation of most contemporary art production.

My ongoing study of critical race theory, intersectional feminism, disability studies, and queer theory has changed my understanding of what is possible within my personal and professional engagement. My new practices include community building, engaged pedagogy, intersectional feminist practice, honest communication, and a willingness to decenter myself so I can effectively respond to feedback. My commitment to these methods has impacted the structure of my creative and collaborative art practices, classroom teaching, and department leadership. Across all of these power dynamics and relationships, I take up the work of sharing information and tools with those in my midst, including liberal and progressive white folks and other interested parties so that we may identify and engage forms of structural oppression manifesting in elements of our work as artists and art educators.

I have only come to understand any of this over the last decade. This delay in comprehension has everything to do with the fact that my upbringing in the affluent suburbs of south Florida during the last three decades of the twentieth century taught me to fully embrace bourgeois conventions. By the time I was twelve, I had already been to the major art museums of Europe. Both of my parents hold Ivy League degrees, and aiming to attend Columbia University was a matter of course in the planning of my future. My mother understood the correlation between en-

1 For more on the work of these activists and intellectuals, please see Sojourner Truth "Ain't I Woman?" Speech Delivered at Ohio Women's Rights Convention, May 1851, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t\\_I\\_a\\_Woman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ain%27t_I_a_Woman); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1935); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994); Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: SUNY Press, 1981); and James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Cambridge: Beacon Press, 1955).

richment and merit. From a very early age she navigated me toward participation in programs and opportunities that would have an impact on my ability to be competitive in the eyes of top-tier institutions. Her literacy regarding how enrichment yields merit has everything to do with her cultural and class backgrounds and nothing to do with my innate talent as an artist. My father made sure that I developed the proper study habits and oratory and analytical skills to thrive in competitive academic environments. When I lacked aptitude, tutors were hired.

Long before the art fairs legitimized Miami's status as a cultural capital and certainly before any white people I knew understood that gentrification was a euphemism for the displacing mechanics of mercenary capitalism, my parents participated in the real-estate boom that was fueled by an infusion of cartel cash into the local economy. They designed and built five consecutive luxury homes while my mother secured grants to build less-alienating forms of affordable housing. As an Ashkenazi Jew, I was taught to over-identify with the civil rights struggles of the Black folk who provided reproductive labor for my family, like driving me to and from Jewish Community Center summer camp so both of my parents could pursue their chosen careers without sacrificing the care of their children. My mother's feminism was decidedly second wave, which provided me ample cover during the formative stages of my gender-identity but provided no analysis of the persistent racism within the National Organization for Women. Since my late teens, my family's financial situation has changed drastically. This certainly contributed to my ability to form a class analysis at all. I understand both of my parents to be liberal and acutely concerned with the plight of those who are disenfranchised, but the painful trajectory of what we gave up to become white, including an acknowledgement of our own participation in oppressive systems, never entered the conversation until quite recently when I began to share such ideas with them.

## II.

My own unlearning process began slowly around 2012. I was digesting ideas about the formation of subjectivity with its roots in Enlightenment-era notions of the free and autonomous individual and connecting this to the position of the contemporary artist-as-bourgeois-invention.<sup>2</sup> This inquiry coincided with preparations toward a re-

2 See Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 1–24. To synthesize this in relationship to how the Enlightenment project connects to white fragility, white supremacy, and white centrality see Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70. For a resource that addresses racialized codes of discourse, including whiteness and politeness, please see Derald Wing Sue, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Dif-*

search trip to Afghanistan supported by then-director of Global Initiatives at Creative Time, Laura Raicovich. There I was, about to take a fully funded trip to Afghanistan to research and photograph Soviet infrastructural projects, War Museums, and monuments in Kabul and Herat, yet I was carrying a productive but pressing doubt about my entitlement to do so. It is now clear that however destabilizing this particular psychic and cognitive dissonance was, it was also an important travel companion. I was already in the process of questioning my own positionality as I understood it in relationship to everything I encountered, but every day I spent in Afghanistan delivered a lesson in the inaccuracy of my worldview. For example, one day, I was on Swimming Pool Hill outside of Kabul with my fixer Hikmat Zahid. I was taking pictures of Soviet-era tanks left over from the days of Russian occupation when an Afghan man in traditional attire approached us. My entire body tensed and all I could imagine was that we had unknowingly transgressed a territorial line. I was terrified that he would know I was an American and that something violent would happen. Clutching my camera, I stood next to Hikmat while he translated. The man had seen my camera and wondered if I would take a portrait of him and his dog and then show it to him. This is just one example of hundreds that alerted me to the fact that my worldview was inaccurate, racist, islamophobic, and ignorant, despite my idealized sense of self as curious, open minded, and benevolent.

The first step of many healing modalities is to recognize the problem. Thankfully, before I started teaching full time, I was aware of my ignorance. After Afghanistan, commuting through the pattern violence of systematic disenfranchisement in north Philadelphia to my first full-time teaching job, made it impossible for me to ignore that I was a critical academic working within the walled fortress of a university, aggressively expanding its presence by displacing and neglecting the surrounding community.<sup>3</sup> The routine alerts transmitted over text messages from the university police, describing crime in the vicinity of the school, almost exclusively profiled across race and gender lines. The tone and content of these alerts had much in common with the State Department alerts I received in the months leading up to my trip to Afghanistan. They cast me, the recipient, as a vulnerable object in a barrage of reports, threatening imminent danger at the hands of those continuously profiled.

My embodied experience on the streets of north Philadelphia was similar to my embodied experience in Afghanistan. Anticipating that bad things would happen, my adrenal system was in high gear. While the situations were vastly different, one variable was consistent: my misunderstanding of my position in relationship to it all.

*ficult Dialogues on Race* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2015,) 55–64.

- 3 For an analysis of the fort versus the surround and the role of the critical academic within it, please see Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 25–43.

I was assigned female at birth and my culturally programmed beliefs around scarcity and insecurity chase each other up and down the same, well-worn neural pathway. This neural pathway relies on misinformation to generate fear about potential violence, this fear then generates reactivity and recenters my position as a vulnerable object, even though the entire system is set up to justify its racist practices in the name of protecting me. The interlocking logic of white supremacy, white centrality, and white fragility was automatic and immediate in ways that prevented me from perceiving how the mechanisms of systemic oppression were dictating the narrative of my experience. Simultaneously, my own matrix of privileges prevented me from understanding my actual role within these mechanisms. This pattern was hardwired into my reptilian brain long before my fancy pedigree, international exhibition, and travel experiences. This chain reaction incorrectly signals to my adrenal system that fight or flight is necessary. In order to understand these mechanics, I had to slow down and pay attention so I could learn to redirect the surge of energy generated in my body.

Part of this process was the decision to turn toward and tend to my own racism, internalized sexism, internalized homophobia, internalized ableism, and classism because these belief systems, and the paradoxes they produce, were limiting my growth. In my classroom practice, this meant acknowledging and putting an end to the fact that I struggled to remember the names of cis, femme students; that I tended to provide a disproportionate amount of attention to students of color which is its own form of racism; and that my go-to artist suggestions were predominantly white and male. Reckoning with my identity as an ethnic white person has meant uncovering the violence of erasure of my own heritage by my own family. Jews became white during my lifetime.<sup>4</sup> This violence can be traced from the survival mentality of my first-generation grandparents to the class aspiration of my Ivy-League-educated parents that squarely distanced me from a history of vulnerability and persecution. From here it was easier to accept ruling-class values as though they were my own. In February of 2014, I attended an anti-racist workshop which took up the relationship between the impact of oppressive structures and the messaging produced by white indoctrination.<sup>5</sup> The complicated, nuanced, mess of white indoctrination has to be approached in a way that is multisensory, multidisciplinary, and cross-modal because to the favored class, hegemony is like a cast covering a broken limb. There is a rawness to molting and a sensitivity once the cast gets removed. The trainers introduced information, tools, and practices that helped me reassemble my beliefs and

- 4 For more on Jews and the process of becoming white, see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 138–70.
- 5 For more on the work of Training for Change, visit <https://www.trainingforchange.org/>.

behaviors as a person with skin, class, and education privilege. This knowledge set also provided support for the ways that my marginal identity markers around ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexual orientation make me vulnerable to anti-Semitism, ableism, transphobia, and homophobia.<sup>6</sup> At the time, what I understood to be a loving, learning environment where I felt seen, heard, and empowered was actually the culture of intersectional feminist practice, engaged pedagogy, and direct education. Clearly, I too could cultivate a sense of belonging in the classes I facilitated.

Because failure and iteration play a critical role in the long-term success of this work, I externalize my own unlearning process through an instructional and leadership style that blends the folk-educational model of the organizer's workshop and the critical orientation of academic methodologies. This combination of storytelling and theory potentiates a weakening of the ideological instruments of white, Western philosophical thought that prevent us from experimenting and learning in public. Imagine leaving behind the disempowering register of paternalistic and hierarchical learning. Imagine leaving behind the fear-mongering of a dominance and subordination paradigm that is bent on punishment and evaluation. Imagine bringing shame out of the shadows so it can no longer be used as a silencing tool especially against those who are discovering new and liberatory ways of being. Imagine releasing the orthodoxy of mastery and its henchmen who tell us that we are not ready to take up this work. Only through intersectional thinking, cultural analysis, and feminist practice will these cultural touchstones and practices of art institutions that reify, maintain, and validate patriarchy, white centrality, and white supremacy be unlearned.

### III.

Indoctrination into the practices of intersectional feminism and engaged pedagogy has both brought on and supported the activation of a previously undeveloped cognition. It has also produced a kind of estrangement that I now understand to be productive. At first, this estrangement tormented me; it felt like a nauseating social freefall. I felt so completely alienated from almost every single white person I encountered, like I had a secret heretical position that was itching to get out. But it also jolted me out of the comfortable numbness that characterizes whiteness. I could now attend to how listless and isolated I had actually become; how much intimacy and connection with others I had lost in the process of being ignorant; and how much I had relied on the framework of hegemonic narratives to explain the world to

<sup>6</sup> This is an important piece of learning because in previous iterations of my thinking, my learning was slowed by a construct that only allowed me to either perceive the complexity of others' or the complexity of myself but never the two together as actors on an interrelated stage of hegemonically produced dynamics and structures.

myself. Now this estrangement is motivation for the care work I take up in my own community. I seek out ways in which my words and actions can be in solidarity with BIPOC who have been asking white people for hundreds of years to work to change our own communities. Because I can finally hear the ignorant clamor of white supremacy housed in the codes of conflict-avoidant, well-meaning, white, progressive utterances, I am perpetually and generatively estranged from the values and beliefs held by members of my family, life-long friends, and colleagues. And I confront it.

But seizing the opportunity to address asymmetrical power dynamics and unarticulated, but deeply felt, ideological and ethical constraints as I encounter them, doesn't just mean "Shame the Racists!"<sup>7</sup> Rather, it often means helping the people with whom I share so much experience by virtue of our skin privilege understand that the institutions to which we belong are grounded in racist ideology: that this applies to formal institutions—such as specific universities or governmental practices—but also to categorical ones—such as education, as well as informal ones, like gender roles; that people with privilege cannot elect to disown their privilege; and that, thankfully, there are ways of existing and moving within the world that contradict racism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny. Sharing tools and best practices with stuck and confused white people is loving, white work.

Often while leading public programming with audiences of my "peers" or in casual conversation, it is suggested that I am preaching to the converted—that the people who "really need to hear this" are, conveniently, not present in our community, but somewhere "out there." I have come to understand this allegation as a stalling tactic, however, a defensive move made by those who think they understand white supremacy but have not yet examined their own lives. I know when I am actually preaching to the converted because they affirm "the sermon," so to speak. The converted understand that when I describe the insidiousness and ubiquity of what bell hooks has named the cis imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, they respond to my words with a hearty "amen."<sup>8</sup> When I am preaching to the converted, I am with my comrades in arms.

The ways I create large-scale installations and nurture artistic collaborations have been profoundly affected by my unlearning and relearning processes. When I am teaching and serving as department head, I am able to envision different possibilities in the classroom and departmental cultures that I create. Even though my art, teaching, and leadership practices didn't start out as vehicles for anti-racist and intersectional work, they contained the seeds of what I now understand my work to

7 For helpful guidelines on how to lovingly intervene when racist microaggressions occur, see <http://interactioninstitute.org/love-while-challenging-racist-behavior/>.

8 For a contextualized explanation of this term, see bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria, 2004), 17–34.

be. Several years into a new orientation, I understand a few steps to be absolutely vital in the process of doing intersectional work in my communities. I want to stress that these lessons do not emerge from a vacuum. The alienation of white supremacist ideology is antithetical to the community of intersectional Black feminism. Every practice I seek to pass on in this essay is one I have learned from others, from thinkers and activists like those I named early in the essay, to friends, to ancestors, to students.

To lay the groundwork for group ethics, mission, and vision with long term collaborators and colleagues I have invested in the processes of building a common language and understanding. This work required me to listen to the needs, desires, strengths, and deficits of those around me and take the opportunity to learn from them. In order to remain in solidarity with those who bear the brunt of systemic inequity and to compassionately teach the privileged, I have found it necessary to commit to facilitating and participating in complex conversations across differences. This means I must acknowledge microaggressions and overt abuses of power as they occur, confirm solidarity with those who have been harmed, and commit to teaching and learning alternative behaviors. Keeping these practices aligned requires me to ask for feedback, depersonalize it to keep the goblins of white fragility out of it, and work to implement change, period. The processes of following and refining these steps has aided me in my attempts to support a creative and pedagogical community that values the contribution and honors the learning of each person. It also makes these spaces more supportive to me as I continue my work in a disabled and trans body that is more vulnerable to censure and hazing than my cis-hetero, able-bodied counterparts.

The two relationships that beautifully overlap in respect to these outcomes are my ongoing collaboration with my band Peebls and my relationship with my colleagues in the Sculpture Department at Rhode Island School of Design. My formation of and continued engagement with Peebls is possible precisely because I created conditions to support the building of a common language between us. Our process of choosing a language that suits our purposes cultivated an ethical orientation toward collective liberation for all beings that is best understood through the lens of intersectionality. We use our shared understanding of the concepts that form the cosmology of intersectionality to design the terms of our engagement, resolve conflict, and build trust.

This was accomplished at first because I was able to introduce intersectional ideas to them within a focused classroom setting. Because Peebls is composed almost exclusively of my former students, I had to facilitate an open conversation about the asymmetry of power dynamics and disparity of access to resources among us<sup>9</sup>. This

9 Peebls members include Joanna Bellettiere, Maia Chao, Teresa Cervantes, Filipe

has been essential to the development of our relationship. It's not just that power dynamics between faculty and student, mid-career artists and emerging artists are essentially asymmetrical, it's also that systemic oppression affects white and BIPOC members differently, masculine and femme members differently, and cis and trans members differently. Our group acknowledges and interferes with the presence of systemic oppression on behalf of, and alongside with, one another. Because of this commitment, we have established an exalted incarnation of integrative teaching, learning, and creative practices.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV.

My commitment to the craft of teaching and learning including and leading up to the formation of Peebls has birthed a strengths-based perspective that is directly transferable to my leadership role as department head. I'm grateful that when I arrived at RISD, I encountered a school where all manner of student actions and protests had sparked momentum for transforming the foundation of art pedagogy, trends in hiring, and instructional methods, such as group critique.<sup>11</sup> I also encountered a cohort of colleagues who were open to my ideas about how we could transform the department.<sup>12</sup> As a department head supported by my colleagues who were also quite sensitive to the student movement at the college, I could make a wide range of near-immediate transformations to staffing and curriculum, and my leadership style found affinity with the desires of the students I serve.

de Sousa, Jorge Galvan, Maria Leguizamo, Lisi Raskin, Daniel Stern, and Daniel Zentmeyer.

- 10 Since 2015, we have been working on a story album that tells the tale of a group of friends of varying ages and identity markers who meander through their neighborhood learning about queer, Latinx, and Black radical tradition as it applies to the formation of their values, ethics, and community relationships. This is a soundtrack for the movement for collective liberation that models alternative narratives for resolving the conflict resulting from structural oppression. We imagine characters who model an understanding of how their small scale actions impact larger patterns of oppression.
- 11 For more on the student movement at RISD in 2015–16, see “The Room of Silence,” 2016, dir. Eloise Sherrid, in collaboration with co-producers Olivia Stephens, Utē Petit, and Chantal Feitosa, and the organizing efforts of the student group Black Artists and Designers.
- 12 My colleagues who have generated and supported the department's vision at RISD are Funmi Aileru, Taylor Baldwin, Doug Borkman, Teresa Cervantes, Maia Chao, Tanya Crane, Felipe De Sousa, Gail Dodge, Carla Edwards, Amber Hawk Swanson, Tomashi Jackson, Ben Jurgensen, Lane Myer, Victor Pacheco, Laine Rettmer, Heather Rowe, Dean Snyder, and Daniel Zentmeyer.

My practice of engaged pedagogy translated directly into consensus-based leadership, supporting a culture of co-learning among faculty. When it came to reimagining the curriculum of the Sculpture Department at RISD, I described the process of writing a curriculum as that of authoring a living document that would contain space for our inevitable learning within it. I authored a new vision and mission statement, detailing what we as faculty wanted each student to walk away with in terms of knowledge sets; asked for and incorporated student feedback; and based on group-generated knowledge, engineered a three-year track that hit these outcomes. In collaboration with my colleagues, we identified that the deep state of the discipline of sculpture, as we inherited its traditional legacy at the college, centered whiteness and masculinity. We attend to these problems by putting practices into place that cultivate and coordinate an expansive and inclusive read of art history. We employ intersectional methods as we promote and demonstrate critical thinking skills, shop-based skills, and have crafted curricular pathways, making space for research and literacy in a studio-heavy curriculum. Attending to these problems is a formidable task, but, because everyone is participating, I understand that the task is a shared one. And it is an ongoing task, one where each educator in their individual classroom continues the development of their pedagogical models in ways that are different from one another.

Much is possible when a group of faculty sets out to model and practice intersectional feminist leadership; decides not to reproduce a dominance and subordination paradigm; and transparently facilitates activities that aid the formation of loving community. We have tethered the shifts in our department culture to our own practices of continued learning, resource-sharing, loving collegiality, and respect for one another. Our students benefit from seeing that we care about each other and from our commitment to framing multiple perspectives in relationship to one another. If we are committed to empowering students, we must never forget that when we bring examples of artists, theorists, and philosophers who share culture with them, it means that the examples themselves are relevant. And if they believe they are relevant, they can understand that what they make can change the world.

## V.

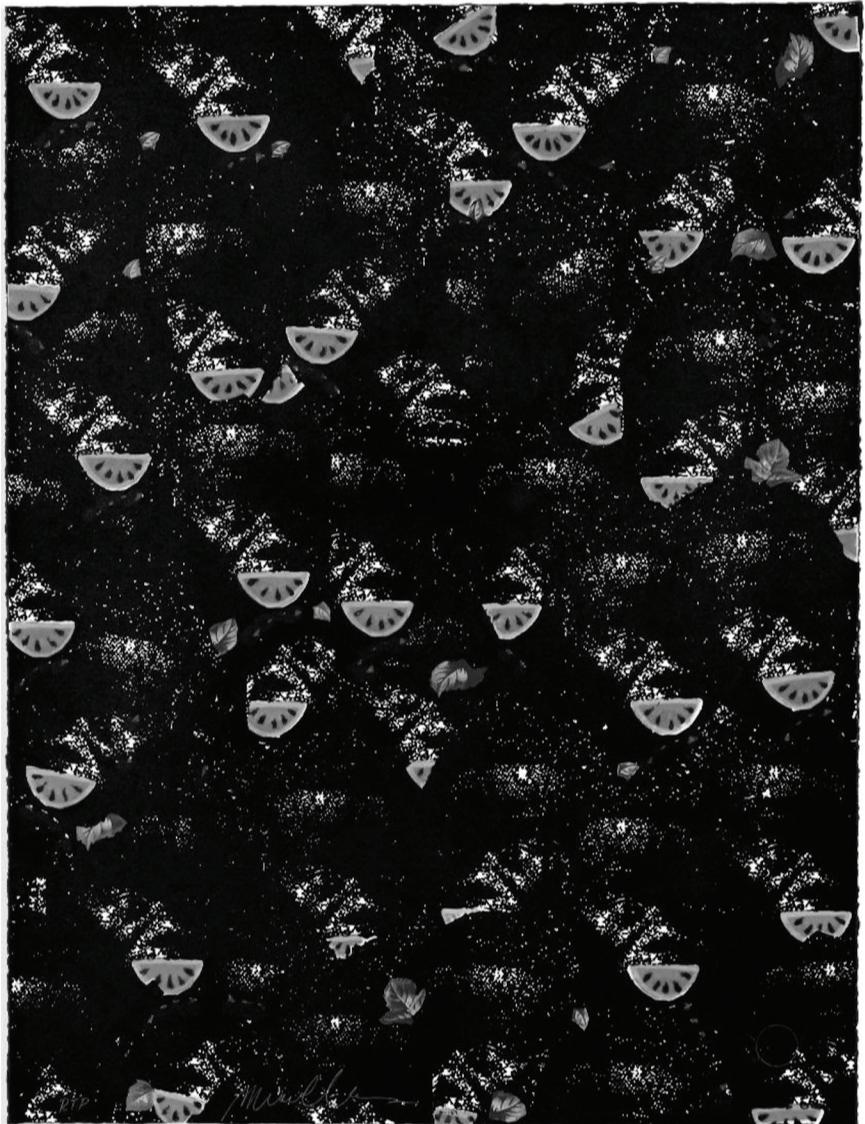
Challenging the myths we have inherited is a fundamental part of this change, which is why I must acknowledge another truth. It wasn't merit but rather some combination of luck, skin privilege, and access to powerful networks that landed me in the role of department head of Sculpture in the first place. It is incumbent on justice-minded, art educators to continually and candidly audit the origins of their status. We have to ask what structures benefit from a myth of meritocracy and be willing to consider who benefits when artists and professors perform their work under the presumption that they "earned" what access they have. In addition to granting me

access to higher education, as well as the freedom to elect such a precarious and risk-prone professional identity, skin and class privilege absorbs much of the risk that a less well-resourced BIPOC artist faces as they pursue a career in this field.

By design, I land on my feet. That my family has been allowed to accumulate wealth means that they have been able to support me through ups and downs in my professional status and earning capacity. And herein lies the argument for why it is so important that middle class, and upper-middle class, college-educated, white folk take up this work: while our conditioning would have us believe that everything is at stake, we are literally less vulnerable than our BIPOC counterparts. Capitalist white supremacy urges me to pursue my career in a frenzied panic about whether there will be “enough”—enough opportunities, enough money, enough lines on the cv. Further, white supremacy would have me conceal the role it played in my acquisition of an Ivy-League terminal degree, which in turn granted me access to networks of power, which in turn allowed me to develop my cv. White supremacy generates mercenary greed and then provides the rationale for the cover-up. When white artists and art cultural workers oppose hoarding of resources and opportunities, we acknowledge that what’s usually at stake in our careers is not our housing, or an incarcerated family member, or friend whom we’re also supporting, but rather our identities, our egos, our perceptions of ourselves as uniquely successful and brilliant.

I see my overlapping roles as a creative problem solver, educator, and colleague as ones where I can impart useful methods that aid in the process of developing visual and critical awareness of race, gender, disability, and other overlapping intersections. This means explicitly centering and paying homage to the work of indigenous communities, third-world women, Black feminists, womanists, and all of their children through the ages. If I abdicate responsibility for the impact of my actions in these spheres, I essentially fall into practices that collude with hegemonic power and reinscribe inequity. It is imperative that I choose how to comport myself in relationship to the power that is arbitrarily conferred on me. It is imperative that I realize the impact and terms of my artistic inquiry and the subjects I engage. When I teach, I set the stage and create the culture of my classroom. Regardless of who my students are, I have more power than they do. In most cases this means that unless I am self-aware and act ethically, and with kindness, and compassion, I will cause harm. With the work I describe in this essay, I pick up the burden that has already traveled such a distance on the labor of so many queer and trans folk, disabled folk, and BIPOC folk throughout the ages. I call on other white folk to take up our place on the field. We must show our respect and gratitude for the liberation work of those who came before us by picking up the ball and running with artists of all kinds, so that together we can produce new models for pedagogical, intellectual, and artistic production.







I.

Who, what, where, when, why, and how? These are the questions that inform my life and my creative practice.

Within every life's journey, a person reaches that moment when cultural circumstances demand that one chooses between who one is and what one will become. Before I began to call myself an artist, I knew I was an artist. My creative development started long before I would ever attend an art school. As a kid, often too shy to express myself in words, I effortlessly embraced art as my default mode of expression, and drawing and painting became the ways I responded to the world around me. I was then, as I am now, a curious person interested in how things function. The endless subjects and objects that captured my young imagination generally fall into the categories of nature, culture, religion, and identity.

Growing up in a Post-Civil Rights America, nature indiscriminately taught me how everything was connected and worked in unison. The spiritually and socially-segregated, southern, rural town of St. Martinsville, Louisiana, the historical southern city of New Orleans, and infamous south-central Los Angeles, California, directly and indirectly, imposed their unique customs, traditions, and values upon me. I recall paintings, sculptures, and sounds that surrounded me in the Catholic church on Sunday mornings. These seduced me and contributed to a belief that my inescapably proscribed Blackness is forever deficient, incomplete, and tragic. This is the nostalgic lens with which I view America's historically bleached traditions, customs, and values that influence my perspectives of reality.

In addition to immersing myself in comic books, my early art lessons began with adventures in nature, accompanied by a *World Book* encyclopedia, experiences in social adaptation, and my spiritual enlightenment. The encyclopedias provided a wealth of information. They were small home libraries, and, in some ways, functioned similarly to the internet today. However, among the many glaring differences

between encyclopedia and internet is the abundance of gossip, sensational information, and useless offerings pervasive to the latter. I grew up among adventurous, creative, and fearless kids. We were ignorant of the harm we would encounter given the circumstances of our adventures. Our curiosities occasionally caused discomfort but no significant bodily or mental harm. I often carried an encyclopedia on our many adventures. My favorite and most memorable adventures were hiking through the woods and climbing trees to determine what kind of bird's nest and eggs we would find. The encyclopedia helped to decide which type of irritated birds discovered us snooping around their unhatched eggs on many occasions. The encyclopedias were essential tools, mainly books B, F, and S. They included topics comprised of summarized fact-filled explanations, descriptions, and illustrations that prepared us for fishing the surrounding bayous and fresh and brackish water holes of southern Louisiana. Funny, we never knew what we might catch or what might catch us. There were as many snakes in trees swallowing bird eggs as there were lurking the edges of what we called "a good fishing spot."

## II.

Birds, fish, and snakes were among my earliest drawings and painting subjects, and the first time I began to render these subjects as a part of an environment. Nothing exists independent of a context. This fundamental idea continues to inform my creative production today. As my fondness for other subjects evolved, it seemed like every Sunday morning my brothers and I marched single file through the catholic church doors as we followed our dad to the nearest available pew. I sat through church services, fascinated by the artwork which enshrined the cathedral.

I often reflected upon the images that surrounded myself and others. Was I the only one in church curious to know the origins of the images? What was their intended purpose? Where and Why were they made? Most importantly, why were there so few depictions that resemble me or the different types of Black people in the congregation? After years of studying art, architecture, design, and visual culture, I can fully understand the impact of these subjects and the lives of those who contributed to their existence.

It has been profoundly expressed that we will cherish, protect, and preserve the things we love, love what we understand, and only know what we are taught at the end of our lives

*The Mickey Mouse Club's TV Show* became my introduction to cartoons, painted set designs and, oh, Annette Funicello I wanted to be a Mouseketeer so badly, that that show and its cartoons were among my favorite playground, providing important sources for me to develop my visual vocabulary. Aside from the many variations and characters, I noticed patterns like the white gloves worn by Disney & Looney Tunes characters and the often-repeated exploding comedic cigar bit. I would later

understand these to reference minstrelsy and vaudeville performers. Despite the variations, images of exploding guns, rifles, firecrackers, and ultimately exploding bombs reveal similar results. An explosion and the clearing of smoke reveal blackened remains of an incapacitated character peering back at the viewer. The joke, an unusual and unexpected occurrence, results in laughter at the expense of the tragedy of Blackness.

In the 1933 cartoon, *Mickey's Mellerdramma*, Mickey Mouse stands before a mirror in preparation for a performance as the character Topsy in Uncle Tom's Cabin. He's wearing a tattered garment and a wig; in his mouth is a firecracker and before him a box of matches. He strikes the match, lights the firecracker, closes his eyes, and places his hands over his ears. The firecracker explodes, the smoke clears, and, wah-lah, Topsy stands before the mirror. Simultaneously, cross-dressing and blackface, two staple characteristics of the minstrel show, are also revealed. While unaware of what the exploding cigar bit means, the results of Mickey Mouse and the cow before him are obvious and yield the same outcome. Prepared and served like happy meals, these cartoons often conflated American Minstrelsy, the blueprint institution that first constructed the comically exaggerated notions of the Black body, with the Civil War narrative. Classical, jazz, and ragtime music were often heard when watching these cartoons, perhaps a strategic attempt to establish a connection to a specific demographic or just simple supplemental children's educational material.

Whatever the case, whenever the song "Dixieland" was included, it signified a reaffirmation of society's deeply-rooted notions of white supremacy and its underlying racist attitudes. This cartoon and others of its time subtly and sinisterly introduced kids to the complexities of a cultural hierarchy rooted in racism, racial violence, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, religious intolerance, discrimination against individuals with disabling conditions, and other conditions that are considered taboo today.

Comedic visual tropes like this provided consistent references to minstrelsy, America's first creative cultural contribution to global society. Entertainment, comedy, history, and the lineage of minstrelsy contributed to my understanding of the cyclical nature of images and ideas in America's collective consciousness. Although much of my early visual vocabulary is informed by the artwork I saw in church, early cartoons, and comic books, I continue to be intrigued by the development and evolution of American minstrelsy and its ongoing impact on American, European, and Asian visual cultures.

### III.

Innovations are often used to recall and promote America's triumphant past, historical significance, and cultural values. Today as our society experiences a resurgence

of harmful, hateful ideas and their inevitable consequences. Our lives remain closely linked to our past negligent efforts to negotiate the treacherous waters of indifference and otherness. As a member of the Post-Civil Rights generation, I entered an America that witnessed multiple assassinations of prominent leaders.

The deaths of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, as well as the strategic dismantling of the Black Panther Party, have forever impacted the course of American culture. Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and the Black Panther Party each possessed differing philosophical and political perspectives that shaped the complexities of Black culture, in the minds of the white establishment during a critical socio-political climate in America. In their passing, they leave this world ideas about self-reliance and disobedient civil activism. Although radically different in their approaches, their desires to motivate people to organize a collective strength into political and economic power, persists in the hearts and minds of survivors of those turbulent times. In their absence, my generation's formative years were shaped by dire needs for the legitimate political power necessary to confront and overcome ongoing voicelessness and powerlessness within Black communities across the country.

Once, in his deep baritone voice, Dr. King declared, "I'm Black, and I'm beautiful" as Black people's response to needs made compelling by white people's crimes against them. The 1960's expression, "Black is Beautiful," conveys the ability of Black people to assert their admiration and self-appreciation. It sprang forth from the Negritude movement of the 1930s and emphasized a Pan-African identity among people of African descent. "We Shall overcome," a commonly used expression during the Civil Rights Movement, expresses Black collective determination, strength, and endurance.

In 1968, James Brown's groundbreaking song "Say It Loud!, I'm Black, and I'm Proud" harnessed the strength of Black achievement to soulfully articulated Black people's ability to unite in defiance during moments of discontent. Other expressions exude optimism, self-worth, and historical significance. Since 2013, the international movement "Black Lives Matter" has denounced racism, hatred, racial violence, and the damaging effects of racial terrorism, systemic racism, and the death of Black people at the hands of the police. These expressions provided solace and reassurance during difficult times and responded to the need to acknowledge hard truths about racial injustices across our global, societal landscapes.

As my interest in popular culture and Black cultural representations increases, deconstructing images and artwork help me develop a progressive understanding of visual communication, how cultural, economic, and political power is expressed through art and media images. In addition, I am interested in the essential role viewers' perception plays upon image-shaping processes, which reflect and transform meaning through symbolism, form, and style.

The 1970s builds upon the sixties' inclusion and tolerance of Black representation in film and television; however, there are significant differences in the types of characters in stories told. The depiction of America's first Black nuclear family on television was a comedy that exacerbated the struggles, failures, and countless setbacks of Black family life in the Chicago housing projects. The sitcom was titled *Good Times*—how ironic is that?

The opening credits included an image of the painting titled *The Sugar Shack* by Ernie Barnes. It was the first image of a painting by and about Black life I would see before eventually discovering the works of Jacob Lawrence and other Black artists. I identified with the character JJ, an artist played by actor/comedian Jimmy Walker. Almost every episode, this playful character and that of his politically conscious, younger brother Michael, a.k.a. "the militant midget," were often the primary sources of laughter. Perhaps unintended but given the belief that art imitates life, a consistent pedagogical pattern emerges, representing the creative, intellectual, and political components of Black culture as trivialized sources of humor. An artist reflects the ideas and characteristics of a culture, and the politically aware, speak truth to power.

This show satirizes the critical roles that an artist and the socially and politically conscious play within a culture. It appears uncoincidental that both are ironic choices for sources for comic relief. It is unfortunate to think that I, like many others, watched as the creative and political branches of Black culture were represented as comic relief during a time when the voices of Blacks began to flourish within post-Civil Rights America. At times, it was like looking at the Currier and Ives *Dark Town* series, nothing ever seemed to be done correctly, and after failure, tragedy, or calamity occurred, only Blackness remained.

Photojournalist, author, poet, filmmaker Gordon Parks directed essential films of the 1970s, which remain defining moments in Black culture and American cinematic history. A generation later, his creative legacy can be felt in the music of rappers/entertainers from the 1980s and nineties. His groundbreaking 1971 detective film, *Shaft*, spawned a series of movies that would be labeled as Blaxploitation Films. The genre was laced with negative stereotypes of Black men involved with drugs, violence, pimps, and prostitutes in urban ghettos and were commercially successful films that featured Black actors. I saw my first movie in 1974 titled *Three the Hard Way*. It was also directed by Gordon Parks. The film showcased Jim Brown, Fred Williams, and Jim Kelly as benevolent liberators of the Black race.

As I navigated my then south-central Los Angeles neighborhood, I searched for examples of those types, evidence of their efforts, and the potential they exuded. I was determined to relate to those characters and, most importantly, their ideas. During this period, Blacks began to see images on the big screen that possessed agency, strength, and intellect to respond to the white power structure. The poems of Nikki Giovanni and images from Gordon Parks's poverty series, films, music, al-

bum cover illustrations, ideas of social injustices, and the challenges of civil unrest filled me with pride and a sense of the inherent beauty which lies at the core of Black American cultural pain and suffering.

#### IV.

As New York City took the world stage as the center of avant-garde culture, the United States postwar political and socioeconomic dominance was reflected in art historical priorities and newly formed innovations in the visual arts. The accompanying narrow pedagogical viewpoints in contemporary visual art would begin to expand because of scholars' fresh, challenging perspectives. These viewpoints informed the methods I used when I started working in academia, but over time, I searched for excellence. This was a fundamental shift in my pedagogical approach to my role in academia and my studio practice.

While visiting a friend in New York City, I noticed a collection of reading and listening material. The capstone atop of each stack varied from a Tom Wolfe novel, a *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, *People* magazine, and a Britney Spears CD. It was impressive to see someone with an equally broad range of interests; however, I posed one question about the listening materials. At which point, my friend, an educated, successful, and influential business person, attempted to explain that each was a cultural example of excellence. As my friend's voice faded and my smile departed from my face, I concluded that excellence is in all things considered beautiful, but beauty is not in all things understood to be excellent. My ongoing search for examples of excellence persists today.

At the core of my pedagogical strategy is a concept that beauty norms are selective and vary with each society within a given culture, but excellence does not. Greatness, like beauty, is often combined and mistaken for being the same since both encompass an ethos of its time. They are born out of necessity, both reflect and channel the language of those who participate within the same systems of shared meaning. And, while both spring forth from a given cultural context, it is excellence that exceeds cultural limitations.

Language evolves with its application. Each generation differs because of its use of language to deconstruct, interpret, and disseminate complex ideas. Language application during the technological age is a prime example. Technology has altered how language is used to communicate. GIFs and emojis have become important forms of nonverbal communication. Ultimately each generation sets standards of language use; however, the inevitable slippages of meaning are consequential and require constant fresh perspectives to extend and dismantle philosophical and theoretical definitions necessary for self-identity.

Studying language usage offers a better understanding of the similarities and differences of cultural standards of excellence. It increases accessibility to creative

processes that reflect and expand creative and cultural production. The personal pursuit of individual excellence within a chosen practice and a commitment to developing relevant artistic discourse is among the most critical challenges an artist faces today. The visual culture I inherited forged by the political and socio-economic landscape of the times strengthens my ability to interrogate visual perceptions and representations of American culture and to explore how they produce meaning which shapes society. An interdisciplinary approach to fine arts education is inevitable. Visual culture has become a critical component of a range of disciplines, including literature, cultural studies, architecture, graphic design, philosophy, media studies, sociology, anthropology, language, and film studies. Thus, the exploration of interdisciplinary practice's impact upon art production raises pedagogical considerations.

## V.

During my time in academia, the role that fine arts play in society has changed significantly but remains a peculiar fit within the academy. Within the academic system of checks and balances, colleges face ever-increasing constraints to account for their programming. The rise of technology creates demands which challenge traditional ways fine art departments function within the academic institution. Technological advancements offer an opportunity for creatives to choose between an array of disciplines to influence their critical and creative problem-solving skills for careers in the art world as well as the corporate workforce.

Every cultural innovation affects images and language as much as both have defined it. From early printmaking to the internet, each share one commonality, an effective form for telling and distributing stories and experiences. Animation, video games, social media, and film all utilize technology to construct meaningful images that alter perceptions and reshape language. Today, educators face inescapable opportunities to redefine fine arts education through an emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, which is transforming how artists work, create, and contribute to culture. As the role of the artists shifts, the psychological, technological, and physical effects of creative production in visual, art, and culture fabricate demands for a new creative class equally capable of excelling in the fine arts world and corporate industries.

Against the background of Covid-19's ravaging effects upon Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, the violent death of George Floyd at the hands of police places dismantling structural racism and police reform at the center of national policy discourse.

Today's calls for systemic societal and organizational change in America are from diverse voices have never been louder and, at the same time, are faced with the uncertainties of adjusting to life during a pandemic. Teaching art through virtual

courses has proven to be less than ideal. Covid-19 ushers in a range of potential challenges. Perhaps the most important is accountability. The time away from the classroom has exposed pedagogical concerns, good and bad, requiring long-term and short-term changes to policies, standards, practices, and expectations. There are many challenges to this approach, far too many to list casually. However, moving forward, art instructors must face the realization that virtual studio art is here to stay. After a year away from the classroom, we now know what it will look like, but there is still more to learn. We must begin to find ways to manage creative production in virtual spaces that are both personal and private.

Through my art practice, my work attempts to represent underlying collective consciousness. I seek to convey complex ideas, evoke otherness's social, political, economic, and historical underpinnings, and contribute to the normalization of Blackness in an ever-increasing polarized world. I do work that does not require an audience to be familiar with esoteric concerns of high culture but one with shared systems of meaning. American visual culture is a continuation of Western cultural ideological expressions of difference through representations that emphasize concepts of marginalization, exclusion, exaggeration, and ridiculed otherness.

My art practice and creative instruction engage in cultural critiques of historical developments that influence art production and how contemporary art builds upon and departs from its historical precedents in order to inform and shape the creative development of others.





## Axis Lab

### I.

It is June 2018, and I am finishing my dissertation while a massive caravan of asylum-seekers from Central America are being forcibly detained, and children are violently separated from their parents at the border. My dissertation focuses on Vietnamese refugees and the aftermath of the Vietnam/American War, and in this moment, I ask myself, “What does it mean to write this dissertation in this current political moment?”—especially as I am the only person from my neighborhood and Vietnamese-American community in Uptown, Chicago to earn a PhD while working in the very place that raised me to build a better future.

There is a real divide between institutions of higher education and the lives of people outside of those institutions. Academia emphasizes silos of specialized knowledge, which isolates expertise to the academic institution itself, either in the classroom, conferences, or inaccessible texts. It was difficult for me to sit still, and I grappled with what it meant to have the “luxury” to read and write, but it is not a luxury. I think of Audre Lorde’s “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” where she writes,

It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

It is urgent to reveal these histories of violence, and center the stories of those who have been deeply affected by us foreign policies of imperial war and trade resulting in forced migration and disastrous humanitarian aid efforts, and all the while, imagining new and different worlds, cultivating other imaginaries for a more just society.

I spent the month of June not only finishing my dissertation but organizing a community teach-in called, “Rapid Response: Border Violence and Community Care.”

This teach-in also included healing practices and artmaking stations for the “Families Belong Together” protest that took place the following day. The event was co-hosted by my organization, Axis Lab, and abolitionist Timmy Châu, and Organized Communities Against Deportation (OCAD). Axis Lab is a community arts organization centering art, food, and design as vehicles to advocate for inclusive and equitable development for immigrants and refugees in the Argyle Street neighborhood of Chicago. As a political commitment to a more expansive understanding of knowledge production and where expertise comes from, the panel was curated to highlight the voices of community organizers, Timmy Châu from Dissenters, Arianna Salgado from OCAD, and legal humanities scholar A. Naomi Paik.

I would organize during the day and write my dissertation late into the night from 10 pm to 3 am. Was it sustainable? Absolutely not, but was it the work my soul needed and aligned with my political commitments to social justice?—yes. Burn-out is real and even though my soul needed to do this work in these moments, I am learning how to shift toward creating healthier boundaries, prioritizing rest and creativity, as ways of thriving in this world. My father reminds me, “you have to think about where you want to be and this work to be in ten years, fifty years, don’t burn yourself out before you’ve really had a chance to build a longer-term vision

How do we intentionally carve out time and space to write when we are in the midst of the daily grind, especially as visiting faculty, independent artists, and community organizers? I began writing this essay while on the academic job market, preparing for campus visits, teaching a full load, programming events for the university, designing a memorial project, getting ready for a performance residency, and closing down my organization’s space. Did I end up turning in this essay on time? Not at all. Did I try? I tried so hard. I was pushing through, finding slivers of time to write during the early morning hours and late at night, but I just could not finish. My head and heart space felt crowded, as I moved through so many different registers of being in multiple institutional and community settings.

At a certain point, I just needed to be honest with myself and ask for more time. Luckily, the editorial team was extremely supportive and understanding. This kind of support is rare, and I want to point it out because as a junior faculty and queer woman of color in the academy and the arts, navigating these institutions and publishing deadlines are not always conducive to the conditions of working at these intersections. Working at the intersections of academia, the arts, and community demands so much time and energy, and the list I offered is only a glimpse of what it looks like juggling the demands of academic institutions while maintaining an arts practice and community center. Nevertheless, I found the writing process really healing, albeit at times painful to engage in. The opportunity to reflect on the trajectory of my work and offer an essay in this collected series alongside other amazing artists is beautiful.

When the Trump administration took office alongside the continued abuse of power by Mayor Rahm Emanuel in Chicago, Axis Lab began to respond in crisis

mode to the onslaught of anti-Black, anti-refugee, and anti-immigrant executive orders, police killings, forced migration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, inhumane conditions of detention/incarceration, and deportations. I want to emphasize that for trans and queer communities of color, especially those in low-income/working-class areas, life in the United States has always been precarious and in states of crises. For this current political moment, we are living in, it is only the exacerbation of what has already existed. As a cultural producer, the question then is, what can we do? How do we make an impact on this world and imagine/manifest other possibilities?

## II.

My scholarship and artistic practice are grounded in my experiences growing up as a child of Vietnamese refugees in Chicago. My father, Tam Van Nguyen, is a community leader, survivor of war and postwar incarceration and my mother, Thuy Ta, is our family caretaker, survivor of war, factory technician, and former housekeeper. My family resettled in the city as refugees in a predominately Black and Latinx working class neighborhood in Chicago that faced intense police surveillance, under-resourced public schools, and gang violence. I lived across the street from the Latin Kings, one of the most notorious gangs in Chicago. My father's car was shot up a few times, caught in the crossfire. Through it all, the soundscapes of my childhood were of cumbia, reggaetón, hip hop, and R&B blasting out of cars and apartments, there was a sense of community and liveliness to the neighborhood. You could smell meat barbecuing on the grill and large groups of people laughing, dancing, and making jokes. Our family was one of just a few other Southeast Asian families who were also refugees resettled in the area. Layers of informal economies and communal care offered modes of survival in response to the city's neglect and financial divestment.

Growing up in Chicago during the 1990s, a plethora of youth programs focused on creative writing and the arts to support "inner-city youth." I took many of these creative writing classes during my time in elementary school and in various community organizations including the Multicultural Youth Center and Vietnamese Association of Illinois. One of the most influential programs was YAWP!, which stands for Young Asians With Power. It was started by a collective of Asian-American spoken-word artists and performance poets. My college mentor, Jill Aguado, introduced me to the program during the summer between high school and college. We learned about Asian America, focusing on histories of war, immigration, internment camps, and refugee resettlement through interactive workshops and processed our critical reflections through poetry. It was a transformative experience for several reasons. The first was that I learned history in a more embodied way; the second was that it centered the stories and perspectives of historically marginalized people (I was getting a dose of Ethnic Studies as a field before I even learned what it was); and

lastly, it gave youth of color a space to process through creative writing, histories that helped us contextualize our experiences and understand structural violence. YAWP! offered a space where we were able to write and perform with and for each other. It became a collective space of healing and offered a sense of community. My experience with YAWP! left a deep imprint on me. Although I have been part of youth arts programs in Chicago, this was the first one where the intersection of arts and politics aligned in a way that fundamentally shifted something inside of me.

My philosophy and work have also been deeply shaped by brilliant women of color, especially Black women. My mentor in college, Dr. Phyllis Jackson, was a Black Panther. Her courses and our hours of conversations during office hours profoundly shaped me and are the reason I believe in the power of art. Classes with Dr. Jackson opened up another way of thinking, being, and living, to not only critique and analyze racism, classism, and sexism but locate practices in the arts to envision a better future. We can deconstruct the world all we want, but what does it mean to actually create change, to impact, enliven, and re-imagine the way the world can be? The arts became the playing ground where I could explore these questions.

Before graduate school, I lived in Vietnam for two years. This is a period of time that I still find difficult to talk and write about. My family and I had a huge falling out when I decided to go to Vietnam. My family felt like I was betraying them and yelled, “Why would you go back to the country we left? You’re going to die” during our arguments. I was torn inside. My journey back to our homeland was, to me, one of reparations: to return to a country my father is exiled from and make sense of their story, understand where my ancestors came from, and learn about the other side of the war and its aftermath. Years later, my family finally understood why I needed to go on the journey and the human-rights work I was doing when I lived there, but of course, without its own layers of resistance, and inevitable disappointment turned to acceptance.

I initially went as a Fulbright Scholar teaching in a community college in the Mekong Delta. Soon after I arrived, I also started working with survivors of human trafficking with a transnational Vietnamese/American, non-governmental organization (NGO). My friend, Kim Dam, and I started the first arts education program in the organization and had to navigate through quite a few barriers from censorship to surveillance. As Fulbright Scholars, we were told that due to the history of the Vietnam War and our Americanness, we would be surveilled by local police in the towns we were staying in. Working on issues of women’s rights and human trafficking, specifically with young ethnic minorities in the country created even more suspicion around me. I struggled to grapple with my privileges as a US citizen and “American” in this context. I was seen as both an insider and outsider, a traitor and an ally, a potential threat and safety. The war trauma my family held still lingered in their psyche and bodies as their warnings for my safety triggered their own memories of war and my own sense of danger and hypervigilance was compounded by inherited trauma. The

hypervigilance was not without reason, as there were police cars staked outside of organizational meetings, undercover officers following us in different coffee shops, official US foreign officers issuing warnings, information including notebooks and cell phones stolen at around the same time, and phone calls to my supervisors from the national police with questions about my Fulbright and anti-human trafficking projects. We have our own surveillance systems within the US. As a person of color living in a poor/working-class neighborhood in Chicago, I am familiar with these apparatuses, but this was the first time the safety of those around me were in precarity because of my presence and human rights work.

### III.

What pushed me to go back to school was the fact that I was not allowed to even utter the word “human rights” during particular meetings with NGOs because the government would see it as a critique and attack against the state. I was also not allowed to have a larger critique of the ways the government is implicated in the increased numbers of young women facing human trafficking due to neoliberal government policies that lead to deregulation of development and government land seizures resulting in high rates of unemployment and poverty. I facilitated visual arts and theatre workshops with survivors of human trafficking as a way to navigate across linguistic and educational barriers with young women from various ethnic minority groups, where Vietnamese was actually their second language, and some of whom have never had the opportunity to be formally educated. I offered arts education workshops as a way for women to reflect on their situation through workshops based in transnational feminism to build community and to cultivate spaces to heal. Little did I know, I was a major suspect. The government was concerned about what I was teaching the young women and, of course, “art” became a simple way to frame it. However, in a country that deployed propaganda to rally the masses for communist revolution, art was not innocent nor divorced from political engagement.

I worked in Vietnam for two years, and it felt like I kept hitting a wall. I began applying to PhD programs where I could integrate an analysis of political economy with art. Someone who I met in Vietnam told me about performance studies, a field I never heard of before this encounter. I started researching performance studies, specifically at Northwestern University, where they bring the worlds of theory and practice together. My advisor and mentor was Dr. D. Soyini Madison whose work on critical ethnography, performance, and human rights was everything I was looking for. I remember reading her work alongside articles by the late Dwight Conquergood in the mountains of Vietnam at the border with China and just feeling like I finally had a theoretical and methodological framework to make sense of the work I was doing. Work I could feel—work that helped me put language to what I was experiencing, alongside a community of people committed to social change.

I had a series of failed collaborations with other upper-class Asian-American women in the academy my first few years of graduate school. My collaborators dismissed the importance of grappling with difficult emotions as embodied responses to legacies of colonial and imperial violence and questioned the very methodologies developed by Black feminists and women of color that I use to work through histories of war and inherited trauma. I found this tendency throughout the academy: theories and methods from working class women of color are cast as illegible, passé, irrelevant, or lacking rigor as they are simultaneously reappropriated as “radical” and “critical” by the very people who initially denied their value after they attained a particular market value in the academy and the current political climate. During another collaborative project, I injured my knee and needed crutches, which limited my mobility for almost a year. My colleague ended the collaboration and told me to read her article on collaboration so I could understand her approach to it. Her ableist assumption was that I would not be able to perform. I’d had enough of people who could talk the talk, write the words, but who had absolutely no embodied investment in grappling with the messiness of working with others, deal with emotions, and histories of violence that have continually denied and erased our epistemologies and ontologies.

#### IV.

My research, artistic practice, and community work is deeply personal; it is about the history of forced migration, war, trauma, violence, and the painful work of remembering. It is also about the work of imagining, experimentation, and community building. I’ve had to continue to fight to be grounded in this work. My presence, work, methods, intelligence, process, and vision are constantly questioned, especially in academia. My artistic imagination and creativity are dismissed by the community organizations, who typically center on social services, as too wild or difficult to measure and evaluate. My political voice was too dangerous when I lived in Vietnam. I felt stuck and wanted to create a space where I could truly work integrating all these elements together. So, I started Axis Lab with the ethos of experimentation, community building, artistic collaboration, and social justice. I had just finished my qualifying exams and my soul was literally crying out to embody what I was learning and researching. I wanted to break institutional divides between modes of knowledge production and who is considered “the expert.” I was tired of witnessing people posture and perform theories of social change while being completely removed from the actual struggles of people they were theorizing.

I called on friends to begin the process of brainstorming to create Axis Lab and imagine possibilities beyond and within the structure of the nonprofit, industrial complex, neoliberal university, and art market. We brought together visual artists, theatre artists, a graphic designer, environmental scientist, urban planner, architect,

bartender, acupuncturist, yoga practitioner, and herbalist into the conversation. We wanted to build the world we want to live in, one where we could activate all of ourselves and be well. We reconfigured infrastructure, modes of creating knowledge, innovative artistic practices, and ways of healing from histories of colonialism/imperialism and the constant onslaught of racist, homophobic, and xenophobic violence. The experiment continued for five years.

I started my full-time position as faculty in the Asian American Studies program at Northwestern University a few weeks after I submitted final paperwork for my doctoral degree. I was hired for my scholarship, artist practice, and community organizing efforts, in order to further develop the program. I received much support from women of color faculty. Spearheaded by student organizing and supported by faculty, the Asian American Studies Program (AASP) is still fighting for departmental recognition and institutional resources. Students have asked for courses that connect what they are learning in the classroom to the world around them, especially as they learn about social, political, and economic injustices.

The collaborations and partnerships that I have cultivated through Axis Lab and my work in Chicago with non-profit organizations, community organizations, policy think tanks, artist collectives, museums, galleries, and other universities allow me to bring these relationships to build opportunities for students creating a larger ecosystem of engaged learning. As for my pedagogy, my classroom is experimental, my practices offer me the tools to bring together methods in community organizing, visual arts, theatre, and movement to center embodied modes of learning. Assignments for students include creative projects that challenge the students to take ethical risks and engage with the complexities of these systems we live in. At the crux of this work is the importance of refining my own practice as a scholar, artist, and activist to open up spaces for students to experiment, take risks, value the power of cultural production, and connect to local communities. A demand that students have called for, especially living in this political climate.

## V.

As I finish this essay, this week is full of tragedy, devastation, and persevering love of community.

It is Wednesday, March 13, 2019, and the Chicago city council voted to approve a \$95 million police academy in a predominately Black community in the southwest neighborhood of West Garfield Park and the Lincoln Yards, a luxury riverfront development project in the predominantly white neighborhoods of Lincoln Park and Bucktown in the northside. Young, trans, queer, Black, and brown youth went to city hall to protest the vote and have been organizing against this direct investment in the criminalization and divestment of communities of color in the city, they were met by police and held back from entering the city council meeting until hours later.

It is Thursday, March 14 in the us and Friday, March 15 in New Zealand, and a white supremacist/terrorist propelled by the Trump administration attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand killing forty-nine people.

It is Friday, March 15, and *Still Here*, a historic art exhibition organized by the Chicago Torture Justice Memorial Project, opened to honor the survivors of torture by Jon Burge. Burge, a former commander for the Chicago Police Department, tortured over 120 Black and Brown people from 1972 to 1991 into decades of incarceration. Burge learned these torture techniques as an officer in the us military in Operation Phoenix during the Vietnam War. This speculative memorial art exhibition is part of a larger reparations ordinance fought for and won over decades of activism by survivors, family members, activists, lawyers, and communities. Chicago's ordinance is the only one in the United States that offers reparations directly addressing racially motivated violence and human rights violations by law enforcement.<sup>1</sup>

The constellation of these events are connected by a history of racist discourses of white supremacy that are either implicitly or explicitly carried out through urban planning policies, building policing infrastructure, mass shootings, torture, and incarceration. People say, "it doesn't have to always be political," "not everything is political," or "why do you always have to make it political?" Everything is political, even how we enter outer space and imagine life on Mars. We cannot escape histories of colonization and imperialism that have shaped our knowledge systems, governments, and intimate interactions with one another. However, we can acknowledge these histories as we imagine elsewhere together.

What sustains my work as I navigate academia and the arts is a commitment to radical love and liberation. Love as a verb. Love as the ethos of fighting against punitive and violent systems of oppression. Love as care work. It is in collectively building platforms to enact and envision the world we want to live in, to challenge institutional structures while manifesting other imaginaries/ways of being. My practice is to move through these spaces grounded in the lived material conditions of the world we live in, but always pushing boundaries beyond limitations, honing creative compulsions for survival, and moments of wandering/daydreaming for social change.

1 The memorial project I proposed with architect, John Lee, was awarded the honor of being chosen for construction. It will be the first memorial and educational center of its kind in the country.





Rudy Lemcke California College of the Arts, San Francisco CA †

Tina Takemoto California College of the Arts, San Francisco CA

## Queer Conversations on Culture and the Arts

### I.

TINA TAKEMOTO: While preparing for this conversation, Rudy and I realized that we both shared an early love of the art/life philosophy of Fluxus. It is a good point of departure for this dialogue about living and sustaining a creative life.

RUDY LEMCKE: My first encounter with Fluxus was in the mid-seventies as a philosophy student in Belgium. I was introduced to Fluxus along with other radical ideas from the sixties and seventies, ideas that I would carry with me for the rest of my life. Foucault and Wittgenstein were two thinkers whom everyone was talking about in school, ideas that were shaking up the tradition of Western thought. Studying at the Philosophy Institute meant all of my friends were theory queens. Some of the Belgian students used to call the American students the “nausea crowd” (after Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*) because all we ever did was endlessly talk about art and culture. I was introduced to the ideas of John Cage and Fluxus. I became more and more interested in art and aesthetics in Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Art and Language, Earthwork, and Performance Art. These ideas became a way of thinking materially that made complete sense in the context of what I was interested in philosophically.

TT: I probably learned about Fluxus in a contemporary art history class taught by Anne Wagner at the University of California, Berkeley in the late 1980s. I had just returned from a year of studying art at the University of Leeds, where I received my first taste of feminist theory, Marxist art history, and poststructuralism. I was so enthralled with the lectures given by Griselda Pollock, Fred Orton, and Terry Atkinson that I didn’t want to return to California. But I was also eager to take classes with Wagner and T.J. Clark, who had just moved to the West Coast. I was also taking painting courses

and my first performance art class with James Melchert. Every week, each student was required to perform a piece for the class. It was exciting and absolutely terrifying. Melchert introduced students to ways of creating performances based on “temporal structures” defined by the logic of materials and activities. For example, we looked at Laurie Anderson’s *Duets on Ice* in which the artist played violin on a street corner while wearing ice skates frozen into blocks of ice. We noticed how Anderson feverishly played her continuous violin duet until the ice blocks melted and she toppled over. It was exciting to think about ways of starting, stopping, and interrupting performance activities based on material processes, such as ice melting rather than the conventional arc of song or storyline. This combination of structure, chance, and absurdity resonated with my previous training in science and architecture but also appealed to my nascent desire to disrupt stereotypes or common trains of thought in humorous and unconventional ways.

RL: My best friend in school, Jim, was a handsome, well-read, and very cosmopolitan New Yorker. He had traveled all over the world, convinced me to study philosophy in Belgium, and was essentially my cultural guru. When Jim gave me a copy of Calvin Tomkins’s *The Bride and the Bachelors*, John Cage’s *Silence*, and the *I Ching*, it was the turning point for me. I moved away from the idea of pursuing a career as an academic-professional philosopher/teacher and toward something that was “in the world” in a more material way. I saw conceptual art as a path for anti-establishment thinking and art work that seemed more right for me. Another friend at school, Paul, was a conscientious Vietnam War objector who was living as an expat in Montreal before he came to Louvain. On our summer breaks, I went with Paul to Ontario, Canada to harvest tobacco and got a glimpse of life as an undocumented worker. To live with the threat of imminent deportation was a constant reminder of the precariousness of life that left a huge impression on me about human dignity and social justice.

These summers were such a pivotal moment for me, philosophically, politically, and artistically. I was beginning to understand my sense of being in the world—“for-the-sake-of-which,” as Martin Heidegger called it—meant that actions by themselves are devoid of meaning without a nexus of significance in which they take place. Fluxus opened a door for me to be an artist-in-the-world who could upend or at least question the formal systems of our relationship to visual and political culture. It represented the wellspring of my art/life project that still motivates my art practice. I didn’t think I needed any formal art education to be an artist because everyone is an artist. Everything I needed to know was already there, in the world. I don’t have a degree in art. It actually never crossed my mind to go to art school. I saw art schools as a boondoggle—part of the industrial-art-education complex that was one of the problems with the art world and just another way to alienate people from themselves and the world. Very 1960s, right? Well, that’s me. When I started

making art, it was about questioning the systems of knowledge and power, and making installation art both inside and outside of the gallery and gallery system that actively involved the participation of the audience. Blurring that separation between artists and life—Fluxus!

## II.

TT: I spent college summers teaching carpentry to kids and doing odd jobs for artists. After college, I took a full-time job making handmade custom wallcoverings that were designed to resemble artistically water-damaged Victorian wallpaper. I really wanted to move into the commercial, mural-painting area where all the cool clove-smoking, motorcycle-riding artists worked. But the workplace departments were cliquish and segregated, and I felt doomed to be making faux-water-damage effects forever. As an exit strategy, I applied to the MFA program at Rutgers University in hopes of studying with Leon Golub, who epitomized for me visceral approaches to political painting and the opposite of shabby-chic décor. When I arrived, Golub had just retired, but I had the opportunity to work with amazing artists including Joan Semmel, Emma Amos, and Martha Rosler. I vividly remember the first day of a performance art class with Geoffrey Hendricks. By way of introduction, he set up a 16mm projector and asked us to respond to a short abstract silent black-and-white film. During the discussion, we learned not only that the film showed full-frame portraits of bare bottoms shot as a Fluxfilm by Yoko Ono in 1966 but also that Hendricks was one of the unclothed film subjects, although he did not reveal which one. After Ono made the feature-length version of this film in London, she suggested that the parade of exposed bottoms was like a long list of “signatures” for a hippy-era petition for peace. There was something so compelling and awkward about being in the classroom, experiencing this Fluxfilm together, and then retroactively trying to guess which naked ass belonged to the professor. This was a lively topic of debate among students at the time. In hindsight, I associate these awkwardly compelling and mind-opening moments with both the spirit of Fluxus and queerness.

In my painting practice, I was working through “deconstructive” self-portraiture and the ephemeral aspects of intergenerational trauma associated with Japanese American wartime history by using unstable chemicals and materials that would fade and disappear. Although I primarily identified as a painter, I got involved with a monthly performance night that emboldened me to try more absurdist ways of grappling with stereotypes of Asian femininity, by stabbing my clothing with hundreds of chopsticks and eating Top Ramen from clay bowls attached to my head.

RL: When I moved to San Francisco in the late seventies, Harvey Milk had just been assassinated, the Jonestown massacre had just occurred. But I wasn't involved in the activist scene yet. It would take the AIDS epidemic to push me over the line into po-

litical action. My early work in San Francisco explored a type of conceptual performance art where I would create scores that were “spatialized” as sculptural installations that people could walk through and perform according to a set of rules that I would give out. It was during this period, the early eighties that I met John Cage. What a life event that was for me! We met at the opening reception for his new piece called “The First Meeting of the Satie Society” at the alternative art space La Mamelles. Cage’s ideas about language and temporality, about ephemeral performance notations that appeared on a computer screen were completely mesmerizing and inspiring to me. I saw Cage’s ideas coming to life with the avant garde maestro there to witness it all.

All of this happened at the moment AIDS entered the picture in the mid-1980s. AIDS made worlds collide and made it impossible for me to stay neutral, abstract, theoretical. As a gay man, this moment was like a bomb hitting ground zero. It wasn’t a theoretical idea. It was real terror with real lives at risk. It was a call to action, a moral obligation, and the best way I could manifest this political action was through art. I was particularly struck by how AIDS as an idea was manifesting in different ways for various people and elicited a broad range of representations and responses. The move to foreground political thought differentiates my work from that of Cage.

TT: By the mid-1990s, I enrolled in a doctoral program in upstate New York. This “school-school-and-more-school” trajectory was never part of a well-considered career path. When I finished the MFA, I planned to move to New York City, work in a bookstore, and maybe apply for the Whitney Program. An advisor suggested I check out the University of Rochester because it had one of the few doctoral programs that encouraged artists with MFA degrees to apply and gain teaching experience in their undergraduate studio program. I liked the idea of teaching while deferring loans and receiving funding to go to school. At Rochester, I taught many studio courses, and it was there that I really fell in love with teaching. When my collaborator Angela Ellsworth was diagnosed with advanced lymphoma, my practice totally changed. We embarked on a ten-year collaboration using absurdist performance to deal with the experience of life-threatening illness. I was deeply moved by Professor Douglas Crimp’s work on mourning and AIDS activism. Under his mentorship, I started to understand the vital relationship between cultural activism and the frameworks of representation and power that impact our daily lives. At this point, my scholarly and creative research started shifting toward the psychic and queer dimensions of illness and grief that eventually led to my queer speculations about Japanese American wartime history.

### III.

RL: I chose a less-traditional path, partially born in an academic frame, but one that tracks alongside a continued love of critical thinking but not beholdng to institu-

tional structures for validation or for a sense of success. In the waning days of AIDS activism in San Francisco in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a real crisis in thinking about what would happen to the queer community since so many of our leaders had died of AIDS and because so many people were still very sick even with the new anti-retrovirus AIDS cocktails that were prolonging lives. “AIDS burnout” was a very real phenomenon among support givers. The community was decimated and hobbled by the disease. I remember thinking that it was activism—not just activism in the streets or as agitprop—but activism as a way of living every day with the intention of making a difference that helped so many of us survive the epidemic. For some of us, this took the form of making art and building community as a mode of pragmatic utopianism.

During this period, a group of us came together and formed an organization called the Queer Cultural Center (QCC), which is now in its twenty-second year of producing and supporting queer art. The organization is best known for its annual National Queer Arts Festival, which has presented more than four-hundred visual, literary, and performing arts events featuring over one-thousand queer artists during the queer heritage month of June. QCC also maintains a queer arts website and offers a number of art and professional development programs. My artwork and social engagement around AIDS issues slowly evolved into work about queer narratives, queer lives, and world building using the QCC as a social platform. I didn’t stop doing work about AIDS, but it became contextualized as part of a greater project about social justice. My current work is about video games, experimental narratives and world building. I can trace the lineage of my art practice to those early days of Fluxus thinking.

TT: My first full-time teaching job was at a large private, Catholic university. I was hired through a predoctoral fellowship program that aimed to increase the racial diversity of faculty but did not consider sexual orientation and gender expression as important aspects of diversity. I was asked to participate in various Asian American programs and activities and to appear in official school photographs displaying the racial diversity of the faculty. But I also learned there was a queer student group that the university refused to officially recognize. It could not receive university funding and could not appear on the website. Students could only gain membership through word of mouth, and they often met off-campus or in secret. When I expressed interest in meeting with these students and possibly serving as a faculty advisor, a senior colleague urged me not to make myself publicly available to this group until I had the status of tenure and could not be fired.

During my four years at this school, I had long hair, wore dresses, and presented my version of “femme parody.” But, I probably appeared “straight” to most of my colleagues. My department was pleased to highlight my Asian American identity, but they did not want me to be openly queer. While the invisibility of my sexual orienta-

tion eased the anxiety of my peers, it also meant that I endured hearing homophobic and transphobic remarks. I worried that I would get in trouble for bringing queer content into the classroom and that I would not be able to keep my job because my research discussed queer art and sexual subcultures including sadomasochism. A tenured senior faculty member, and my informal mentor, said to me, “I support you. But you have to understand, teaching gay content at a Catholic university is like being in favor of the Holocaust at a Jewish school.” The comparison did not make sense to me. But I understood that my identity, research, teaching, and point of view were not welcome. I started looking for another job.

In 2003, I joined California College of the Arts (CCA), a private school of art and design with a large number of openly queer and transgender faculty, staff, and administrators. I was hired by a search committee with two openly queer female faculty members and was encouraged to develop classes that reflected my interests in race and sexuality including courses on queer art, culture, and theory as well as Asian American art, postcolonial theory, and performance studies. Within my first two years at the college, queer and transgender students were having difficulty feeling safe in gender-segregated restrooms. We began our advocacy by inviting the Transgender Law Center to conduct a series of educational workshops. They pointed out that without safe access to public restrooms, many queer and trans students avoid restrooms altogether, often leading to health problems or dropping out completely. The college now provides all-gender restrooms in most of its buildings as well as maps indicating their locations. During my time at CCA, much of what I have learned about creating a supportive queer campus comes from working with external arts and activist communities.

#### IV.

RL: I’m pretty sure that you and I first met in 2007. I was having a retrospective exhibition at the LGBT Community Center in San Francisco about my work on AIDS. A year later, we shared a ride to a mutual friend’s birthday party. We arrived early and sat in the car planning for what would become Queer Conversations on Culture and the Arts or “QCCA” as a joining of QCC and CCA. This program was a way of making visible the kind of community building, world building work we were doing at QCC. It was a way of creating visibility for underrepresented, queer art within a traditional institutional space that often undervalued anything to do with “community.” The art-industrial complex has always been about creating art stars—high-profile, financially sustainable, degree-certified, cultural capitalists who would advance the mission of the system that produced them. My vision of art has always been about opening ourselves to other worlds, other ways of being an artist, queer ways of having a sustainable art practice. I was happy to introduce, or reintroduce, even model, a different path whose lineage includes the work of Fluxus.

TT: We developed QCCA as a free public program open to students and the community. It was designed as a series of conversations that bring together professional artists, curators, and scholars to discuss their engagement with queer art and culture. Our strategy was to take advantage of the growing number of queer-themed courses as well as the large number of queer students, faculty, and staff that already existed at my college. We coordinated our events with specific classes in order to maximize student attendance and advertised them through QCC's vast social network to invite the broader queer art community. We started on a very minimal budget, but after a couple years of successful programming, the provost embraced it and now provides matching funding. Over the past few years, QCCA has expanded to collaborate with other local schools, galleries, and museums. It is exciting to see so many queer students forge alternative pathways for themselves by becoming actively involved with queer arts communities beyond the college.

RUDY: QCCA is now in its tenth year. Our first program *Queer Histories* was organized as a conversation among Cheryl Dunye, Rob Epstein, and Susan Stryker who presented excerpts of their films *Watermelon Woman*, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, and *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria*, respectively. The filmmakers discussed not only how and why they became involved in queer history but also the challenges of bringing queer histories to light, especially when there is a lack of historical evidence or when individuals are no longer alive to tell their stories. A program that stood out over the years was our tribute to Marlon Riggs and his groundbreaking film *Black Is Black Ain't*. Part of QCC's bylaws maintain that our board and programming would include 60 percent trans people, women, and people of color. This commitment also informs our programming decisions. Presenting the legacy of this important queer filmmaker to a younger, predominantly white, queer audience was part of a broad social agenda that includes an anti-racist vision. Our recent program *Queer Pedagogy* was a tremendous success. It featured the work of Juan Carlos Rodriguez and Anthea Black, two CCA professors who exemplify the activist art practices that we've been promoting. The program centered around the pedagogical strategies that Rodriguez uses in his graphic design classes and the *HANDBOOK: Supporting Queer and Trans Students in Art and Design Education* that Anthea Black co-authored at the Ontario College of Art and Design. This book provides concrete ways of supporting queer and trans student viability and success.

## V.

TT: CCA has been described as one of the queerest art and design schools in the United States. Our current and former provosts are both queer women who have worked hard to develop and sustain a queer campus by hiring queer faculty and staff, enabling queer courses, and supporting queer students. Some faculty and admin-

istrators have even tried to “pass” as queer in order to increase their chances of getting hired at the college. Student application forms accommodate a more expansive view of gender identity and expression, and there are college-wide efforts to support the use of chosen names and correct pronouns in all records and interactions. Students can choose to live in “gender-inclusive housing,” which enable students to room together regardless of legal sex or gender identity. The college’s webpage of resources for transgender students includes information about accessing transgender health services, public safety, and counseling. It also describes how to legally change one’s name on a driver’s license, social security card, and passport. As a long-time teacher and very recent administrator, I am moved by the college’s continuing commitment to equity and am proud to be part of the changes that have taken place over the past fifteen years. There is plenty of work left to do, especially to support undocumented queers and trans people of color within our current political climate.

RL: In the last few years we launched a program called Emerging Scholars Program (ESP). We saw that many of the queer graduate students in Visual and Critical Studies were doing research around the themes of race, class, and gender. We wanted to create a space to promote this work, both inside the academic environment and outside of it. Modeled after QCCA, we developed a program featuring newly graduated students from Bay Area programs in conversation with each other. The programs take place in art and community spaces around the city, and each one is moderated by a more prominent scholar or artist, who leads and responds to the discussion. It is a way to introduce these up-and-coming scholars to the queer community and open up the dialogue for community members to be aware of what’s going on in queer theory and queer scholarship.

TT: The programs we have forged through the collaborative efforts of QCCA have transformed the way I think about the possibilities for arts pedagogy as a mode of world-making, sustainability, and survival. Our work continues as an engagement with the queer, anti-racist, progressive political culture here in San Francisco.

RUDY: This led to finding an authentic voice and a realization that this voice comes from being part of a community of voices, always already defined by our radical interdependence with others. It’s about becoming engaged out of concern and care. Building worlds through this active engagement can begin with a conversation.

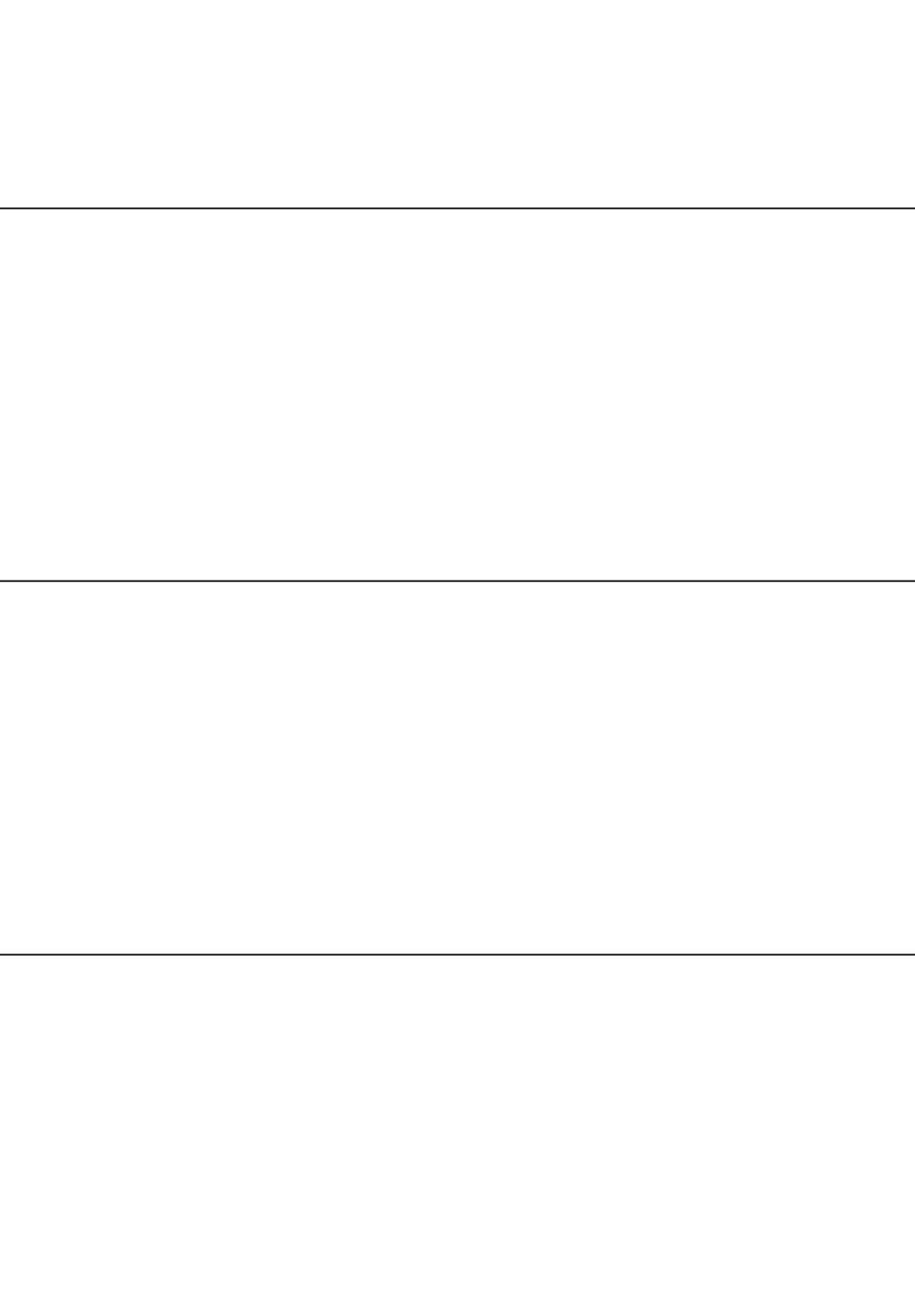
# **INSIDE- OUT**

---

---

---

**2**







Caroline Woolard Pratt Institute, Brooklyn NY +  
Susan Jahoda University of Massachusetts, Amherst MA

## BFAMFAPhD

### I.

*Susan Jahoda*

My parents and one sister emigrated from Manchester, England to Rhode Island in May 1968. I was in tenth grade. The scale of everything, from the size of sandwiches to the expanse of sky was daunting. My mini-skirts, Beatle-like haircut and accent created a spectacle that quickly felt burdensome, so I swapped my attire for a more hippy-like appearance and became a flower child of the sixties. It wasn't difficult to adopt a new identity as neither of my parents were British.

The other day Caroline Woolard, my collaborator, asked me if I came from a working-class family. It was a difficult question to answer, and, after hesitating, I spoke about how war had interrupted the predicted trajectories of my parent's lives in ways that complicated an understanding of my class background. Neither of my parents came from wealth, but their parents understood the value of education and prioritized opportunities for learning. My two sisters and I inhabited an isolated and sealed off existence, with two, traumatized parents who were afraid of what lay outside the four walls of our home. Our uprooting wasn't so much a spatial and geographic disturbance but a promise of an improved economy beginning with an extra bedroom and a bigger car.

I graduated from high school and entered Emerson College to study theater. Toward the end of my freshman year, I decided that I wanted to be a visual artist. I transferred to a studio arts program at Rhode Island College in Providence. It was September 1971. A month into my classes, I was shocked by how narrowly faculty were defining artistic practice. Anything other than observational drawing, figurative sculpture, and painting was dismissed. I spent long, boring, hours drawing from anatomy books and making paintings of apples and bottles. I thought I was failing but, at

the same time, it wasn't clear to me what I was actually failing at. Luckily, I gained the wisdom to realize that observational practices were not the only means to investigations I was interested in pursuing. Courses at Emerson College had provided exposure to social and Marxist feminist theory and returning to this material helped me to put into words what I sensed and experienced as a young, female student.

Rhode Island College offered a degree in Art Education, and that seemed like a better option for me. The shift in degrees provided more flexibility to experiment with different media but carried a stigma that my current Art Education students still experience today. Remember the phrase "those that can't do, teach?" Failed artists could always try their hands at teaching children! In retrospect, I understand why students in BFA and MFA programs are taught by educators who have little knowledge, training, or experience in arts pedagogy.

The courses I took in child development, psychology, and pedagogy provided an academic context for teaching but were hard to apply during my student teaching experience at a public high school in Providence, Rhode Island in 1974. I greatly resisted enacting the disciplinary practices required of me; they made me feel ineffective as a teacher. I couldn't find my way through this. Instead of applying for teaching jobs in K-12 I worked in service industries, waitressing, and doing home health care for the elderly. After a year of working to support myself and save money, I applied to a one-year program at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York to study photography. For the first time I experienced the power of working in an experimental, collaborative environment. Working artists, filmmakers, and writers gathered together with students in spaces that felt more like experimental spaces than traditional classrooms. I gained skills and confidence and applied to Rhode Island School of Design.

I entered graduate school in 1977 and was fortunate to study with Wendy Snyder MacNeil. She created a space of learning for in-depth dialogue, support, and transformation of self and others. There were no courses in professional practice in the 1970s, but she demonstrated how the life of an academic artist could have both a practical and ethical dimension. My goal became to get a teaching position at a college or university. If I could support students and colleagues and, in turn, be supported by them, I could sustain my own creative practice and the creative practices of others.

During graduate school I had been lucky to teach undergraduate courses, but I knew that what I needed to get a teaching job were professional credentials. It helped that I had the privilege of studying at an elite institution, that I had teachers who supported my work and that I was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant three months after receiving my MFA. I began exhibiting work internationally and nationally. My day job working in a restaurant provided flexibility to continue my practice, and I got a few residencies and adjunct teaching positions. After two years of traveling back and forth between Rhode Island, New York City and Europe,

I began to feel weary and empty. The communities of people providing a context for my practice, to feel like it had meaning, were not the people involved in the circulation of my projects.

I shifted my priorities and began to seriously pursue teaching jobs, hoping that I had acquired enough visibility to find one. I moved to New York and after five years of one-year renewable contracts at Princeton University, three one-year sabbatical replacements at The Museum School of Fine Arts, at Sarah Lawrence College, and at The International Center of Photography. I applied for and got a tenure track position at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, my first job at a large public research university. The decision to leave New York City was a difficult one. I had built community and felt a sense of belonging. Even during the years of teaching in other cities I had chosen to commute, to be able to remain in place. However, I was a single mother with a one-year-old daughter, and commuting was no longer an option for me. I moved to Amherst, Massachusetts. Eight years of full-time teaching in temporary positions hadn't, however, prepared me for the challenges ahead. As a woman hired in a predominantly male department, where all but one of the few women faculty held the same sexist, territorial, attitudes, I was miserable. At every turn I experienced hostility to my ideas, my politics and my projects.

I requested to come up for tenure after two years of teaching, which was unsupported by my department but supported by the dean of the college. My creative research profile was overall higher than other faculty in the department, making it difficult for the department to make a case against me. I got tenure and then the following year was brought before a committee to discuss the possibility of moving my position over into Women's Studies. The major complaints articulated were that my interests were too interdisciplinary, and I was prioritizing conceptual practices over formal practices.

I found community and collaboration outside the conservatism of the faculty within my department. I was invited to become the art editor for *Rethinking Marxism*, a journal started by two Marxist economists and their graduate students at University of Massachusetts (UMASS) in the late 1980s. I served in this capacity from 1992 to 2014. The first five years were transformative. There were opportunities for curatorial work, as the parent organization for the journal (Association for Economic and Social Analysis) organized international conferences held at UMASS and we were able to secure one of the galleries on campus for exhibitions. The editorial board periodically went on retreats and got together for two-day board meetings, where we would engage in deep intellectual work while building community and friendship. My creative practice, editorial and curatorial work, and, in turn, my approaches to pedagogy felt fully integrated.

When the journal was picked up by Routledge, the ways in which the board interacted shifted toward production and deadlines rather than open-ended conversations and gatherings based upon friendship and shared ways of being and thinking.

What had been a labor of love became instrumentalized labor. Our relationships suffered, and I no longer experienced my labor as praxis.

Then Occupy happened. My living space, two blocks north of Zuccotti Park, became a shelter and a place to bathe and eat for a number of occupiers. I became involved in a health and housing working group and met Robert Sember, a member of the sound collective Ultra-red. Like Julie Graham, Robert had a profound impact on my life, in ways that deepened my understanding of collective labor and pedagogy. I was lucky to be able to participate in a course he was teaching at The New School and later met Dont Rhine, one of the other members of Ultra-red. Dont organized Encuentro, a gathering at Vermont College in Summer 2012 on collectives and collectivity. I attended as a representative of *Rethinking Marxism*. It was during this gathering that I realized it was time to resign from my position as art editor. It had become an obstacle to sustaining my creative life.

At Encuentro I reconnected with artist Maureen Connor, who had been a colleague at Princeton. She and I discussed how timely and productive it could be to form a pedagogy group, where like-minded teachers could come together to share resources, ideas, and the challenges we faced in our classrooms. In January 2013 we held our first meetings for the Pedagogy Group.

## II.

### *Caroline Woolard*

I remember learning the word “autodidact” at a very young age. My mom helped me sound it out and spell it: au-to-di-dact. My mom told me that’s what she and my dad were—people who taught themselves. Books carried my parents out of the childhoods they felt they needed to escape and into a life together. They seemed to say to me, “books are the way out, reading is a practice of freedom.” I was raised in a library of a house, a place where books far outnumbered visitors. I remember my mom amidst boxes of journals and articles, finishing her PhD. I remember my dad fast asleep, a book on his chest. I sensed that, for my parents, books had always been more reliable than people.

My parents come from working-class families and raised me to understand that learning has nothing to do with academic institutions. Learning is self-directed—a daily engagement with one’s own curiosity and capacity to seek delicious texts that are often excluded from academic institutions. My parents came of age in the Black Power Movement, in second-wave feminism, and in Vietnam War protests. My parents took out a mortgage on a house and bought books of their own, went on vacations, and sent me to private school. They wanted me to be comfortable in elite, social spaces that they cannot enter with the ease that I can.

My parents aspired to belong to this elite community, to have friends who read all the time and who were able to own a big house, have personal libraries, and to go on elaborate vacations. To this day, my dad has not been to a single one of my art openings. I am 35 and have had at least five major art openings at which I wanted him present. I cannot help but wonder if it has to do with the owning-class, social dynamics that are reproduced in art spaces.

I attended Cooper Union in 2002, the year after 9/11. The professors who taught me, Hans Haacke, Doug Ashford, Jill Magid, emphasized the importance of institutional critique and gave no assignments. As students, we were expected to show up to class at least three times in the semester with a project for group critique. Classes were places for discussion and critique. If no one had work to show, we would do independent studio work and one-on-one studio visits. At Cooper, I unlearned what Paulo Freire called the “banking model” of education. My approach to learning shifted from one of memorization and rule-following, which was how I survived high school, to self-discovery and self-directed learning. Cooper gave me a structure in which I became aware of my own curiosity and helped me follow it with rigor.

Every student had a tuition-free scholarship at Cooper, as had been the case for over 145 years at that time. This pedagogy of self-direction combined with free education at Cooper changed my life. Cooper taught me to investigate the conditions that enable a group of people to gather pedagogically, historically, and economically. Cooper’s mission and history represent a model for free higher education at a time when seemingly “there is no alternative” to ever-increasing tuition and accompanying student debt. At Cooper, I learned that experience is a criterion of knowledge; because I lived the experience of full-tuition scholarships for all students at Cooper, I know that free education is possible in this country. This has inspired my life’s work. By inviting people into experiences of solidarity economies at the scale of an installation or a para-institution, I offer experiential knowledge of economic justice to people who might otherwise dismiss these ideas as utopian, impractical, or undesirable.

In the winter of 2006, I graduated from Cooper, moving into the abyss of year-round work and the brink of the 2008 economic crisis. After four years of art school, constant dialog with faculty and peers in my studio at school and being challenged on a daily basis to transform myself and my thinking, I was in a space where no one cared about what I thought. No one cared about art, let alone me.

I left my administrative job the next year when I got a job working the night shift as a Studio Monitor at Cooper Union. During one night shift, I found a grant on the internet for “Economic Revitalization for Performing Artists” and decided that I should apply. I wrote the grant from work. My idea was to make a website that would allow artists, designers, and craftspeople to get their projects done without money. They would see each other’s projects and offer to help one another by shar-

ing their skills with one another. Somehow, with a CV that only included a BFA and no residencies, I got the grant in 2008. I had \$5,000 and no idea how to make the project a reality. I asked the best graphic design students I knew from Cooper, Louise Ma and Rich Watts, if they wanted to work on this project with me. We knew we needed another administrative person and a computer engineer, so we would each get \$1,000. Thankfully, we were all young enough to think that we could pull this off for such little funds. Over the next five years, we would go on to raise enough philanthropic money to make OurGoods.org a part-time job for Louise Ma, Rich Watts, myself, as well as for Carl Tashian and Jen Abrams.

### III.

#### *Caroline Woolard*

The one-to-one barter network OurGoods.org led us to start TradeSchool.coop, a self-organized learning platform that ran on a barter system from 2008–18.<sup>1</sup> I worked again with Cooper graduates, Rich Watts, Louise Ma, Christian Diaz, Aimee Lutkin, as well as artist and computer engineer Or Zubalsky and curator Rachel Vera Steinberg. As majority Cooper graduates, we connected the cost of tuition to the education a student receives. I like to say that there is a “pedagogy of payment” that must be explored in the economies and administrative structures of schools, accredited or not. Through TradeSchool.coop, I learned from great educators and helped groups in thirty cities around the world open similar, self-organized schools, understand the open-source software and the principles of self-organization that we were using in New York City, and adapt it according to their local context, from in Athens to Pietermaritzburg, from Glasgow to Quito. My excitement for education has to do as much with economic justice and self-governance as it has to do with pedagogy; for me, they are inseparable.

I never considered that the classes I taught at TradeSchool would lead to a job in an accredited BFA program, but they did. Teaching at TradeSchool was always an experiment, and I was only 24. Most often, it was I who hosted classes there, helping teachers set up and welcoming students into the space. Every now and then, I would teach a class on grant writing, since I had raised over \$300,000 for OurGoods.org, and I would also teach a class on so-called “alternative” economies, or what I would later learn to call “solidarity economies.” In 2010, TradeSchool.coop was written up in *The New Yorker*, WNYC, and in *The New York Times*, and the classes became so full that we had to turn people away. We had wide a range of people in our classes: high school students, unemployed artists, millennials who thought it was cool, ac-

1 For TradeSchool’s story, visit <http://tradeschool.coop/story>.

tivists who believed in solidarity economies, retirees who wanted to keep teaching, well-known artists who had art market success, and lots of people who attended for the sake of self-directed learning.

Because of this range of students, I did not think any faculty members from The New School were in my classes. But in 2010, one of my TradeSchool students, Pascale Gatzert, who was also a faculty member at there and who I had met at another experimental school called Mildred's Lane, invited me to teach a class. With only a BFA, I never imagined that I would be invited to be an adjunct teacher. That summer I got really depressed and felt like all my students would know that I was an imposter. I was so nervous to enter a "real" classroom with BFA students paying over \$40,000 a year in tuition. I asked everyone I knew how to teach a fifteen-week, BFA course, and a curator named Erin Marie Sickler put me in touch with Susan Jahoda. I was relieved when, a year later, Susan started the Pedagogy Group, and I could meet with other faculty members, both adjunct and tenured, to talk about how to teach.

That fall, when I started teaching my first class for BFA students at The New School, it was the year of Occupy Wall Street. That fall, the new President at Cooper Union, President Jamshed Bharucha, also started openly talking about charging tuition at Cooper. This would be a radical shift as the first time in the institution's 154-year history where any student would have to pay for their education at Cooper. I knew it was time to move from my work on self-organized learning with TradeSchool.coop and into arts advocacy for cultural equity and for free education. In addition to joining the Art & Labor working group and the Alternative Banking working group at Occupy and demonstrating against charging tuition at Cooper, I began to shift away from my work with TradeSchool. In 2013, I held open meetings throughout New York City with a call to found a collective called BFAMFAPhD, which investigates the relationship between student debt and precarity in the arts and advocates for cultural equity and free tuition on a national scale. By 2014, Susan was fully involved, and we produced a report, *Artists Report Back*, which used rigorous statistical methods and data visualization to advocate for cultural equity in arts education.

By 2014 and four years into teaching as an adjunct at The New School with a stint at the Rhode Island School of Design, I turned 30 and began to think about job security with a kind of desperation. I had started to love the dialog that is possible in the classroom; I also loved being recognized as an academic in the academic arts community. The grants that had supported OurGoods.org had dried up, and TradeSchool had never generated any money. We were opposed to payment in that collective. I was working three part-time jobs at nonprofits while teaching as an adjunct and trying to sustain my organizing work and my artistic practice. I was deeply exhausted. My partner had a tenure-track job, as did Susan, so I knew it was possible, despite all the odds against me. I had no MFA. But teaching in higher education seemed to me to be the best job in the United States.

Mark McGurl has called the university system—employing artists since the 1950s—the “largest patronage system for living artists in history.” I was fully aware, from BFAMFAPhD, of the contradictions held within the neoliberal university, including the fact that the majority of faculty will be adjuncts. I started applying for tenure-track jobs while also trying to find free and fully funded MFA programs. I had interviews at a number of places, but a few search committee members told me confidentially that the lack of an MFA was a real problem. I asked an artist to put me in touch with someone at the School for Visual Arts (SVA), hoping to get an MFA there. When I asked the Chair of MFA Fine Arts at SVA if I could get an MFA for free, he suggested that I teach in the program! I went from trying to get an MFA to teaching in their MFA program, starting in 2016. I kept applying for jobs.

After teaching at The New School for seven years from 2011 to 2017 and at SVA in 2016, I got a tenure-track job at the University of Hartford in Connecticut without an MFA. The summer before I began teaching in Hartford, I allowed myself to feel the anxiety that had propelled me from 2011 onward. I now have to confront the difference between the workaholicism that was necessary for my survival as a precarious adjunct and the compulsive workaholicism that numbs me from the present and from feeling and from being available to others. The incredible stress of seven years of adjunct work is starting to wear off, but the contradictions of inequity between faculty does not go away. I now have to confront the inequity of the university from the privileged side of the adjunct/tenure-track divide. I feel as though I have gotten on a cruise ship, sailing away from my peers, all of whom continue the precarious hustle. With the privilege of a tenure-track job, I am able to devote at least forty more hours per week on my research and organizing.

#### IV.

#### *BFAMFAPhD (Caroline Woolard and Susan Jahoda)*

Collectivity has sustained our academic and artistic lives. For Susan, this has meant being an arts editor for the journal *Rethinking Marxism* from 1992 to 2014, co-founding a collective for arts educators called the Pedagogy Group, and joining BFAMFAPhD in 2013; for Caroline, this has meant co-founding barter networks OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop from 2008 to 2016, making media for the economic justice collective SolidarityNYC from 2009 to 2012 and founding BFAMFAPhD in 2013.

BFAMFAPhD is a collective that employs visual and performing art, policy reports, and teaching tools to advocate for cultural equity in the United States. The work of the collective is to bring people together to analyze and reimagine relationships of power in the arts.

Why Now?

In 2014, we, along with other BFAMFAPhD members Blair Murphy, Agnes Szanyi, and Vicky Virgin produced a report called *Artists Report Back* that looked at the lives of arts graduates and working artists. The group chose the format of a “white paper,” or research paper for policymakers that circulate more widely in policy circles than art exhibitions do. In addition to the report, we created an animated video that we knew would circulate in the arts community. Vicky Virgin’s day job as a demographic analyst meant that she could rigorously analyze Census Bureau data, specifically data from the American Community Survey, which is the largest survey that collects data about artists, available in the United States. In 2014, we wrote the following to introduce *Artists Report Back*:

As artists and art school graduates, we often find ourselves in conversations about the difficulties of continuing our practice as writers, authors, artists, actors, photographers, musicians, singers, producers, directors, performers, choreographers, dancers, and entertainers. We struggle to support ourselves with jobs outside of the arts and we struggle to earn a living in the arts. Yet art school administrators and “creative class” reports assure us that arts graduates make a living in the arts. Loan officers insist that art students can afford art school tuition, repaying student loans over time by working in the arts. This is not our experience. We decided that it was time to make our own report.

Connecting our lived experiences to national trends, we wanted to know: What is the impact of rent, debt, and precarity on working artists and arts graduates nationally? How many of us are there? If we are not supporting ourselves as working artists, what jobs do we work?

We looked at artists’ demographics, occupations, educational attainment, field of degree, and earnings as recorded by the Census Bureau’s 2012 American Community Survey (ACS). With this data in hand, we made this report to reframe conversations about the current conditions and contradictions of arts graduates, and to make informed decisions about the ways we live and work.

Our report made a larger impact than we imagined. Over 10,000 people watched our animated video that summarized the report, and over 5,000 people downloaded the report from our website. Although we were effective on a national level in 2014 by making news headlines and speaking as a kind of think tank for cultural equity, we were still teaching in classrooms and our pedagogy had not changed. We asked ourselves, how can we talk about making a new project without talking about labor conditions? How can we talk about labor conditions without talking about

payment? How might we bring practices of cultural equity and collaboration into the classroom itself?

These questions became prompts for creating *Making and Being*, a teaching guide and workbook addressing cultural equity and world making—enacting the worlds that we desire to live in.

### BFAMFAPhD Appendix

#### Mission

*Making and Being* is a book, a series of videos, a deck of cards, and an interactive website with freely downloadable content; it is a multi-platform pedagogical project which offers practices of collaboration, contemplation, and social-ecological analysis for visual artists; it is for arts educators who want to connect art to economy and for students who want to make artworks that reflect the conditions of their own production; it provides a framework that asks artists to explore both who they are becoming as they make projects and also what their projects are becoming as they take shape and circulate in the world.

AGREEMENT: We follow the Public Science Project’s collective agreement “to collaboratively decide appropriate research questions, design, methods and analysis as well as useful research products (i.e., making artworks and reports, videos, and articles).”

QUESTION: How will you determine when a “white paper” report, an art exhibition, an animated video, or a comic strip will be the most appropriate format for the circulation of your ideas?

#### Finding Collaborators

We had a long phone conversation, talking about our mutual connection to the Community Economies Collective, but it took a year for us to meet in person. When Susan co-started the Pedagogy Group in 2012, she invited Caroline to join. About twelve teachers gathered around the long wooden table at Maureen Connor’s house, talking about our common concerns around teaching. Over the course of our weekly meetings, we began to notice our shared commitments to collaboration, cultural equity, and economic justice as well as a sense of our compatibility and of our obsessive work habits combined with an earnestness, a vulnerability, and a generosity of spirit.

We were both at moments in our lives where we had removed ourselves from multi-year collective projects—for Caroline, TradeSchool.coop, for Susan, *Re-*

*thinking Marxism*—and at moments where we wanted to grow in relationship to a new collective project. While the Pedagogy Group was focused on dialogue itself, we started working on a series of projects as a way of getting to know each other. These projects included joining the Media Working Group for the New York City Community Land Initiative with Picture the Homeless and forming a group called New York City To Be Determined, where we organized four public conversations at the Museum of Art and Design about artists as long-term residents working in coalition for affordable housing. In all of the previous groups, we had been in supportive roles. It was not until we started *Artists Report Back* that we began to truly collaborate on a daily basis, creating projects from scratch together with a collective voice.

### Collectivity

We believe that learning together is fundamental to a meaningful life. As members of a collective, we learn, labor, and take action in continuous dialogue with one another. A collective is an example of what the social learning theorist Etienne Wenger calls a “learning community,” defined as a group “of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” We recognize one another as learners and as teachers. We yield to one another as our individual and collective aspirations shape us daily.

We want to be in dialogue with familiar faces and with new ones, again and again. We are renewed each day in our collective and in each semester as teachers, when we discover who we are in relation to one another and to our research. We get to be surprised, to try things out, to fall on our faces, to laugh together, to change our minds, to sit together in the space between not-knowing and knowing, and to grasp new concepts. When we sense new possibilities for ourselves and others, we take action in relation to these ideas. We cherish spaces of individual and collective transformation, where people show up to grow and listen deeply enough to transform.

### Intergenerational Collective

Being in an intergenerational collective relieves a lot of the stress that occurs in collectives where everyone is at the same life stage.

While the past five years have presented *many* personal challenges for us, our different perspectives have stabilized us. Susan, who is 66, has the perspective of over thirty years of teaching and ascendency in the field of art, so she has been able to provide a broader perspective to Caroline, who is 35, and Emilio, who is 24. Vicky, who is 65, has the perspective of being a performing artist with a day job for thirty years, and has been able to remind us of the importance of embodiment and live/work balance. Vicky has even created a “brain massage” for us because she says

that we are too much in our heads, not enough in our bodies. Agnes, who is 39, has provided the perspective of a PhD candidate who understands the arts from a sociological perspective. Caroline has been able to provide connections and energy to her generation, who are emerging as leaders in the arts and in the solidarity economy in New York City. As a Fellow from 2016 to 2018, Emilio provided the zeitgeist of a younger generation, bringing in the urgent concerns and interests of recent BFA graduates.

Working in an intergenerational collective brings together a sense of the past, the present and the future through lived and embodied experience. We bring in readings and references with the specificity of having lived through those debates. We speak about our need for visibility or invisibility with an honesty that is possible because we have different needs and goals according to our life stage.

AGREEMENTS: We agree to explore our expectations of one another, our gifts and skills, and also our challenges and triggers, individually and collectively. We agree to see this ongoing process as integral to our transformation as individuals and as a group.

QUESTION: What are your expectations of yourself and of other group members, specifically about the time you will spend together and apart working each week? How will the labor be distributed?

### How We Write Together

Looking back on the past five years, we realize that the first two to three years of writing helped us find a framework for our thinking. Once we had the framework, we had to rewrite the entire book based upon this clarified structure. There were multiple fits and starts, including moments where we agreed to publish, prematurely, parts of the book in ThreeWalls's *PHONEBOOK*, at the Creative Time Summit, in *Art21 Magazine*, in the College Art Association's *Art Journal Open*, and in a series of public programs at Hauser and Wirth bookstore. Having never written a book or been involved in a five-year project, we have learned that books move at a different pace than art projects. We have pushed back the publication date three times because we realized we needed to allow the writing to move at the pace that was best for the book. We are trying to get it done at a high level while balancing our health and the slowness of our "collective metabolism"—the speed in which we can come up with an idea and put it in writing.

In 2014, we felt that it would be best to write independently and then to share our writing with one another. This felt important because thoughts often develop in writing, in moments of clarity that often happen without scheduling a writing session together. This caused a lot of tension because, when we came together to review

the texts, we often felt like the time we put in on our own was unrecognized or denied when we inevitably rewrote the text together. Slowly, over two years, from 2014 to 2016, we began a process of writing in a shared Google Doc *while* talking on Skype or sitting side by side in person. We realized that we needed to see one another and to talk through ideas as they were being written, to watch the sentences taking shape in real time. This allows us to acknowledge one another's thinking and labor and to have a dialogical process with one another. We know that it can be hard to develop a thought collectively because before the idea one person is presenting is fully formed, the other person might adjust or negate it. One solution is to write quietly, at the same time, after talking about the general idea we want to convey. Another solution to this is to become more aware of ourselves and to notice when we are in a mood or dynamic of reaction or negation. After writing together for five years now, we are more aware of the moments when we are getting stuck in a bad dynamic with one another, or straying from our collective voice, or away from the structure that we agreed upon.

A few years ago, we noticed that we each had a tendency to jump on a section or a word and never finish reading a section that we needed to edit because we obsessed about one small phrase, one word, or one footnote. To get around this dynamic, we started doing the following: while one of us reads aloud, we both underline something that we know we want to come back to and talk about or we make a comment in the Google Doc. We take turns reading sections aloud, so we are both listeners, readers, and underliners. That may take half-an-hour. Then, the next hour is spent going over all of the underlines to get clarity and to see if we agree on the adjustments that we want to make. While some people would find this process tedious, it is important to us because we imagine that our book will be read aloud in self-organized groups and in classrooms.

In addition, we have adopted a practice of checking-in before working. We do a check in to see what we are bringing into our collaborative dynamic that day. When we are writing during the semester, we begin by asking each other how the week has been so far. This first part of the check in is more focused around events, more of an account of what has happened. Then we check in about the emotional impact that those events had on our sense of well-being. We listen to each other and try to sense where the other person is at. One of us might be challenged by physical illness or emotional stress. We evaluate what we are capable of doing that day. Who should take the lead in any given task because they can. It's a subtle and beautiful thing, now a practice that is a part of every working session.

AGREEMENTS: We follow the Public Science Project's agreement to "excavate and explore disagreements rather than smooth them over in the interest of consensus (as they often provide insight into larger social/political dynamics that are informing the research)."

QUESTION: What is your relationship to disagreement and conflict? What practices of self-awareness (therapy, meditation, ritual) are you involved in to become more aware of your relationship to tension or conflict?

### Decision Making/Roles

A year into our work together, when our schedules limited when we could get together, we did an asset-mapping exercise to self-identify our strengths and weaknesses. This enabled us to settle into particular roles, while acknowledging the potential for switching them.

One of the most difficult tasks in a collective is the process of making a quick decision. Sometimes it is necessary that the group yield to the authority of one person. This requires deep trust. We have been able to build trust slowly and to create agreements that can guide quick action rather than assuming that all decisions must be made as a group at all times.

To understand our collaborative dynamics, we engage in the process of “threeing.” Threeing is a method for group work that was developed by the video artist Paul Ryan between 1971 and the end of his life, in 2013. Threeing is “a voluntary practice in which three people take turns playing three different roles: initiator, respondent, and mediator.” By practicing threeing in groups of five, three, or two with members of BFAMFAPhD, we are able to experience the positions of firstness (the initiator), secondness (the respondent), and thirdness (the mediator). We also use the vocabulary from threeing to understand and describe our collaborative dynamic with one another, even when we are working as a group of two. Threeing has become such a common part of our vocabulary that we have a spreadsheet that lists every task that has to be accomplished for our group to function, using the roles firstness, secondness, and thirdness.

### Balancing Friendship and Work

Two years ago, we had to confront a major difference in our working styles, precipitated by a deadline to complete a text while working from two different continents. Caroline had gone to India for her honeymoon, and Susan was on vacation with her daughter in Los Angeles. We needed to finish a small publication based on our book in time for an exhibition at CUE Art Foundation in New York City. We convinced ourselves that we could do it remotely, as we had no choice but to finish it. Caroline would try to call Susan from a WiFi cafe with rolling power outages at 8 p.m. India time, which was 6:30 a.m. in Los Angeles. The reception kept cutting out, the writing was going in a direction that Susan did not agree with, and the process

was incredibly frustrating and stressful. Susan was working with Emilio to design and illustrate the publication, as Emilio did not work well alone.

We started recognizing that we were all drawn to each for our openness and desire to cultivate emotional vulnerability alongside our work, and that we saw this as part of our feminist politics. As J.K. Gibson Graham writes, “the slogan ‘the personal is political’ authorized [people] to speak of their intimate concerns in legitimate tones, enabling them to connect the private and the public, the domestic and the national. ... The practice of feminism as ‘organizational horizontalism’ fostered alternative ways of being (powerful).”

We reflected on our larger dynamics and discussed how not to repeat these patterns. Caroline’s desire and ability to work remotely, at high speed, created emotional distance that did not at all align with Susan’s desire and ability to work together in person, to slow down, and to be emotionally available. We talked about how to be present with one another in a deeper way. For Susan, checking in for a while about difficult emotional circumstances in our lives would be an experience that deepened our friendship and allowed us to work; for Caroline, checking in about difficult emotional realities created a terrifying emotional landscape that she feared she could not “hold” for Susan and would not be able to “return” from to head into work. Emilio found themselves in thirdness, mediating between Susan and Caroline. This self-awareness and collective awareness allowed us to reevaluate the things we each needed in order to work with one another more openly and smoothly.

We began to refer to Caroline’s “Capricorn-ness” as a description of her ability to manage large and simultaneous projects, set up meetings with people whose work we are inspired by, and quickly apply for grants. Caroline continues to write down all of the tasks required for project-management, make a calendar for the entire year for the project, and manage the recruiting and hiring for tasks that support the collective like computer engineering and design. Caroline also facilitates the circulation of the collective’s work by understanding how to strategically amplify and translate projects according to people’s research areas and desires. We refer to Susan’s “Virgo nature,” as a description of her ability to go deeply and analytically into material, remain grounded, and take a detail-oriented and slower approach to working together. Susan continues to connect deeply with all of the BFAMFAPhD collective members in their lives, to keep the larger collective connected and included, and also supports the detail-oriented and patient work of accounting, keeping track of footnotes, and editing text. Generally speaking, Caroline creates breadth, and Susan creates depth.

Rather than seeing our working styles and skills as limitations, we are able to celebrate our differences; Caroline can be like the air, zooming around, bringing new ideas and new people to the group, and Susan can be like a rock or a root, steady-ing and weaving together deep community and also—importantly—beautiful folder systems for group memory and organization. We name these things in order to know

what we are experiencing without allowing these generalizations to place us in fixed positions. Susan is bringing in new readings all the time, and Caroline is mentoring Emilio with deep friendship. We seek the middle ground between air and earth and are grateful for how we have learned to do this together. After five years of working together we have created an effective, collective equilibrium.

**AGREEMENTS:** We agree to acknowledge that our working styles are different, and that there is a strength in our difference. We agree to discover the working style(s) that we gravitate toward in our collaborative work, and to acknowledge that any healthy, functional group can benefit from the strengths of at least four different working styles.

**QUESTION:** What working styles do you tend to take on at home, at work, at school, or in a self-organized group? What working styles do you need to seek out to balance your working style? Name a few contexts in which each working style might benefit the group at large. Remember to differentiate the working style from the group member.

<b>Personality Type</b>	<b>Strength</b>	<b>Weakness</b>
Analytical (Get it right)	Thinking	Excludes feelings from decisions
	Thorough	Goes too far; perfectionist
	Disciplined	Too rigid or demanding of self/others
Driver (Get it done)	Independent	Has trouble operating with others
	Decisive	Does not take time to consider other perspectives
	Determined	Domineering; too focused on doing it "my way"
Amiable (Get along)	Supportive	Tends to conform to wishes of others
	Patient	No time boundaries; things do not get done
	Diplomatic	Not assertive or directive
Expressive (Get appreciated)	Good communicator	Talks too much
	Enthusiastic	Comes on too strong
	Imaginative	Dreamer; unrealistic

Table 1. Working Styles Chart

## Structure

BFAMFAPhD has both a core group and contributors. To be a core member you must be aligned with BFAMFAPhD's aesthetic and ethical principles. You must be

aligned with the solidarity economy concept that “another world is not only possible—it already exists.” You must be interested in prioritizing the remaking of institutions over institutional critique for the sake of critique itself. You must be interested in looking for strategic opportunities to advance cultural equity in the arts and to build a community of rigor and care over a cynical, ironic, or antagonistic stance that denies our capacity to create change in the world.

People become group members by emailing us and asking to join the collective or by being invited in through existing relationships. The core group takes care of all of the administrative tasks that keep the collective alive. These include maintaining the website and caring for the well-being of members through events like collective meals, meditation, and movement practices. Friendship and emotional labor are central to our group agreements, and we privilege these in order to maintain the collective. One benefit of being in a collective is that we have five people to draw from.

Contributors are people who have created projects that the core group has agreed to host. Contributors can also potentially become core members but are not responsible for the maintenance of the group and do not have the right to approve new contributions or to represent the group in public.

#### BFAMFAPhD Economies: Emotional and Monetary

Each contribution to BFAMFAPhD has its own economy. For example, Vicky is bartering and gifting with people for her contribution. Our contribution, *Making and Being*, had a Fellow from 2016 to 2018 (Emilio) who, like us, was not paid for their time working on the project. We pay people when there are tasks that must be accomplished that we do not have the skills for or that we do not want to prioritize.

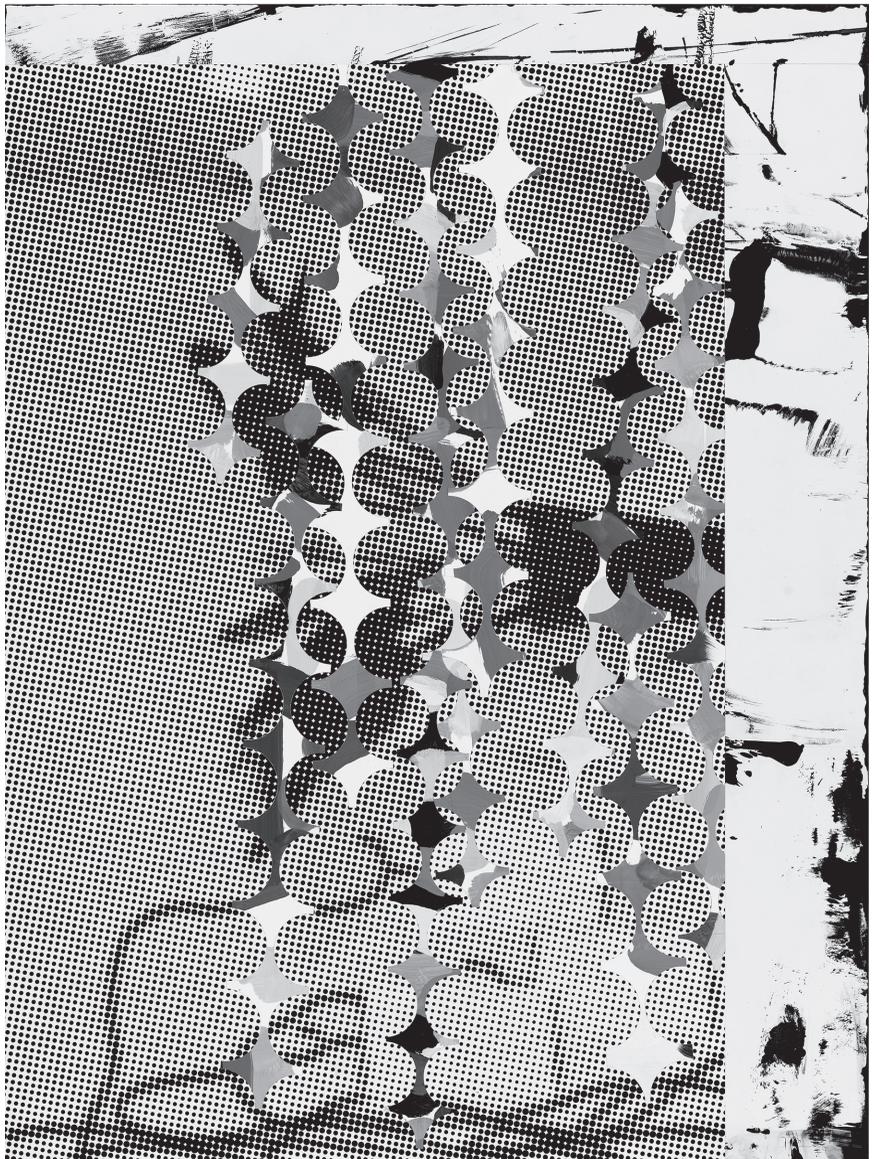
While Emilio was unpaid as a Fellow from 2016 to 2018, they were in a far more precarious financial position than we were. We spoke openly about the reality that Emilio, as a Fellow, who had just graduated with a BFA at 22 (they are now 24), would need to fit in their collaborative work between day jobs, and they wanted to be mentored in relationship to professional practice and pedagogy. They needed to be compensated in the form of a cash stipend for some of their work. For the first three years of this project, Caroline was an adjunct faculty member who had an extremely precarious livelihood. Susan supported Caroline’s chaotic work schedule by being as flexible as possible with their collaborative writing schedule.

When Caroline wanted a tenure-track job, Susan and Emilio allowed parts of the project, the card game, to be visible before we felt it was ready, so that it could be in her application. As we write this, Caroline, at 34, now has a tenure-track job, and Susan, at 66, continues to be a Full Professor. Now we both have salaries that support our experimentation and research.

We recognize that our individual and collective needs for livelihood are far more complex than our salaries. We try to speak openly about what we need to give and receive in terms of time, money, and support in order to feel a sense of equity in our work together and in our personal relationships. We are in constant negotiation with our partners about the time that we need to spend working during weekends, days off from teaching, winter break, spring break, and summer break. This is a challenge for our romantic partners, who create their work alone. They have had to come to terms with our commitment to prioritize this work and to acknowledge that experiences of collectivity are essential to our wellbeing. When our partners suggest a vacation to either of us, we will schedule it in relationship to our collaborative work times. Because we cannot work alone, and must work together, Susan is often “on” Caroline’s vacation with her partner (via shared GoogleDocs and Skype) and Caroline is often “on” Susan’s vacation with her partner and daughter. In fact, we have celebrated Christmas together in Los Angeles and we often schedule our holidays in open conversation about our collaborative work with our partners.

**AGREEMENTS:** We follow the Public Science Project’s agreement to “commit to an ongoing negotiation of conditions of collaboration, building research relationships over time.”

**QUESTION:** What is the difference between a job, a friendship, and a collective? What expectations do you have about this collective on emotional, intellectual, and financial terms? How does the group’s structure and conditions of collaboration reflect this?





## Devening Projects

### I.

Like many artists, my path in life and art has been a circuitous and complicated one, but it reflects my unwavering desire to live my life fully as an artist. It has been gratifying to examine the pieces of my journey for this essay and attempt to lay them out in some sensible, orderly fashion. One's path through life is never as straight and narrow as one would hope: there are inevitable tangents, deflections, false leads, interruptions, and surprises that make any life trajectory colorful and unpredictable. But I never wanted to realize any plan made by anyone else. It was absolutely necessary that my creative energy go into my ideas and my work. So this has been my path—not exactly designed, but something that defines who I am as a maker and minder of art.

I knew becoming an artist would be an unconventional career choice, and, especially in my family, one fraught with challenges and obstacles. Yet I have spent my life pursuing, and successfully finding, the means to make this choice work. Teaching and curating, owning and directing an exhibition space have become the support system upon which my personal artistic output hangs. For most artists, one or two of those ambitions would be plenty. But for this artist, the multiple ambitions are intertwined and indivisible. The pathway was long, but as I gained experience and confidence as an artist, I began to see facets of the art world with which I wanted to fully engage, that, conveniently, would give back to me tenfold. I wanted to make art, live with art, and be around artists—no matter what.

Primarily, I'm an artist/maker. My work employs a simple and direct language of geometry, gesture, and assembly. Trained as a painter, I produce work that is a hybrid of painting, paper assemblage, and display. I construct images from underused materials as a way to subvert the negative associations of the "throwaway" and to build something formally rigorous and visually satisfying. For the past ten years, I have been strongly interested in how employing ephemera allows me to find useful materials while still addressing the eventual burden of accumulation. The layering of

this material and the revealed history of its previous use gives the work a density and weight I relish. I make the joinery of these disparate elements visible and critical to the viewing experience by sewing, stapling, or attaching with paper clips. Revealing the joinery brings the viewer into the experience of making and suggests the potential for alternative possibilities.

Color drives many compositional decisions in a work of art; it also acts as the emotional trigger for how the work might be experienced. My practice is a choreographed set of eccentric moves that attempts to produce something unified and codified. Each step in the process provides an experience quite different from the next. A work might include gestural painting; then require the addition and accumulation of geometric elements; then call for the joinery of hand sewing. Each move satisfies a distinct need in me as a maker. I greatly appreciate the diversity of these making-methods and the resulting tension.

Like many artists who achieved an MFA degree in the early eighties, I anticipated a life with few tangible, art-career opportunities. There weren't many commercial galleries in Chicago at the time, and those considered important focused on well-established and/or recognized artists. Except for the rare non-profit or artist-run space, recent MFA grads faced a future that was more about working than showing. We all held onto some parochial view that with the right amount of perseverance and discipline, someone would recognize our brilliance. Unlike today—where sometimes youth is valued over experience—we held little hope for notoriety or success. Despite this rather pessimistic view of our career futures, I was very fortunate. I was invited to participate in important group exhibitions and received notice by significant curators and gallerists. With that recognition came even more attention. All of which grounded my sense of confidence and gave me a hint at a brighter future.

In the early 1990s I continued to move along this path: a studio-defined life with goals of better work, exhibitions at more important venues, increased recognition. I received everything I hoped for. Attention for the work I was doing and opportunities to put my work within strong curatorial contexts seemed to come easily and lasted for decades. I have had numerous solo shows, been in many painting surveys, and continue to be invited to show my work nationally and internationally. I mention all of this success because as I aged, and as my life changed, so did my relationship to my work. Starting in the late nineties, a new and liberated sense of urgency was driving my work. I was taking more risks and putting more at stake. I saw that over-determination and fussiness had killed my voice and the energy in my work, and so I injected more disparity and contradiction into the paintings and collages with a goal to create friction that might recharge my projects. Those sparks fueled my practice for years. This new energy kept me in the studio, working longer and harder than I had ever before.

After several years working at a breakneck pace, fulfilling exhibition quotas and constantly trying to keep the work moving forward, I hit a severe roadblock. I was

recently divorced and facing other personal challenges. This block ultimately left me creatively stymied. As much as I had worked to liven up my practice, I found that all my ideas were familiar and strained. I needed to shift my focus to something outside of me—in particular, to the work of other artists. I began curating exhibitions (at other galleries, not yet at my own) in order to deploy ideas that never quite made sense or couldn't be logically applied to my own work. I thought by engaging other artists in a conceptual proposition that could be realized within an exhibition context, I might recalibrate my own thinking and kick-start my own studio program. Shifting attention away from myself and toward the minds and production of others allowed me to find a way to begin again.

Curating offered a foolproof doorway to broader social spectrums and platforms unavailable to me as a studio artist. Operating with the self-assigned title of curator, I found myself with access to new audiences and institutional systems. No longer was I another artist making work and looking for an opportunity to show; I created those opportunities and was in communication and negotiating with galleries, museums, and a variety of other host venues. My art world role shifted from content provider to context producer. It felt good to exercise muscles never used when making work in my studio. I got out of my own head and my batteries were recharged. Within six years, I had presented five ambitious exhibitions in Chicago, New York, Berlin, and Dusseldorf, Germany. Many were accompanied by a catalog and were positively recognized by supportive, critical reviews.

Curating allowed me to draw from the work and thinking strategies of others. It taught me how to re-engage, both with my own work and, very closely, with the artists with whom I worked. The process of collaboration was elastic—full of potential to shift in directions neither the artists nor myself might expect. It was thrilling to find project possibilities conceived through the lens of someone other than myself. It became clear that a more concrete platform for my projects might allow for more regular programing and stability.

## II.

In 2007, I formally opened Devening Projects, a commercial gallery focused on presenting emerging and established artists from all over the world. The gallery was located in the same building that housed my studio, so that I could infuse my own practice with the energy of the gallery. It also meant operating costs and my time-use were manageable. The gallery premiered with a small group show highlighting a selection of artists with whom I intended to work. For the rest of the year I programmed a series of solo exhibitions. Besides extending the platform created when I was curating for other venues, the gallery gave me a clearly defined exhibition vehicle with concrete parameters through which artists could move, respond, and shine.

From the beginning, the gallery functioned as a for-profit, commercial enterprise, in which the artists and I shared equally in any sales. By choosing to run the gallery this way, I purposefully entered into a direct conversation with the art market, but from the point of view of an artist. It was important to me to explore firsthand how galleries work, sustain themselves financially, and potentially grow. Business was a foreign concept, so I focused on the artists, the work, and the exhibitions, and let the rest unfold. People came. Occasionally they bought work. The gallery was quite successful from the beginning, and it continues to grow as a business, gaining stature and providing opportunities I'd never imagined.

Devening Projects had a very simple objective: it must pay for itself while giving back to the artists whose work provided its foundation and purpose. Sales needed to cover the rent on the physical space as well as all the expenses that go into presenting a show: marketing and promotions, website hosting, staff, shipping, materials, reception expenses, insurance, etc. At that time, my sole source of income was from teaching plus the few sales of my own work. I am a financial pragmatist. In order for the gallery to succeed, it needed to pay its own way.

The gallery allows me to showcase emerging and established artists that haven't been exposed in Chicago. With the gallery in place, I began traveling internationally, meeting artists and curators, doing studio visits, building relationships that became the foundation of my program. Those relationships continue to grow. I often think about how much my life has changed since my days as primarily a studio practitioner. With the gallery as an active platform, my scope has widened considerably. It was clear from the beginning that my point of view as a gallerist—a focus on object makers and with a strong interest in Modernism and form—was different from many others in the city. The gallery staked out territory that continues to interest a wide and dedicated audience. I see a future for the gallery that is more eclectic and strange.

### III.

My studio practice has evolved dramatically since the gallery opened because my studio time is now more limited. I look at my practice as loosely woven tapestry: studio time comes in fits and starts and is made up of the bits and pieces of the ideas that have been percolating outside of the studio and with the materials immediately available. This studio framework seems to be the perfect analogy to my current life strategy. Piecing together disparate parts to form a cohesive and poetic whole—be it in my personal art making, my curating, or my career path—permeates my thinking. I love to consider how disparity, the discarded, or the abject might come together to make something beautiful and to communicate something meaningful.

Making my work, while curating/running the gallery and teaching, at times proves more than I can handle, but each component is necessary and integral to the way I govern and navigate my creative life. Studio work has always been primary. It

ties me to my art community and concretely validates my credentials as a teacher. The gallery platform launches my ideas and passions about contemporary art into the world, as well as financially supports my studio practice and personal life. Teaching is a passionate vocation and a steady income that provides stimulation, stability, and structure. Keeping all three in balance without losing momentum while also having a personal life is never easy and takes thoughtful juggling. Do I sometimes drop the ball? Of course. But, through perseverance as well as trial and error, I am becoming a master juggler.

In the late seventies when I was finishing high school in Omaha, Nebraska and working as a busboy at the Golden Spur Diner in the Blackstone Hotel—the Golden Spur was legendary for inventing the Reuben sandwich—art for me was the Andrew Wyeth poster I had pinned to my bedroom wall, as well as the work of several illustrators that I saw on album covers and in classic seventies and eighties magazines like *Omni*. I knew next to nothing about this art thing, but I wanted to learn more. And I was voracious in my curiosity. I sought out what other artists in the past and present were thinking, doing, and making.

If I were to travel that road, wise choices would have to be made in order to be immersed in the intellectual and creative facets of art making while still having a financially stable foundation for “grown-up” necessities. Even then, I was a pragmatist, formed by a family life constantly in flux, and rarely fully financially or emotionally stable. To make this art thing work, I knew I had to go to college and bolster my passion with the knowledge and experience I was missing. I would use higher education to learn everything necessary about art (and the world at large), and I would use it as a means to infiltrate the “art community” and establish my own support system for whatever happened next.

With amazing support from high school teachers, I received a fully funded undergraduate education from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, a fantastic, liberal arts school with a strong art program. My art professors were all studio artists and very generous teachers. They provided me with the first indication of how real artists lived, worked, and wove themselves into networks of other artists and organizations. These role models nurtured my passion and gave me a level of confidence I was sorely lacking when I entered college. They supported my work, strategically guided my development, and continually spoke to me about how this could be a real thing, a thing that could be an actual life.

I began to see how teaching art at the university level could be a viable pursuit for an artist. Teaching was a job and a vocation, integrally linked to one’s creative practice but something respected and honorable. It was something my parents would understand—I thought—to be a practical career choice. Teaching meant doing what you love within a community of like-minded people via an organized structure that valued thinking and doing. I loved that environment and decided that if I needed to have a job outside my studio practice, it would be teaching.

In my final year of undergraduate school, I met Michael Brakke, an artist from Chicago who was having a solo exhibition at the Joslyn Museum. Students sometimes helped with exhibition installations thereby getting to know the artists. Michael's work was a postmodern hybridization of painting, photography, performance documentation, and spectacle. It was the most incredibly contemporary thing I had ever seen. Smart, explosive, and risky, the work stoked my imagination and sketched out an example of where painting could go. Michael's work suggested a new kind of painting logic driven by strategic moves that simultaneously represented, deconstructed, and contradicted his conceptual sources.

Michael was a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). He suggested I apply to their MFA program the following year. Chicago had museums, galleries, and a small but thriving art scene supported by important artist-run spaces like N.A.M.E. and Randolph Street Galleries. Going to grad school at UIC also meant I'd be able to work with Michael and other remarkable artists like Martin Puryear who was also teaching there. And because it was a state school, tuition costs wouldn't be prohibitive. Michael inferred that if I were lucky, much of my tuition would be offset by teaching assistantships, stipends, and waivers.

After graduating with my BFA I spent a year working full-time to save money for grad school. I worked nights at UPS sorting and loading boxes that went into semi-trailers, and in the morning and late afternoon, I drove a small school bus for a handful of kids who lived at opposite ends of the city. I remember dangerously speeding around with those little characters while they yelled at me to drive faster! It was always a little tight to get them safely home each day, drop off the bus, and then go to UPS to work until 10 pm. It was a grueling year, but I saved a lot of money and was in the best shape of my life. Despite the schedule, I still had most of my late mornings and afternoons to work on my art. I was very happy.

#### IV.

I applied and was accepted to UIC. In fact, I was awarded a full-tuition scholarship and was invited to start teaching my own drawing class during the second quarter of my first year.

Everything about graduate school was enormous. The pressure, the anxiety, the rigor, the intensity, and the joy fueled me just when I needed it most. Everything that came out of my studio felt like rubbish, but I was encouraged to take my ideas as far as they needed to go regardless of the outcome. I learned volumes of life lessons from my peers and professors during those two short years. The most important was the value of the work: the action, the production, the assembly, the presentation, and the inevitable good fortune of a new discovery that just might open a door to the next project. These years provided a stable, supportive, and extremely rigorous foundation to establish my point of view while also teaching how to articulate my

position and form an identity. My art intellect grew enormously during that time. This was the beginning of a very long trajectory toward a life spent answering my own questions.

Teaching was a big part of that identity building. Even though I was only a few years older than the undergraduates under my tutelage, who often had little or no art experience, I gained the confidence to design inventive projects for them and to communicate my own passion for art-making. I taught classes independently almost every quarter of grad school, including the summer. This was Teaching Boot Camp. It was challenging, ridiculous, and exciting all at once, as well as invaluable. I learned that teaching is collaborative and that teaching art is a careful negotiation between the project objectives and the subjective lens through which the student can interpret, massage, and alter those objectives. I learned that the teacher needs to set parameters, but those parameters need to be extremely flexible to allow room for each artist's own needs and desires.

One of the most important and critical discoveries about teaching I made early on was how careful instructors must be with the creative energy dispensed, transmitted, or granted to the young artists in their charge. Experienced artists know that the smallest move or slightest bit of information can redirect a work to yield very positive results. I soon realized that my careful guidance of the students toward these actions not only hindered the student's own discoveries but also drained my own resources and left less energy for my own practice. It seems obvious, but it's quite difficult to help a student by guiding them to a possible solution rather than by simply telling them what might be the best way.

Teaching has always been about constructing a foundation upon which students can build a house designed particularly for them and their desires. What style they choose to follow, what cladding they use, how the façade addresses the street, what embellishments they add are the facets they must decide. On their own. They must develop a point of view and the means to vigorously express that.

Those student interests and desires reflect another aspect of teaching I realized must occupy a primary, fundamental position in my relationship to students. When I was an undergraduate, some of my teachers believed our work should be developed through their lens. When they looked at or talked about our work, they could rarely see past their own point of view. There was little real curiosity about what we were doing. Their measure of success was how well we applauded and mimicked their work. This can be one of the fundamental failures of teaching studio art. The inability to empathetically recognize or celebrate a student's ideas results in a diminished sense of identity and confidence. However, when the instructor's ego is secondary to the needs of the student artist, something truly remarkable can happen.

I love the funkiest, weirdest, most outrageous work my students make. I so love helping them develop those ideas fully, fertilizing them with anything that will help those ideas grow. It's the absolutely personal, passionate, subconscious-level stuff

that I love to see explosively released out into the world. This is what is needed to enrich our culture. Anything that blocks that channel from transmitting and relaying those essential concerns should be quickly removed. Teachers need to get out of the way. Our job is to provide the means through which students can fully realize the manifestations of their delusions and fantasies.

## V.

I have been teaching for more than thirty-five years and continue to absolutely love my job. It is difficult to fully express how closely tied my own studio practice is to what I do as a teacher. So much of my teaching is sharing the passion and joy one can feel when making art. As all artists know, there are no clear paths, rules, or recipes one can follow to success, whether within a single work or in a career. What I hope students gain from their time with me is that all the elements that go into this chosen life—the “making the unknown known,” the challenges, the failures, the social complexities of the art world, the art/life balance—feed into who they are and become as artists.

This is so clichéd that it definitely goes without saying, but it’s what and how we do it that defines us, and it’s only by doing, trying, discovering, accepting, and pursuing that one can find a place in their work. The pride an artist feels when they construct a worthy question for their work and then find the means to answer that question is what makes this life worthwhile. Becoming an artist helped me form my essential self; teaching helped me articulate how to create the conditions to become that essential being and ultimately how I can keep going.

Within six highly respected academic institutions, I have either held tenure-track positions, been a Senior Lecturer, or been an Adjunct Full Professor; I’ve directed visiting artist programs; I’ve defined departmental programs, designed curricula, and developed new courses. All of these responsibilities reflect a level of experience and seniority that I am very proud to hold. For various reasons, however, I have chosen to not pursue a tenured position. Teaching is a vocation and a passion for me, but, like many other non-tenured university faculty, the moral and ethical ramifications of adjunct teaching is ever-present and often a deep source of concern.

I spend a good deal of time thinking about the discrepancies in pay, workload, student-contact time, and professional status between adjuncts and tenured faculty and how so many non-salaried instructors are forced to fill in or add to their workload with either more teaching or work outside of their disciplines. Most see this imbalance as the disintegration of the academic model: In some cases, no longer do tenured faculty carry the heaviest loads; instead, colleges seem to prosper with high numbers of low-paid, rarely benefit-supported, and non-contracted teachers. I did take a tenure-track position at a state university away from a major art center but left after only one year when I realized that my career would suffer if I stayed. Although

I retained gallery representation in other cities, I felt I needed to be closer to those sources to benefit fully from their support. I've never regretted that decision.

Teaching at a significant art academy as adjunct faculty allows me the freedom to focus primarily on teaching without the additional responsibilities that come with committee work, administrative assignments, or curriculum development. I am still fully involved in departmental agendas, but my role is primarily pedagogical rather than administrative, and it suits me perfectly. The tradeoff is a certain status assignment and definitely a salary gap, but, ultimately my focus is on my students, and that is what I desire most from my work.

## VI.

There was a very curious moment near the end of my father's life when he asked if I would teach him how to paint. He was in his late seventies and suffering from several illnesses, one directly related to his exposure to Agent Orange toxins when he was in the Air Force stationed in Vietnam in the late sixties. What made this request surprising and fascinating was that we were never close and rarely shared more than the most cursory conversation. We never discussed, well, anything, and he definitely never asked about my interests. He showed no interest whatsoever in my decision to pursue art as a vocation and career. Becoming an artist occurred without any curiosity or support on his part one way or another. He was never there to guide me or frame my decisions through his own experiences. My mother was more supportive and willing to let me go in whatever direction I chose. If ever I considered what my father thought about my decision to be an artist, I assumed that for him it was confusing and probably a little embarrassing.

My dad spent most of his life in the military. As an undereducated kid from a lower-middle-class family on Chicago's southwest side, the military was his most legitimate career option. He spent more than twenty-five years in the Air Force and found personal benchmarks defined by an incredible series of deployments that took him to Vietnam, Thailand, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and several US locations. As a family, we followed along to Europe and all the assignments in the United States; I believe those locations provided cultural exposure he would never have experienced otherwise. I assume this because we never discussed what he thought about being in these places or what it meant to travel so frequently throughout his career. In fact, we spoke on a personal level about almost nothing.

My father was a bit of a scoundrel. A heavy drinker who regularly found creative excuses for avoiding his wife and four kids. I'll never know how he truly felt, but it seemed that to him we were a burden, a distraction, and an annoyance. He had no idea how to be a father and we suffered from his inability to try. After clocking out at the end of his workday, he would hang out with his buddies at his favorite bar, drinking late into the night until he would drift home to my angry and frustrated mother.

It became clear to me that there would be little if anything to gain from spending much time with this guy.

Eventually, so much of what I learned about how to make life choices, to navigate the world, or what it meant to be an artist came from the many, many hours I spent alone reading or sharpening my pencils and teaching myself how to draw. First, by copying cartoons and later, by looking at more complicated systems and machines like motorcycles and muscle cars. These subjects allowed my imagination to expand into fantastical structures of design and visual complexity.

This alone time didn't only come as a result of a disinterested paternal figure but from the almost constant moving we experienced when I was young. During most of my pre-high school years, we were stationed at a military base for only a year at a time, two at the most. We often spent at least one month a year either packing or unpacking. It wasn't that making connections or friends in these new places was difficult—it wasn't. What was difficult was the undeniable fact that those connections would be short-lived and put aside as we relocated to the next assignment. But as kids we knew the score and rolled with the punches.

My greatest childhood adventures happened with kids I saw for only a couple of days or a week. Those memories framed my view of the world and occurred in some very exotic places. When we were stationed in Germany, my friends and I would go into the woods and pretend to be Allied infantry battling Nazis. The only difference between the war games we played and those carried out by friends stateside was that we had our fun in real concrete bunkers and with crazy military paraphernalia we would find when digging trenches around those bunkers. We played where the real battles happened, and it was exhilarating.

Despite the difficulties I had with my father, it was always clear to me that he was a very talented craftsman, carpenter, and tradesman. He could cook really well, and assemble or design almost anything, all with a very impressive level of perfectionism. There was a time in high school when I helped him renovate part of our house. I got to see him in action then, always surprising me with how able he was to solve complicated design and structural problems quickly and efficiently. He was definitely a contradiction: a man deployed into the world along with a family in which he showed little interest, imbued with skills as a thinker and maker, but with a drinking problem that kept any real feelings for anything at bay. For me the sadness came out of how little he wanted to share with me or my brother or sisters. It never occurred to him to teach us any of what he knew. That disinterest alienated us permanently.

By the time my father asked me to teach him how to paint, he had mellowed considerably, and he and my mom had a lovely life together in Colorado. For many years, they ran a small business that gave him a creative outlet for those pent-up, underused skills. They were designing and selling lamps my father would make out of plaster poured into molds he built from original forms. This was the kind of physical,

creative work he needed to be doing all his life but was unable to pursue. He loved the process and the attendant social stuff that came out of selling and marketing to his retailers.

I bring up this story because, for me, it illustrates a significant validation of my chosen life. I have always found joy and fulfillment in my work as an artist and receive the same joy from my colleagues and peers. My many years teaching young artists at the university level reflects my dedication to my discipline and my desire to share knowledge and experience, which is also hugely gratifying. But it is always the support and acknowledgement from our closest loved ones that we yearn for most.

## VII.

My dad and I never talked about this, but during those painting lessons, when he watched me lay out the image in a drawing, mix paint, block in color, and then reflect on that object's particular formal qualities through the pigments I mixed, it was clear that he was quite proud, and I think moved, by what I had become. Having my father recognize the skills and experience I developed during my years as an artist meant the world to me. I have always found it rather sad that he died too soon after that teaching moment to try things out for himself. He did experiment with painting a few small canvases in his basement studio, but with more time, he would probably have made some great work.

My passion for teaching was inversely nurtured by the lack of knowledge my dad shared with me. Learning how to effectively express ideas, skills, and experiences became one of my most important goals as an artist. I am overjoyed when I see a positive shift in one of my students as a result of something I've shown them, something familiar to me but new and fresh to them. I teach in response to my father's unwillingness to do so. For so long, I held on to my anger at him for not being a better father. It was only later when I learned how to channel that personal loss and turn it into gifts I could give my own students, that I really did recover.

I continue to be fulfilled by teaching and the gifts my students give to me. Their fearlessness, lusty imaginations, dexterity, and pure energy feed me daily. I can't imagine a studio life absent of conversation and interaction with young artists. My practice is also alive and flourishing, still fueled by new developments and by the rich interactions coming from the gallery and collaborations with the many artists in my life. For that and for everything else I've been gifted in my life, I'm very grateful.







## Extrapolation Factory

### I.

As an emerging practitioner, I admired the idea of design but my mental picture of “doing design” was blurry, since I knew only a handful of practitioners in the field. Throughout my career in practice, pedagogy, and research, I’ve been filling in the picture with detail and structure. Each next step came into focus as I processed the last. Along this journey, I understand design’s value through the nature of the process, the tenets of that process have illuminated my idea of design itself.

By the time I finished my undergraduate studies in industrial design, I was insatiably curious about commercial, industrial design. I landed my first job out of undergrad at a robotics startup, focusing on ergonomics and hardware design. At this shop, we created robots for rehabilitating sewer lines, which wasn’t glamorous but opened the door to professional experiences I’d never had before. In one instance, I joined the boss on a research trip to deploy several test robots with a crew of sewage-line-rehabilitation workers. After days with the crew in pouring rain and numerous unsuccessful tests, we returned to the office with robots covered in pungent detritus and devised new design directions for our team to pursue. During trips like these, I experienced the challenges that workers would face while using our designs. I was developing a far deeper respect for field research. I was kindling a desire to work outside the design studio, something I hadn’t had many chances to do in undergraduate school.

Working at the robotics startup provided my first opportunity to do industrial design as a professional, but as the only designer in the company, I was in desperate need of a mentor. After a year of work amongst engineers and salespeople, I decided to find my way into a design consultancy where I could learn from other designers.

I first looked for opportunities in large cities, and the New York metropolitan area emerged as a hotspot for prospects. Faster than I imagined, I found myself in an entry-level position at a firm in Long Island. Having never spent time in Long

Island until I arrived there, I hadn't realized how far it felt from New York City, both geographically as well as culturally. Thanks to my eagerness and naiveté, I was yet again introduced to an extremely different perspective on design from the one I was exposed to as an undergrad.

The owners of the firm were two brothers from the area. They served as chief designer and engineer and made all decisions, large and small. The rest of the staff was expected to execute ideas that trickled out from the corner office. Over the next few months, I realized that the exclusive, creative ownership was coupled with opaque—to the point of being shady—business operations that precluded the staff from fully understanding the scope of projects and therefore rendering us unable to do innovative design work. This taught me to value transparency as a necessity of a flourishing design practice.

After only six months at this unusual, family-run firm, I was ready to leave. I took a position at a more mainstream design consultancy in Manhattan, where openness was ingrained in the company culture. For example, entry-level designers, project managers, and executives all knew the budgets of every project in the office. This transparency engendered trust within the firm and the access to critical project information helped the design teams do their jobs better.

Although this firm had a refreshing work culture, the projects caused me to question the role of design. While working at this firm I was asked to conceive products that had minimal necessity in today's world. In one instance, my team was charged to develop gadgets for suburban car owners. One of the concepts that caught on quickly in our field research was a proximity sensor that helped a driver park a car in the home garage without bumping the wall. While developing this electronic object, I remembered my grandfather's garage utilizing a simpler solution to the same challenge—a tennis ball hanging on a string would contact his windshield when the car was in the right spot. Despite this preceding DIY solution, our team persevered to create a slick device that could be packaged and sold to consumers.

At this firm, the lion's share of creative energy and intelligence was dedicated to design for low-priority needs and rehashing challenges that had already been managed. The collaborative team dynamics were inspiring, and the extensive field research offered countless learning opportunities, but I ultimately felt that the motivations and ethics behind our project briefs were seldom questioned. The lesson I learned through this stint in professional practice had to do with the importance of understanding and defining impact and necessity in a field that notoriously fabricates needs for the privileged.

## II.

At this point in my career, I had satisfied my curiosity about commercial industrial design and established a deeper set of values for design practice. I began to pre-

pare for a return to school to find other ways to apply design in harmony with these values. Among the more experimental design programs at that time was Design Interactions at the Royal College of Art. I was drawn to the program's experimental approach to design as much as being tested by students, and I hoped to incorporate some of the principles that I had been developing through my professional experiences. My application was successful, and I spent the following two years at the RCA developing a design practice that engages communities, exercises transparency, and prioritizes critical needs.

During my studies at the Royal College of Art, I enrolled in a special topics class on arts and design pedagogy. Although I hadn't yet seriously considered teaching as a career, I joined the class. In retrospect, this may have been the turning point at which I started to imagine myself as an educator. The instructor, fittingly named Mr. Wisdom, introduced theories on art and design pedagogy. One of the most resonant notions presented was an invitation to reframe educators as "expert learners," as opposed to individuals who impart knowledge, information, or skills. This idea really impressed me and continues to inform the way I engage in conversations with my students today.

Most graduates know that along with completion of a master's program comes the stress of a job hunt. Among the many applications I submitted was one for a part-time teaching position at Parsons School of Design in New York City. Following a phone interview with the program director, I was offered a part-time position and returned to New York shortly before the start of the fall semester. I was learning on the job and bringing my recent education and professional experience into the classroom as an expert learner.

My students were very open to experimentation, so I regularly invited them to help me prototype emerging design ideas. Early on, I began introducing futures-oriented activities in class to see how these ideas could shift the conversations we were having. One exercise in particular energized the students, that is, a step-by-step workflow for envisioning objects and services from future scenarios. Building on the success of this experiment, I began to share it with colleagues. Among these exchanges was a productive discussion with a fellow RCA graduate, Chris Woebken. Chris particularly liked the experiment and wanted to try it with folks outside the classroom setting. We agreed to work together on an iteration of the original prototype, which, inadvertently, launched the Extrapolation Factory, our collaborative research practice.

The Extrapolation Factory is dedicated to exploring approaches to Futures Studies outside the places they're commonly found. Beyond the walls of think tanks and strategy groups, the idea of studying futures is foreign and often met with skepticism. While school curricula in most societies include history classes, these curricula almost universally neglect classes about futures. Very few people know that graduate programs in Futures Studies exist. Extrapolation Factory projects attempt

to address this gap, by inviting a broader audience to experiment with academic Futures Studies approaches; by questioning popularized narratives about futures; and by testing new ways to imagine, depict, and critique hypothetical scenarios.

In the practice, we create experimental participatory workshops that borrow from the research of academics. These workshops and events challenge everyday persons to collaboratively create future visions. Our interest in democratizing Futures Studies responds to the long history of future visioning that's historically been characterized by a top-down power dynamic. Most historical future visioning has been dominated by politicians, large corporations, and Hollywood producers. These visions tend to inculcate perspectives of privilege, techno-utopianism, and homogeneity. The ubiquity and saturation of these visions has the tendency to colonize imaginations with slick clichés.

### III.

Part of The Extrapolation Factory's experimental approach focuses on helping people materialize their visions of futures. We believe that when someone can make, see, touch, and interact with a figment of their future visions, they perceive a different sense of agency over those visions and can reflect on them in a way that might not have been possible otherwise. We've incorporated our backgrounds in design to facilitate the prototyping of interactive future artifacts and scenarios in our workshops. Our many workshops range in context and inquiry, including invitations for the public to imagine and produce fictional items that could exist in a future dollar store; research devices for future climate scientists; and city infrastructure that encourages symbiosis between humans and non-humans.

After several years running the Extrapolation Factory and teaching part-time, I accepted a full-time position at The New School. At that point, I recalibrated the balance between my research through the Extrapolation Factory and the demands of the institution. Taking on my particular full-time position required commitment to a heavy service load, including expectations to fill leadership roles, serve on hiring committees, conduct classroom observations, coordinate part-time faculty, and develop school-wide curricular strategy. These responsibilities, on top of the full-time teaching commitment, left little time for research.

With my research hours constricted, I sought ways to integrate futures experiments into my teaching and service more intentionally. As part of this effort, I started meeting with university colleagues outside the design school to expand the range of my teaching and service explorations. Among the many amazing conversations, I met an inspiring PhD candidate named Tamara Alvarez, working within The New School for Social Research. Tamara was researching the geopolitics of space, air, and earth's atmosphere. Her research examined a rapidly changing and urgent area of study that fit beautifully with the type of approaches I'd been investigating. Our

discussions revealed mutual fascination with each other's work, and we agreed to structure a studio course as part of the MFA Transdisciplinary Design program for students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds including design, humanitarian work, neuroscience, and philosophy. Over the first half of the semester, we conducted several short projects to ground the students in futures studies and speculative design. We also discussed the ranging utilities of Futures Studies, speculative design, and related discursive approaches. Early in the course, the students crafted and led their own participatory futures workshops based on the model of The Extrapolation Factory.

The core of the coursework challenged students to engage with Alvarez's research through speculative design and futures studies, and to probe alternatives to the dominant future narratives concerning the sky—the space above the ground plane. In class, Tamara gave four lectures about her research on verticality, outer space governance, air and rising sea levels, and the underground. Following each lecture, we discussed with the students the ways these topics complicated humans' relation to the surface of the Earth. Discussions ranged from the vertical infrastructures that constrain mobility; to the commercialization of geostationary orbit, and current projects of space extractivism; to cobalt mining in Congo; to underground nuclear storage.

Then we asked students to think about the ways in which these issues could expand in our futures beyond what we can predict. The students applied “the futures” approach, combined with open imaginations to develop some surprising and fascinating scenarios. For example, one proposal depicted a future in which climate refugees have been relocated to inner cities and digitally recreate the air from their home countries to recollect history and heritage.

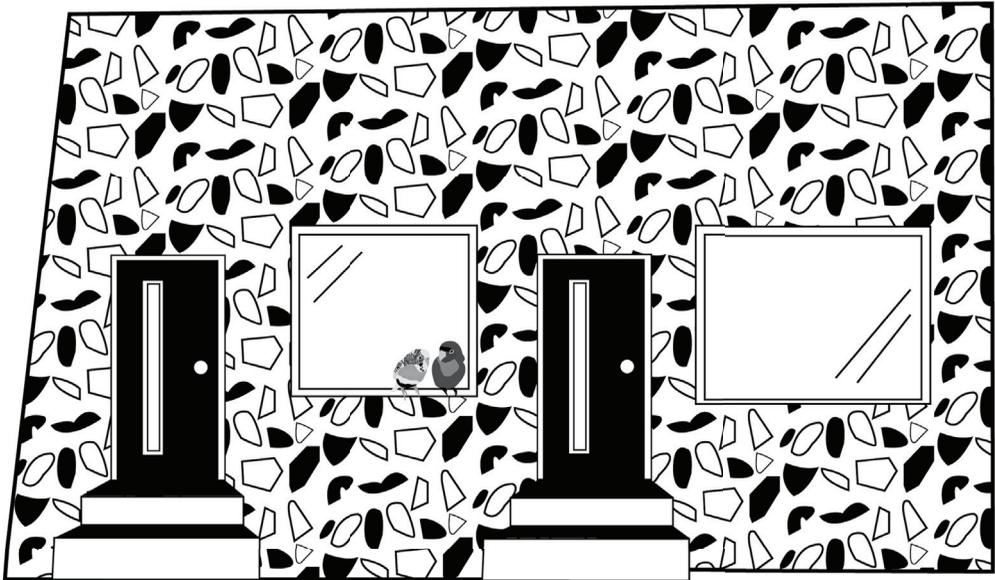
#### IV.

This experimental collaboration between speculative design and social science became a demonstration of the symbioses between our two disciplines, and through it we expanded the range of our own work and pedagogy. The synergy lies in the inverted goals. Social research aims to surface the social forms and power structures of the world but also to explain how these structures come to be. Social researchers present and critique the connections between people and things and the power relations that govern them. In doing so, researchers destabilize social and political systems by removing their foundations. Speculative and discursive design often work with the inverse goal to construct alternative hypothetical systems that allow us to see possibilities that may not be apparent in the current social forms and systems. The complementary relationship between speculative and discursive work signals a potential sum greater than the parts. Social research gains a generative kinship that offers early potential for application, while design gains a new bridge to cross the

bounds of the studio, with deeper visibility into the world and an implicit framework for critique that demands response.

Upon finishing the semester, I was invited to present this course model at a speculative design conference in Berkeley, California, called Primer. Together, Tamar and I shared a deep dive into our collaborative process and findings as a case study for pedagogy that links social research and speculative design. In the lecture, we told the story of the collaboration, sharing material from our respective course lectures, the process that students engaged in, and the outcomes of the class. Most importantly, we spoke about the complementary relationship that had formed along the way, in hopes that other speculative designers might be able to use our work to inspire their own similar collaborations.

This leads me back to those early days in industry, as I learned tenets of what I now believe to be critically important in my design work. Through both teaching and practice, I've continued to track and test these key findings. My coursework at The New School and our projects at The Extrapolation Factory push outside the conventional studio walls in partnership with collaborators of many stripes. I attempt to practice transparency in all the work I do, sharing what I've learned through lectures like our talk at Primer, the publication of *The Extrapolation Factory Operator's Manual*—a short guide to running participatory futures workshops—and through teaching and public-facing media. Lastly, I take care to constantly assess the impact of my work and to better understand its implications through reflective discourse with a range of partners. My journey as a practitioner continues, and along the way I keep learning. I suspect I'll have another tenet of design to incorporate when I round the next corner of my career path. Stay tuned.



**SIDE by SIDE**



## Open Engagement + Side by Side

Sustaining and maintaining are not what our culture typically defines as wealth. I learned from a young age how to make things happen with very little. Acknowledging poverty as a valuable and formative experience in my life has not come easy. There is shame, embarrassment, and regret that things were not different. But ultimately many of these experiences have allowed me to work creatively within institutions; care about the collective; and work so tirelessly. Most of these lessons came through my mother.

I was raised by an immigrant single mother who to this day does not have savings. We moved eighteen times in twenty-two years because of housing insecurity. I am the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college. If I am anything, I am resourceful, adaptable, and persistent. My mother immigrated from the Philippines to Canada alone when she was only 14. By the time she was 17 she owned a small place of her own. She worked hard in a garment factory and used almost all of her income to sponsor family members to bring them to Canada. She deftly navigated complex bureaucracies with little knowledge of those systems and limited resources. By the time I was born, she had sold her modest home in the service of supporting bringing more of her family over. When my sister was born six years later, my mother was working four jobs.

I watched my mother work hard and saw a network of friends and family coalesce to help with childcare. Though we often couldn't buy groceries, I was introduced to the idea of community pantries. My mother was resourceful. She researched. She found pockets of support within a large and unwieldy system and found ways for us to not only sustain ourselves, but for joy and celebration.

It took time for me to realize how I absorbed and deployed this acquired knowledge once I was working in institutions. How when working in programs and departments with slim budgets I would find ways to collaborate with others, pool resourc-

es, or find creative work-arounds and ways of reframing. I learned how witnessing her endurance of the paperwork of the immigration system likely gave me a high tolerance for the bureaucracy of state schools and major institutions. And maybe most importantly that through all of it, I made it a priority to build community and make sure there was enjoyment, pleasure, and fun.

I see now how I put those lessons directly in service of Open Engagement. Open Engagement began in 2006. It started as a hybrid project that uses a conference on socially engaged art as its foundation, while incorporating other elements, such as workshops, exhibitions, and residencies. I wanted to foster a different kind of conference, one that worked in the way I wanted to see, with a sense of togetherness; putting emerging and established voices side by side; highlighting different ways of knowing and learning; and serving as a site of production as well as reflection. It evolved into an artist-led initiative committed to expanding the dialogue around and serving as a site of care for the field of socially engaged art. Since 2007, OE has presented ten conferences in two countries and six cities, hosting over eighteen hundred presenters and over seven thousand attendees. In addition, OE manages a publishing arm, and assembles a national consortium of institutions, colleges, and funders all dedicated to supporting artists engaged in this necessary and critical work.

In 2010 at the end of that year's conference all of the volunteer organizers were asked to stand for a moment of acknowledgement. Every single person who stood up identified as a woman. OE has been, since its inception, primarily woman-powered and femme-fronted. What does it mean that the labor for this was done primarily by women year after year for free or for less than minimum wage? In Marilyn Waring's 1999 book *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women Are Worth* she examines the unacknowledged and unaccounted labor of women on a global scale and makes visible these contributions. Acknowledging this aspect of the conference is also to ask, why is this the case?

In 2014, I sent an email to the OE team, asking each of us to account for our roles and collective hours every year up to that point. Since 2012 I have been tracking how many emails I send related to Open Engagement. On average I send four thousand emails a year on this subject alone. In 2014 I sent and archived 4,553 emails connected to the conference. If I spent an average of four minutes per email that would equal 302 hours, which translates into about eight weeks of full-time labor just on emails. And this doesn't even factor in the emails I write for my full-time job as an administrator.

In the past I have allowed myself and others to work for low pay, or no pay. When I have worked for free or below minimum wage, it has not been because I operate from a place of privilege or generational wealth, it has been because I believe deeply in the work. Given my personal economic background and history, I did not realize when I started Open Engagement that many people that start arts organiza-

tions or non-profits come from generational wealth, which is why they can afford to take positions that are low -pay or no pay. Many of the systems of wealth and privilege operate in our arts communities in other ways that continue to be barriers to ВІРОС, keeping them from entering into leadership positions in arts and culture. I think of internships, where, in order to take them, you need to be able to sustain yourself without an income.

I don't want to uphold and romanticize the kind of work myself and many others do in order to make a necessary site of care, and I don't want to perpetuate systems that we know are fundamentally flawed and do not create access or change in the arts and culture. I have made a choice moving forward to no longer participate in or perpetuate unsustainable models of arts and culture. We need to advocate for compensation that allows for full participation in the arts, one that goes beyond either needing to be wealthy or exploited to participate. We need to value ourselves and each other.

In 2019 OE intended to take the year off, partly for burnout and sustainability reasons and also to assess where the field, and we as a team, were at. With the pandemic of 2020, and the social uprisings and global call for justice, that year of reflection has become nearly two. When we made the decision to end Open Engagement it was because we were enacting an unsustainable model of artist-led culture that did not allow us to uphold our values and hopes for the field. We were replicating models of competition and scarcity even though we strove for an open and vulnerable institution. The project scale became unmanageable and the budget outside our capacity to raise. The framework is unable to allow for alternatives. We are now shifting from large scale organizing, to creating forms of support on a human scale.

2020 has laid bare how nearly all our institutions, systems, and support structures are failing us. For much of the year museums around the globe were shuttered, hundreds of museum employees across the country at institutions like the MoMA, LACMA, the Portland Art Museum, and SFMoMA were laid off or furloughed. Artists were and are without critical income streams and are looking towards artists grants and emergency funds that could not possibly sustain us all. The structures of competition and scarcity do not work.

How can we build an artist-led culture that is sustained by our very existence? One that emerges from our lives and communities? Models change for larger institutions, which demonstrates how art and culture can be generated and cared for and embody our ethics. How one organizes and administers their domestic sphere is a political act that can radiate out into the world, demonstrating through action on a small scale the potential for larger systems to change. Together with Latham Zearfoss, one of core members of Open Engagement, we will develop projects and initiatives such as Side by Side to support the field at the scale of our lives. As we

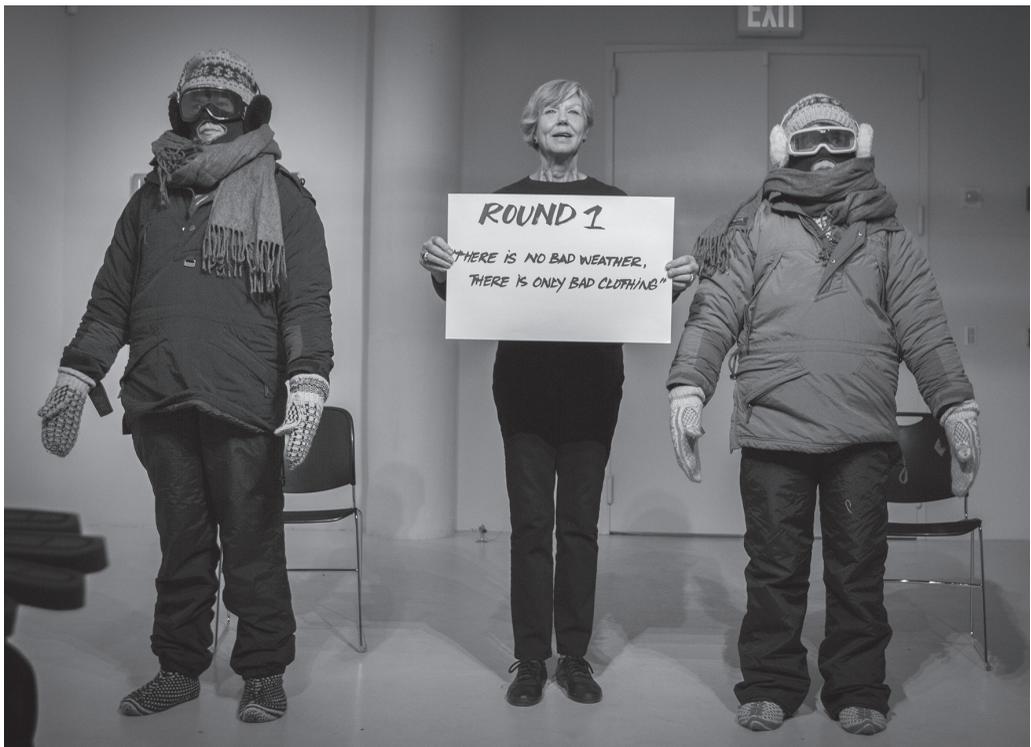
move forward from OE, we commit to connecting the support of our lives, to the care of our communities.

We are manifesting a micro-residency for BIPOC artists and arts laborers through our collective resources, relationships, and skill sets. Side by Side is a 550-square-foot, one-bedroom dwelling with wheelchair access on a quiet street in a postindustrial corridor. By repurposing the attached dwelling unit of my home, we are activating a space one of us literally owns. The space will be beautiful, joyful, and flexible, and despite being small in scale, it will hold space for community and gathering. Pleasure is a priority. There will be a cedar sauna outside and a hot tub. It will model sustainability and move toward personal space sovereignty. We will use solar energy, grey water systems, geothermal heating and cooling, and we will produce our own food and food for local community pantries.

By continuing to expand our gardens and chicken coop and growing fruit trees and fostering beehives, we are expanding our joyful, homesteading practices in order to grow our capacity to feed other folks. At one tenth of an acre, the garden at Side by Side will yield all the food to sustain ourselves, our residents, make donations to local food pantries, and host quarterly community dinners. The garden will be part of the design, and certain plots will serve as examples of approaches to growing to inspire and teach others, for example, how to do Three Sisters plantings. The detached garage will be turned into a greenhouse to produce food year-round.

Side by Side will annually fund, feed, and host four arts-laborers, one for each season. We will invite support and partnership from well-resourced institutions, who can offer paid opportunities for our residents. Artists will be nominated by values-aligned, explicitly anti-racist partner organizations in sister cities and sympathetic towns. The Winter session will focus on uplifting an arts administrator dedicated to supporting emancipatory spaces and practices. And by building on our relationships with organizations working to combat environmental racism and gentrification on the southwest side of Chicago, Side by Side can be of service to a larger community vision of care and inclusion. It offers deeply rooted space for artists to rejuvenate, while meaningfully connecting with our neighbors through intimate public programming. Our holistic, sustainable social infrastructure rejects dominant art world practices.

Our lives and work are inextricably linked. Side by Side is a model to support the field at the scale of our lives. We are returning to the spirit and ethos of the very first Open Engagement event that hosted keynote lectures in living rooms, that turned our homes into accommodations for our out-of-town presenters, and that drew on locally produced and donated food to feed attendees. In the words of Adrienne Marie Brown, “small is all.” Side by Side is a lifelong project that models how one can sustain one’s life and support and make space for their cultural community. This project will model that our daily lives and arts and culture can and should exist side by side.





Janelle Iglesias University of California, San Diego CA +

Lisa Iglesias Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley MA

## Las Hermanas Iglesias *ma is as selfless as i am*

We think of collaboration as a flexible sensibility that encompasses cooperation, coordination, orchestration, collectivity (and more)... as a plastic material. We have been collaborating since birth as sisters.<sup>1</sup> *Las Hermanas Iglesias*<sup>2</sup> became a formal entity when we encountered the need to name some of the impulses and creative work we began during graduate school.<sup>3</sup> After receiving our MFAs, we moved back to New York City where we were born and raised.<sup>4</sup>

*EVERYBODY LIKES TO DANCE* was one of our first major projects as a collaborative team. When the opportunity to participate in the Queens Museum<sup>5</sup> Biennial

- 1 We are the youngest of 4 daughters, born almost 15 months apart.
- 2 Janelle Iglesias + Lisa Iglesias = Las Hermanas Iglesias.
- 3 We attended different high schools, colleges, and graduate programs. We came to art-making through separate paths and our first collaborations were sent through the mail. While Janelle studied Sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia and Lisa studied Painting & Drawing at the University of Florida in Gainesville, we began to send a thick stack of drawings back and forth to each other through the post. These works on paper would arrive without instruction or written prompt, they were a visual communication between the two of us, a space for us to layer and mingle the palettes, images, and gestures we were experimenting with.
- 4 We christened the naming of our collaboration by ordering *Las Hermanas* nameplate necklaces, one of our most treasured belongings. Our collaborative name privileges our sisterhood, the logic of our surname and a vernacular of Queens.
- 5 Since the Queens Museum, formerly Queens Museum of Art, is a popular destination for public school field trips, the Queens Museum is the first museum we visited in childhood and likely the only art museum we visited for many years until we began to loiter on the steps of the Met as teenagers.

in 2010<sup>6</sup> presented itself, we aimed to create a project emblematic of our own Queens experience, one typical of many immigrant stories in the borough. With this vision in mind, we set the stage for a coming together, a literal platform for collective imaginings, playful movements and listening. With the understanding that the QM serves a wide range of audiences and communities,<sup>7</sup> it was important to us that the work be accessible to art lovers, art skeptics, adults, children, non-English speakers and the accidental passersby.

We have a deep pride and appreciation for our home borough. Queens<sup>8</sup> is the most ethnically and linguistically diverse urban area in the world.<sup>9</sup> The street we grew up on still hosts Jamaican, Orthodox Jewish, Chinese, Guyanese, Indian, Polish, and mixed immigrant households with a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and generational representations. At some houses we took our shoes off by the front door and greeted folks in Korean. We played dodgeball in the alley on Saturdays with some friends, other kids could only join in on Sundays. At some homes we snacked on nori and ate roti or egg rolls at others. In our own Dominican–Norwegian household, Christmas Eve and Christmas morning meals told a story of our parents' origins — a dinner of rice, beans, *platanos maduros*,<sup>10</sup> pork and *pasteles*,<sup>11</sup> followed by *lefse*,<sup>12</sup> cheese, cloudberries, and *sylte*<sup>13</sup> for breakfast the next day.

*EVERYBODY LIKES TO DANCE*<sup>14</sup> incorporated collective activities that reflected these cultural multiplicities in a variety of ways. We asked our parents to choose a dance song that defined their youth in their respective countries. In response, our mother,

6 *Queens International IV* was curated by Erin Sickler & Jose Ruiz.

7 The Queens Museum hosts a Tiffany Glass collection, the Panorama of the City of New York, a replica of all of New York City's five boroughs in 1:1200 miniature, as well as changing exhibitions; and is located in Flushing Meadows Corona Park.

8 The land we refer to as the borough of Queens is the territory of the Matinecock, the Rockaway, the Maspeth, and the Canarsie people, among others.

9 In addition to our lived experience, Wikipedia confirms this to be true.

10 Fried sweet plantains.

11 *Pasteles* are likened to Dominican *tamales*, made with plantain instead of corn.

12 *Lefse* is a Norwegian flatbread. Our older sister tells the story of being taunted at school for eating napkins for lunch. After that incident our mom stuck to packing peanut butter sandwiches for most of our collective elementary school experience.

13 *Sylte* is a type of head cheese made from pork, calf, and sheep meat.

14 Not everyone likes to dance. Not everyone is physically able to dance. The title is a nod to the ubiquity of dance in human cultures.

Bodhild<sup>15</sup> chose a Norwegian Pols<sup>16</sup> and our father, Bienvenido,<sup>17</sup> identified a Dominican Merengue.<sup>18</sup> We then invited five different musician and DJ friends<sup>19</sup> to create mash-ups<sup>20</sup> of the 2 selections,<sup>21</sup> which added our generation's sounds and technologies into the process.<sup>22</sup>

For these new music tracks, we choreographed a fusion of the two traditional dances and created a corresponding dance diagram.<sup>23</sup> Directly referencing Andy Warhol's *Dance Diagrams*<sup>24</sup> of the early 1960s, we hand painted our sequence of

- 15 Bodhild Brendryen Iglesias, born January 6, 1947, Folldal, Norway.
- 16 A Pols is a partner dance in the round that is likened to a Norwegian Polka. Our favorite move includes a skip step where one bends their knee and reaches back to tap the underside of their foot.
- 17 Bienvenido Amable Salvador de las Iglesias, born December 21, 1945, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, deceased 2014.
- 18 Merengue is the official music of the Dominican Republic and a partner dance in which the hips of both dancers move in the same direction throughout the song. One theory suggests that the dance was invented by people who were enslaved in the Dominican Republic, laboring in sugar fields and chained together at the ankle which produced the characteristic leg movement.
- 19 Musicians/DJs included Chris Gooris, Christopher "Ryan" Spence, Colin Bragg, Johannes Brechter, and Mark Vicente & Guilt with mastering by Gregory Adkins.
- 20 "A mashup (also mesh, mash up, mash-up, blend, bootleg) is a creative work, usually in a form of a song, created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by overlaying the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another. To the extent that such works are 'transformative' of original content, in the United States they may find protection from copyright claims under the 'fair use' doctrine of copyright law." See Wikipedia, s.v. "Mashup (music)," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup\\_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup_(music)).
- 21 The original tracks were sourced from: Pols: *Storpolsdansen*, "Folkemusikk Frå Sogn Og Fjordane, Møre Og Romsdal," Various artists, 1995 and Merengue: *Compadre Pedro Juan*, "Brisa, Mar Y Arena - Los Años De Oro Series," Billo's Caracas Boys, 2003.
- 22 We have developed a broader decision-making process for identifying collaborators since making *ELTD*. While the five musicians represented a diversity of backgrounds and identities, today we try to be more intentional by, for example, inviting parameters into our decisions that deliberately involve a greater number of folks who identify as female or non-binary and of a wider age range in our cooperative structures.
- 23 While in residence at the Cité Internationale des Arts through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Paris Residency, we met two Norwegian artists from the same region as our mother who generously taught us the Pols dance in their studio.
- 24 One of Warhol's first solo shows, at the Stable Gallery, in 1962 debuted his *Dance Diagrams*. The series was originally installed on the floor of the gallery.

steps onto a raised platform that simultaneously functioned as a painting, a sculpture and a dancefloor for museum visitors. To further alter the space, we created a series of hanging disco balls. In total, we created about fifteen blinged out spheres, dotted with mirrors spelling out phrases in Spanish and Norwegian, surfaces forming patterns from appliquéd lycra, and studded with hundreds of reflective sequins. Boddild knitted cozies for three of the globes that scattered light across the floor, from shiny acrylic yarns in blues, reds, and silvers, approximating the shared color palettes and geometries of the Dominican, Norwegian, and American flags.

Viewers were invited to move their bodies according to the dancefloor step diagram while listening to the mash-ups under the canopy of spinning mirror balls. Though the choreography instructions communicated a specific dance score, we preferred the multiplicity of interpretations, improvisations, and reimaginings that gallery visitors invented and carried out.<sup>25</sup>

Our favorite aspects of *ELTD* were contained in the moments when museum visitors taught each other dance steps from the diagram and invented their own movement scores to share. Viewers became the performers and creators, both for themselves and for others. A visitor could shift between teacher and student, passive viewer and active participant. Many of our later projects have continued to include such invitations for participation, interaction, and performance.<sup>26</sup>

*ELTD* included a take-away poster of the dance choreography, a printed object that served as instructional manual and souvenir. The take-away has become a tradition for us, an element we attempt to incorporate into each exhibition.<sup>27</sup> Digitally printed, screen-printed or risographed posters, postcards, zines, and newsprints serve as educational components as they communicate references and underpin-

25 *ELTD* has been exhibited in various forms at: The Queens Museum (Queens), Taller Boricua (New York), Davidson Contemporary (New York), MACLA (San Jose), University of Colorado Art Museum (Boulder).

26 Later projects such as *Friends, Comrades and Good Companions* at Abrons Art Center (2015, curated by Carolyn Sickles) and *HERE, HERE* at the Utah Museum of Fine Art's A.C.M.E. Lab (2017, curated by Jorge Rojas) entailed various forms of interactivity, community celebrations, and participatory structures. In both examples, visitors were invited to create and contribute physical objects to the installation and rearrange items in the exhibition. The local Salt Lake City community was invited to reserve and use the physical space of *HERE, HERE* as a platform for their own meetings, classes, and get-togethers which led to a philosophy class, a birthday party, a yoga session, a movement rehearsal, and other community-driven assemblies in the museum.

27 Sometimes our print projects exist on their own. Lately they have doubled as poetic protest posters featuring palindromes such as *WON'T LOVERS REVOLT NOW* and *ARE WE NOT DRAWN ONWARD TO NEW ERA*.

nings of the work, and function as free artworks or opportunities to fundraise for organizations using a sliding-scale price system.<sup>28</sup>

The first project for which Las Hermanas asked our mother to knit was a conjoined dress, one to wear together for a photography shoot and hypothetical performances. From our very early childhood as the youngest of four daughters, we were treated as a unit, a duo, a team—as twins—and so we wore coordinated outfits when available, obeyed matching bedtimes and inherited parallel chores. A conjoined dress, we thought, would underline this history and make visible the tethering of our bodies. Our impractical request was an assault to Bodhild’s utilitarian sensibilities, but her pleasure in problem-solving and attention to our needs led to a knit, wooly garment with four sleeves. Beyond staging photographs in which we braided our hair together and fused our fingers with red fake nails, we never performed our imagined activities in that dress, but her knitting contribution set the stage for future collaborative projects with our mother.<sup>29</sup>

Bodhild Brendryen Iglesias was born in the remote agricultural hamlet of Follidal, in south central Norway. The sixth of seven children, Bo was raised on a small dairy farm,<sup>30</sup> commuting to the local two-room schoolhouse by ski most of the school year. One of the three rooms of the family’s wooden home dated back to the mid-1700s. Tall grasses grew from the sod roof,<sup>31</sup> insulating the house. Most of the objects inside contained tracings of the hand—knit woolen mittens, woven rugs, carved spoons, burning paraffin lamps, a well-used spinning wheel, hand-hewn floorboards. Our mother was 12 years old when the first electrical bulbs illuminated Follidal and the barn as she hand-milked the cows. She began to knit around the same time that she learned to write.<sup>32</sup>

28 Recently, we’ve been donating proceeds from takeaway posters to organizations supporting refugee and immigrant rights such as RAICES: The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, located in Texas: <https://www.raicetexas.org/>.

29 Our collective efforts have fluidly evolved to include a number of open-source strategies and team contributions and variations that frequently involve students, friends, and lovers. Shout out to Jin Kim and Susan Lee for proofreading this essay.

30 The Brendryen family farm is referred to by the nickname *Der Uppe*, which translates as “up there.”

31 A *torvtak* is a traditional Norwegian type of green roof with peat and grasses growing from several layers of birch bark. Our mother remembers that at times goats were hoisted up to the roof to trim the grasses.

32 We often confused scenes from the book and television series *Little House on the Prairie* with our own mother’s stories about her childhood. It was actually Laura Ingalls that put hot potatoes in her pockets to warm her hands, not our mother.

Bodhild's mother, our *bestemor*, was well known in the local region for her impeccable skills in mending clothes and for her *filleryer*,<sup>33</sup> rugs woven from old clothing remnants and rags. While most *filleryer* are striped of different colors, *bestemor* was known for designing and weaving her own geometric patterns.<sup>34</sup> The summer Janelle was born, cousin Svanhild came to live with us in Queens and brought with her an extra suitcase with two long *filleryer*. These rugs were later each cut in half, producing four pieces, one each Iglesias daughter would later inherit.

Norwegian mittens and rugs were part of our own childhood home experience. These items and the handmade straw Christmas ornaments, the woven pillowcase edged with tufts of raw wool were placed alongside a range of other *chachkas*, offerings, knickknacks, tools, and figurines. Handmade objects and garbage day pick-ups, cast-offs from garage sales, 99-cent store finds, souvenirs from trips, well-intentioned gifts and elementary school crafts sat side by side on tabletops and shelves.

Our family home in Hollis, Queens was the site of unspectacular metamorphoses, a house where evolutions of material occurred on a daily basis. Used elastic, pulled from our father's old underwear and sewn into retired necktie fabrics, transformed into hair scrunchies. Discarded food packaging, laminated with junk mail stickers, organized desk supplies. A lone sock lining a cup protected reading glasses. Cereal box cardboard backed the extended family snapshots lining the walls. It seemed plausible that every single physical ingredient that entered the home was squirreled away by our parents, stacked in Tetris-like configurations, for some future possible use or revealed importance.

Our father, with a lesser form of photographic memory, could direct one of his daughters to fetch a bit of random hardware from such a safe spot in the closet to jerry-rig<sup>35</sup> a screen door fix. With a similar ethos, our mother kept a Button Lady,<sup>36</sup> a repository for all holed fasteners, gleaned from ruined clothing which in turn, save future shirts and such that need clasps. Gift opening was attended with zealous attention for carefully peeling back tape edges such that a piece of wrapping paper could be used again and again (and again). We grew up against this backdrop of hum-

33 *Fillerye*, plural *filleryer* in Nynorsk. In the Follidal dialect, rugs woven from old clothing are called *matte*, plural *matter*. We use both words in our family when speaking about these weavings.

34 While at the Textile Arts Center, Bo knitted translations of some of these *matter*.

35 Jerry-rigged means that something was assembled quickly with the materials on hand. Jerry-built means it was cheaply built. Jerry-rigged is a combination of these two words, meaning a makeshift building solution, doing what can be done with materials available.

36 Bodhild moved from Norway to the United States in 1967 to serve as an au pair, or nanny, for a family in Great Neck. Her Button Lady is the largest from a set of matryoshka dolls given to her from the matriarch of this family. The smaller, nested dolls were always missing.

ble pride and gratification in sock and sweater elbow darnings, with having objects mended, repaired, and deconstructed until they lost any vestige of usability.<sup>37</sup> We inherited an allegiance to these MacGyver techniques, repetition of use and make-shift solutions. These strategies surface in our own family, studio, and pedagogical lives in a variety of faces.

Communal dinners were usually accompanied by deep storytelling, which often featured histories handed down about family members. Our memories collage together facts and fictions<sup>38</sup> about our Dominican bisabuelo<sup>39</sup> who built the clock in La Zona Colonial and made money as a young father grinding and selling chocolate.<sup>40</sup> When dictator Rafael Trujillo put the next generation's family members under house arrest in Santo Domingo, our tía abuela Gloria<sup>41</sup> buried the car to avoid its repossession by the government and built a cistern on the roof to catch rainwater. Gloria built the house we grew up in, in Hollis, Queens in 1954, where over two family branches and four generations have since lived at different times and where our mother and cousin still reside.

After our father died, we went through the house to sort his belongings. Packed into closets and slid under beds we found boxes of boxes nested within cardboard boxes, plastic tubs of collected take-out soy sauce and hot mustard packets, a stockpile of floss from dental visits, a cache of free samples, printed receipts and warranties filed every year dating back to 1975, *Playboy* magazines from the '80s and *National Geographic* from the '70s. During those years of cleaning out cabinets and

- 37 At this moment, there is clean clothing folded in Queens within a cracked plastic laundry basket held together with three zip ties, a medical hose and a length of jute twine.
- 38 Much of these stories were imbued with a sense of what we later came to recognize as magical realism. Our Abuela Paquita, who was a few inches shy of 5 feet tall is said to have knocked down the door to a bathroom engulfed in flames to save her husband. The story goes that she threw his over 6 foot burning body to the ground, wrapped him in a carpet, carried him down the stairs and across several blocks to the hospital. He died shortly thereafter.
- 39 Our great grandfather, Bienvenido Iglesias.
- 40 Our father's grandfather was an inventor, chemist, and clockmaker. Our living room hosted framed drawings of our father's aunts that our parents referred to as "copies of photographs." Lisa traces early influences in her drawing practice back to these portraits. Family lore suggests that our bisabuelo also invented the Coleman lantern and (as the story goes) sold his patent to the Coleman Company for the price of one bus, a bus that he never received.
- 41 Gloria Escolastica Iglesias Molina was one of the first female civil engineers of the Dominican Republic. One of the hoops she had to jump through to get her degree involved marrying a classmate in order to travel and do the necessary fieldwork as it was socially unacceptable at the time for unwed women to do so independently.

pulling up the 50-year-old carpet, we stashed aside materials and objects as potential studio materials. Many of the resulting sculptures during this period integrated plastic TV trays,<sup>42</sup> checkered floor tiles and a never-been-used barbecue grate,<sup>43</sup> a souvenir conch, metal canes and medical equipment.<sup>44</sup> Our parents' shared gratification in extending the life of objects, their inventiveness of means and the economic (not to mention environmental) arguments for reuse have had profound effects on our decision making strategies and our own love for dumpster diving.

The house basement was insulated by stacks of books shelved by layers of bricks and 2x4s that held every textbook, manual, publication or volume that our father came across, no matter the subject or quality, such was his high esteem for the printed word. From a young age, we were well steeped in the art of lusting after books and respecting the practice of learning. We were raised by educator parents—Bohdild taught 1st grade in a public school in Bushwick, Brooklyn, while Bienvenido taught a few political science courses at St. John's University before working as an administrator at the New York City Department of Education. When we began to develop commitments to identifying as artists in our early 20s,<sup>45</sup> this familial reverence for pedagogy lent our excuse of professorial goals an air of viability and maturity in the face of our parents' early dismay.

We cultivated this shared habit of presenting our parents with a fictional career goal in order to assuage their fears that we wouldn't be able to support ourselves as artists—we would become college professors. We joke that it was perhaps repeating this intention, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, that led to our lives in academia.<sup>46</sup> Teaching studio art in a university setting was a relatively unlikely option for us. While we grew up in New York City, being an Artist was a career that seemed archaic and exclusive, one reserved for another kind of person. Our family didn't know any artists personally, and we had no access to examples of artmaking, save for historied stereotypes of the starving lone male genius. We didn't see examples of professional artists who looked like us in the art classes we took in college—the ones whose paintings and sculptures we saw in slide form were usually male and dead. Neither of us met Latinx or immigrant art professors or learned various ways to sustain a life of "making" in the world. None of our professors ever mentioned their family life. When we eventually succumbed to our late-blooming thirst for making things, we

42 *Avantgardener*, 2015, first exhibited at Mulherin, New York, curated by Katharine Mulherin.

43 *Whack a Mole*, 2016, exhibited at 1708 Gallery, Richmond.

44 *Chasing their Ponytails*, 2016–2018, exhibited at Present Company and BRIC, Brooklyn.

45 In our 20s we came to this identification through (somewhat round-about) different paths. In our 30s we came to teaching through different experiences too.

46 In a similar turn of the illusory truth effect, perhaps our parents came to believe our fraudulent career goals after repeated exposure to this white lie.

decided to apply for funded graduate programs in visual arts to sate our curiosity for studying art seriously and to stall from making other life plans, not with any imagination that it would lead to a career in higher education.

We didn't expect to become either full-time artists or educators,<sup>47</sup> and we recognize and appreciate the privilege and responsibility with which we assume these synergistic roles. Each choice we make in these intersecting positions are opportunities to amplify the contributions of the established and the emerging, those both in power and the disenfranchised, the technically savvy and the jerry-rigging novice. We now find ourselves with the power of curating information for our students—deciding which artworks to offer as examples, which histories to include in an hour-long presentation or which strategies can best intentionally foreground a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences.<sup>48</sup> Each of these deliberations is an opportunity to provide examples of individuals and collectives who are reflective of our students and to foreground the voices of under-represented communities.<sup>49</sup>

In our projects and in the classrooms we explore the overlaps between art and social justice. We ask students to consider other points of view, the role of history, equations of power and the realities and complications of privilege. Art making is a tool for critically examining and engaging with the world. Our students understand that as artists they are active agents in shaping contemporary culture.<sup>50</sup> Because we are unwilling to separate ourselves from our studios or classrooms, our collaborative/individual practices and projects engage the familial, the playful, the make-do,

47 After receiving our MFAs and until fairly recently we worked part- and full-time jobs while existing as artists including: waitress, hostess, arts administrator, residency coordinator, teaching artist for various arts organizations, fabricator, studio assistant, professional pumpkin-carver, house painter, nanny, special effects technician, personal assistant, garage sale organizer, and nude model for art classes. We have also sustained our creative work through grants and artist residencies which provide us the time and space to have moments of complete focus on our creative practices.

48 Lisa titled a recent graduate seminar at the University of Florida *Radical Togetherness: Collective Strategies in Making*. This course required participants to democratically identify topics and artists to present to the class, incorporated visits by guest makers and involved a range of skill shares such as ceramic cup hand-building.

49 In many cases, those communities which are not cis-male, straight, Caucasian and/or wealthy.

50 We ask students to consider which societal and cultural structures determine whose voices are heard and supported. We ask classroom members to participate, support, critique, and contribute to their own local community by organizing public events, attending get-togethers, interviewing local folks, and identifying influential factors causing the status quo.

the autobiographical, the historic, the folkloric, the democratic, the alchemical, the magic, the messy,<sup>51</sup> the blurry, the mixed-up. No layer is siloed from another.

Finding and retaining full-time employment in academia is a process laden with inequality and politics, with often depressive results. There is no road map for becoming a full-time professor,<sup>52</sup> nor to trying to succeed as one with a family. Our current roles as tenure-track educators<sup>53</sup> have resulted from some mysterious recipe of luck, hustle, privilege, and persistence mixed with a dash of being at the right place at the right time.<sup>54</sup> We communicate acknowledgements of such with our students and peers and aim to share our successes, however small. Our collaboration has been a deep source of camaraderie and resource for us in the world of academia and working together is a practice we hold dear.

Central to our collaboration is an exploration and commitment to the collaborative process itself and a curiosity in revealing what we can make when we work together. We constantly challenge *how* to do this— which often involves making mistakes, breaking our own rules and trusting that we will learn something new from that process. Early on in our collaboration we maintained distinct boundaries between our individual practices<sup>55</sup> and our project-based collaboration. Upon realizing we shared possessive feelings over our specific creative territories, we decided to experiment, allowing boundaries to break down. We made deliberate efforts to challenge mental barriers, inviting each other to overlap and blur distinctions of authorship<sup>56</sup> and to intentionally step on each other's creative toes. What emerged was a new dance in which we continuously revise the steps.<sup>57</sup> We allow ourselves

51 We mean “messy” both metaphorically and literally. While a visiting artist at the University of Colorado Art Museum in Boulder, Janelle led workshops in which undergraduate ceramic students and graduate dance students worked together, shared their processes and created an event/performative installation in which over 200 slipcast, unfired vessels were danced with and smashed to bits.

52 Or full-time artist for that matter.

53 Currently, Janelle is an Assistant Professor in Studio Art at the University of California San Diego and Lisa is an Associate Professor at Mount Holyoke College.

54 Likewise, our partners have been supportive to us in our academic careers. Shout out to Brandon Som and Paul Gerlitz.

55 Alongside our collaboration we've always maintained our individual practices grounded in drawing and sculpture.

56 Our projects are created by Las Hermanas Iglesias. We deliberately avoid identifying which elements are made by whom and this essay itself was jointly written in Gainesville, San Diego, and New York using a variety of methods including writing side by side, using online sharing documents, talking on the phone and texting.

57 We do this in different ways. Since we don't live in the same city (or even the same state), we travel to build things together simultaneously. Sometimes collaborating means shipping works back and forth between our studios or arriving on site with components to finish together. We might make something for the other

the flexibility to reset rules and goals to the context of each project and to adapt to what's going on in our lives, while maintaining an evolving manifesto that privileges learning, growing, and parity.<sup>58</sup>

Eschewing the notion that family life is ever at odds with an academic, professional, and critical practice, we are interested in exploring and celebrating the ways in which multiple members of our families influence, reshape, and finish each other's aesthetic sentences. After our dad passed away, our mom enthusiastically threw herself back into knitting,<sup>59</sup> and became available for more collaborative projects. Bodhild agreed to translate paintings on paper<sup>60</sup> into knit interpretations. In *ma is as selfless as i am*,<sup>61</sup> we treat drawings and paintings as visual scores and Bo responds to gestures, line quality, color, illusionistic space and compositional elements in textile terms. The resulting knit paintings are a matrix of knots that retain a clear relationship to the original and have a unique presence all their own. The process of creating the complementary pairs of works on paper and knit paintings requires conversation, compromise, and idea sharing.

As our mom is the only member of our family who speaks fluent Norwegian, Spanish, and English, she has always played the role of translator in our family. In translating paint to textile, constructed divisions such as those between art and craft or between contemporary art and folk traditions collapse. We often display these works so that both the front and back of the knits can be viewed, further blurring

to create a sister-work for. We might have a studio visit to establish parameters or an approach and decide that only one of us will physically make it. We might both make our own version of something and choose which object we end up feeling works better or make a third that integrates elements of both approaches.

- 58 Some examples of what we consider and encourage our students to consider: Who is our audience? What is at stake and who are the stakeholders? What other projects are on our plate? What are our current responsibilities, commitments, and plans that might need to be shifted or adapted to take this on? What do we want/need to learn? Beyond interested, what are we invested in? How much, and what kind of support is available? What currently motivates our enthusiasm? How can we make this project more inclusive? What ideas or strategies do we want to foreground and privilege when developing this project? What are the histories and who are the funders of a given opportunity? What questions are we asking? What are the lessons we have already learned and can apply here? Are we perpetuating a harm through our project? How can our work contribute to living well and building community? Are all of us collaborators on the same page?
- 59 While we were growing up, Bodhild didn't knit very often. This long hiatus was due to raising children, teaching, and caretaking.
- 60 See footnote 2. We continue these works on paper today.
- 61 We've long been lovers with word-play. Many titles of exhibitions and works in the past few years are palindromes or include homonyms and/or alternate meanings.

the distinctions between painting and sculpture and laying bare the process of how they are made.<sup>62</sup>

For this series and other projects, Bowie, who is Lisa's first born child and named after Bodhild, collaborates with us by recording audio tours, directives, and playfully poetic explanations of the artworks.<sup>63</sup> He also arranges objects we make in galleries, paints responses and creates sculptures in reaction to our installations and hides items for visitors to find.<sup>64</sup>

Our collaborative practice has long been invested in the productive power of play. As siblings close in age we were each other's primary companions in navigating the playground and passing time. The childhood games we loved the most were open-ended with no particular goal or winner.<sup>65</sup> These interactions often included creating physical collages of our toys, fabric, cardboard, and items from the house into alternative worlds.<sup>66</sup> We were also fond of random competitions in which we competed against ourselves to see how well we could perform a task together.<sup>67</sup>

Early on in our collaboration we began to harness the ease and intimacy of our sibling relationship as well as the static and friction<sup>68</sup> generated between us as sites for exploration and growth. Projects such as *self-portrait piñatas*,<sup>69</sup> in which we took turns beating full-size papier-mâché sculptures of each other, poked fun at both the poignancy of familial connections as well as the drama inherent in our particular

62 In 2018, our solo show at Ortega y Gasset Gallery, entitled *LOOPS AT A SPOOL*, featured works from this series made over several years.

63 In the audio tour made for the exhibition mentioned above Bowie intones: "*Look around the galaxy...see all kinds of paintings...once you find your favorite one, close your eyes....take it all in your mind and you can remember it forever..*"

64 For *LOOPS AT A SPOOL*, Bowie decided where small magnetized sculptures, faux lemons and other objects would be hidden—under light switches and free-standing walls and near ceiling joists.

65 In fact, much of this essay was plotted during non-competitive rounds of ping-pong on a table Lisa's partner fished out of the garbage.

66 We referred to these sprawling games as making "set-ups."

67 Our childhood games included "rocket jumping," rounds of bending and flexing our legs, bursting in and out of standing water surfaces and other exuberant physical movements, ignorant as we were of any institutionalized sport rules.

68 We fight argue disagree debate at least a little bit about most things.

69 The piñatas were filled with innards of individually wrapped red candies and confetti. The viewer was invited to take the sweets—as both a continued logic of the fate of the piñatas and as a reference to Félix González-Torres's early 1990s candy installations.

relationship.<sup>70</sup> In our ongoing *Competitions*<sup>71</sup> series, we face off against each other in amateur contests both conventional and ridiculous. These matches include private exchanges between us, documented and exhibited as videos and photographs as well as live performances, that reference beauty contests and double-dare antics. In our most recent *REMATCH* competition,<sup>72</sup> our mother played the role of referee and judge, moderating contests of balance, drinking, blind makeup application, and eating.<sup>73</sup>

From 2018–2019 we participated in the Cycle 10 Artist in Residence program at the Textile Arts Center in Brooklyn, as *Familien Iglesias*.<sup>74</sup> Bodhild served as the full-time in-house artist in residence and we came in and out of the studio throughout the program while talking on the phone, exchanging emails and hanging out with our mother. The idea of participating in the residency was to centralize our mother's creative role in our collective making and to foreground her own impulses in a new project. The main series we developed during our residency at the Textile Arts Center organically intertwined current events and experiences, both personal and public, about motherhood, daughterhood, and the legacies of textile traditions.<sup>75</sup> We believe there's no untangling of these tentacular elements in our lives and we believe that a rejection of compartmentalization in our lives is political.

In our studios, our lives and our classrooms, we aim to challenge categorization, hierarchical structures<sup>76</sup> and patriarchal notions of power in order to amplify the

- 70 During the creation of this essay, we have argued about no less than the following: the best way to shell an egg, the sound of a spoon scraping on a bowl, moving one's feet in bed, snoring, toothbrush sharing, interruptions, food sharing, clothing stealing, botulism, when to start speaking in the morning, how to write this essay, how to start a project, how to end a project, the tone of this writing, what to include in this list, loud typing, whether or not to continue working together.
- 71 Our *Competitions* began around 2009 and include but are not limited to: pie-eating, jumping rope, blowing bubble gum bubbles, lollipop licking, staring, hand slapping, arm-wrestling, and dressing/undressing.
- 72 *My Brother Is a Liar*, at 601Artspace, curated by Sara Shaoul in 2016
- 73 Rounds included: "THERE IS NO BAD WEATHER ONLY BAD CLOTHING," *Book-Balancing*, *Choke Full (Cherry-eating)*, *Putting on Your Face*, and more.
- 74 *Familien Iglesias* is Norwegian for "The Iglesias Family" and it is the name Bodhild coined for use during our residency at TAC in order to emphasize our mother's role in the work and to distinguish the efforts from this period from her other collaborations with Las Hermanas Iglesias.
- 75 This project is inspired by specific familial and historical figures such as our mother's mother and Anni Albers—who is popularly considered the mother of modern textiles.
- 76 Including but not limited to: the "Art World" and institutions deeply intertwined with the political economy of the cultural sector, academia, hegemonic structures of value and societal obsessions of celebrity, youth, and individualism.

possibilities of more supportive, radical networks of art-making.<sup>77</sup> In lieu of competition, we support each other, our community members and students in gestures both symbolic and concrete.

We hope that these detours from convention—the audience as author, the student as teacher,<sup>78</sup> a footnote<sup>79</sup> as the main stage, a painting as sculpture, the expendable as resurrective tool, a child as guide, a dancefloor as laboratory—are catalysts for conjuring new and alternate ideas. These detours are deliberately structured into our workshops and college courses as we regularly require students to generate instructions, contribute skill shares and collectively make decisions that affect the group. By doing so, we set the stage to be surprised, to welcome in the unexpected which in the studio or the classroom expands the potential for reimaginings and becomings.

77 By *radical networks* of art-making we mean: working in mutually beneficial collaboration and cooperation with others, interacting and learning with/in communities, citing, crediting, amplifying, supporting, and building upon each other's work. We believe these modes challenge the archetypal legacy of the lone genius artist (often white, male, and mythically self-destructive) and question a strategic attitude that perpetuates competition and upholds a fear of resource and opportunity scarcity. We work towards shared respect, generosity, and transparency and support processes that encourage folks to come/work together.

78 We are fans of Sister Corita Kent's 1968 "10 Rules for Students and Teachers" which was popularized by John Cage. (See rules 2 & 3.)

79 We use footnotes in this essay in an attempt to thoughtfully engage in backstory, center the margins, further clarify, muse, parallel the dialogic nature of the essay's writing and to remind the reader that there is always more to one's story. Some of our takeaway posters feature footnotes of the research and anecdotal information that contextualize our projects. We were first inspired by the potential of extensive footnoting after reading *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Dominican American author Junot Díaz and *W or the Memory of Childhood* (1975) by French writer Georges Perec.





## The Center for Undisciplined Research

### I.

As a young person, I had no concept of what college was or what it meant to be an “educated person.” I loved school because I got to be around adults who asked me questions and gave me confidence. Even when I didn’t know the answer, I felt compelled to find out, and I was eager to understand more about the lives of things around me, such as earthworms, orange groves, alligators, creeks, and the moon. I appreciated the patience teachers gave me when I tried to figure out the answer—sometimes it took weeks until I returned to the front of the classroom, standing in line at their desk waiting proudly to let them know I finally learned how the orange tree develops its blossoms.

I felt seen by my teachers in a way that I didn’t by my peers or my family, and I wanted to be like them. I especially wanted to be like Ms. Angelica Acosta. She was a student intern from the local University of Florida who was teaching in my AP European History class with Diane Ried. Ms. Ried was in her late forties and wore a shirt that said, “well-behaved women rarely make history,” and Ms. Acosta was in her early 20s, witty, passionate, and unbelievably bright. Together they were a serious power duo. The direct relationship Ms. Acosta had to the university made me realize what it would take for me to become a teacher: I would have to go to college!

This realization made me determined to attend. Suddenly, I had a reason to get good grades, and I improved my writing and reading skills with the help of compassionate educators. When it came time to apply, I felt discouraged by my school counselors who didn’t believe I had “what it takes” to attend a competitive university. I sat alone at the Dell desktop computer in our living room using dial-up, searching for tips about how to apply for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and I believed the counselors were right. In 2008, Florida’s lottery funded scholarship program, Bright Futures, awarded full tuition waivers to public institutions in the state plus additional expense money for any student who received

a specific GPA and SAT/ACT score. It was crucial for me to achieve these numbers, and I did. I only applied to two schools: The University of Florida (UF) in my hometown of Gainesville, Florida and New College of Florida in Sarasota, Florida. They couldn't be more different from each other: UF with over 50,000 students and at least fifteen colleges, and New College with barely 800 students and a 13:1 student professor ratio.

I wasn't accepted into UF, but New College invited me to attend their alternative, self-directed program. I packed my bags and headed to college, but only after attending a memorial service in Maine for my grandfather where a family member told me I was a traitor. She said, "we're a blue-collar family, and we don't go to college."

One of the weird things about this comment is that my grandpa who we were celebrating did go to college, and, in fact, he was a professor of political psychology at the University of Maine, Orono. He also divorced my grandmother when my mom and her siblings were young, remarried, had more children with a new wife, and then remarried again. My maternal step-grandpa worked at a university, too, as a plant pathology researcher. None of the women who came before me in my family, paternal or maternal, ever went to college, and I've noticed feelings of resentment from them towards the institution of higher education, for fairly obvious reasons. Because of ingrained sexism and past trauma, my attending college was not part of the conversation about my future, and education as part of my familial history was almost erased completely.

## II.

On the first day of college, I sat around a big wooden table with about twelve other students in an anthropology class called "Heritage: History and the Past Today" with Dr. Uzi Baram. He was discussing his own heritage, explaining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and I raised my hand while he talked. Generously, he invited my question: "Where exactly is Palestine?" Without hesitation, he pulled up a map on the projection screen to show the class while the other students snickered at my "dumb question." That weekend at the first big party of the year, a student from my class motioned to me in line at the keg, "hey, you're that first-year student who doesn't know where Palestine is!!!" I quickly learned to ignore people like that, and I continued asking unsophisticated questions until I became confident enough to conduct my own research.

Because I was the first person in my nuclear family to graduate from college, I had freedom to experiment with how I behaved in the institution. I never felt pressure to perform, and I only fulfilled tasks I wanted to accomplish. I tried to become a better reader because I wanted to think for myself. I learned how to conduct participatory anthropological research because I wanted to be involved in a community.

I practiced drawing because it was the best way I knew how to communicate with the world outside of my mind. Despite being an avid drawer and painter since I was a kid, I completed a BA in Anthropology, not art, and I wrote my thesis about education in Public Archaeology because that was the department where I found a mentor who believed in me.

I graduated one semester early, and I bolted across the country toward a lover in Portland, Oregon. The move followed an informal “thumbs up” conversation with bell hooks who told me something along the lines of, “you have to follow your heart.” hooks was a visiting faculty member at New College my senior year, and she impacted me greatly. When I arrived in Portland, I realized that I didn’t have a career plan, but I used the time to develop relationships while I worked as a nanny.

My directionless life was unsettled when I flew to New York City for my 24th birthday. I went to visit friends in Brooklyn, but one day, I took a solo expedition to the Met Cloisters in Upper Manhattan. I walked around looking longingly at the objects, and I became enamored with the baptismal font collection. I had never seen a font before, and they reminded me of two other cement water holders: swimming pools and birdbaths. I questioned why I hadn’t encountered fonts at another point in my life, and I became irritated. It felt like someone was keeping them from me. I wasn’t wrong. These historical objects exist inside of gatekeeping institutions where I hadn’t ventured before, first inside churches and now inside museums. Their beauty and transformational magic made me curious to know what else might exist in places I hadn’t been.

On the flight home, I drew sketches of baptismal fonts for birds. In the following weeks, I recommitted to the idea of teaching because I wanted to float into institutions and unbolt doors to secret gardens for other people who are afraid of locks. About two weeks later, I visited Portland State University (psu) to see if someone could show me how to turn my sketches into sculptures. I met artist Harrell Fletcher, and I shared examples of interdisciplinary social science projects I made in college and since graduating. I explained that my dream was to make these sculptures so I could create a portfolio, get an MFA, and become a teacher. A couple weeks later, I joined the Art and Social Practice MFA program that Fletcher directs at psu.

### III.

Now I am an adjunct professor at psu with an active artistic practice involving collaborative and participatory learning. The students I work with in the university give me a sense of purpose, and I feel useful for the first time in my life. They have also taught me to see the institution with new eyes—to truly recognize, acknowledge, and call attention to the inequality that exists within educational institutions.

When I say, “the institution,” I’m specifically talking about public schools and universities in the United States which are built on and dependent upon the preser-

vation of the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” a phrase coined by bell hooks. The institution has provided me with many positive experiences, and it has also caused me a lot of subsurface damage, primarily, the trauma of trading my family for an education in order to become part of the “professional middle class.” Despite any damage I have incurred from participating in the institution, I recognize the benefits I’ve received from my education, and I see that I’ve reaped these benefits because those places were built for someone like me—a cis-gendered, white woman, born in the United States, leading a life perceived as heteronormative. The curriculums are designed for me. The teachers mostly look like me. And I can easily relate to my peers.

This is not necessarily true for many of my BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) friends and publicly identified LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) friends who sought an education from the exact same schools. The privileges I carry as a result of my identities allow me to move freely within status-quo educational spaces centering white supremacy, and I am catered to within them. Because of this, I feel I have the privilege and responsibility to challenge the information they provide, their sexist, racist, ableist, classist, and oppressive policies, their formulas for producing knowledge, and their approaches to professionalism. Everything I do with and inside of institutions comes with the burden of engaging in a system that causes overt pain to people I love and respect, and, because of that, the positive experiences I’ve had with institutions are complicated.

As I age, I’ve become more ambitious, more persistent, and more persuasive. I see how I can develop methodologies and strategies to capitalize on my privilege to challenge aspects of institutions that I disagree with. I situate my work as an artist within the broad framework of institutional critique. More specifically, I identify with the recent concepts of “Constructive Institutional Critique,” a term used by Maria Lind, Director of the Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, and a former Director of the Graduate Program at Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies, to describe the most current generation of artists who manifest their interest in critique by creating alternative institutions, as well as the “Educational Turn,” which refers to trend within contemporary art for artists to create socially engaged projects addressing the inadequacies of systems of education. In the past four years, I’ve seen my work advocating for art in traditionally “non-art” spaces, redirecting funding from general programming budgets directly into the hands of artists, undermining capitalism by working in direct exchange for things I need like housing and food instead of money and encouraging people to harness their own agency within institutions to advocate for what they need or want.

In graduate school, our director offered my cohort an opportunity for someone to live in the university’s residence halls for free, in exchange for facilitation of arts programming in the first-year undergraduate “living and learning communities.” I enthusiastically agreed, and I became the first Artist in Residence (AIR) at Portland

State University's Housing and Residence Life (UHRL) program. For three years, I worked directly with the UHRL staff to establish activities encouraging community formation through critical questioning of things in our nearby vicinity, such as the Portland Art Museum. As time went by, the administration started to trust me more, but despite positive feedback and budget increases, I was constantly anxious that I would do something wrong and the luxury of "free" rent would be swept away.

In the spring of 2017, my residency at PSU was ending, and I applied for a social practice lecturer position at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth (UMass Dartmouth). I was invited for an on-campus interview where I presented my work in the residence halls, among other projects. I didn't get the job, but the Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts (CVPA), David Klamen, called to see if I'd be interested in creating an AIR program at their school like the one I helped establish at PSU. Dean Klamen, Megan Abajian, who was Assistant Dean of CVPA at the time, and I worked with Michelle Black, who was Assistant Director of Housing and Residence Education, to design the job's requirements. We kept the description vague to account for the many ways an artist might approach this job—no teaching and an emphasis on community engagement, but the key desire was for the AIR to engage with the first-year students living on campus.

The deans expressed interest in increasing visibility of the arts at the university, improving enrollment and retention, and challenging the preexisting traditional notions of what art could be within the college. It seemed possible that enrollment could increase if the curricular and non-curricular aspects of the program were able to mirror trends in contemporary art.

In response, I wanted to make something that would be mutable and able to be transformed by the student participants, but I knew I would need to establish a familiar and accessible conceptual framework within the context of a university. I founded the Center for Undisciplined Research (CURE) in the fall of 2017, which, like a typical university Center, would take on interdisciplinary research and community-oriented projects across campus.

Unlike typical Centers, CURE was led by students and their interests, and it was temporary and decentralized. Right away, I surveyed over 200 first-year students to determine their interests, and the topics they chose to study were: local cultures, music, social justice, and sustainability. Most of the programs and projects the Center did happened outside of the classroom in an extracurricular context, and it was important that participation was completely voluntary. At any point, someone could become interested and get involved, or disinterested and become uninvolved.

#### IV.

As part of the project, everyone who participated chose their own title within the Center. Students saw this as a chance to define themselves, their interests, and their

skills. For example, Armani Marquez-Chaves, a first-year student in CVPA declared himself “Brainstormer” because he wanted to be acknowledged as a skilled idea-generator. Other students took on titles such as “Photographer,” “Illustrator,” “Jack of All Trades,” “Peer Art Mentor,” and “Graphic Designer.” People from the local community joined us, too. For example, Daniel W. Everton, an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) at the New Bedford Art Museum and aspiring historian, took on the title of “The Bad Ass-torian.” Local artist, Brittini Ann Harvey, adopted the position of “Curator and Project Manager,” because she saw this as an opportunity to learn new skills and be involved with a new community and also as a chance to build her resume.

We partnered with a wide range of individuals and groups in the region. Events, experiences, and activities associated with CURE were happening almost non-stop while I lived on campus. I worked with students to catalogue everything through a monthly newsletter that was distributed in the residence halls. At the end of the residency, I moved the furniture out of my AIR studio, and I installed an archive organized by month that featured photos and ephemera from the experience. Students led tours of the installation for the public.

For me, this project was about experimenting with the limits of what’s possible in an academic institution—not just in the classroom but, more importantly, outside of the classroom. I showed students where and how to find resources for themselves in the institution, and I lead by example. My pedagogy was inclusive and gave people a place where they could be heard. I wanted to inspire people to advocate for themselves and to ask for what rightfully belongs to them. I also encouraged people not just to imagine what is possible but to make it real. I am proud to report that the AIR program at UMass Dartmouth continues into its fourth year, the artist has received a pay increase, and, according to a CVPA survey, 80 percent of the students I worked with cited CURE as a reason they stayed at the college into their second year.

In February 2019, I co-hosted a pseudo-conference with my colleague Ralph Pugay called the Schemers, Scammers, and Subverters Symposium. It was a one-day event inside two glamorous meeting rooms of a Crowne Plaza Hotel, where we invited artists and non-artists to present lectures and workshops about the ways scheming and scamming affects their lives. I facilitated a round-table discussion for a room of about sixty people where I posed the question, “is higher education a scam?” Try to imagine what ensued when a group that consisted of multiple kids, teenagers, college students, graduate students, adjunct professors, full-time professors, independent scholars, and art administrators had a one-hour conversation attempting to answer that question. Everyone had a seat at the table. It was awe-inspiring to hear the variety of perspectives, including an anecdote from a 13-year-old immigrant teen who came to tears over the microphone discussing her personal fears of debt and indebtedness, and the 11-year-old who said schools would be great if someone could figure out how to make public education equitable.

## V.

While I lived in Massachusetts, I started drawing people at their worst. I made drawings to reflect how I was feeling about my own relationships that took sour turns as a result of institutional expectations, scarcity, and power. I often thought to myself, “I would never have this feeling about a person if we hadn’t met in the context of an institution—where in addition to positive things, we are taught to be competitive, begrudging, bitter, critical, jealous, deceptive, secretive, protective, and perhaps worst of all, egotistical.” At the same time, I know I wouldn’t be where I am today without institutions and the people I’ve grown to love within them.

Why is this all I think about? Because I’ve given up so much to be here. When your parents didn’t go to college, there might not be someone to tell you what college is going to do to you. The school counselors, recruitment officers, and teachers assure you that it will only bring good things like intelligence, resources, connections, and awareness, but no one explains what might disappear from your life as a result of attaining a diploma—family, friends, community. The academy and art world continue to ask me to give up these things, to move across the country for a job, travel from residency to residency to build a network, work for free until you’ve “paid your dues.” At this point I’m clinging to every kind or generous person I’ve met in my travels because those people are my friends and my community. This approach lures in young, often naive students who can’t envision the weight of a \$20,000 yearly tuition bill let alone owing upwards of \$80,000 upon graduation. At its worst, accrual of a degree creates moral and intellectual schisms that feel miles-wide; it perpetuates financial and social indebtedness to a society that refuses to love and support “non-normative” ways of being, it encourages classism; and it further emboldens white supremacy. At its best, I think systems of education teach people to challenge the system from within it.

One of my mentors asked, “you’re critical of institutions, but haven’t you benefited from higher education?” To answer the question: Yes, I have undoubtedly benefited from my life-long love affair with education. It supported so much inner-growth in addition to providing the tools to function as an artist in contemporary society, especially graduate school, which changed my conception of what art is and showed me how to critically navigate systems. And yet, in the four years since completing graduate school, I’ve repeatedly found myself frustrated because I can’t imagine my life without the institution. I can’t imagine a life where I’m not dependent on my adjunct income, and I can’t see past my own desperation to be hired for the maximum number of credit hours equating to approximately \$22,000 per year without benefits. It feels like all I think about is how to participate in the institution in an ethical and rewarding way and how to change it so it’s more inclusive, experimental, self-critical, and student-centered.

*Since this essay was originally written in 2019, I've mostly quit working as an adjunct professor, moved home to Florida, begun repairing familial relationships, gotten engaged, expanded and renewed friendships, and started working for myself in addition to being a full-time public school art teacher. Change is possible.*





Wendy DesChene Auburn University, Auburn AL +

Jeff Schmuki Georgia Southern University, Statesboro GA

## PlantBot Genetics

### I.

Residencies have become an immeasurably important aspect of our lives. They came with the gift of time in the studio, support of peers, adventure, and for artists exiled to a place of the world unfamiliar to them or in need of direction; they brought community and a place to reconnect. We met at one in Connecticut. During our first dates, we discussed the limitations of art, and how we could change it. On-line dating sites often survey potential participants about religion to find a match. A relationship has more of a chance of success when a couple has a similar religious philosophy. Ours was art. Not the cult of the object but the growing fringe born through the ideals found in activism, the new “termites of art.” We both thought art was lazy and could be so much more than it was. We thought our chosen areas of study were limiting, almost insulting to a world in need. What is the purpose of something going on a wall or pedestal to die? Artists have responsibilities, and we were both on paths to define what that meant.

Wendy was a lost Canadian and had just moved to a job in Alabama, fresh with a graduate degree after taking a ten-year sabbatical between an undergraduate degree in Montreal and graduate work at Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Jeff had graduated from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University with an MFA in ceramics. He was disheveled and unmoored, drifting from residency to residency. Hurricane Katrina destroyed Gulfport, Mississippi where Jeff had been a professor, which occurred just a few years earlier. Jeff has stories of losing everything—his home, job, pets, and a book collection—and needing a pistol in the postapocalyptic aftermath.

We did not want to make dead art, that is, art waiting to release its full potential as profit once we too perished. Subverting that system became our duty. We were already exploring these ideas individually. By 2009 Wendy had spent five years de-

veloping an installation that welcomed the community. Using abandoned stuffed animals found in every home, she rearranged the spaces with collaborative paintings and sculptures that anyone could have a connection to despite education, age, race, or religion. These fluffy toys provided powerful connections that lulled the audience into a new world where art ate away at itself in an attempt to be “more.”

After Katrina, Jeff explored modes beyond his ceramic background. Thanks to the ever-intensifying storms of global warming, he was born-again to a practice not requiring kilns and drying times. Jeff took his love of gardening and grew plants within an art context. After Katrina, he would find subsistence plots hidden away or carefully tended gardens fighting weeds and rubble. This inspired him to use live plants, to wheel mobile gardens down streets as a way to reconnect with the community, science, sustainability, and his lost garden. These grew to larger, elaborate, sound-producing hydroponic gardens that filled galleries. As the gardens grew, so did the concepts.

Displaced and stringing together residencies and visiting professorships, Jeff developed a series of works that used live plants as a way to replace his gardens lost to Hurricane Katrina. During one residency, we located a Monsanto research station just outside of town that held a “farmers day.” A representative mentioned what the biotech was doing was no different from what the father of modern genetics, Gregor Mendel, accomplished during the 1860s. High school biology has taught us differently.

## II.

The road held its methodology; we learned that the vernacular was practical. Together we began by extending the things we were already doing but with the challenge to invent something new through each other. Our first step was to throw out ideas that there were “right” and “wrong” art skills. Could Wendy’s social skills, honed as years as a bartender, become useful? Could Jeff’s love of gardening have value as art? In the sixties, artist realized that they could nap as art. We happened to both have spent plenty of our lives building craft skills, and, between us, there were zero overlaps in our toolboxes.

What grew from seeds that we collected on this trip looked monstrous to Wendy. Jeff wasn’t as convinced, and when she suggested placing them on a remote-control car, he resisted. But trying to impress her, put one together. This silly, remote-control plant we later named Monsantra—a combination of the former biotech Monsanto with Monster—was fun to drive, and Jeff’s eyes were opened to the possibility of humor in public space. People in the street took to this odd plant, laughing and asking questions. The veil had fallen, and we realized taking art to the streets and creating a humorous situation was disarming and put audiences at ease, allowing for more authentic discussions. This provided us a classic lightbulb moment. Handing

over the remote to participants also allowed trust and created a shared space where more serious discussions could develop.

Monsantra traveled worldwide and drew people. It did not matter what language we spoke or what country we visited, a moving robot-plant hybrid was instantly absorbing. Working in the street created fast-paced engagement, and soon our collection of humorous PlantBots flourished. Using materials often bound for the landfill such as cheap, battery-driven toys allowed experimentation since it was not a significant loss if hacking and short-circuiting burned their circuits. Second-generation bots sang instantly recognizable pop songs and the disconnect between the original tune, the movements of a robot, and the foliage materials created a form of culture jamming. Many anti-consumerist social movements use forms of guerrilla communication to subvert culture.

Wendy's family is part of the Indigenous Metis Nation, and she understood the significance of mischief used in the stories of First Nations cultures. In grade school, Wendy was fascinated by Nanabush, an Ojibwe spirit, trickster, and cultural hero, who uses the hoax to create ruses to create a better world. Subverting cultural messages with trickery makes activism particularly memorable and disarming. For example, taking a Britney Spears song stuck in everyone's subconscious, disrupting it with plant material, sticking it in an odd place that unexpectedly activating it creates a new space for us to fill with ways to think about sustainable practices.

Dialogues of the corporatization of food production begun by Monsantra encompasses broader issues. PlantBots can be "hidden" anywhere. Varieties underscoring all types of environmental problems like invasive species were developed as installation spaces in the galleries. Portable greenhouses were placed in open fields and alongside nature trails. Neighboring communities were invited for nature tours through fields and nearby woods, where we pointed out and shared information on the importance of native plants alongside destructive, invasive plants. One would walk by a tripwire to set off a barrage of plant material dancing and singing silly pop songs. Donning lab coats, we would speak on the bot's bizarre and educational mythology before moving along to the next specimen. The success and public enthusiasm gave us the confidence to dream about how the project could grow.

We dreamed of risks we could take and envisioned transforming a fully enclosed 18-foot, bright yellow utility trailer. To ensure that our vision took root, Jeff told galleries about the fully functioning trailer before it existed, and soon we were booked for events! A temporary teaching position partially funded the purchase, and it meant risking money customarily set aside for emergencies or retirement. Dubbed the ArtLab, the trailer combined a catalog of printed information inspired by historic bookmobiles, with larger solar panel systems than those used in prior Greenhouse Labs. This method effectively released us from the tethering cord of the electrical outlet and allowed the trailer to act both as a stage and power generator for activities both inside and outside the trailer.

The exterior of the portable lab displays information to encourage those walking by to enter and experience something new. The space surrounding the ArtLab is just as significant as what occurs inside, and the solar power system powers and illuminates outside activities such as lighting for mobile gardens, insect tents, and video projections. Exterior lighting draws attention, while lengthening the growth cycle of portable gardens, as insects landed in the project to be studied. Any environmental issue could be tailored toward this itinerant format. Recent projects included the migration of chimney swifts, local salamanders, and native gardens. Functioning without permission and curated spaces allowed us to target the audience precisely in order to bring the conversation to the general public.

### III.

The ArtLab acts as the stage for hands-on educational activities, environmental information, and sincere dialogue. Specimens activated the space at the push of a button that was energized by a big block of deep-cycle batteries charged by the sun. This elucidated the question, “how can I power my hunting shack or garden shed with solar?” A discussion and simple diagram listed all the necessary components and gave participants the confidence they could also do it themselves.

The work became a mix of activism, art, education, and entertainment that used culture to corrode and disrupt the messages of multimillion-dollar agricultural companies. As we traveled, folks would ask if we were artists. Having come from art schools, we knew what we were doing, but it became secondary to the information that we wanted to share. Art was the toolbox we drew from, but it was no longer paramount, and, in fact, it no longer mattered. Humanity is fluid. Cultures are malleable, and our first directive was positively touching people with what was happening in our environment. Inspiring change and empowering others to know they can be part of solutions is imperative. A traditional soapbox of any kind would not work; we had to use everything in our magicians’ hat to get people to listen. Our street-trailer performance was a way to engage people directly, to talk to them about problems, and then offer solutions. Scientists are not always great communicators, but as creative thinkers, artists working alongside them can help make the issues felt and remembered.

The project grew to include projections, videos, dinner parties, basically anything that allowed us to make space intelligently in the world for our message. It is ironic how often this type of art is taken from a street-based project and embraced back into curated spaces. Once back in the traditional cathedrals for art, we were asked several long-established questions, such as, “how did you finance your project?” We usually say that we got the money from our retirement fund. Without a livable world, what would be the point? If you don’t believe in your project with everything you have to make it happen, you can’t expect others to support it. Grants for

us came after we had poured in money to create a flourishing project. The work may never happen waiting for a grant. We made the idea more manageable to find a way to get it started. To make it more manageable we found smaller ways to get it started, like simply starting at the beginning and working forward toward the larger goals. Secondly, we are academics, so unlike many artists, we have regular paychecks. We are both passionate about handing our tools to new generations of artists, however, in our minds, our jobs are no different than any other job.

Wendy was a waitress for a very long time, and she made much more money serving tables than as a full Professor. For the most part, the two jobs are similar: both jobs have positives and negatives, bosses and requirements that must be fulfilled to keep them, in addition to someone or a group who is asking something from you. Although both could be considered service jobs, the most significant difference is one position requires one to make art, or it should. Increasingly very few persons in academia have tenure-track jobs, a situation that liberates artists from using their creativity directly to make money. In an academic job, creativity isn't limited to what a collector might buy or even the "gig" economy—jobs that are temporary, contractual, and flexible. Perhaps other less respected jobs can provide that freedom as well. For example, if Wendy hadn't secured a tenure-track position, she would have been totally fine being a waitress. In some ways, more artists should look for more straightforward ways to make a living than being adjuncts. Teaching is now a poverty-level job, and making pizza allows larger paychecks. It may even leave a little more creative juice in the tank. Maybe if supply and demand weren't so in favor of the university, the wages for artists would increase. Universities pay so little to the people who work in the classrooms. It is immoral. If one has a job, it must pay livable wages. Until that changes, there is no shame in supporting one's art-making habits beyond academia.

Of course, not working in a pizza parlor to make money to support our art leads to its own set of challenges. Our institutions were not going to award tenure based on PlantBot interventions, street festivals, and community work. The dichotomy of firmly bucking a system that we were decisively a part of created friction that we had to find innovative solutions towards reconciling. One way to do this was to embrace universities, museums, and galleries invitations. Understanding that world through our academic positions made it easier. Ironically for us, universities and galleries became an extension of the street. If our philosophy concluded that art should and could be anywhere, there are no exclusions, and we should be proficient in any space.

#### IV.

Visiting artists, who work in street art, expansive practices, environmental activism, and collaborative methodologies in order to teach students without a long-term

commitment, continues to be a popular short-term fix. As artists working with one foot in- and outside of the system, it also made it easier for us to say no to offers that would not compensate us. Universities must provide the means for visiting artists the same way they would for any other professional. When paid by an institution, we can utilize that income to collaborate with an underserved or unsuspecting community, so it is essential that institutions deliver. Contracts and reimbursements should be no different in the arts than any other professional sector.

Yet it is common to have these agreements shift in the arts. Contracts are changed. Hired on a 2/3 research-intensive track, Jeff's teaching load increased to a 3/3 without discussion or pay increase. The few colleagues engaged in a sustained practice at his university have managed to maintain a research agenda. But not as successfully as before, the course-load change increased his teaching load. There was a shift in the culture of the university towards the bottom line, and a thought that doing more research meant you cared less about teaching and its goals. However, how can one teach without being a practicing maker? Talented teachers find ways to include students in their research. There are other benefits, such as allowing relevant information to be learned—knowledge creation and integration; providing examples of what is required in the field; making connections that assist students; and sharing current practices.

Can an instructor or professor profess when she or he is not or cannot engage in scholarship? During yearly reviews, acknowledgment for socially engaged outreach performed nationally or internationally should count as service and not as an issue no one knows how to quantify. Problems arise when faculty, who are expected to excel at research, teaching, and service, receive mixed signals from the decisions being made from the top down. Should grants be given to faculty who consistently do very little as practicing artists or academics?

The research grants at my many universities are not awarded equitably. Studies show women academics do more than their fair share with fewer rewards. Wendy has experienced this "boys club" mentality directly. To counter it, she did what all ambitious minorities do, to try and do more, be better, excel higher than the majority of her male peers. The hope is that in doing so, at least equivalent success and validation could come if even from beyond the home institution. One would think that sexism in the art world, a place of thinkers and cultural innovators, would be gentler, but unfortunately it is not. Another example is that many institutions and interviewers list Jeff's name first on the bill even though all our communication and materials list Wendy's name first.

Reaching across multiple disciplines is a common practice in contemporary art, and a significant number of artists use whatever material or process is best suited to achieve their creative aims. Academic departments bill themselves as interdisciplinary when, in reality, discipline-specific curricula that were invented for another time are no longer relevant in current university art programs. Yet, they still perme-

ate them. Whether you are a scientist, artist, or historian, your position requires you to add something new and valuable to the current bank of knowledge. Our interdisciplinary practice has hurt our opportunities for traditional academic jobs. Our practice does not fit tidily into one box. Even though we both have degrees from prestigious schools in painting and in ceramics, it has proved challenging to instill confidence in institutions, even considering the work we make now. Though our work is now much more experimental and no longer medium-specific, we have not lost any of our prior knowledge or experience and can still teach effectively in more traditional areas.

## V.

We need an educational system that is designed to help people seek truth and serve society, an education that develops a more conscious individual and citizen and not just a worker. The opposite is occurring with the corporatization of the university, where the priority is profit, and what is taught is no longer determined by the teacher but by the market. When Jeff was a student of liberal arts in the eighties, he was allowed the opportunity to explore various classes and engage in activities that interested him. This approach helped him develop a deep respect for the pursuit of knowledge, diversity of discourse, and civic engagement that supported critical thinking and cultivated a social consciousness. At many institutions today, vocational style curriculums do not defend the right to question assumptions, participate in an inquiry, and gain new insights into the complexities of the world are not supported. When we apply that mission to the teaching of the fine arts, artists have the potential to alter perceptions, foster dialogue, and inspire social change. These potentials motivated us as students and are why we teach and make art today.

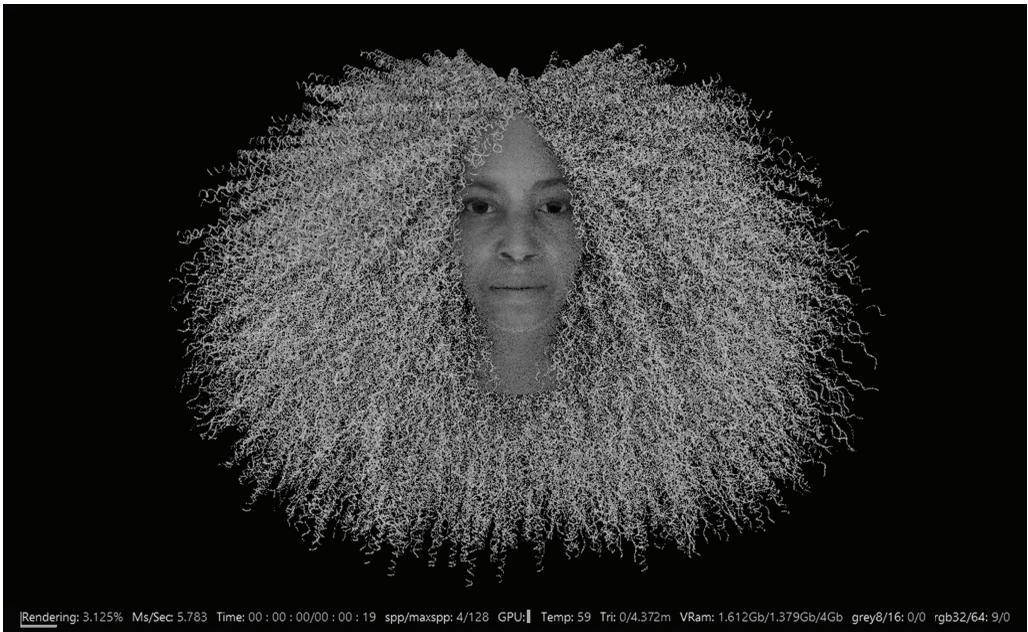
How can a corporatized system of higher learning support these outcomes let alone democracy? Even as we stand before a great wave of social crisis and ecological catastrophe on a global scale, a corporatized system of higher learning will not devote resources to an ecologically secure pedagogy.

As Claes Oldenburg said, “Get art off its ass!” By sharing our creative process, we hope that it may serve as an example on how participants can develop multiple perspectives and can break free of the assumptions about what art is and can be in the hope of inspiring informed citizens who become enthusiastic participants. Our environmental and educational street projects, packaged through the name of “art” counter the damages of commodified education as well as lack of opportunities for learning.

We are educators in- and outside of the classroom who share similar goals but different approaches. One approach conforms to a standard curriculum sheet, with accountability to rubrics, fitting around committee meetings in a privileged space. The other approach conforms to public space, fitting between buildings, and having

accountability to no one but truth and our principles. Both, however, try to empower those who are listening, that they too, can be more than they thought they could be and better humans all around.<sup>1</sup>

- I On Wednesday October 13, 2021, the Georgia Board of Regents voted to give its universities the power to fire tenured professors without faculty input, due process, or cause. This directly impacts Jeff's academic career. Members of the Board of Regents are appointed by the Governor of Georgia from each of Georgia's legislative districts. These appointees view universities through a political lens and have seldom, if ever, instructed college-level courses. Out of nineteen appointees, only one has taught college courses, another taught grade school. All are business people. In the end, their tenure decisions will be ideological and not evidence-based. The end of tenure represents the ongoing corporatization and homogenization of education in the United States. To read more about this, please see: G. Heyward, "Georgia's University System Takes On Tenure," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/13/us/georgia-university-system-tenure.html>.



Rendering: 3.125% Ms/Sec: 5.783 Time: 00 : 00 : 00 / 00 : 00 : 19 spp/maxspp: 4/128 GPU: Temp: 59 Tri: 0/4.372m VRam: 1.612Gb/1.379Gb/4Gb grey8/16: 0/0 rgb32/64: 9/0



I.

Art is a productive, self-sustaining place to put my creativity and unique view of the world. It is something I can do while honoring my disposition and talents. Having space and time to follow my curiosities and to think deeply about issues and ideas I care about and want to think about over time is important. Expressing thoughts in the physical visual realm, metaphorically, is a language I understand. Through a life in art, I have been able to craft space for these practices.

I am an artist because my grandmother, Bernice Curry, had an agile artist's mind. She expressed it in her home, her garden, and her interactions with the communities she intersected. Creativity and ingenuity were central to the life she built for herself and family. In many ways, these attributes were necessary for survival in her world. She made no claims to the term artist, but she was an extremely creative person. She was forever pointing out figures spotted in clouds, on tablecloths, or in the twisted limbs of a tree. She could create items of beauty for the house out of found objects. Like a number of Black people who migrated North from the South in the thirties and forties, she didn't have a lot of money. She made do with what she had or could find. She used creativity to make up for what was lacking. Anyone who visited our apartment for the first time was given a tour that included in-depth explanations of objects she created to sustain and enhance her home. She made a bathtub enclosure out of old screen doors, for example. No one necessarily had to know the tub enclosure was upcycled, but she made sure they did. She was proud of her work. This practice of creative upcycling continued long after the necessity for it waned. Her interventions were transformative for our living space and the people in it in particular. It is not unusual for members of my family to share their handiwork, their extensions of this tradition.

Nana also maintained a large flower garden where we lived. Her almost obsessive gardening played a huge role in my becoming an artist. I grew up in Tottenville in

Staten Island. It is the southernmost tip of New York and probably as small of a town as New York state gets. I grew up there, as my mother did, because this is the place where my grandparents settled after their move North. I imagine the availability of jobs brought them there. Or, perhaps the proximity to Sandy Ground, a long-free community of Black clammers, and the ferry to Perth Amboy, New Jersey drew them there. I can only speculate, but Tottenville was, and still is, a mostly white town. A small enclave of Black families lived there as well. For the most part, they were relegated to a place called “the flats,” a small apartment complex on the edge of town. I learned much later that it was one of the few places in town that would rent to Black families. Nana made the best of that situation. She turned the large, dirt lot on the side of the building into a beautiful garden. There were grass, marigolds, petunias, and many other kinds of annuals I don’t remember the name of. She kept that garden meticulously manicured. It attracted people from around the neighborhood. They would walk by, admire the garden, and eventually talk to her. I now realize the garden was a form of social practice. She seduced even her most trenchant, white neighbors with the garden’s beauty. Her work in that garden—her joy really—helped make Black families living in the area safer and more comfortable. The garden was a space of social practice that built alliances. That garden was her solace and entry into the community. That garden was vital to the way I think about working in and building community.

## II.

I am not an artist who is compelled to make art. I need to express myself creatively. Almost anything that pairs problem-solving with imagination can satisfy that proclivity. When I do make “Art,” it needs to have purpose. My projects are most gratifying when they have an underlying use value. Whether it is obvious to those experiencing it or not, the work is always trying to make space in the world for non-supremist, non-compliant thought and action. I’m most interested in exploring ideas through the disciplined play that art affords and seeding thought in others. For me, expression and the propagation of ideas is essential.

In addition to family influence, my trajectory as a person, artist, and professor are fueled by curiosity, a sense of adventure, and willingness to say yes to opportunities that present themselves to me. Adventure can be as pedestrian as walking down a street I never walked down before or as risky as volunteering at an orphanage in a conflict zone. I find yes—even the occasional haphazard yes and a willingness to extend into the unknown—to be powerful in opening doors of opportunity. Yes led to my first travel experiences and ongoing love of travel, my first teaching assignment, and a tenure track position less than a year later. Becoming acquainted with death early in life allowed me to detach from preconceived notions of success and status. My mother dying when I was quite young taught me that each day lived is precious

and precarious. There is great value in doing the things you want to do in the now and not to take myself too seriously. This knowledge and my inheritance freed me to follow my interests and curiosities rather than pursue a career. The short of it is, as long as I can support myself, I am happy. My goal is to be as true to myself and to my thoughts as I can be and to keep a roof over my head.

Art was not even a consideration when I chose an area of study in college. I imagined working in creative settings where I could put my creativity to good use. Marketing and advertising seemed to fit the bill, so that is what I studied as an undergraduate student. I saw these majors as ways for me to earn a living while cultivating creativity in daily life. During senior year of college, I met a few new friends who were art obsessed. I had gone to museums but had never engaged them or art as intently as my new friends did. Fine art was a central part of their lives. These friendships planted new ideas about what art, as a serious pursuit, might be for me. I continued to go to museums and galleries with these friends for years. The socio-political climate in the early nineties, combined with my growing disenchantment with a false sense of urgency in the corporate world, pushed me to pursue photography seriously.

Quitting my job as a publicist and travelling throughout Central America for six months felt a bit risky and full of potential. While traveling, I created a series of images of the Indigenous communities I interacted with. When I exhibited the images back at home on Staten Island, all anyone would comment on was the poverty they saw in the images. I saw resilient people rich in tradition and love who reflected my existence in some indescribable way. The differences of perception and the failure of the images to communicate my intended perspective shook me. I needed more training about creating and thinking about images. I used the portfolio of images created during my travels to get into the General Studies Program at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York City.

It was an amazing year of immersion in photographic study with people from around the world. There was an almost deafening ping-pong of shutters clicking at every gathering, yet I was driven to make video, carvings, and installations. This was before many artists routinely made video as part of other art practices. I decided a Master's of Fine Arts (MFA) was necessary to support my expanding definition of image creation and to bulk up my art-making toolbox. I didn't study art in high school or undergrad, so I had some ground to make up.

The problem was, I didn't really know what it meant to get an MFA. I didn't know where to look for grad schools, either. I didn't know many other people interested in going to grad school for art. To figure it all out, I started studying resumes of artists showing in galleries I had an affinity with. If I found myself repeatedly in the same gallery or art space, I read the resumes of each artist showing there with a fine-tooth comb. I cruised the resumes to discover where they had studied, what awards they'd won, and where they were showing their art. I set my sights on the choices

in their resumes that seemed to apply to me. In the aggregate, the resumes helped me chart a path toward art as a way of life. It was a challenge, but I eventually I enrolled in the photography program at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) for graduate study. MICA provided an open-minded, program director in Will Larson. He was open to interdisciplinary practice, and I found a model of Black leadership in Leslie King Hammond. I was once again surrounded by photographers, but this time it was a very talented group of multigenerational, mostly Black, but racially diverse, photographers working across documentary and fine art forms of image-making. The particularities and thinking of my peers in that program highly influenced the way I teach and think about art today.

### III.

Graduate students often ask how to achieve teaching jobs after they graduate. I have trouble seeing this as anything other than a wrong-headed question. Considering the number of MFAs that graduated from art school each year, going to school with the thought of immediately securing a teaching position seems daft in most cases. There are so few academic teaching jobs available for artists. The best thing I can tell students is to define success on their own terms, find a good side hustle, and make awesome work. Full-time, tenure-track positions are more elusive than ever. Better to concentrate on making art that sustains mentally and creates opportunity than to worry about getting a teaching gig. Having teaching experience will be helpful, but the work is what gains first admission in the door. My students often don't believe me. The message only sinks in years after graduation when the students are still trying to find full-time teaching gigs and not getting the responses they'd hoped. This attitude stems from my own path into academia. I never set out to teach. I set out to explore and improve my skills. The opportunities I've received often arose from initial responses to my artwork, the support of allies, and saying yes to opportunities. Yes, it can sometimes be hard, but it almost always leads to learning and future opportunities.

Residencies and fellowships have been my most comfortable and productive connection to the art world. They support my belief that I am putting thoughts, not consumables, into the world that cannot be easily commodified. I prefer deliberate interaction, community-based access, and collaborative growth to exhibitions in the gallery world. Residencies support my need for convivial community and friendly competition. They support my penchant for learning how to do by watching others do their thing well. They allow me to feed my need for curiosity and adventure and art-making. Art Omi in Ghent, New York was my first residency. That experience was formative and opened a lot of doors. It made it possible to interact with artists at the top of their games and newly minted artists in the same space. I can often trace my path to subsequent opportunities to people I encountered at residencies.

I didn't know what to do with myself after earning my MFA. I was trying to figure it all out when a friend at MICA suggested I apply for the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art. I applied knowing I was going to be a fish out of water there. I eschew rarified approaches to thinking about art. Critical thinking and approaches can be good; however, I believe that if you can't relate art and ideas to people in a language anyone would understand, something is missing. Since I did not know what to do with myself after grad school and their focus felt counter to my interests in intuition and craft, I thought the Whitney program would be good for me. I needed a deeper understanding of the language of the contemporary art world to effectively function in that world. The Whitney program was a tougher experience than I expected. I found it hard to ingest copious amounts of theory and still make interesting art. The most incisive comments I offered in the seminar were often attributed to other Brown folks in the room. I also started to feel weighed down by the expectation that I would make a very particular type of art object centered on Blackness and hybridity. It felt like I was being fetishized. It took years for me to recenter myself in my own ideas about art, still, I would do it again.

A strategy I've used to build my life in art is to attend highly regarded schools and programs. This was part of the decision to go through the Whitney program. It has a long lineage of people who've been quite successful. I chose my undergraduate university in the same way. When people read my resume, they see touch points. I find this to be a sad state of affairs, but I also know it to be true. Being a Black woman in American society, I have to give myself every opportunity to open space for greater prospects and broader choices. I now fight against this kind of shorthand that is often reserved for the privileged by making space for others through my practice. I also call out the use of codified signifiers often deferred to on resumes, applications, and in professional conversations. I challenge those I encounter to find common language and to do the harder work of understanding and providing access rather than limiting them.

#### IV.

My job in academia supports my art habit. It provides a stable foundation on which to create. It allows time, space, and energy to produce on my own timetable rather than toward the demands of the market. Because I teach in a research institution, academia has also been a great motivator toward professional benchmarks. I might have left art if not for this pressure to produce. The conditions to earn tenure and promotion require a high level of production and participation in the art world—as sanctioned by peers and institutional hierarchies. Despite all of that, I see academia as an entrepreneurial space that allows me to make more holistic, life-supporting choices.

There are challenges in the academic system. The bureaucracy of working at a large, under-resourced, state institution and the burden of service, in addition to teaching and research can at times get in the way of art production. Because of my focus on Black communities and emerging technologies, my work has been challenged by some in my department who don't have the motivation or the scope of vision to understand it. The work does not fit the canon they subscribe to, so it can be negatively perceived. Still, I have more control of my time, thought, efforts, and standard of living in the academic space.

Helping people learn, grow, and claim their power is essential. Whether I'm in the classroom or working within the communities I meet, I work towards interactions with the world that are curious. Curiosity is central to my pedagogy. My teaching, like my studio practice, reflects my multidisciplinary interests. I bring my passion for learning, curiosity, and drive toward social change into the classroom. My aim is to help students exercise their creativity while developing the technical and critical skills necessary to produce, contextualize, and discuss art from well-informed and socially informed foundations. My approach to teaching critical thinking about art, culture, and society is underpinned by research and a playful approach toward action-oriented, socially engaged, art practices. Active listening and contemplative practices are also central to my teaching. I emphasize a balance of experimentation, technical skill, and the social determinants of art production. Horizontal learning environments help students understand their views are valid and that we are working together to improve, support, and enrich each other's art practices and problem-solving abilities. I encourage students to connect the seemingly disparate worlds of art production, theory, and compassion as they employ new materials and techniques to art, tech, and life problems. Explaining concepts and ideas in plain language that students already understand, while working to expand their vocabulary and encouraging them to do the same, helps students realize projects that express their ideas effectively.

I encourage students to bring their entire selves—including their cultures, studies outside of art, and passions—into the classroom. This is especially important for students of color who are often led to believe that hegemonic representations and thoughts are better than ideals or culturally-based ideas they learn at home. As schmaltzy as it sounds, I encourage students to “be the change they wish to see in the world,” as Gandhi said. I also push students to expand their social context and to rigorously interrogate the ideas they hold most dear. This internal questioning, paired with play, the serious type, leads to intellectual discovery. Self-interrogation is expanded by research that enriches, expands, and supports discovery. Historical precedents from art and society are introduced to contextualize working methodologies and tie new knowledge to a continuum.

## V.

Critique is a site of questions and questioning. I help students find their own answers through trenchant query and by providing avenues for finding models that support whatever mode of production students are engaged in. Critique is a forum where students are expected to speak honestly and knowledgeably about their work and the work of their peers. Starting with simple, attentive description, then building toward deep associative readings and lots of questions, critiques help students refine their ideas and hone their ability to speak about art and build confidence as makers. I try to establish a conceptual and critical context in which students can define their artistic activities and challenge traditional notions of what constitutes art. Doing so helps students develop an evolving set of tools to fold into their practices in response to the radical changes being brought about by advances in art, tech, and society. Addressing questions and challenges presented by our rapidly changing landscape opens opportunities for the arts to expand its boundaries, reach, and leadership roles within society.

We all have different learning styles. Some learn faster than others, some have trouble paying attention. Regardless of style, students need space to experiment, fail, and eventually excel. Here failure is seen as a natural part of the artist's practice and feedback rather than defeat. I encourage fast iteration to help students learn from their missteps and move on to try new iterative solutions to the problems encountered. I give them time and space to absorb content or digest my instructions without interference. To keep students excited about their work, I encourage them to examine ideas and aspects of culture that are truly meaningful to them. I provide a balance of guidance with space for students to take ownership of their learning and the ideas or methods taught and their resulting projects. I encourage students to work steadily, pushing them to overcome their own perceived limitations and to take creative risks while providing a positive, optimistic space for learning and curiosity.

## VI.

The future of work is collaborative. To be well-prepared, people must know how to work together effectively, in person and remotely. By nature, success in many of the topics I teach— video production, creative coding, and experimental media— depends on engaging the skills and knowledge of collaborators to learn new skills, invent new approaches, and complete projects. Advancements in digital media tools and computational art production come at faster and faster paces. Changes in software packages and other tools come quickly and are often significantly requiring users to relearn and adapt. Digital, media, and computational artists need to be continual learners to keep pace with the rate of change and new developments in their fields. This circumstance makes mastery more a function of having confidence

in one's foundational skills and one's ability to adapt to changes in systems quickly and efficiently. Going forward, this mandate to continually learn and adapt will apply to most people as our lives become more intertwined with ever more pervasive technologies.

To help myself understand the need to keep pace and embrace my art practice as a long-term site of learning, inquiry, and joy, I adhere to a few mantras:

One: To learn efficiently to seek and find the information needed to accomplish the goals I set for myself and my practice, a.k.a. research well and always be learning.

Two: There are many paths to solve a problem. Fail quickly, reassess, retool. Turning ideas into art is a process of learning, assessment, and adjustment. It requires patience and the ability to learn from your mistakes. Think of failure as feedback, instead of the end of the creative road. Seeing failure this way helps makers avoid getting paralyzed into inaction. I find that the faster I learn, the closer I am to a viable solution.

Three: I measure my successes by what I've learned instead of a particular outcome.

Four: Done is better than perfect. This is not a new idea, but I often have to remind myself and others to keep this idea front and center.

Five: I hold myself to a high standard. I see myself as competing with all I see around me I am only competing with myself. As conflicted as these ideas initially sound, they often hold true.

Six: You've got to be in it to win it. Even when the rejections are piling high. I recall why I do what I do and keep doing it. I always hope that my practice and the world will be in sync one day. Even if the two never meet, remembering art is inquiry in action, a process, and, while society often tells us otherwise, art is a privilege to pursue and can be a potent catalyst for change.

Seven: I define what success means for myself. I often have to remind myself that artists that succeed in their endeavors don't give up on their practices. Keep making, keep applying, keep learning.

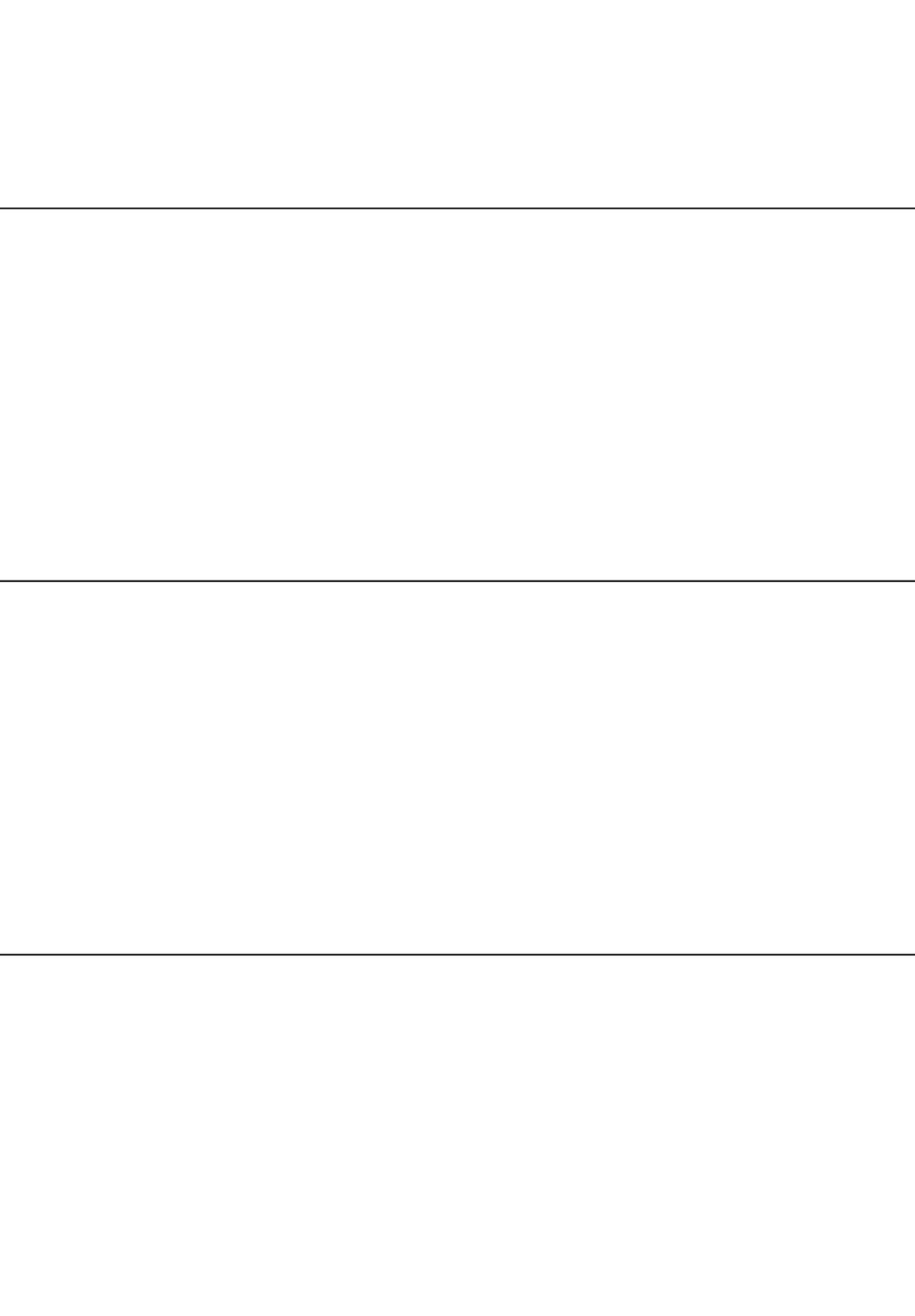
---

# ARTISTS AND PLACE

---

---

3







Alexis Granwell Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia PA; University of Pennsylvania

## Tiger Strikes Asteroid

Launching an artist-run gallery is like making a drawing: the artist lays down marks and responds to them in turn. Slowly, a structure emerges. The process can be organic and beautiful.

In 2009, I became a founding member of the art collective Tiger Strikes Asteroid (TSA), developing a community that has supported me and many other artists over the last ten years. While serving as an Adjunct Professor of Fine Art for those same ten years, Tiger Strikes Asteroid has been a counterbalance to academia that has empowered me to lead, make my work, and connect with artists from all over the world.

I have been teaching at the college level since 2006. I've taught at many schools in the Philadelphia area, working with a diverse group of students at public and private universities and art schools. I always wanted to teach. My mother was a special education teacher, and she modeled many possibilities of teaching, including creative ways of problem-solving. At home, I was encouraged to work in tactile ways, for example, drawing and building models. Learning made me curious about teaching others because there are so many different types of learners in the world and so many ways to approach education. I attended a public school with a strong arts program, and I fell in love with painting there, spending most of my weekends constructing abstract landscapes and pushing paint around canvases. By my sophomore year, I knew that I wanted to go to art school. I attended Boston University's School of Fine Arts and received a BFA in painting in 2003.

Shortly after graduating, I began to teach art to adults with disabilities at an art job training program called Gateway Arts Center in Boston. Working at Gateway was revelatory. What struck me most about the artwork from this community was the humility of the people making the drawings. The experience shifted the trajectory of my art and my philosophy about making. Although I probably knew this at my core, I relearned that the desire to make things is so innately human and that there

are many ways to share art within the world. I am grateful for my academic painting education, but I became fascinated by the art worlds that operate outside of the academic structure. The work made at Gateway is some of the most inventive artwork that I have ever seen. My experience at Gateway also reaffirmed my desire to keep teaching, and it deeply influenced my studio practice. Gateway inspired me to dig deeper into my ideas, work with more direct approaches, and embrace the physicality of materials. I abandoned painting and spent several years working with drawing and printmaking.

In 2005, I decided to pursue an MFA because I wanted uninterrupted time to explore art making, and I was interested in teaching at the college level. I attended The University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), Penn Design, making sculptures and works on paper. My work began to expand: thinking about the physicality of material and process as failure as well as articulating visually what is not physically manifested in this world. I began as a painter, but I now make sculpture. As a consequence, a tension exists in my work between the 2D and 3D, the surface and the substrate. Working with assemblage allows me to create a feeling of painting within space. These sculptures show the nature of undoing and becoming. Materiality, process, and play are central parts of my practice.

As a teaching assistant in graduate school, I worked with Professor Joan Curran and was impressed by her precision and intuition in the classroom when teaching drawing. She began the class in an open-ended, almost primal way. Yet, the students created comprehensive observational drawings by the end of a fifteen-week term. Modeling the process of breaking down a complex technique or philosophy of making parallels the process of constructing a piece of art. I am passionate about creative investigation and discovering a way to communicate an initial foundation, transitioning into more intricate ideas. Teaching helped me to sharpen my own ideas about process, and the energy within the classroom fed my studio practice.

During my last few months at UPenn, I began to apply for part-time adjunct positions in Philadelphia and land my first job teaching in Continuing Education at The University of the Arts (UArts) in 2007 teaching painting and figure drawing. After two years working at UArts and assisting a local artist, I began teaching drawing in the BA and BFA programs at Tyler School of Art. It was around this time that I applied for full-time or tenure-track teaching jobs on the east coast. I continued to build my teaching resume, adjuncting at several schools around Philadelphia.

After graduating from UPenn, my school colleague Alex Paik contacted me about starting an art collective in Philadelphia. Our original group consisted of friends from my MFA program at UPenn, as well as local artists from Philadelphia, including myself, Alex, Caroline Santa, Phillip Adams, Nathan Pankratz, and Tim Gierschick. Although I was nervous to join a collective because I had never worked collaboratively, I was eager to gain the experience. Being part of a group that fostered something new for the community was intriguing to me, even though none of

us felt like we knew what we were doing. Instead, we would simply try things and see if they worked. We met monthly to figure out the structure of our organization, the artists we would contact for studio visits, and the conceptual underpinnings for our future shows. The most energizing parts of the experience were building something organically and working off of each others' ideas. Even our name was decided upon organically, through an Exquisite-Corpse type process. Each member suggested a word and we threaded the words together until we agreed on the combination, Tiger Strikes Asteroid. Every single decision was a group decision.

## II.

Our collective's main goal was to initiate a new dialogue between Philadelphia artists and artists across the country. Philadelphia is a wonderful city in which to be an artist, but it can be insular. Creating new experiences for artists and meeting artists from all across the country could help change this dynamic. Furthermore, the landscape of the art world was shifting. Mid-tier galleries were closing in response to the 2008 recession, and it seemed that opportunities in the commercial gallery world were becoming fewer and far between, especially in Philadelphia. The group wanted to respond to this lack of opportunity. We aimed to support under-represented artists in our city, particularly emerging artists. And we planned to be bold with our exhibitions, taking artistic risks.

When we started Tiger Strikes Asteroid (TSA), the rent was fairly affordable. We moved into a tiny gallery space in Chinatown that housed the oldest art collective in Philadelphia, Vox Populi, and the gallery, COPY, another artist-run space. There were also several live/work artist studios, a commercial photography studio, and a commercial gallery. Part of the reason we wanted to be in the building with these spaces was proximity, creating a density of gallery spaces for people to visit.

Much trial and error accompanies the freedom of building an art collective. As we moved beyond the first year, there were many times that I questioned and doubted what we were doing, but I've always believed in the mission of Tiger Strikes Asteroid to create exciting programming in Philadelphia. As someone with an admittedly Type A personality, I've learned that believing in the project when you are flailing is ok. Having a sense of humor is useful too. When there is no exact, pre-existing model for what you are doing, it can be liberating. Creating your own gallery allows for the opportunity to expand and grow with your peers. You learn from your mistakes together. Unlike the academic setting, we do not have to answer to anyone, follow an agenda, or even succeed commercially. We were a group of young artists, but we could try out the role of curators. We could play with the structure of the art gallery and what this means to the artist. The risk felt lower because we were working together and motivating each other as we continued to build our vision of the gallery.

Philadelphia is now dense with artist-run spaces, and there is a less-pronounced hierarchy that divides commercial from non-profit galleries because the artist-run spaces are the emerging, mid-tier galleries in Philadelphia. The lines have blurred. But unlike in the commercial world, the relationships we have fostered with other artist-run spaces feels reciprocal and supportive, in part because there is no monetary competition. We want to see the artist-run model succeed because the artist-run spaces fill in the gaps of the non-blue chip art world. Working together, artists can create not only dialogue, but momentum, to sustain this model. The energy that is built through collaboration is impactful because we can generate more interesting ideas as a group, combine our skills and resources, and work efficiently toward our goals.

Cooperative galleries and artist-run galleries share a long history, but this type of space is more sustainable now because of the internet. Artist-run spaces have the ability to exist in multiple online platforms in addition to a physical space. We can enjoy diverse programming from artist-run spaces in small towns across the country without visiting in person. At TSA, we easily archive our exhibitions on our websites, share our exhibitions through social media, and connect with other artist-run spaces all over the world. Our virtual platform introduces artists to new audiences, which allows for natural conversations to develop in an immediate way. Many of the artists we have exhibited have connected with other artists we have archived, sometimes collaborating in exhibitions. Students utilize our archive for curatorial research and inspiration.

The relationship-building and collaboration that we achieve as a collective is key for navigating the art world and is something I want my students to understand. Art programs should offer more opportunities for students to collaborate and research together both inside and outside of the institution. These collaborations should assist students in learning how to work in a group, build one's own opportunities, develop programming, or work with the local community. This type of educational experience could help to inspire students to take initiative in their local art scene and soften the transition from art school to the real world.

Additionally, graduate schools or even BFA programs need more Professional Practice curricula. It is necessary for students to learn some art world professionalism before they graduate so they can advocate for themselves and potentially work on projects outside of the studio. I would have loved to have learned these skills in college, but my experience in school was one with firm boundaries between disciplines and an emphasis on the individual pursuit in the studio. TSA is partially a response to this academic model. There is no hierarchy in TSA and our collective is built to create agency for artists. As a group, we have developed a multitude of skills for working together: listening, sharing ideas, delegating, balancing personalities, mediating. Most importantly, TSA has taught our members and exhibiting artists to take risks.

The experience of TSA has helped me to recognize the social role of being an artist. I used to be very introverted, thinking of the artist as a maker in the studio. I am now much more confident, trusting my ability to lead a group and make decisions. This has empowered me to think ambitiously and work on projects that move outside the maker skill set. Recently, I curated *Intimate Immensity*, an ambitious show at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) with contemporary sculpture and works from the PAFA museum collection and Brodsky collection. I do not have a PhD in Art History, although I have ten years of being in dialogue with artists, doing studio visits, and learning all the administrative elements of building a show. When curating, I trust my intuition, using the maker part of my brain to design the exhibition.

Now, ten years since TSA began, we have a national network with spaces in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. We are the only artist-run collective network of this kind in the United States. We have eleven members in Philadelphia and over forty members total across the network. This ever-growing structure is one of the most thrilling elements of TSA. Each gallery in the network operates as a separate entity, meaning that we share non-profit status, but each gallery has its own separate programming and budget. I currently co-direct TSA Philadelphia with Megan Biddle, and Mary Henderson is our assistant director. Andrew Prayzner and Jackie Hoving co-direct TSA New York. Carl Baratta and Liz Nurenberg co-direct TSA Los Angeles, and Esau McGhee directs TSA Chicago. Alex Paik is the director of the entire TSA Network.

TSA Philadelphia now operates a gallery in the Crane Arts building, another building with studios and artist-run spaces. Our current space is about three-times the size of our original. At the local level, we are connecting artists through artist-run exhibitions and various projects. We also collaborate between the various TSA spaces, joining forces for gallery exchanges. Additionally, we have done exchanges with other artist-run spaces across the us, and we are now linked to many art communities throughout the us and abroad.

### III.

Artists can't sustain a practice in a cultural vacuum. Artists need critical discussion and opportunities to exhibit new work. They need context for their work. Art collectives like TSA can help to create meaning in what sometimes feels like an isolating vocation. We inspire, influence, push, and support each other. In our gallery model, we offer the option of co-curating, individual curating, or solo exhibition, allowing for maximum experimentation within our group, our studios, and our exhibitions. Unlike the commercial art world, we do not have the pressure of selling work to keep our doors open and so artists do not have to produce commercially viable work. Artists also have the opportunity to curate. This is often an extension of the artist's own studio practice. Curating has the potential to connect artists with

like-minded sensibilities. Over the years, I have been able to work closely with artists I greatly admire, some older or more established, some living in faraway places. When curating, I dream BIG. I have learned that people usually say yes to invitations to exhibit, even in a tiny artist-run space.

For my first major curatorial project with TSA in 2012, I created an exhibition and performance series celebrating and reflecting upon the films of Ross McElwee. I partnered with UPenn's Film Studies Department to bring Ross to Philadelphia and to screen his current film, *Photographic Memory*. Although I currently teach at UPenn, I was not an adjunct there at the time. However, I felt comfortable approaching the university as an alum. It was a necessity to collaborate with an academic institution to fund Ross's visit to Philadelphia. UPenn funded half of my budget for Ross's lecture and travel. I funded the other half through a Kickstarter campaign. Additionally, the university offered space for Ross's screening and lecture, creating accessibility for students and non-artists to learn about the work. Through the platform of TSA, I was able to construct this complex show, to bridge film and object, to connect Ross with the art community in Philadelphia, and to introduce his films to younger students. This project would not have been possible without UPenn, as I needed the resources of the university to assist me with the space and funding for the lecture and the screening. I organized this complex exhibition as an adjunct with no job security and while teaching at a different academic institution. Without TSA, I would not have had the confidence to put together a project of this magnitude. It was beneficial for my students who assisted in designing posters and attending the various programs for this series that involved performances, film screenings, and an exhibition.

When we curate at TSA, we give ourselves permission to play, to experiment with ideas, to work intuitively, and to try new types of projects. Envisioning exhibitions, meeting artists, and writing about art all affect my personal studio practice. These experiences enrich my practice in ways that traditional classes in academia did not. Curating at TSA has helped me create context for my own work. It has also taught me various research methods, especially with subject matter outside my own practice. Within each project, there is an exchange of ideas with many people, allowing for various learning opportunities. My decision to work with TSA and with the artist-run community is pedagogical, as these types of skills involve play and collaboration that is not taught in the typical academic art program.

Through my experience with TSA, I have embraced more elements of play in my studio practice. The culture of TSA is rooted in experimentation. In my practice, there are no barriers regarding approaches to materials, allowing for a kind of mystery that propels me to keep working and making. Over the years, I've worked with printmaking, found objects, metal, wood, and handmade paper. I learn best through direct contact with materials, and this experiential mode of working with paper informs the content of my work and my teaching practice too. Problem-solving tech-

niques are learned through direct tactile experience. In my classes, there is less of a focus on specific media and more of a focus on approach. Students work with spontaneity and then assess their approaches as they hone their craft. The curriculum is a balance of exploring multiple interests and embracing the unexpected.

#### IV.

Currently, I teach at UPenn and PAFA. Collaboration, material, and process form the basis for each of my classes, which are focused around creative investigation. Throughout my teaching career, I have re-calibrated my classes toward slowing down to help students find their own methods with materials, creating a sense of curiosity. My own curiosity stems from a multitude of experiences that exist outside of my academic journey, and this is something I try to transmit to students. It is important that students are given space and time to let ideas germinate.

My teaching runs the gamut: a foundations seminar, drawing, printmaking, mixed media, sculpture, installation, curatorial studies, and visiting critic. In my sculpture class, *Ideas and Critique*, I work with students from every discipline. They spend the entire semester examining a personal language while experimenting with found objects, items from the hardware store, and raw materials. They use this language to construct sculptures and installations, create videos and performances, and consider formal elements of scale, lighting, and color. Students learn to engage in an independent studio practice and a group dialogue, sharing their experiences along the way and helping each other build their own inventive practices. We come together as a group, discuss readings, and share ideas. Then, we break apart for students to work individually, playing with different languages of making. By the end of the semester, everyone is making exciting, diverse, sculptural work. Ultimately, everyone is learning from everyone else. I act as a guide for them, but they run the class, asking for feedback when it's needed. Each semester is therefore an entirely new dynamic with new goals. The curriculum is both individually focused and collectively driven.

This semester, I am teaching a class at PAFA about designing an exhibition and the curatorial vision of the artist. I am thrilled to share my experiences running an art collective with the students, and I hope that the class inspires them to start their own gallery spaces. The class models a broad range of approaches for how to exhibit work, and I empower students to examine all the elements of the exhibition. The class will culminate in a show that the students will curate themselves.

The administrative and conceptual skills of curating should be taught in every art school. Learning how to generate your own opportunities rather than waiting for a knock on the door from a curator creates confidence and purpose. It can help motivate artists when life becomes overwhelming or when the art world is not supporting your work. I feel optimistic that academic institutions will continue to expand their curriculum to assist artists beyond the studio practice.

My vision regarding academia has certainly changed over the last ten years, watching the adjunct crisis worsen in this country. I am a member of the Philadelphia adjunct union, United Academics of Philadelphia, and I see all the changes that my colleagues are making and fighting for as organizers and members of the union. I have so many talented adjunct colleagues, and I would like to see the situation for adjuncts improve in my lifetime. When I started my MFA program in 2005, I never dreamed that I would be an adjunct juggling four different classes per semester in 2019. When I began on this path, there were many more tenure-track jobs available. It seemed possible to have a solid career in academia. For several years, I was driven to find a tenure-track teaching job, and I have been on the market several times, sometimes making it to the second or third round. Yet, at this point, I don't want to uproot myself from Philadelphia. I went to school here. Some of my closest friends are here. My trusted art community is here. In this community, I have created alternative ways of learning and teaching and exhibiting that operate outside of academia. TSA has supported my art practice over the last decade, and it would be a huge loss if I moved to a new location for a teaching position. It would be challenging to start over, particularly in a smaller town.

I love teaching, and I have had incredibly inspiring students over the years. Although I am deeply passionate about my current classes, my community and my art practice are my priority. My hope is that my peers and I can find a path that works for us so we can continue to support ourselves and our practices in the long term. That may mean teaching in academia, or it may mean teaching in a different type of educational setting. As I continue with my teaching pursuits, I help students understand that there are many ways to be an artist and that building your own opportunities is a necessity. I also highlight the issues and realities of academia, and I am honest about my precarious position as an adjunct. I am not sure whether I will continue teaching at the adjunct level for the second half of my career, but I am fortunate that TSA can balance academia that creates space for non-hierarchical community and creativity.



FASES DE UN PROYECTO

1. OPTIMISMO GENERAL
2. FASE DE DESORIENTACION
3. DESCONCIERTO ABSOLUTO
4. PERIODO DE CAGHONER INCONTROLADO
5. BURROSA IMPLACABLE DE CUEMBLES
6. SALVASE EL QUE PUEDA
7. CASTIGO EJEMPLAR A LOS INOCENTES
8. RECUPERACION DEL OPTIMISMO
9. TERMINACION INEXPLICABLE DEL PROYECTO
10. CONDECORACION Y PREMIOS A LOS NO PARTICIPANTES

(DANILO VERAS)



Pablo Guardiola San Juan, Puerto Rico +

Tony Cruz San Juan, Puerto Rico

## Beta-Local

### I.

*Tony Cruz*

La Práctica was always Beta-Local's backbone. Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Michelle (Michy) Marxuach, and I founded Beta-Local in 2009, and the organization was centered around La Práctica. We worked on a series of projects in the early 2000s and wanted to create something that would allow new collaborations.

Beatriz and I taught for a couple of years at Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño de Puerto Rico (EAPD, School of Visual Arts and Design). I taught at the school until 2008, a little before starting Beta-Local. At the time, Puerto Rico lacked an attractive MFA program that would serve as an option for BFA graduates to stay on the island. Many of the recent BFA graduates were leaving Puerto Rico. The pool of artists was shrinking, and we thought of Beta-Local as a way to collaborate with other artists and new allies. Because of limited resources for artists in Puerto Rico, it is imperative to cooperate and collaborate. For us, it is particularly relevant, in order to thrive and to open up our ways of working to old collaborators and to possible, new collaborators. It is important to keep in mind the scale of Puerto Rico. We were trying to be sensible about it. From an almost egoistic mindset, we wanted a broader set of collaborators to work with, not necessarily just other visual artists but from other fields and disciplines. And because of our local scale, it was possible, but in the past, it was poorly explored.

It is also necessary to provide some socio-economic context. In 2009, Luis Fortuño started his tenure as governor. This was the beginning of a long and brutal austerity era for Puerto Ricans. This continues today with a total immersion within that paradigm under the Federal Law, the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). The US Congress established an appointed Fiscal

Control Board (FCB) to oversee debt restructuring. A non-democratically elected body has total control of the democratically elected ones. In order to repay creditors, the FCB approved a fiscal austerity plan for 2017–2026, with dramatic cuts in Puerto Rico's public service budget, including cuts to health care, pensions, and education, with an extreme focus on privatization and neoliberal economic policies. In 2009, many things were directly affected by those initial austerity measures. For example, suddenly the budget of the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y de Diseño, which is a public university, was cut in half, generating a lot of uncertainty within the school and in relation to Puerto Rico's cultural institutions in general.

## II.

With Beta-Local, we wanted to create and work from a structure where we could make things and for the initiative to function as an agent to bring people together. It was a new platform for learning and working collectively. The plan was to develop a project in flux, not static, in the beta phase, never finished. We aspired for a sustainable project that would include economic compensation, while not representing a financial and temporal burden on our families. We had access to an operating space. Michy had renovated an old building on Old San Juan and most of the first level used to be a commercial spot. That's where Beta-Local started. We were quite conservative financially. At first, we developed a system based on knowledge-exchange, although it was clear that we needed to be incorporated as a non-profit organization. Once that was set, we started to slowly apply for grants and to ask for individual donations, first to local foundations, then to foundations based in the us and international ones as well.

With the principle of a flexible platform in mind, we started Beta-Local with the launching of La Práctica and designed The Harbor and la Iván Illich as support programs. The Harbor functions as a bridge to an international scene, and la Illich, as a tool to reach and work within a local context. We gave priority to the principle of thinking while one is making. We identified and contacted a group of possible participants that would be interested in thinking through and materializing a project like Beta-Local with us. We didn't want to be an alternative for, or compensate for the lack of, academic institutions in PR. Instead, we wanted to experiment with new forms of learning. We wanted to be the space where conversations that started at dinner or at the bar could further develop.

We had really long planning sessions and meetings too many times during the week. We tried with some limited success using, as a methodology, the ways artists conduct workshops or work in their studios. Beatriz and I had backgrounds as practicing artists, and Michy is the type of curator who is totally involved with artists' processes. Again, it was important to have the mindset of thinking and planning while

making and allowing failure (also thought) as positive outcomes. This determined our forms of working. We also wanted the project to be in Old San Juan.

I moved to Old San Juan from Vega Alta in 1996 when I started my BFA, and I have remained here since. I was only gone for a year when I started an MFA in Cuenca, Spain. Although I never finished the degree, I was able to teach for a couple of years at EAPD, but sensing how things were going, decided to put all my efforts into my practice and on starting a project like Beta-Local. I'm interested in other ways of learning and knowledge exchange, but I also wanted to talk about drawing, sculpture, process, materials, and formal concerns anchored in a Puerto Rican context. An EAPD-like project that was open for twenty-four hours with undergrads working on all sorts of projects was disappearing in Puerto Rico. That kind of program is crucial for making and thinking about art. Beta-Local sounded like another possible way to do it.

Having a collaborative process in mind, we determined that instead of one executive director, we should have three. We reached this decision because we were three people. Since Michy is a curator and the owner of the property where Beta-Local was established, we wanted to provide a narrative of a collective project that has many heads, not just one hierarchical one. This structure also presented the possibility of day-to-day rotation of responsibilities and later, of leadership too. One co-director would rotate to concentrate on individual artist practices and projects. Beatriz was the first one to step down after three years as a co-director. Then Alia Farid worked with us for six months, followed by Pablo Guardiola, who has been with the organization since 2013. After ten years in the Bay Area in California, he moved back to Puerto Rico. After seven years, I was the last founder after Beatriz and Michy to step down. Currently, the co-directors are Pablo, Sofía Gallisá Muriente, and Michael Linares. It is necessary to point out that Pablo participated in *The Harbor* in 2011 when we met, and Michael in 2009 and Sofía in 2013 participated in *la Práctica*, respectively.

### III.

We should describe how Beta-Local programs work.

*La Práctica* is a one-year research and production program for artists and other cultural agents. It is designed specifically for those interested in creating new conditions from which one can produce in, beyond established art and culture circuits. The work takes the form of a critical and practical workshop. The work expands the Puerto Rican context, the conditions of the tropics, the Caribbean, and the present time. Every year, five to ten participants are selected through an open call. We meet weekly throughout the year in order to share processes, work with guest artists, partake in professional development support, and produce projects/programming. Participants receive a production budget and keys to our workshop and are

encouraged to take ownership over the tools and resources of the organization. La Práctica is composed of visual artists, writers, publishers, movement practitioners, and performers, among others. We finish each year with all sorts of projects from La Práctica—exhibitions, publications, printing/editing workshops, site specific projects, individual or collective works—all determined by the interest of the program participants.

The Harbor is an international residency program, aimed at developing long and strong collaborative relationships with artists, curators, and thinkers that are based outside of Puerto Rico. The Harbor works by invitation only. Guests can develop workshops with La Práctica participants, public programming, projects with local cultural agents, and bridge-building for future endeavors. We seek to be the catalyst for future collaborations, ideally ones that transcend our space. We want that first visit to yield future visits. A perfect example is Ramiro Chaves, based in Mexico. He first came to work with Beatriz Santiago Muñoz on a walking seminar in 2014, then he returned to work directly with *Materia y Oficios* (MAOF), a collective project started in La Práctica in 2014 that examines contemporary material culture in Puerto Rico characterized by the abundance of waste. To this day Ramiro returns regularly to keep working with MAOF, Beta-Local, and other projects in Puerto Rico.

La Iván Illich is an experimental pedagogical program through which anyone can propose something that they would like to teach or learn. This knowledge-exchange takes the form of workshops, talks, study groups, and other events. It is also the platform that hosts most of Beta-Local's public programming and brings together the widest range of thinkers and practitioners, placing arts and culture in dialogue with varying fields of knowledge and perspectives. For example, we held specialized writing workshops, theory study groups, cooking classes, and neuroscience presentations that focused on topics such as fear.

The three programs are intertwined and constantly support and strengthen each other. Beta-Local's work is focused on generating new models of critical thought and art making that respond to Puerto Rico's changing context while maintaining an international dialogue. All these programs and their activities are free of cost to their participants. Due to the current socio-economic conditions in Puerto Rico, it is imperative that the programming at Beta-Local remain free and accessible.

#### IV.

##### *Pablo Guardiola*

I arrived at Beta-Local through the Harbor program in 2011, a program which also aims to bring Puerto Rican artists back to the island who are based abroad. After that first encounter, the conversations were about the possibility of my joining the organization. At the time, I was based in San Francisco, California. I completed an

MFA in 2005 from San Francisco Arts Institute (SFAI) and stayed in the Bay Area for ten years. Although I taught briefly at California College of Art (CCA), my ideas around what type of knowledge art making produced was closely tied to my individual artmaking and my participation in projects like the Independent School of Art (ISA, started by Jon Rubin and Bob Linder). ISA's mission was putting into practice a space for discussion beyond art schools. Also around that time, I started organizing public programming at the Queens Nails Projects, an artist and curator run project based in San Francisco.

The SFAI and CCA shift to a more corporate model was super scary and totally erased my intentions to continue working within those systems. My undergraduate experience at the University of Puerto Rico was extremely important. In the mid-nineties, it was inexpensive to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree, which would have provided a lot of interesting opportunities. For instance, my BA studies lasted seven years. I moved to San Juan from Manatí, Puerto Rico to complete a BA in History at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. At that time, it was normal to spend your entire day in the humanities department's courtyard at the university. That was the most important exchange space in all my educational experience. It was there that I slowly started to think about making art. It was there that my interest in learning beyond the classroom started and determined my investment in projects like Beta-Local. Beta-Local has greatly influenced how I make and think about my individual practice as an artist. The organization's focus on context affects how we make art. It provides a shift in audience.

"Beta," the idea of testing or getting ready, was and still is the spirit of the organization. When Beta-Local was founded, the organization was responding to a looming crisis. The idea was to experiment with different systems in relation to how inefficient cultural institutions were at the time, while also keeping in perspective the social consequences of a profound economic recession. Against all odds, the independent art scene in Puerto Rico has strengthened and diversified over the past years on the backs of artists, educators, and others who take on the responsibility of cultural development in the absence of government support and market viability.

In 2019, the conditions necessary to run an organization such as Beta-Local were quite different from these needed in 2009 when the organization started. Being larger in scale and reach means more administrative work, responsibility, and accountability—accountability in relationship to our funders and that which was equally important to our peers and colleagues. Today there are new spaces and opportunities for artists and cultural workers to develop and present art and cultural projects. Currently, we are taking in consideration these, as well as socio-economic realities, when restructuring our programs and public events. The organization's spirit is the same but with more urgent and concrete aspirations and necessities.

With the passing of time, contexts change. In recent years, Puerto Rico has experienced drastic changes. The effects of PROMESA and the passing of hurricanes Irma

and Maria in 2017 are in part the agents for the dramatic tone in our daily realities by way of also making explicit our colonial relationship to the US. Gentrification is dramatically changing the geographical context where we operate. Short term rentals targeted towards tourists are killing our immediate social fabric. The large number of Americans from the US buying properties throughout the Island after the hurricanes is scary considering how, right now, real estate prices are highly imbalanced. Since hurricane Maria, we consolidated all Beta-Local's operations in Casa del Sargento, a historic building owned by the Puerto Rico Institute of Culture. We've been renting that property for the past four years, using it mostly as la Práctica's studio space and as an occasional exhibition space. Being there full time everyday has been great for the organization, since it's on Calle Sol, an old school street in Old San Juan. Many residents have been living on this street for many years, and the area is an economically diverse section of Old San Juan. We have an open-door policy. We don't want to impact our neighbors; we want them to impact us. We want to have relationships based on being good neighbors that just happen to be artists. Since we are talking about where we operate geographically, Beta-Local describes this as zoom in exercise: the Caribbean – Puerto Rico – San Juan – Old San Juan – Calle Sol.

While our mission is the same, we are experimenting with a reconfiguration of our methodology. We are doing so while real changes are happening to the socio-economic fabric of San Juan. While facing these challenges, we're asking ourselves, "what should be the stance of an organization like Beta-Local?" We take into consideration that both problems and solutions within our colonial status are always going to be neoliberal ones.

The role of artists and cultural workers are crucial, and we need to keep working in order to protect all of this work. We operate within an interesting cross-section. Beta-Local is a legal non-profit with a proper administrative role, but we behave like an artist-run space with the sensibilities and flexibility that it implies. We receive grants and donations that support all programmatic components of the organization as well as operational ones, including the economic compensation of the people involved in running it—three co-directors and one administrator. Keeping this duality requires work, but the work is important for us to maintain it. We are demonstrating that we can be structured and accountable without blindly believing in the institutional behaviors of arts non-profit. It is a weird position too, since legally we are like any other small arts non-profit in the US, but we operate in the Caribbean and, more specifically, in Puerto Rico with a Caribbean/Puerto Rican mindset that thinks and feels in Spanish.

## V.

There is an ethos that is not visible at first glance. At Beta-Local, we privilege the everyday work and practices—experiences that can be considered invisible work.

We champion the value of the everyday over the singularity of the big event as a way to communicate cultural practices. In being consistent with everyday practices, which includes everything from cleaning, reading, making art, cooking, and being good neighbors, we position ourselves and a certain type of cultural worker as political agents. This inverts the social logic of validation, as well as the expectations of how to share and communicate what artists do in a place like Puerto Rico. This position, tied to what we aspired to in our relationship with our neighbors and the idea of the artist workshop Tony mentioned earlier, influenced all our activities.

Although Tony taught at the EAPD, and I taught briefly at what used to be the Social Practices MFA program at CCA, those institutional experiences are not a big influence in what we do at Beta-Local. We share the love and respect for critique seminars and the milieu of the artist studio/workshop, but we don't want to burn ourselves out in the day-to-day realities of contracted/adjunct faculty in the neoliberal, educational landscape. We both have a strong commitment to public education, both receiving undergrad degrees from public local universities. We experiment and support other ways of making art and producing knowledge in Puerto Rico.

Currently, I have a salary from Beta-Local. Tony does not, since he is no longer a director. For the past year and a half, Tony has been awarded a series of grants and residencies that contributed to sustaining his life and practice. Other colleagues are also in the same situation, and collectively we are helping each other with these processes. We have gained a lot of experience writing proposals and grants at Beta-Local that we are putting at the service of local artists.

Tony and I pay attention to what we claim: Beta-Local promotes creating new conditions in which one can produce, beyond established art and culture circuits. With Beta-Local alumni and collaborators, Tony and I continue to think, work, and activate our support systems to sustain ourselves beyond and after Beta-Local.







Heather Hart Rutgers University, New Brunswick NJ †

Jina Valentine School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago IL

## Black Lunch Table

### I.

Our relationship to The Institution has always been fraught. We were both educated at esteemed academic institutions where we learned how to ideate, fabricate, and critique works of art. The art histories we learned were purportedly comprehensive and rigorously composed and presented. The art histories we were taught reserved between a week and a month for the discussion of work by Black artists. Although we attended different institutions for undergraduate and graduate studies, we both noted this lack and have sought to address it in our works, independently as well as collaboratively. We've addressed these omissions as "holes in the historical record," "knowledge gaps," and "un(der)told histories."

Ultimately, we both left undergrad with a lot of questions—perhaps more questions than answers: Are there Black artists to be found within the canon of Art History? If so, why was our history omitted? Why was "Black Art History" only given a slight window for review? Is "Black Art History" a thing to be segregated out of the rest of contemporary Art History, as a parallel and unequal timeline? Why? And where, as young, aspiring artists do we fit into this already unfolding discourse? If this parallel discourse isn't a part of the mainstream art historical narrative, will our production always, necessarily exist on the margins?

Each of us took several years away from school to develop our practices between undergrad and graduate studies. During that time, we had the great fortune to attend residency programs where we were able to develop our work, engage in discourse with other practicing artists, imagine the future trajectories of our individual projects, and begin new collaborations. We met in 2005 at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. We stayed up late talking, drinking, swimming, dancing, creating, imagining with each other, and communing with our fellow residents. Our first

collaborative project was *The Skowhegan Steamer*, a weekly gossip rag. Our second and ongoing collaboration was the Black Lunch Table.

At Skowhegan, we decided who we should invite to sit with us for one afternoon lunch. At the table, we discussed issues of Being Black in the art world; issues of otherness in general; our individual relationships with actual and metaphorical Black lunch tables in grade school and higher education—and of course the irony of having these discussions at an invitation-only all-Black lunch table. The hyper-classification, by way of self-segregation, of Skowhegan's Black residents functioned to both create a forum for topics discussed informally at other occasions and highlight the fact that no such grouping of like-skinned people had naturally occurred thus far.

## II.

Since that initial staging, Black Lunch Table (BLT) has existed in numerous forms, including meetups (IRL and online), skill-sharing workshops, and now as a series of community roundtables, *Wikipedia* edit-a-thons, and an online, oral history archive. The project's origins were initially quite modest. It began as an intervention, a performance, a social experiment conducted on our friends. Sixteen years since, we've cultivated what we consider to be a legacy project that will outlive us, and we hope to reach audiences beyond those we can presently imagine.

Expanding BLT has required our direct engagement with the institutions and the systems we intend to critique. We work within several overlapping institutional realms: the ubiquitous capital-based art system (such as galleries and museums), academia, non-profit arts institutions (such as public or government funding), civic and community institutions, and non-profit humanities organizations (such as Creative Capital, The Institute for Arts & Humanities at University of North Carolina, the Wikimedia Foundation). As BLT and through our independent practices, we challenge the systems in place from within those systems. This is of course the basis of Institutional Critique. Our project goes beyond simply critiquing these systems to encouraging audiences to recognize and question them. BLT participants transform those systems.

Our relationship to The Institution has always been fraught. Is BLT a critique of the institution or an effort to reform its contents, the terms of access, and its structure? Is our intent to challenge the predominant, linear, art historical narrative to elucidate its incompleteness? Or is it to add a multivocality to that singular (western, white, male, cis-gendered) perspective? And how do you critique a system that thrives on and encourages such critique?

We are making art in an era that is post-institutional critique, that is to say, critiquing the institution presenting the work isn't enough. And critiquing the structures that create a public and a discourse for that work isn't enough. While we don't imagine that our projects will catalyze an overhaul of any political or cultural systems in place, working beyond institutional critique means affecting actual change in the institutions' structure. We work from within these institutions to fill the voids in their records, their exhibitions, their programming, their targeted publics. As the institution is reformed from within, its structure, its mission, and its public face must change as well.

The way that we use metadata in our archive is an apt analogy for this overarching goal. BLT organizes roundtable conversations in communities inter/nationally, catalyzing conversations around sociopolitical, cultural, and historical issues relevant to the people gathered around these tables. The hour-long conversations are recorded and later mastered, transcribed, and tagged with metadata which act as markers of the subjects discussed. We are matching these metadata tags to those already employed in the Library of Congress (LoC). However, many of those tags are unique to the BLT archive. By cross-referencing them with LoC, we establish new parameters for organizing and conceptualizing language and cultural data. These new parameters can then be used in turn by larger archives, which in turn establish these new tags as a part of the standard system. This is small, nerdy, and time-consuming work in the grand scheme of documenting contemporary culture. But it is exciting to imagine that it is restructuring the potential for organizing and referencing cultural phenomena and for ordering the language describing and categorizing our cultural production.

Analogous to this is our work with Wikimedia. As we were researching models for the BLT archive and taking stock of artists omitted from the larger art historical archives (such as the Getty, the Smithsonian, and so on) we wondered what artists had also been omitted from the world's most widely referenced encyclopedia. In 2014 when we began our project redressing omissions on *Wikipedia*, we were surprised by how many there were. Seven years later, we are inspired to continue this work as we note what artists, curators, and art historians still lack *Wikipedia* articles. Fred Moten, Peggy Cooper Cafritz, Demetrius Oliver, Cheryl Finley, Koyo Kouoh, and Alva Rogers all began as BLT target articles, and were previously undocumented on *Wikipedia*.

BLT *Wikipedia* meetups train the public how to edit and author articles. Our focus is on adding and improving content related to the production of Black artists and cultural producers. In addition to authoring articles, we engage as Wikimedians in an effort to shift the demographic of editors. A recent study reported that *Wikipedia* editorship is ~91% male and ~77% white. As editing is done entirely on a volunteer basis, folks edit what is important to them, subjects they find affinity with, subjects affecting their lived realities. By targeting artists of the diaspora at our workshops,

we hope on the one hand, to diversify the editorship and engage with publics invested in the subject matter. On the other hand, we also hope to inspire the dominant demographic of editors to contribute to the development of under-documented subjects.

In terms of restructuring the institution to recognize and reduce systemic bias, our strategies align with other Wikimedia projects, such as *Whose Knowledge?*, *Afro-CROWD*, *Art+Feminism*, and *Women in Red*. Additionally, through our edit-a-thons, we also challenge Wikimedia's existing citation and notability standards. Many significant Black artists are omitted from dominant art historical narratives and receive insufficient attention from the cultural media. As a consequence, it is difficult or impossible to prove they're significant enough for inclusion on *Wikipedia*; such restrictive policies like *Wikipedia*'s notability standards fail to take into account systemic bias in art criticism and art historical writing. Basically, Wikimedia risks mimicking the same system it was built to disrupt. Ultimately our goal is to collaborate on alternatives and establish our own archive as a reputable source that may be used for citations in *Wikipedia* articles.

#### Sustaining our project and ourselves

Black Lunch Table hosts events at sites around the country and internationally. As we are most often outsiders to the host institutions' community, our engagements with them require cultivating collaboration. Sometimes the host institution is a place that communities already feel welcomes them and is already active in their engagement as a community member. And other times our project is hosted in spaces that are more polarizing, and we use our platform to disrupt a status quo and propose an alternative territory there. In part because of the nature of our project and the costs associated with programming, our hosts are generally large arts institutions (for instance, museums and non-profit spaces), universities, and publicly funded community centers.

We are presently working to decentralize our engagements away from larger institutions by exploring strategies for hosting with smaller cultural and community spaces. The intention is to bring our events to spaces that are community run and perhaps underserved. In order to democratize the authoring of cultural history, we need to bring our project to the people. In order to democratize the authoring of cultural history, we need to address access to and the unequal distribution of cultural resources.

## III.

## Institution as host site, collaborator, community member

In the summer of 2018, we had our very first engagement on the Continent, producing programming in Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. That trip afforded us the occasion and the perspective to reflect on the parameters for defining Blackness and Otherness as we considered the disparate histories of home and abroad and the sociopolitical ramifications of each. In an *Art21 Magazine* article authored during that trip, we reflected:

As Black Americans we were born of generations afflicted by the toxicity of colorism, classism, and social mores enforced by a white government, bequeathed the epigenetics of slavery. In South Africa, the conversations around racism, classism, and nationalism revealed an equally complex history of racial trauma and [cultivating an otherness very] different from our own.

Considering our position there, as foreigners, we were very aware that our collaborations with host institutions played a critical role in sharing our project with the community. In Cape Town, a non-profit art space called A4 hosted our roundtables and edit-a-thon. The space itself is reputable for its exhibition record, public programming, and long history as a cultural institution. The space however was contentious for recent revelations about its ties to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Various community and arts groups have vocalized their opposition to A4 for its ties to controversial funding sources and have launched boycott campaigns.

Our hope was that as outsiders we could collaborate with A4 to make space for dialogue around this issue and other issues related to the politics of arts funding. While the boycott deeply affected event attendance numbers, our decision to host there did spark critical discussions around related issues. We exchanged emails with the CC'd Collective, the boycott's chief organizers, discussed the boycott with the director and curator of A4, and provided prompts for participants to engage in dialogue around these issues as well.

That experience reaffirmed our belief that each institutional engagement is a collaboration between BLT and the host institution. Public participation supports and endorses both the project and the institution. In retrospect, our engagement with A4 could be seen as a political gesture illustrating their precarious relationship with the Cape Town arts community.

In Soweto, we hosted an Artists' Roundtable at FUNDA Community College. FUNDA was founded in 1984 in the aftermath of the student uprisings of 1976, a time when the majority of young people in Soweto were not attending school. FUNDA

afforded a resource for arts education in a place and time where there was none. The college was built on land donated by the private sector and the Urban Foundation, and, despite having received less than adequate funding to operate, it has survived and provided a unique and essential resource to youth in Soweto.

Convening a roundtable there was a remarkable experience. Gaining the permission to do so was a particularly remarkable feat for our proxies on the ground. Working with FUNDA required gaining the trust and respect of the director Dr. Charles Nkosi and the teachers there as well as getting the students excited and invested in participating. It is in large part because of the relationship our Joburg collaborators—Chairunisa Galeta, Thuli Mlambo-James, and Ashley Whitfield—cultivated with the administration at the school that we were able to host with them. It's also worthy of note that the FUNDA event was the first we recorded in another language (Zulu). At that event we recommended that everyone speak in the language they felt most comfortable using. FUNDA was a great success in that we were able to bring an event to the community we wanted to engage and that they felt comfortable engaging with us and the programming.

Since staging those events in South Africa, we evaluate the current model of “institutional engagements” and consider how centering an ethos of “engaging publics” marks a reevaluation of the host institutions, the voices contributing to the archive, and Black Lunch Table as a project.

#### Institution as funder, sponsor, advocate

As a non-profit, all of our funding comes from production costs related to specific engagements, cultural foundations, and academic institutions. Such is the irony of institutional critique. Presently, our main funders are the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Wikimedia Foundation, all of which espouse values with which we align. As we imagine the future of the project we consider where additional support might come from. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rubin Foundation, and the Obama Foundation are among the foundations that can support what we do. We are keen to create partnerships with philanthropic organizations, arts institutions, and with individuals who not only provide fiscal support but encourage the development of our founding principles as well.

#### Institution as fiscal + practical resource

In addition to the other contributions we request from institutions, when we host edit-a-thons at libraries, their collections and staff are material resources. In order to make the wiki-editing successful and site-specific, we ask that host institutions offer public access to their private and public libraries or to make selected materials available to participants for the duration of the event. This gesture demonstrates

that it is possible for the public to access these materials, while at the same time bringing that information and those resources into the public domain on *Wikipedia*. *Wikipedia* workshops are also valuable to museum, archive, and library workers as the platform affords additional opportunities for interested parties to open their collections to the public and to see that the public is indeed interested. We have engaged in conversations with other hosts about sharing digitized content to WikiCommons, an open-source media platform, about how to improve access to institutional archives, and about the relationships between digitized media and original artifacts. These conversations are evidence that workshops perform an important function in inspiring critical thought around access to knowledge for both the public and institutional hosts.

Ultimately, we envision that our own archive will become a resource accessible from a library or a personal computer, to be used by researchers, students, soccer moms, and all members of the public. We hope that in addition to providing a resource, the website itself and the publicity of the project should get folks invested in questioning who's writing history and with what agenda and curious about where their own voice fits in. Educators, aspiring artists, digital humanities scholars, librarians, and researchers could access the BLT archive as a resource for learning and teaching.

Our relationships to The Institution have always been fraught. But we cannot reject the fact that our practices, collaborative and independent, intersect with and are reliant upon our engagements with them. Outside of Black Lunch Table, our individual projects are supported by arts grants, residencies, fellowships, and funded engagements with arts and cultural institutions. While we are lucky to have the support necessary to do the work we do, we recognize that it wouldn't be possible without The Institution.

#### IV.

Black Lunch Table is Heather Hart & Jina Valentine

Heather Hart is an Assistant Professor at Rutgers University. I have taught at schools, have independently mentored students and artists, and have shared in education beyond the classroom. Part of my reluctance to pursue a life in academia stems from my concerns about access to knowledge. Pursuing higher education in this country remains costly, is bound up with the failings of K-12 public education, and promotes the false ideal that students attend to receive knowledge while professors profess.

Participating in the Wikimedia movement, running workshops, inventing new strategies for filling gaps in our collective knowledge has been deeply satisfying and inspiring for me. *Wikipedia* is not without its issues related to biases, equity, and access, but in its structure, knowledge is open and shared freely, and the platform

itself illustrates that no history is static. Ahead of the new semester, I consider how to incorporate my values into an (calcified?) academic structure.

Jina Valentine is an Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I previously taught in the Department of Art and Art History at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (2011–17). My studio practices, my teaching practices, and my life that includes single-motherhood intersect and inform each other. Resources I have accessed at both UNC and SAIC, non/monetary, have significantly and directly supported my studio practices. This includes everything from research fellowships and faculty grants, to microscopy lab access, to being able to use legitimately licensed software, to invaluable potential connections to a larger community of researchers.

Despite all of this, my relationship with the institution remains fraught. I echo Heather's sentiments about access, particularly as I consider the demographic shift in my classes as I've transitioned from an R1 public university to a private art school. As an institutional citizen, I consider my role in opening up the school to a more diverse demographic an important one. And as an educator, I share these thoughts with my students. They too must be critical of their institution, if not of all institutions. I wrote in my tenure dossier:

The past few years have marked a shift in my practice, due in part to the fact that teaching has been so rewarding. In addition to honing my capacity for critical discourse, writing lesson plans has catalyzed a reevaluation of the work I do as an artist and citizen. I believe that it is possible, if not absolutely necessary, to challenge students to cultivate practices that critically engage aesthetic, art historical, and sociopolitical discourses—that they ought to be challenged to cultivate an ongoing and thoroughgoing examination of their own sociopolitical positionality, self-consciously reflecting on their places as artists, citizens, humans in the world.

Both Heather and Jina value critical discourse in the classroom. As artists, as collaborators, as educators, we are invested in cultivating spaces where knowledge is shared democratically. Challenging students to participate in a horizontal social structure empowers students to be active and sincere contributors to the classroom community. It hopefully prompts them to question hierarchical structures (i.e., institutions) in which they feel disempowered.

We subscribe to pedagogic autopoiesis

The concept pedagogic autopoiesis is either metonymic, referring to both the processes of imparting information or technique and auto-regenerative systems. Or

else it is meta-lingual, wherein the task of comprehending the phrase itself becomes a metaphor for the process it implies. In either case, it refers to an academic pursuit in which learning and teaching inquiries are co-generative, the roles of professor and pupil become interchangeable, and information sought and offered is freely exchanged in an environment that thrives on adaptation.

Pedagogic autopoiesis refers to an academic pursuit that exists in symbiotic relation to the simultaneous practices of learning, researching, writing, creating artworks, and civic contribution. The desire to continuously re-envision and renew a teaching practice reflects a humility borne out of a practice that always produces more questions than answers and cultivates classroom communities that generate more discourse than conclusive statements or resolutions.







Carmen Papalia Vancouver BC, Canada †  
Whitney Mashburn Boston MA

### Meaningful Inclusion

Meaningful inclusion necessitates investment in long-term interpersonal relationships, among artists, institutions, curators, educators, publics, and surrounding communities. The interrelationships of the individuals within a space define the accessibility of the place, and these relationships are a product of lasting, intentional care. In the privileged arena of the museum, a radically new order can be created through a series of commitments that transfer value from objects to people, both as audience members and content-creators. Here, we focus on the responsibility of institutions and pedagogical leaders to activate these relationships so that individuals who are marginalized can claim access to cultural platforms.

This is the story of how we convened around these ideas and clarified how inclusion can be meaningful. We collaborate on a project that reimagines accessibility and challenges the visual primacy of art institutions entitled *Let's Keep in Touch* (2016–present). Through the project, we are investigating non-visual learning and tactile aesthetics through developing a methodology for haptic criticism and publicly crowdsourcing vocabulary for tactile description of object-based art. The project has undergone two phases thus far; dialogue and participation have played key roles in both. Within the first phase, Whitney selected sixteen artists whose work held an engaging tactile aesthetic, and Carmen contacted these artists and entered dialogue about tactile access to, or in, their work. The resulting exhibition<sup>1</sup> presented excerpts from these conversations in both printed and audible forms and two

1 *Let's Keep in Touch: Conversations about Access and Tactility* (2016), Gallery X, Louisville, Kentucky.

interactive sculptural works with complete tactile access<sup>2</sup>; and an opportunity for exhibition visitors to document their own descriptions of the works' tactual qualities via writing or voice recording. The second phase at the Queens Museum in New York City, centered youth input in the production of museum object descriptions. We shared a dialogue with local young people who had responded to an open call from the museum, where we discussed methodology for touching and evaluating objects for tactile qualities.<sup>3</sup> We then listened as they interacted with the objects, and each recorded their impressions via conversation and writing. These interactions spurred further thought, which we investigated in our current writing and research in exhibition content and in future planning of exchanges between Carmen and author Georgina Kleege.

Each of these iterations caused us to think more deeply about inclusion and meaningful participation, and what is required of institutions to develop rapport and long-lasting relationships with art professionals and community members. We have also considered what meaningful participation means for those from marginalized positions who are entering art practice, criticism, and the appreciation of art, whether they have complex needs, experience multiple systemic barriers, or learn in ways that are not meaningfully supported. Through this essay, we share insights into these musings on meaningful inclusion, and we note the difference between inclusionism and tokenism and highlight goals and challenges for better implementation.

Meaningful inclusion is all about dedicating space, dialogue, care, and action to concepts that previously have not been seriously considered. For instance, institutions in the contemporary art landscape do not typically integrate works with reference to disability, and, if such works are exhibited, it is through special programming or "separate but equal" educational departments' interpretation and not within general curatorial schema and practice. It is vital for the progression of art institutions to critically engage topics of disability within their curatorial rigor. All too often, inclusivity is tokenistic, such that the institution includes topical programming thought to be representative of individuals who are marginalized, but these efforts are evaluated on the basis of institutional benefit. Inclusion that is meaningful necessitates a transformational effort toward publicness, emerging from naming and addressing foundational barriers responsible for the vast inequities between those with access and those without.

CARMEN PAPALIA: Inclusion was something different for me when I was starting out as an artist. I was trying to find my place within a field that was built on the study of visual culture as someone who learns with their non-visual senses. What made sense

2 Christina Warzecha, *Please Touch* (2016), porcelain, stoneware.

3 Corey Dunlap, *Thrown About and Without* (2016), painted foam and wood.

to me at the time was to identify my position and say that I experienced my surroundings non-visually. The qualifier “non-visual” helped me stop feeling like someone who was “blind”, and I soon realized that I had access to entire unseen bodies of knowledge from my position. I knew there weren’t many like me practicing as artists. In fact, I learned that many of my non-visual friends had never set foot in a museum; they didn’t think there would be anything for them to do. And even when there was, usually in the form of a specially programmed touch or descriptive tour, it was a poor consolation for the privileged, visual art experience.

Years later, while presenting a workshop at the Baltimore Art Gallery, I remember pausing halfway through my story about the practice of looking as a choice and the museum being an institution that enforces visual primacy. I felt like what I was saying was more for the group than it was for my own sense of belonging. It was one of the first times that I felt like I had privileged access to the museum. At the same time, I knew just how little currency my access held in that context.

WHITNEY MASHBURN: I came to curating seeking to integrate accessibility into the practice of contemporary art curation, combining my work in disability services offices where I collaborated with students to create new accommodations, and as an art historical researcher in galleries, archives, and academia. Also, following a series of workplace exposures, I developed a chemical intolerance, which has increasingly reconfigured my own access to public spaces. Wanting to rethink accessibility beyond the legal stipulations required of institutions to provide simple physical access, I undertook studies and practice in curating, in which I found the arena to test ideas of inclusion in theory and practice. It is here that I began looking for others who were thinking similarly about integrating a social understanding of accessibility within curating.

I found that most individuals working in disability studies or in the arts were unaware of each other’s work. Facilitating this dialogue is at the core of my practice, as I want to share insights across the respective fields. Though most people I encountered were confused because I did not fit into a neat category, through my research I found an innovator already making strides in rethinking contemporary curating in light of disability theory and practice, Amanda Cachia. It is through her writing that I found two insights: I was not alone in my efforts, and there was an artist exemplifying these ideas, Carmen Papalia.

CP: Since I was entering the field as an outsider, I made sure to only accept opportunities that wouldn’t further marginalize me. When Amanda Cachia invited me to show my work as part of her first exhibition that engaged the topic of disability in contemporary art, *Medusa’s Mirror: Fears, Spells, and Other Transfixed Positions* (2011), I made a point of identifying my work as social practice rather than associating it with the disability arts movement. This was my first exhibition opportunity, and

I wanted to reach a mainstream audience: a group with problematic perceptions that my work could somehow help shift. I felt politically aligned with Cachia and knew that we were similarly frustrated with the state of disability discourse in contemporary art. For me, her shows were a platform to a new space, where disability was central and where disabled artists were vital to the progression of the field. Through working with Cachia, I realized that disability had been ever-present in art history; it just was rarely acknowledged.

When Whitney approached me with an opportunity to produce an exhibition for her thesis, it was a chance to take a risk that she would help me pull off with minimal damage. After our first conversation, I knew Whitney trusted me and was open to meeting the challenge of a risky project, even though her thesis depended on it. I knew she would be my advocate and help establish a context for my work that served its purpose. Working with her was a mutually collaborative exchange.

The dynamics of our relationship motivated me to bring Whitney a proposal that curators at major institutions had politely passed on. With Whitney on my side, I could finally set a precedent for critical, haptic engagement and explore its implications in the museum and other contemporary art contexts, something that me and my mentor, Georgina Kleege—a fellow non-visual learner—had only ever speculated about. I asked Whitney to curate a list of living artists whose work she felt would offer an engaging tactile experience. The challenge of this unorthodox request and what it meant in the museum context, where tactile access is reserved for curators, conservators, and the odd, gloved, non-visual visitor, was the catalyst for weekly conversations about how Whitney and I would advocate for the project in a field that would inevitably be unsettled by it.

WM: Keeping an open dialogue facilitated a smooth collaboration between Carmen and me and allowed us to pivot around initial defensive responses to our touchy topic. Our first proposal, to allow the public to touch museum collection objects, was tactfully refused by three institutions, so we shifted our approach to directly engage artists in conversation about tactile access to their works, which became the fulfilled first iteration of *Let's Keep in Touch*. Through this method, we not only achieved tactile access to contemporary works but also gained documentation of rich conversations shared between Carmen and other artists.

It is conversation and collaboration that, when used as tools, enable disruption of norms and progression of social change through care, intention, and listening. As my discussions with Carmen evolved, it became clearer that he approached his practice as an engaging dialogue and that we shared an ardency for asking, “why not?” to institutional policies entrenched in stigma surrounding disability politics. We both wanted to expand the definition of how access was understood in art institutions, beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, toward an embodied approach, subverting existing privilege and creating new thinking about

inclusion. Early in our collaboration, I described Carmen’s art practice as “a playfully subversive yet inquisitive and constructive dialogue to sensitize, reframe, and broaden our manner of ‘seeing’ and experiencing art and our surrounding environment. He uses the social tool of conversation to challenge institutional accessibility and prompt exploration of ... perception.”<sup>4</sup> Since then, he has not only engaged these methods through his art making but also via direct consultation with institutional leaders.

CP: In the summer of 2018, I received one of ten Host Your Own Engagement (HYOE) grants from the City of Vancouver’s cultural department as part of its Creative City Strategy, a recent initiative to follow up on their 2008 cultural plan and produce a document to guide the distribution of resources in Vancouver’s cultural sector over the next ten years. HYOE’s mission was to support organizations in holding public consultation-style events with community members at the margins of Vancouver’s cultural sector so the city could hear directly from those for whom access, support, and representation was limited.

After learning that Accessible Canada, a new federal accessibility plan from Employment and Social Development Canada, failed to address ableism, social accessibility, and the ongoing and intergenerational effects of colonization, I felt it necessary to frame the HYOE program by asking what accessibility might mean if institutions were to acknowledge systemic barriers and traditions of cultural violence. Accessible Canada’s 2017 online survey reached less than 1 percent of the population that “lives with a condition that limits their participation in one or more daily activities,” and the initiative’s “priority areas” were informed by a cross-country consultation process that resulted in the exclusion of community members living in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside neighborhood altogether.<sup>5</sup>

I didn’t want to bear witness to yet another consultation resulting in a tokenizing program that organizers could celebrate as an institutional investment in a community that they played a role in marginalizing. Knowing that the HYOE consultations were intended to inform Vancouver’s own cultural plan, I wanted to represent deep-rooted barriers to access that those at the margins face when accessing cultural resources in Vancouver; and to show just how vast the gap between those who have

4 Workshop methodology from a set of participatory exercises presented by Whitney Mashburn during her 2016 thesis defense, based on selected examples of touch techniques developed by Georgina Kleege in a collaboration with Fayen d’Eve in *The Levity, The Gravity* (2016), Kadist Foundation, San Francisco, California.

5 Whitney E.B. Mashburn, *Let’s Keep in Touch: Conversations about Access and Tactility*, PhD thesis, University of Louisville, 2016. DOI: 10.18297/etd/2500.

access and those who don't is when the effects of ableism and its intersections with other forms of oppression guide one's approach to accessibility.

WM: In observing how the practice of artists working along the lines of disability politics has been presented and received through my own work and in discussions with other curators seeking to incorporate accessibility, the same frustration emerges: the inclusion of work not in exhibitions but through public programming, outreach, and/or educational departments. Even in preparing access-topical projects, it is common to find only limited funding for programming through a public outreach designation, and no budget or staff is allocated to exhibition components of the project. This is not unfamiliar to those working at the intersection of disability studies and contemporary art.

Though inclusion via outreach departments is a good start, we must do better. Why should the critical discourse of disability be approached with any difference than other dialogues of race, gender, or class, topics that often headline major shows? Why should artworks be relegated outside of mainstream curating just because they engage critical discourses of disability or access? Cachia devotes a discussion to this very conundrum in her 2014 essay, "Disability, Curating, and the Educational Turn: The Contemporary Condition of Access in the Museum."<sup>6</sup> Such an integration necessitates listening, care, and allowance for fluidity of roles. There is much benefit for institutions, especially those with more rigid organizational configurations, to embrace flexibility of roles and efforts, both across departments and inside and outside museum walls.

Institutionally, meaningful inclusion requires a mutual exchange with individuals who are disabled. As curators, it is a great responsibility that we do not speak out of turn for those whose own voices can better tell their own story. In order for disability politics to vitally inform curatorial premise within institutions, curators need to understand access in social rather than physical terms, assess any attitudinal barriers inherent in their own practice and disrupt ableism, listen to, center, and learn from those in the disability community who hold embodied forms of knowledge, and then rebuild their own intellectual rigor to be respectfully and intentionally inclusive. For institutional decision-makers, inclusion requires the allocation of resources to support projects engaging topics of disability. Arts leaders need to know what it means to disrupt ableism and be open to a radical reorientation of the field, guided by

<sup>6</sup> Amanda Cachia, "Disability, Curating, and the Educational Turn: The Contemporary Condition of Access in the Museum," *OnCurating* 24 "After the Turn: Art Education beyond the Museum" (December 2014): <https://on-curating.org/issue-24-reader/disability-curating-and-the-educational-turn-the-contemporary-condition-of-access-in-the-museum.html>.

those at the margins. An excerpt from Carmen's Open Access project lends clear direction:

Let's not forget that offering support requires us to listen, realize our privilege, redistribute our access, step aside, and let those who are seeking support lead the conversation about their own well-being. It requires us to acknowledge the disabling social, cultural, and political conditions that the institutions that we are dedicated to enforce. It requires us to admit the injustice that we have perpetrated or been complicit in and then participate in reparation, reconciliation, and a radical restructuring of power. It requires the systems and practices that those in need rely upon to undergo radical change. My hope is [to] help guide some of the challenging work ahead and transform accessibility into a cultural practice that is central to the ways we relate to each other. My hope is that we organize for accessibility from the grassroots and invest in the formal and informal support networks that keep the most vulnerable people in our communities alive."<sup>7</sup>

7 Carmen Papalia, "Ottawa City Hall," in the exhibition *Open Access: A Demonstration*, 2017, in partnership with the Ottawa Art Gallery, curated by Stephanie Nadeau.







Kenneth Bailey Boston MA

ds4si

With smart luck, the mind is prepared for what it isn't prepared for.  
It has a kind of openness, holding its ideas lightly and willing to have  
them exposed to impurity and the unintended.

—Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*

If I had to say one thing about myself, it would be that I'm a creature of smart luck. I, like Hermes, who stumbled across a turtle and knew he had to invent the lyre, stumbled across insights that led me to found my current organization, the Design Studio for Social Intervention (ds4si). This is not to say that I think I'm as talented as a demigod; that would be a little arrogant. The point is, if one were to look at my experiences at face value, they would seem a little disjointed. However, I want to show you the moments in my travels where, due to smart luck, I stumbled onto little conceptual wormholes and slipped from one kind of consciousness to another on my way to the Design Studio.

#### Wormhole I

I grew up in St. Louis and spent my formative years in the Midwest. I started community organizing as a teen in St. Louis. I went through an extensive training program that I was recruited for by Youth Service America (YSA). I learned about the world of nonprofit training and capacity building. And during that training I learned about the National Youth Service movement. I applied to and was hired by Campus Outreach Opportunity League. I became one of the training and supporting people in this role. It was nice to have gone pretty fast from being trained by YSA to leading these trainings in my new position. I led workshops day in and day out on the road with a wonderful colleague Dana Nelson. It was during those days that I started to learn about the larger nonprofit sector and the government sector, philanthropy, and program development.

From there, I became Field Director for Ten Point Coalition Boston Freedom Summer. I had a group of pre-teens map how they would like to see their neighborhood in a decade. All of them mapped a prettier, more domesticated urban space except for one. He wanted to see a neighborhood exactly like the one we were working to improve. His peers told me to ignore him, that he was a troublemaker, a misfit! I didn't, and I could see and feel myself doing the emotional and conceptual work to take him seriously. I asked him to tell me why he did the map he did, and he told me that he couldn't imagine himself in any other kind of neighborhood!

Two kinds of learning happen to me at that moment. I learned to question the presuppositions of my actions—a lesson I'd have to keep relearning, of course. And I learned to be open to my own enclosed wayside of seeing and moving through the world. I was able to figure out that my own enclosed thinking was, in fact, doing something. And it took the young man not playing along to expose me to myself. Instead of resentment, I found myself excited by the learning I was able to do at that moment. I thought about it a lot. Now how do I teach what I learned?

### Wormhole 2

As a Designer on the “Boston Community Building Curriculum” for The Boston Foundation, I was in charge of Principle 4: “Building Community Strengths and Assets.” When I asked resident activists to imagine what was possible when they switched from a deficit approach to community problem-solving to an assets approach, they tended toward forms and relational stances that re-inscribed the deficit approach, such as tutoring programs for teens making poor grades in a community. Although I had asked them to explicitly come up with radically new things, they defaulted to the known, both at the level of programming and at the deeper level of how they saw themselves and their community. I learned, here, that the practice of imagining is more than a notion. It takes more than a little space and being asked.

I also started to see how forms and relational stances act. I didn't have language to fully take on what I was seeing, but I knew I was on to something.

### Wormhole 3

As Knowledge Curator at Third Sector New England (TSNE), I was charged with helping nonprofits see the relevance of organizational learning. I fell into a focus on applying organizational learning principles to conflict. For example, take two mid-level staff inside of a human services nonprofit, named Gail and Yamira. They had each decided that the other was evil. As they started attacking each other, it would appear that their conflict was interpersonal. But with the kinds of x-ray specs developed with understanding organizational learning, we could find and point out where invisible structures within their organization had pitted them against each other. But

what were these less visible structures? How were they working to create conflict and stay hidden in plain sight?

That led me down a path to writing “Brave Leadership in Organizational Conflict” for *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. And during this time I was able to learn that presenting problems are often a result of non-presenting forces. And because people are visible and the underlying forces are not, problems can stick around for a long time while the people expressing them take the fall.

#### Wormhole 4

After leaving TSNE, I took two fellowships, one with The Center for Reflective Community Practice in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and another with stone circles. It was here that I learned about design as a stance and a set of methods. I also learned about divergent thinking during this time. I was really struck by a conversation I had with Ryan Chin, one of the leaders of a design research team on cars. He told me he’d bring together diverse thinkers from soccer moms to anthropologists, clowns, and theologians to imagine and design transportation together. Because they have such different training and different worlds of knowledge to pull on, they could lead each other to novel ideas.

It was his descriptions of making divergent spaces that made me think of the kinds of divergent thinkers we need to assemble to produce new ways to think about how to reimagine solutions to social problems. I knew we needed a bigger portion of people in the mix who understand the difference between the expression of a problem versus the actual problem, and we needed people in the mix who could easily think beyond prescribed forms for approaching solution making. That’s how we got to bringing artists, academics, and activists together at ds4si.

#### Wormhole 5

During this much needed time of reflection, I thought plenty about past work, especially one piece of work I did for a large, community-based nonprofit. This organization wanted to reknit its relationship with the community in which it was situated because it had lost much of its placed-based focus. I learned that neighborhood leaders and residents wanted to do something about the entrance of the nonprofit. They felt that the experience of entering the organization—an unwelcoming door complete with a buzzer that required someone to give you permission to enter—was disrespectful and spoke to the relationship between the organization and the community overall. With that said, I recommended that the organization host an entrance breaking ceremony with members from the community as a way to enter into a new relationship.

The leadership of the organization thought it was a weird idea. I was trying to redesign their interaction and their interface with their community and spark the much needed, symbolic work of creating a new covenant with the community. The organization found our solutions to be illegible. They honestly wanted to offer the community more services and hoped we would tell them what to offer. I was functioning with knowledge about coherence, integrity, experience, change, and other insights that were not shared such that they could be practiced by fellow community change practitioners.

### Wormhole 6

I met a younger colleague during my series of fellowships who asked me to help evaluate another colleague's program. The problem was—it was *awful*. It repelled a majority of the population it was meant to attract. The thing is this program was only a year old. My pal was earnestly trying to learn from what had succeeded, but his collaborators simply couldn't look at what had failed.

This was the turning point. I knew I wanted to do something with this string of insights. I had learned that in design you can build-in user-experience research and play-testing in order to debug and strengthen user experience. Through these additional steps you can decrease the speed of a program's rollout and do the kind of preventions necessary to handle discovering where aspects of a design might be off or failing entirely. In design you have permission to be wrong, to be off, to fail. But if you can fail before you become deeply invested in a thing succeeding, you can avoid the shame of not seeing when a design belies its intended purpose. And here's another place where aesthetics, systems, and other insights can benefit any human centered design. We include artists, academics, and activists as it triangulates the kinds of knowledge encountering a nascent design and can spot different kinds of bugs and flaws before they are woven into the heart of a thing (or the heart of its designer!).

These experiences lead me into thinking about design as a practice and allowed me to start the Design Studio for Social Intervention. I knew we needed to bring artists, academics, and activists together from the start. Artists aren't monoliths, and I know all artists aren't experimental and open, but, within a field of practice, artists tend to be more willing to play, experiment, and get things wrong. And with an expanded sense of artists, artists tend to understand how a thing signs. I knew we needed to have that perspective alive and well within the studio. And I wanted to involve people who think systems, causal loops, and forms of nonlinearity for a living, which led me to bring academics into the mix. And the studio always saw informing activists and organizers who are well trained to think power and oppression as our primary reason for existing. We wanted to improve and complicate the work of activ-

ists, first and foremost. And yet, the encounters we create have also impacted the artists and academics we engage as well. Talk about nonlinearity!

It took a collective effort to make the studio happen. Lori Lobenstine, our co-founder, has been with the studio from day one. Youth organizing groups and food justice groups via Praxis Project started to work with us in the very early days of the studio. And now we've been around a dozen years. We've worked with large foundations, art schools, unions, and government agencies since opening our doors.

I've had the privilege of bringing design to the social change sector through ds4si. Design offers practices for building the imaginative muscle and for creating new forms. Furthermore, design realizes that sometimes imagining is in and of itself a skill you need assistance with, maybe from Hermes himself! And I'm happy to be in a place that brings imagination to bear for more convivial and just worlds.







Antoine Williams Guilford College, Greensboro NC †

Daniel Coleman University of North Carolina, Greensboro NC †

George Scheer Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans LA

## Elsewhere

### I.

This conversation explores, in writing, the intersection of art and the academy, or perhaps more appropriately, scholarship and artist practice. Despite differences in practices, politics, and aesthetics, we share a few things in common, most notably that we've all made lives in proximity. We've created in all sorts of different places across the state of North Carolina. We've lived in Durham, Charlotte, Chapel Hill, Raleigh, and Greensboro. We graduated from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill with an MFA and two PhDs. We continue in our ways, making and teaching, in this place, most currently in Greensboro, where Daniel teaches in Women and Gender Studies at UNCC, Antoine at Guilford College Art Department, and George at Elsewhere, before he became the Executive Director of the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans in late 2019). Among the places where we've shared space is Elsewhere, a living museum and artist residency set in a former thrift store. Within this build environment, we've built upon each other's work, done and undone each other's marks, deconstructed the other's work, and reassembled with the materials at hand. This has been an extended dialogue of ideas through space and over time.

This essay continues a dialogue we have been having for years but without explicitly discussing it as such. Through scholarship and art, we each reflect on profession and practice and how institutions, systemic structures—our histories and bodies—provide the material for performative and transformative impulses. The work we've done “together” at Elsewhere serves our reflection, in part because being a resident at the museum is an all-encompassing experience. But also, Antoine's original installation “Because they Believe in Unicorns” serves as a site where our

shared marks and critiques directly respond to one another and, in doing so, reflects something distinct in each of our visions.

By inserting ourselves into each other's work, we lean into the complexity that art and scholarship is a palimpsest, an unending series of erasures and remembrances. In his introductory lecture to Collège de France, Foucault wrote, "I would really like to have slipped imperceptibly ..., to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings ..., leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices." In conversation here and Elsewhere, we find ourselves interstitially relating one to another.

## II.

ANTOINE WILLIAMS: At Elsewhere, I have my version of a unicorn, a Black person whose color isn't relevant to their place in society. The top two-thirds of the room is collaged with *Time* and *Life* magazine covers then painted and sanded. The lower third consists of a flat dark brown color. The unicorn, suspended in the middle of the room, is constructed from surplus WWII-era tents. The figure sits suspended in mid-air; however, I want to play with the perception of whether this figure is being hanged from the ceiling or being elevated out of the so-called darkness. The sanded-over pigment covering the pictures of white housewives and scenes that romanticize war is Haint Blue, a shade containing cultural and spiritual influences particular to the American South. Michelle Alexander writes about how policy built on colorblindness can prop up systems of social injustice, specifically mass incarceration. The idea of one's race not being a factor is a myth, like a unicorn.

DANIEL COLEMAN: "Warriors: Beyond Unicorns and Erasures" is a performance, conversation, and citation of Antoine Williams's "Because They Believe in Unicorns." The performance, created at Elsewhere and sited within Antione's installation, introduces the ongoing war against trans\* bodies, while also signaling wars against intersex, gender fluid, non-binary, and other, gendered bodies, with an emphasis on the current antagonisms of gender variant bodies of color. In the center of the room, a movement-poetry performance of ancestral assignment visualizes a citational matrix of historical realities for Black and trans\* bodies performed to Sweet Honey in the Rock's "I Don't Want No Trouble at the River" and fading into Greensboro train sounds.

GEORGE SCHEER: Elsewhere is a living museum and artist residency sculpted from within a three-story former thrift store that was run by my grandmother Sylvia from 1939 to 1997. The surplus economy fed this small business and a network of related businesses across America, helping transition the materials of American war industry into commercial outposts of postwar adventurism. My grandfather passed away in

the mid 1950s, and Sylvia transitioned her business into upholstery and textiles. She shuttered the upper floors, where the surplus inventories have sat ever since. Truly, those rooms feel haunted.

Elsewhere is itself an unfolding work of art that I've been collaboratively (re) creating with hundreds of artists for 15 years. Nothing is for sale and nothing leaves, but artists utilize the materials to respond to and transform each other's work, as in the case of Antoine and Daniel. When Elsewhere started in 2003, we imagined the space and its contents as an infinite puzzle, made from a seemingly infinite set of materials, composed of the twentieth century's refuse of cultural objects, each weighted with symbolic values, potential uses, possible meanings, concepts, histories. Enough at least to make a world. The years spent arranging and rearranging a museum of material culture—not to preserve and codify its history—but to make a creative environment for artists to respond to anticipated Antoine and Daniel's conversation.

*Antoine, what drew you to that space?*

AW: For quite some time, I've been in world-building and ecosystems, whether they be personal, communal, societal, temporal, metaphorical, or geographical. There was something haunting about watching a body hang in that small space and then making the decision of watching from the outside in the hallway or passing through the threshold. The smallness of that space I thought would add texture to a piece. Once the threshold is crossed, you, the viewer, would now be implicated in the piece in very close proximity to a seemingly foreign figure—so what do you do? How do you negotiate that interaction? Remember, I created this a week or two after a video of Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge, Louisiana) and Philando Castile (Falcon Heights, Minnesota) went viral. In both of those instances the men were murdered in close contact. In the case of Castile, the video was taken from inside the car with a really tight crop of his dying body.

*Daniel, what drew you to Antoine's work?*

DC: When we did the tour of previous artists' work, the second I saw Antoine's work, I felt mesmerized. The Haint blue, the hanging unicorn, the size of the room, how energetically charged the space felt. I knew, immediately, that it was the work I was to dialogue with for this residency. I have been thinking about anti-Black racism my whole life as a mixed-Black person who grew up in a family where we all had different skin colors. Showing up anywhere all together has meant dealing with differing treatment and varying degrees of fascination and intolerance to who we are as a unit. More recently, because of my investment in diasporic Blackness, I wonder what this does for those of us who can feel our ancestors in our bones. My first thought was,

what could it mean for me to bring in this trans\* layer to his work, in dialogue and conversation?

### III.

*The conversation we are having here was anticipated by the Elsewhere museum and perhaps the room in which the work is installed. What does this installation mean?*

GS: The near presence of history in objects and architecture resonate throughout Elsewhere and are part of the conditions of creativity. Nothing exits from the collection; however, what is made visible and what is concealed among the symbolic and cultural meaning of all these things is exactly the work engaged by Elsewhere's resident artists over time. They bring their experience, perception, and politics to their role presiding over these things. The questions Antione and Daniel ask of the museum, of each other, and of their own personages, are figured in the collection and architecture.

There are material factors and modes of artistic practice and scholarly thought that emerge when artists are challenged to respond to a particular set of materials and architectures. The room is an aperture, long and narrow, along a hallway of similar rooms. The army surplus has sat in that corner of the building for nearly eighty years, and it carries a weight. Throughout the building, faint in the plaster beneath peeling wallpaper and along the windowsill, resides the Haint blue. The conversations that would haunt these materials cannot avoid the violence of war and a growing American empire, nor, as Antoine makes clear, the criminalization of Black bodies and the continued rhetoric of colorblindness in American society. The revealing of ideas and concepts through materials and architectures is very much the realm of the aesthetic and the challenge of Elsewhere's residency. That these referents are then reclaimed or annotated as performed in Daniel's work is the nature of Elsewhere.

*Would each of you consider your work a revision, a study, a re-marking?*

DC: I'd think about it as a study in Black-trans dialogues. I'm also being informed by C. Riley Snorton's work *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. I see the three of us in dialogue, my body in the space being the suture of these dialogues. In the artistic process, I continue to be in study about these conversations: what is life, and what are our futures in a world that is predicated on our non-existence?

AW: I would see most of what I do as both a revision and a study. I don't mean revision in the sense of reengaging the same piece but, in revisiting myself, no piece is quite every complete but more of a placeholder in time. My relationship with my

Blackness is shifting, my abilities are shifting, and therefore the ideal of a piece being finite is hard to imagine because Blackness isn't finite. What Daniel is doing is a vital part of this conversation. I exist as a cishet Black male. Conversations around race were and are conversations that I got to dictate, specific to my sliver of Blackness, and queer and women's voices are left out. Lately, I've been more interested in intraracial conversations. By Daniel adding this trans\* layer to the work, pushes a much needed nuanced redefining of Blackness that many cishet Black males and non Black folks must contend with. At the time of making the piece having read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, I was revising, revisiting, contemplating my and our relationship to these systems and their effects on us. Looking back at this piece after having read books like Casey Gerald's *There Will Be No Miracles Here*, things have shifted, and the incompleteness of the piece is all the more apparent to me, which is for every piece always expected.

GS: I think in terms of response and context when creating art and writing. The systems we operate within are conditioned by our environment, policies, and collective understanding, and they are dominated by normative positions and biases that we afflict and are afflicted with. However, learning to look at the abundance of any given place reveals a plentiful landscape, especially considering the stories people possess, the ideas and struggles they attend to, and the natural patterns of engagement and survival people employ. The challenge is to develop resourcefulness from what is at hand and recognize abundance in places that appear derelict. That is the case for Elsewhere, where it was perceived by most as a pile of junk in a forgotten downtown. The challenges of being responsive to a site is far more exciting to me than trying to make something new in a studio.

#### IV.

*Daniel, if Antoine's unicorn is about the myth of a post-racial America, what myth are you trying to expose?*

DC: I'm wrestling through the myth of the post-gender society—something that is so clear right now. I brought these questions to bear on my work at Elsewhere. The myth of gender "equality" as having ever been a desire, much less an achievement, is based on the idea of "men" and "women." In my experience, Black studies scholars have *always* taught us that gender for African-American people, in particular, does not have the same ontology as Euro-American folks who have held colonial power. We and our ancestors did not have the same kind of access to a consolidated, gender formation legible to systems of power. We'd need access to full humanity before we could even conceive of this idea.

I also want to challenge the notion of a historical linearity process of “progress.” We’re desperate to frame this political moment as a regression. However, to do so means we have to pretend that we’ve evolved, historically, politically, socially, institutionally, and so on and so forth, which is simply an ahistorical and privileged read of reality. Some people get to make that read because they get to not look at the complexity of lived experience in this country. I’m not interested in that.

My work calls upon genealogies of Black thought and Black feminist thought, and folks like Hortense Spillers, Cristina Sharpe, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Octavia Butler, among others have always had and continue to have a critical read on these ontological and existential questions. I see it as my duty to further and be in dialogue with these knowings and conversations.

*George, is there a myth about materials and commodity that Elsewhere is seeking to expose?*

GS: There are several myths about the interdependence of consumption, commodity, and our sociality that ought to be disturbed. Historically we’ve conceived of the consumer as passive, waiting to be entertained, purchasing mindlessly, and subject to the powers of advertising and price point. Increasingly today, consumers are asked to engage in experience. Lifestyle products equate consumption and identity in a way that orients identities around consumer choices. Even cities are pursuing lifestyle economies to organize real estate, small business, and public infrastructure development. But outside the framework of product and consumer, there are whole other social economies at work. Second-hand and ethnic marketplaces, solidarity economies, social-movement organizing, and cooperative, live-work arrangements all propose a different relationship between consumer subjects and their social practice.

Elsewhere questions the inherent practices of social exchange in direct relation to commodity. We’ve taken a three-story store on a thriving main street filled with a massive set of commodities off the market, so to speak, and asked artists and publics to rethink what is possible within this world of things. I often refer to the idea that Elsewhere is a store where nothing is for sale, that became a museum. Meaning, it is still a store but one that no longer serves its primary function, and while it became a museum, it could become many other things, and already has—a home, artist studio, community organizing space, site for education, etc.

The phrases most often said by museum visitors when they first walk in is, “I had that!” and “So, wait, nothing here is for sale?” which suggests a kind of dissonance that refigures the identity of the place and the people within it. The museum, its objects, and its artworks appear first to visitors as sites of personal memory rather than aesthetic ideas or formal and material arrangements. At the same time, the museum immediately and almost forcibly denies the impulse to purchase, which visitors carry

with them into the museum, asking them to contend with their consumptive desires and ultimately seek out new purpose and approach to being there.

*George, the collection at Elsewhere is impressive and greatly varied. However, there is a tendency to think of these objects as objectively America without any cultural specificity.*

GS: My grandmother's store is part of a continuum of Jewish migration to the South during the 1930s. My grandfather was a salesman and drove a route between Raleigh and New York, selling surplus and secondhand furniture. He settled in Greensboro, met Sylvia, my grandmother, helped found a synagogue, and ran the store with Sylvia until his early death in 1955. It is said that Sylvia had an eye for things. There is a sense that every object was selected by her, but it is probable that she bought entire lots of miscellanea at local auctions and that people would drop things off at the store like it were a Goodwill. There is a perception among museum visitors, and even among artists, that the objects in the collection are simply thrift that my grandmother bought and more rarely sold. This misperception extends to personal letters between my grandparents in the fifties, or the ledgers where Sylvia meticulously kept inventory and sales records throughout the sixties. There are so many things in the collection that are deeply personal and familial and, at the same time, trigger just as personal memories for visitors.

A resident once said dismissively of the museum that it was just some old white ladies' closet, which it kinda is. We once had a curator from the Jewish Museum in New York visit, and they wanted to know if there was a collection of Menorah, and there isn't. There are only a few traditionally Jewish objects in the collection, and they are far outnumbered by the number of Christian bibles. The remaining inventory of hats, which are mostly from the sixties and seventies, are most fitting the style of Black church-goers, which may have been her customer base at the time given her "south of the tracks" location in downtown Greensboro. My point is, every object that has been touched holds together so many identities, cultures, and histories, and they never match up perfectly with what we perceive through our singular lens. The challenge of creating within a fully responsive environment is to be inclusive of the meaning of things while making clear artistic choices but also, without limiting too greatly, future artists' responses that have yet to be envisioned.

Turning my grandparents' store into an artist residency and experimental museum has been an unparalleled opportunity to participate directly in the ancestral experience of a place. Inviting a new type of creative and intellectual exploration and creating an institution that supports artists and helps equitably transform our city is part of the work demanded by the intersection of my identities as a Jewish, White male, growing up in the South, privileged with generational wealth. Elsewhere's radicality and position toward social justice is also tied up in a history of southern

Jewishness that has always been white-passing and “other” in this place. That said, I remain grateful to the artists, staff, and community that circulate through Elsewhere and have continually challenged this curious place to not only be responsive to the objects inside the museum but accountable to the world around it.

V.

*Daniel, is scholarship a living practice like art-making is a living and embodied practice?*

DC: I agree that scholarship is a living practice. Many, if not all, of my scholarly mentors have emphasized that there’s a major difference between calling yourself an “academic” and calling yourself a “scholar,” for example. This is a question much larger than semantics. Scholarship, in my mind-heart, is a devotion to a life-of-the-mind in an era where universities have become corporate enterprises that are being governed by administrative bureaucrats who have essentially no connection to the critical thought praxis or the work of the classroom and pedagogical engagement with students. Scholarship, which is also that dedicated pedagogical practice is, is a form of alchemy, to me. It’s the practices we create so that we can continue to ask the critical questions arising for us by living in the world in ways that honor our intellectual projects and pursuits. This is the ideal space to be in. However, because of the way the university works and the economy that we are in, it is an ongoing battle to get to have that kind of space and freedom to pursue thought in this way, dialoguing with the scholarship and people we want to be in dialogue with, from a space of inquiry and generous engagement. As such, it is certainly a practice and a fight to get to do this work with integrity. By integrity, I mean pursuing thought without the only important recognition coming from the university bureaucrats or based on star models. I want that. I have that and I’m going to continue to fight to keep it.

*Antoine, what does your engagement with the academy and your role as a teacher have to do with your identity as an artist?*

AW: The academy is an institution steeped in its own history which has morphed into a business whose currency is validation. On some level, we all take that part on. On the other hand, while the academy is an institution, scholarship is personal. As Daniel suggested, it’s “a living practice” that is fueled by one’s experiences, interests, politics, culture, technology, and so forth. As someone who has been through two academic programs and is currently employed by another, I’d be lying if I said the academy hasn’t assisted in resources that allow me to advance my scholarship. However, my scholarship isn’t a product of or solely dependent on the academy.

It is easy to think of the academy as this autonomous entity that has been shaped and influenced by the pedagogy, sensibilities, and ideals of a small number of peo-

ple, mostly white, mostly men, mostly affluent. I engage the academy as an outsider, an interloper—a diplomat—gentrifier? Therefore, my role as a teacher is to share knowledge and disrupt—disrupt cannons, belief systems, exclusive spaces, etc. All of this has actually been very sobering. It has made apparent the limited range of my art practice outside of these academic and contemporary art spaces. The subject matter of my work investigates a population that is mostly barred from these spaces, where Unmitigated Blackness is in very short supply in academia. So that has left me to contend with what to do with the audience and my works normally existing in exclusive spaces. I'm left with work that is a mix of formalism and specific cultural signifiers that is an intraracial conversation.

*George, your academic work has always been beside Elsewhere. How do you integrate the two?*

GS: My academic research, whether into matters of urban and cultural policy after the 2008 financial collapse or issues of museums, memorial, and visual culture in postwar Europe has always held a fascination with the idea of archives in catastrophe. I think that is what Elsewhere is, an archive of catastrophe and also an archive undergoing a kind of creative crisis. I take the archive as a very broad, theoretical concept. Archives are a matter of order, ephemera, remembrance, and resistance. Typically archives express a dominant order of knowledge, but in catastrophe they stand to be re-ordered. When I was researching Jewish archives and museums built during the Holocaust, I was particularly interested in the Ringleblum Archive, a disorganized horde of detritus collected by a historian and publisher captured in the Warsaw Ghetto. While he was busy collecting bits of ephemera from around the ghetto, he was also running a clandestine printing press that was working to incite a revolt against the Nazis. Simultaneous with his archiving was an uprising, which led to the liquidation of the ghetto.

Elsewhere is itself an archive of catastrophe. The entire twentieth century of American material over-production and commodity fetishism, cycled through and left as surplus materials, picked up and resold second hand by my grandmother, and ultimately left in heaps throughout a building in an economically divested city. Now we are arranging and re-ordering, making new meaning and a new sense of place, and helping turn around this city's cultural economy. But, there are thousands of former stores like this in divested downtowns across America.

*Daniel, you are situated in a Women and Gender Studies Program, with a doctorate in Communication and Performance Studies. In addition you maintain an active performance career. Is your work fueled by the disruption of disciplines?*

DC: I wonder if disruption is the right word. I pull from many disciplines and genealogies because the questions that I'm asking cannot be, as Lewis Gordon calls, disciplinarily decadent, that is to say, using one discipline to name the world. I've learned in the last year and a half that folks who might perceive me or my work as "disruptive" within the institution are really just filling in for what they are afraid of and have not been trained to read or to see. It's kind of like the word "apologetic"; I've also learned that when this word is used against me as if it were a negative trait, it's because I'm expected to apologize for myself when I walk into one of these spaces. Since I haven't had to do that for a while now, I'm also getting to reframe for myself what my role is. That being said, I now see my work and my presence in the spaces I inhabit as one of doing things differently, and in doing differently, creating space for others to do differently as well, carving out the revolution while we wait for it to arrive.

*George, your academic career has always been situated in the Communication's discipline. Is that relevant to your work as an artist?*

GS: Both my undergraduate and doctorate are in Communications. Communication as a discipline means different things in different departments. My academic experience has focused heavily on political media, cultural policy, rhetoric, and performance. If there is anything specific to the study of Communication, it is how speech acts are determinative of a material reality, which is a fancy way of saying that how we communicate matters as much as the message. Performance, media, and policy are all frameworks through which meaning is made.

Like many artists, I see the material world as a mode of communication, however it goes beyond material alchemy in a studio. At Elsewhere, the objects are like words that we arrange and rearrange to create stories and an unfolding narrative of transformation. However, unlike traditional narratives we instead produce environments that artists inhabit. I think the environment has a tremendous effect on the way people express their sociality. Environment is the framework through which we make meaning, construct identity, and perform our relationality as a culture, and in all of my work I seek to enhance the kind of agency artists and other communities have over the transformation of their surroundings, and the kinds of 'speech acts' that can happen there.

## VI.

*To do scholarly and artistic work and live within these practices, must you always intrude upon and bump up against the academy and the art world that formalizes, signifies, and codifies? What parts of your life as an artist and scholar are legible, and which parts illegible?*

DC: I operate with the understanding that there's no way my work could ever be fully legible or understandable by everyone. If it was, it would stop being my work; it would then be motivated by something else entirely. In this way, not being perceived as a phrase perhaps names it more than imperceptible. It's interesting how that phrase and that word mean different things.

I've learned that spending time being combative with the powers that be or even just with haters, can drain us of our agency and life force and distract us from the work that is ours to do. I don't spend my time explaining my work or my life to folks who are deeply invested in not understanding me or my art practice. Is legibility, then, only important when I think about who needs me to be doing this work? It's counter intuitive. The folks who need my work are the ones who will see it and know it and that's why I must do it. Working in this manner means that the scope of legibility decreases so that those receiving and perceiving it get a greater depth of engagement.

AW: There are definitely aspects of my practice and scholarship that are legible—formal qualities as well as the work's placement in art history. After that, the legibility varies due to culturally specific signifiers, and other references that leave the work open-ended. I'm not interested in complete legibility. The inability to completely read an artist or their work (at least upon initial viewing) is what makes this interesting. The illegibility forces me to give up control, which is great because my concerns are elsewhere.







Christopher Robbins Purchase College, State University of New York NY +

Maria del Carmen Montoya George Washington University, Washington DC

## Ghana ThinkTank

### I.

MARIA DEL CARMEN MONTOYA: Christopher Robbins and I are two of the core members of Ghana ThinkTank. We have done a lot of different things to make ends meet, to stay inspired, to keep our spouses and friends from abandoning us. All of this has fueled the work of Ghana ThinkTank. We seldom agree on anything and this energy feeds the fundamental tension of the Ghana ThinkTank process, which pushes us to admit the biases we carry all day and to accept the assumptions we make about the lives of other people and that dares us to tamp down our own hubris and ask for help.

CHRISTOPHER ROBBINS: In the Ghana ThinkTank, we collect problems from people in the so-called “First World” and send them to be solved by think tanks we help establish in the so-called “Developing World.” With teams in Ghana, Cuba, El Salvador, Serbia, Iran, Indonesia, and two groups of incarcerated youth in the United States penal system, the project has become pretty all-consuming. This is true not only in specific practical ways—my family holidays are increasingly paired with visits to think tanks—but also in a more general way as a sort of Frankenstein project that tells me what to do.

I co-founded Ghana ThinkTank after over a decade living and working overseas as an American who supposedly had solutions for cultures in which I had not grown up. As a Peace Corps worker in rural Benin, West Africa, I quickly came to experience the gulf between the intentions and the impacts of many “do-gooders” and the differences between the typical American expectations of “Africa” and its realities. As a prospective do-gooder in West Africa, the popular rite of passage were the cautionary tales of the other side of good intentions.

The Peace Corps in Benin prided itself on being a “slow-burn.” Newbies were taught—shamed, really—to second-guess our instincts, to simply follow peo-

ple around, to learn local cycles and methods before trying to figure out how we could be useful. As we sat in circles on stark cement benches being taught how to eat “sauce” with our hand (right hand only!) or carry water on our heads, we were warned away from Western hubris through stories of Western failures in West Africa.

There was the story about the well-intentioned American whose clever chimney-systems caused a malaria outbreak as they very effectively ridded homes of smoke, which is a useful mosquito deterrent. The German charity that replaced an open well with a sealed pump system, which was much cleaner because “a goat could fall into the well, die, and ruin your water supply!” but failed to provide training or funds for pump maintenance. Once the pump inevitably died, the village turned to the even-dirtier river for clean water. I saw an NGO build pigsties that were fancier than the village chief’s own compound. No-one would put a pig in these immaculate cement structures. But people were afraid to use them for any other purpose, lest their village be “blacklisted” from future development projects regardless of their actual usefulness. During a gorgeous sunset on my first evening in the village, I remember being ridiculed by local children for climbing an enormous fallen tree to “look at the sun.”

## II.

CR: For me, Ghana ThinkTank began as a form of punishment, of self-flagellation. It has changed quite a lot since it was founded in 2006, but initially I saw it primarily as a way to show “my culture”—we can debate what that means—and what it feels like to have someone else’s good will imposed on us. It was a way to flip assumed power dynamics between the helper and the helped, the expert and the needy, the “West” and the “rest.”

Again and again, I saw cultural misunderstandings and a “West Knows Best” mentality cause waste and even harm as well-intentioned outsiders unwittingly forced their goodwill on groups of people seen as needy rather than as knowledgeable.

MCM: It’s no secret that socio-economic dynamics in the US mirror global disparities. I think of the First World-Third World dichotomy as a dangerous psycho-political defense mechanism on the national level and I relish the opportunity to poke holes in the logic of it every time we launch a Ghana ThinkTank project. I grew up in a neighborhood, where one year well-intentioned people, wanting to keep me and the other children at our junior high safe, from each other, decided to spend the school budget on metal detectors, while leaving nothing for textbooks. That year we had to spend our time reviewing the previous year’s lessons and many of us were held back when we were unable to test into the next grade level. So, of course this idea of asking people living their daily lives on either side of complicated issues such as racism, immigration, elder care, religious freedom, gentrification, climate

change is exciting. Doing it in an art context, where the terms of engagement are up to the people involved and equity, participation, and agency for all are imperative, seems revolutionary. I see myself reflected in a process that brings these tremendous soul-eroding problems down to human-scale, personal concerns and creates a framework for challenging the presumed inevitability of everyday life.

The Ghana ThinkTank process turns the common idea of expertise on its head by asking the people who are assumed to be needy, poor, and ignorant for solutions, turning “them,” “us,” and “me” into resources rather than burdens.

CR: For three years, I worked in the South Pacific island-nations of Fiji, Samoa, Kiribati, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands as a Multimedia Specialist at the University of the South Pacific (USP). I was seen as “an American, paid by the Japanese, to tell us how to think,” working for a University founded by the former colonial administration. Still today, I am seen as a tool for intellectual colonization. As one university covering fifteen island-nations spread over thirty-three million square kilometers of ocean, they have their own satellite network to reach the more remote students. I am still struck by the paradigm-shifting words of the provost, “we do not subscribe to the Myth of Manpower.” There are many, many universities where students can be trained to get a job at Microsoft, but the University of the South Pacific is the only University of the South Pacific. So, USP focuses on knowledge, pedagogies, and technologies built from Pacific ways of knowing rather than on training for the global workforce. If one aspect of Ghana ThinkTank is self-flagellation, another is of self-realization—casting off “Western” expectations and inverting colonial systems so that people begin to notice the hidden assumptions they are bringing to these power relations.

I lived near the border of Serbia and Kosovo, during the pivotal time when Kosovo declared independence from Serbia. Serbia rejected the bid, and the United Nations responded by remaining “neutral” while positioning heavily armed international troops at key “non-borders.” The degree of international influence on the situation was so pronounced that a group of artist/activist/social-democratic nationalists were reduced to wheat-pasting blank posters on government buildings so that Kosovo citizens could write down their “requests” for items to be included in their own constitution, which was being written by an international consortium behind closed doors.

Ghana ThinkTank’s “power flip” approach was perfectly suited to this situation. We entered this fraught space as Americans who realized that Serbia and Kosovo were tired of Western interventions. Instead, we came to ask Serbs and Albanians to solve each other’s problems from across that “non-border” in the violently divided town of Mitrovica. We knew that it would be difficult to ask Serbs to help Kosovars and vice-versa, so we just asked Mitrovicans to help Mitrovicans but secretly tagged and translated the problems we collected so that the “enemies” were always solving

the “other sides” problems. They saw through our scheme immediately. They could instantly identify a problem coming from the other side and complained about the other side’s perspectives while grudgingly finding problems that they identified with:

“This is correct—how is it we are a town of so many rivers, yet never have enough running water in our homes?”

“Yes! We are not a big city. Why is parking such a problem?”

“I feel like a guest in my own home. The guests have arrived, and now they rule.”

“I remember that bar on the other side, up the hill, with the view. My favorite. I would love to go there again.”

In fact, after ten days of this process, a group of Serbs and Kosovars who had not crossed the bridge between their ethnically-divided neighborhoods since the war ended in 1999 came across to work directly with the other side for this project.

They essentially kicked us out of our own project. “Why are you here?” they asked us, “Shouldn’t we be talking to them?” And we realized this was a greater success than anything we had actually planned. After that, giving up control became a goal for us. The Mitrovica project forced us to bring our artwork back into the “real world” it was purportedly critiquing to see if it could be relevant to peace-building or development to people’s lived experience.

### III.

MCM: Exploring the tension between art and life is an inherent facet of the Ghana ThinkTank process and has long been a struggle for me as well.

Education was a value for me growing up. As a matter of fact it was the value in my home. I was told every day that education was what would raise me up and out of the barrio in every sense of the word. In my family’s scope of thinking, school was where you went to become an able worker, and so I was exhorted to become an accountant or a computer programmer or a pharmacist. On “good days,” art and artwork was mystified, not something you could study or practice, and, on “bad days,” it was something dangerous, entirely de-legitimized by a crippling sense of practicality.

One year I got really sick of school. I defied my parents and took a break from the university. I grabbed a backpack and decided to travel south from Chicago. My destination was Machu Pichu. By the time I got to Guatemala, I was nearly out of money and knew I would have to find work or come home. I failed. I was sitting in a bus station in Quetzaltenango, debating if I should buy a ticket to Ciudad Mexico or to San Salvador when I noticed a young Pipil woman admiring my homemade tie-dye t-shirt. She asked me if I was American. The stereotype of the long-haired hippie in a tie-dye t-shirt was way off and entirely right on too. We ended up riding the bus to San Salvador together. Xotchitl explained to me that she and her family were part of a rural farming collective trying to bring their goods to market in San

Salvador. The newly formed group had been approached by a Swedish NGO that was offering to supply equipment and a vehicle for transport if they attended subsistence farming training. It seemed ridiculous that a group of European agriculturalists would think that they could teach indigenous people who had been cultivating this land for generations how to farm, but a gas-powered tiller and a truck were hard to pass up. The NGO brought an interpreter, but the farmers wanted their own. Xotchitl could speak Pipil and Spanish, and I could speak Spanish and English and the group from the NGO could speak English and Swedish. I admitted to her that I needed help and wasn't sure what I would do next. She assured me I would be paid enough to rent a room from her cousin in the city with a little to spare so I agreed to stay on through the summer. The mutual distrust, the mutual need, the intractable stereotypes each group had about the other and the high stakes made every conversation a challenge. I didn't know it then, but this experience would be crucial training for the art practice of my future.

Working with Xotchitl and seeing her determination to save her family really inspired me to get serious. I did end up going the practical route. I returned to school in the fall, and I went to nursing school. I specialized in critical care and promptly went to work in a busy urban hospital in a world-class medical center. It was rough, I was the charge nurse on "deep nights," 7 pm until 7 am or longer, depending on the crisis at hand. Photography was my main medium during that period, and I took courses at community college so that I would have access to a darkroom. My favorite teacher, a cynical perfectionist who had shot for Reuters in the sixties, was the one person who knew about my day job. He never hesitated to remind me that I wouldn't know rough until I had tried to make a picture at 4 am, lying on my belly in a puddle of mud in a Vietnamese jungle under fire. That was true at the time, but it was still early in my nursing career.

I continued to make work because it provided a balance to my life in the emergency room. I kept these two worlds strictly separate and pitted one against the other as a survival strategy. The compartmentalization helped me get through the difficulties of each. When I had a bad day at the hospital, I would remind myself that I shot a gorgeous portrait for a friend. When someone told me my photography was shit, I would remind myself that I ran a resuscitation successfully when there was no doctor available.

Ghana ThinkTank also posits a strict dichotomy—self/other, rich/poor, powerful/powerless. These provisional categories are structures that activate a relationship between disconnected cultures and communities. And it's when they start to fall apart that we see what each has in common with the other, that the rifts that were once strategic no longer serve and that we are able to get to something real. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had also set up a very brittle art-life dichotomy that would soon come crumbling down.

Some nights were really bad. I was exhausted from lack of sleep; the waiting room was full of angry, ailing people; the ambulances kept coming; there was so much suffering. The one thing I knew I couldn't do was let anyone see me cry. Nurses don't cry, and if the charge nurse is crying you know *all hell has broken loose*. So, at the first lull in activity, usually 4 or 5 am, I would run up to the chapel on the second floor. I would wail and curse my choices, take the names of Dorothea Lange and Mary Ellen Mark in vain. I remember seeing the elevator opening and closing on its own. I had begun exploring time-based imagery, mainly digital video, and I fantasized about how I could use that elevator to restage the elevator scene in *The Shining* with me, my mother, her mother, a pile of pork tamales, and flowers, lots, and lots of flowers. Would it be funny? Would it be vulgar? This brief creative break helped me center, and I could make the trip back across the river to the land of the living.

I came into work one evening, and something was clearly wrong. The day charge nurse was sobbing out loud at the desk. The Sisters were rounding with rosaries in hand and all the doctors were in a huddle behind closed doors. There was a large pile of bloody linen on a stretcher in the hallway. The elevator on the second floor had malfunctioned and dismembered a young intern. Nothing could be done for him. My worlds came crashing together.

One thing I learned in the ER is that good people die every day, but none of us could get over this loss. The culture shifted in our tiny piece of hell with everyone blaming themselves for what had happened. My artwork no longer balanced the work in the hospital. My images seemed worthless in light of what had happened. The categories of nurse and artist crumbled into a giant pile of everything. I didn't fully understand it then, but I was getting to something real.

#### IV.

I decided to do something that seemed crazy to everyone—go back to school. Just like when I was kid, I felt education could raise me up again, but I was done with being “practical.” I wanted a school that could provide serious, cultural capital. I wasn't so interested in new skills or a job per se as I was in connecting with a community of critical, deeply invested artists. I aimed high. My partner, also an artist, decided to take the plunge with me. We wanted to stay together, and money was an issue so we agreed that if we both got accepted and that we both got funding, we would go. If we didn't both get in, we'd figure something else out. It was important not to think too hard about it because we might change our minds. Kevin ended up at Brown University in a studio PhD program and I entered an MFA program at Rhode Island School of Design. It was liberating to say, “we're gonna do this crazy thing.” That sense of flying in the face of reason, of just trying it, is something that, thanks to Ghana ThinkTank, I get to do all the time. Many of the problems we respond to are

big, *really* big, and the art process creates a no-holds barred space for trying things that no one else, in any other field, would consider feasible much less advisable. Working in Houston, Texas on the issue of diversity and inclusion we built and toured a Mobile Mosque. This project grew out of a young man's earnest complaint that even though Texas is a very religious state, he felt he had to find a place to hide five times a day just to pray. The solution proposed by the Syrian think tank—a group of Syrian women living in a refugee camp in Serbia—was that if the young man didn't have a safe and dignified place to pray, the mosque should come to him. Brilliant! Crazy! Let's try it. The Mobile Mosque created a vibrant, intercultural flex space where we shared music, meals, yoga, and of course prayer.

Ghana ThinkTank gives me and others a context to do work that extends far beyond the galleries and museums into people's lives starting with our own. Everything I learned as a young woman working as an interpreter for a collective of rural farmers in wartime El Salvador; as an advocate for battered women in Ciudad Juarez at the height of the femicide; as an English teacher in a peaceful craft cooperative in Guatemala; even the deep crisis conflict resolution I practiced in the Emergency Room is useful in this work. I accept now that it is all the work and I allow myself to put it all in.

## V.

CR: I entered the Peace Corps with images of bringing plumbing, toilets, and basketball to a rural village. I was quickly shamed by my director for “trying to turn this place into Gilligan's Island.” He warned me, “if it looks good on your American CV, or sounds good in your letters home, then it is probably useless for the village, or worse.” When I wrote my final report after nearly three years in that village, I had organized cooperatives and aids training, brought an art class to the kindergarten and started a micro-credit program. But so much of this felt like training for a capitalist America—business-development and self-sufficiency training in a village that took care of itself through methods my own country would do well to learn. Growing up in New York City, I didn't even know the name of the person in the apartment next to mine, who slept less than one meter from me but divided by a not-so-soundproof wall. In my village, people took care of each other. They had casual contingency plans for the wives and children when alcoholic husbands went through their violent spells. Hagglng in the market, I realized, was a form of getting to know each other. American virtues like “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” started to feel like another word for “every man for himself.” I began to worry that my time in this village would succeed in making it more like the United States. So, in my final written report, the moment that stuck with me as most valuable was back at that fallen tree. I returned to that tree every time the sky glowed promisingly. And toward the end of

my time there, as I scaled the tree one evening, I found a group of children there, admiring the sunset themselves.

This felt like an unequivocal accomplishment. It taught me to value things that are not so easily quantified. And it taught me that a change in perspective is powerful. This is a major goal of Ghana ThinkTank and has made me question the default metrics by which our society evaluates success. I believe many of us pursue jobs that make money not simply because we need money for sustenance but because it is so easily quantified. Choosing a career in art means choosing to pursue something that is not generally valued, not easily quantified. But it can change perspectives, and, while that can sound “mushy” or intangible, changing perspective changes everything.

CMC: The conversation at the bedside was becoming more and more constricted by health policy, an engineered lack of resources and rampant greed. As the Ghana ThinkTank projects grew in scope, I needed more time away. I had been working ten twelve-hour shifts in a row to have five days off and then another ten in a row to meet my monthly requirement for on duty hours. One day the manager called me into her office to tell me that my having five consecutive days away was making it difficult for her to staff the floor. From now on I would now have to apply for written permission to be away for longer than two consecutive days. I realized that I would have to choose between the security of the lucrative, terrifically portable and in a way very satisfying work I had done for fifteen years as an ER nurse and what amounted to a great big question mark. This idea of letting go of my status as an expert, the feeling that what I did all day, every day, mattered in a concrete, undeniable way was—I won't lie—terrifying.

I wanted to participate in university culture because I saw it as a way to streamline my life. In medicine the formula is see one, do one, teach one. I had taught adjunct for years because I wanted to stay connected to the world of ideas and because I believe that teaching is the best way to deepen my own knowledge. But the adjunct system would not allow me to survive in Brooklyn with two young children and a partner with failing health.

My last day of work in the ER was August 21, 2016. These days I've traded my scrubs and clogs for overalls and work boots. My title is really sexy, too—Assistant Professor of Sculpture and Spatial Practices at Corcoran School of Art & Design and the Department of Art and Art History at The George Washington University. It's a mouthful, but I think it suits me. Christopher was already a professor at SUNY Purchase College, and I saw how he was leveraging the resources of the institution to support the mission of Ghana ThinkTank to mutual benefit.

CR: SUNY Purchase College was established by Nelson Rockefeller in 1967 as the “cultural gem of the SUNY (State University of New York) system.” And while some

take issue with the allusion to a royal crown, his statement is meant to capture that Purchase's role within SUNY is to find purpose for the arts and culture within systems of science, engineering, governance. Purchase positions artists as active citizens, art school as a training ground for civic engagement, and the rigorous self-interrogation of art-making processes as valuable in any field. As a public university, we are required to consider how our school can benefit those outside the campus. We can't only offer less-expensive tuition, but we also need to directly impact taxpayers who are not students. This forces us to consider the impact of our work, our art, and our teaching beyond traditional confines.

In a time in which many art schools are still stuck with the myth of the solo artist hermit in their white cube studio/cave, I've been super lucky to work with a university that expects art to get off its pedestal and "do something." Rather than have to justify how Ghana ThinkTank is "art" and figure out which art-silo I can slot it into, at Purchase I have found a place where I can explore the many ways that Ghana ThinkTank can push ideas of art into other fields and industries.

CMC: Inspired by all this I began applying for positions very selectively. I was looking for an institution that recognizes that art can be a potent crucible for social change and that values work like Ghana ThinkTank, work that doesn't fit neatly into categories and work that is about challenging norms, inverting hierarchies, and breaking rules. I had heard horror stories of mismatched relationships and what could happen when an artist's practice clashed with the institutional culture. I'll admit that more than once I cancelled an interview.

The few people at the hospital who knew about my art practice were shocked, "what are you thinking!?" Not sure yet. "Can you afford a pay cut like that?" Probably not, but—

During the period I was preparing for my interviews I had a warm-up call with a group of artists for a conference panel. I was gradually losing my mind, reading all the books on what one is supposed to do and say at interviews while resenting the slightly degrading tone of the wannabe-professor, self-help websites. I found myself oversharing with this group of strangers—that's a thing for me—telling them about how scary this whole thing was, how I couldn't stand all the waiting, how tattered my clogs were and not sure if I should buy a new pair yet, and the haunting feeling that I just wasn't good enough. Then Roberto Rodriguez, a Chicano journalist and experienced academic, said something that totally changed everything. "Relax, you made the short list. The reason they want to talk to you is because they are looking for someone just like you. So just be you."

I got the gig I wanted, and it was thrilling and legitimating for me personally but my relationship with the academy is also tinged with guilt. I am often the only Brown person in the room, always the only Latinx woman. I surveil my own actions from this imagined, out-of-body vantage point, knowing I am complicit, at least in

part, and checking myself constantly to make sure that my actions are not simply contributing to the maintenance of an elitist system of socio-economic exclusion. What can I be doing to leverage the resources of the institution to foster inclusivity? Asking questions is important, big open questions like those unruly questions Ghana ThinkTank asks, the kind that leave lots of room for interpretation and almost never gives you the answer you want or think you will get. I've come to understand that my nook of academia is a center of cultural criticism and progressive politics. There are many people a lot like me, who also made tough choices and worked very hard to get to this place. A lot is at stake. Faculty meetings can get pretty uncomfortable, and sometimes I feel like I'm in the middle of a Ghana ThinkTank session with power dynamics laid bare and stereotypes flying around the room.

## VI.

CMC: It seems strange and funny and altogether awesome that Christopher and I met in art school, became collaborators in Ghana ThinkTank on the outside, and now, through very different but equally circuitous routes, we are both back in art school.

CR: So, it makes sense to ask what role does art school (not just art, but the teaching of it) play in Ghana ThinkTank. The easiest way to answer this is by talking about resources. The institutional support has been deep and diverse; probably the most noticeable in Ghana ThinkTank is the American Riad project, an arts and housing justice project that brings together think tanks from Syria, Morocco, and Indonesia with artists, activists, and non-profit organizations in Detroit. SUNY Purchase College provided access to digital fabrication equipment that would have cost tens of thousands of dollars, as well as access to a fundraising consultant. SUNY Purchase College even created two new classes that linked students to the American Riad, one in which students work with the think tanks and Detroit partners to design aspects of the American Riad and another in which students live in Detroit for several weeks, working with Ghana ThinkTank and our Detroit partners to help build the American Riad and run Theater of the Oppressed sessions. Students learn digital fabrication, sculpture skills, community organizing, cross-cultural training, make professional contacts, and experience the unvarnished realities of community-driven work. And I am able to push our art-work far further than we could have done without this institutional support.

Recently, SUNY Purchase College asked Ghana ThinkTank to join its new Center for Engagement, providing an office-space and fellowship and internship program for Ghana ThinkTank on the Purchase Campus. The arts non-profits Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) and For Freedoms, founded by Hank Willis Thomas, Eric Gottesman, Michelle Woo, and Wyatt Gallery in 2016, will also have offices in this

space, providing a way for students to deepen their own roles in the social impact of arts.

This support has provided Ghana ThinkTank scaffolding and institutional legitimacy as our work reaches into fields (e.g., Conflict Resolution, Housing Justice, and Immigration) where being known for “socially engaged art” is not an asset or even necessarily understandable. But, it has also created a prerogative to ferret out the many ways in which the Ghana ThinkTank process can be integrated into and useful to a host institution. This has been a fascinating process that has forced us to expand the use-value of Ghana ThinkTank beyond art world confines, often where concept, symbol or “getting it” is often considered enough. As in Mitrovica, we are finding ways that people can find their own value in the process of Ghana ThinkTank.

CMC: We strive to ensure that each new undertaking benefits our long-term goals and overall mission, but it’s not just about financial resources. The Ghana ThinkTank process itself is interdisciplinary, dialogic, and emergent. Each iteration of the project we find ourselves drawing from across fields of inquiry, such as history, anthropology, biology, sociology, geography, physics, engineering, and many others.

We always start with asking questions and position ourselves as students of a situation. And so the nature of the work lends itself well to collaboration with institutions of higher education. Our yearlong partnership with Williams College is a great example of how our work both supports and draws support from an academic institution. In 2016 Williams College decided to make anthropogenic climate change a campus-wide theme of inquiry for the academic year. Faculty, staff, and students from all departments committed to addressing the issue via their area of expertise. They launched a number of substantive initiatives including one to achieve sustainable carbon neutrality by the end of 2020 and another to invest in curricular additions to help students understand the complexity of climate change in terms of its political, social, cultural, and economic implications. The goal was to empower the Williams community to act from a place of informed civic responsibility.

Christina Olsen, the then Director of Williams College Museum of Art, and Sonnet Coggins, then Associate Director for Academic and Public Engagement at the museum recognized the potential of the Ghana ThinkTank process to connect with people from all their service communities, students, faculty, town locals, and international, visiting scholars. The project started with a series of meetings with stakeholders. Imagine large, blaringly lit conference rooms full of committed educators and administrators, some supportive of the arts and others deeply skeptical of what work like ours could contribute to the effort. We presented our track record of initiating and facilitating difficult conversations, rendering this dialogic process as visual art, emphasizing the characteristics of our particular process, reminding our partners that this work is about creating points of access, connecting people, improvisation, and negotiation.

Any plans we would make would have to be considered sketches, always meant to be reworked and improved as we learn more about the community with which we are working. All we emphasized was that this work is not art handed down from on high. Their participation in all phases of the process and their ownership of the work would be essential to the success of the project. We were very honest, and this work can get messy. After several months of discussion, we embarked on a yearlong commitment that would be our most involved collaboration with an academic institution to date. Williams College students and faculty would become an integral part of each phase of the Ghana ThinkTank process.

Having a continued presence in the community is an essential aspect of our process and so the work began with assembling an action team of six students that would head up the community outreach for the project. These students would be an integral part of devising the climate change communication strategy, identifying partner communities and problem collection. They began by restoring the Ghana ThinkTank mobile unit that had been damaged during hurricane Sandy. Students used the freshly painted, teardrop trailer to travel throughout the Williams College area, interviewing people about their ideas around climate change.

In order to fully integrate the project with the curriculum, we collaborated with Williams College faculty to develop a new Winter Study course in which students worked with members of Ghana ThinkTank to design and implement an installation in the Williams College Museum of Art's historic Rotunda. The installation served as the main workspace for the project and evolved as the engagement unfolded, displaying the range of climate change-related problems submitted by members of the community, inviting visitors to submit their own problems, to observe the think tanks in discussion, and to sign up for the implementation of solutions. We arranged that the central sculptural work in the installation, the stainless-steel tower pictured above, would be moved to Detroit to be incorporated into the American Riad, giving the sculpture a new life as a part of our ongoing work. It had been a goal of ours to bring think tanks to the United States for real-time discussion of problems with our host community, and when we proposed this to our partners at Williams College, they immediately recognized the value of this interpersonal exchange. They provided funding for travel, accommodation, and assistance with processing visas, which would have been very difficult for us as individuals to accomplish. We were able to bring think tanks from Indonesia and Morocco, two countries already suffering from the widespread effects of climate change, for a period of three weeks to work with students on campus.

In the Spring of 2017, we collaborated with the Williams College Center for Learning in Action to develop a Spring Break Out trip to Detroit to visit the site of the American Riad. Here, the students were provided with a context to explore the intersections of urban development, environmental sustainability, cultural sustainability, and art. In addition to these more theoretical questions, they played an

important role in the actual building of the site, working closely with members from the Indonesian think tank to install a rainwater catchment system and with the Moroccan think tank on the fabrication and installation of sections of the Riad.

It was a win-win situation as they say. Students were provided with opportunities to acquire multifaceted knowledge rooted in their own experience of a real-world context. This relationship met the goals of the college and the museum and allowed Ghana ThinkTank to explore a new way of working with academic institutions while engaging the academy as an invested long-term partner. Through our work in Ghana ThinkTank we regularly find ourselves arguing about power, strategies for inclusivity, and the best way to get from dull facts to lush truths with others. These questions are the questions we have all the time regardless of which role we are in.

This is the work. It's all the work.

*Ghana ThinkTank is managed by John Ewing, Christopher Robbins, and Maria del Carmen Montoya. It was founded in 2006 with Matey Odonkor. The project began with think tanks in Ghana, Cuba, and El Salvador, and has since expanded to include Mexico, Iran, Serbia, Indonesia, Sudan, Morocco, and a group of incarcerated, young women in the United States penal system.*







farid rakun Jakarta, Indonesia †

Leonhard Bartolomeus Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Yamaguchi, Japan †

Marcellina Dwi Kencana Putri Jakarta, Indonesia

## Gudskul

### I.

On June 4, 2019, farid rakun conducted a Skype conversation with Leonhard “Bar-to” Bartolomeus. At the time, Barto was about to leave his position as Gudskul’s manager in Jakarta to take up the role of curator at the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM) in Japan. His role as a manager has since been filled by Marcellina “Cella” Dwi Kencana Putri. On March 24, 2020, farid then conducted a Zoom conversation, forced by the Covid-19 crisis, with Cella as a continuation of this on-going collective reflection process.

Gudskul is a study program inaugurated in November 2018 by three collectives based in Jakarta: Grafis Huru Hara (GHH), Serrum, and ruangrupa. Gudskul is a program on contemporary art collectives and ecosystems. As a public learning space, it was established to explore the potentialities of collective values, such as equality, sharing, solidarity, friendship, and togetherness. By the time of the conversation with Barto, Gudskul was just finishing the second semester of its inaugural year, while the one with Cella happened while we were preparing for the start of the second year of the program.

Between 2015 and 2018, before Gudskul was established, ruangrupa co-developed the cultural platform Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem (GSE) together with several other artists’ collectives in Jakarta. Located at Gudang Sarinah warehouse in Pancoran, South Jakarta, it was a cross-disciplinary space that aimed to maintain, cultivate, and establish an integrated support system for creative talents, diverse communities, and various institutions. It also aspired to make connections, to collaborate, to share knowledge and ideas, and to encourage critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. The outputs of these collaborations were open to the public and presented

in exhibitions, festivals, workshops, discussions, film screenings, music concerts, and publications.

The following is an imaginary dialogue happening in farid's head, threading between things touched upon by his separate conversation with Barto and Cella. They have been transcribed and translated, edited, and paraphrased for recontextualization.

## II.

### There are only versions

FARID: We have a lot of versions. Mine and yours might be different. Why did we decide to become a school?

BARTO: My version, officially, we have to find a common thread. Learning from the failure of Gudang Sarinah (Ekosistem). There, our goal is to build an ecosystem. This ecosystem was not fully functioning. Actually, there was no connection between collectives. School, as an idea, came about because we were looking for a format that all of us collectives could engage. There were a lot of ideas when we first discussed this possibility.

FARID: This is the official version? What were the ideas existing at that moment?

BARTO: To build a venue, if I am not mistaken. Becoming an art center, to push deeper the seeds that were planted by RURU Corps. And RRRECfest, to name a few of these initiatives. Another one was to break all of us up. OK.Video would have a location somewhere, while Jakarta 32 would have a different one, for example. We would all set up in different locations; the third one was school. Why couldn't we compile all of our existing programs and turn them into one big program as an umbrella? I don't remember whether all three of the collectives agreed upon becoming a school or whether the idea was originated by ruangrupa.

Unofficially, the dream of becoming a school was already there. Institut ruangrupa (Ir.) was established. I heard from others who met Ade (Darmawan, the founder director of ruangrupa) or me that we should build a school and no longer work with event-based initiatives. Out of these options, Grafis Huru Hara and Serrum were most excited about the school idea. It was already mentioned as a school—not only educational programs. “We are going to establish a school,” we collectively decided, despite that it was not clear what type of school we were going to give birth to.

FARID: What I recall, when we applied to the funding agency whose grant enabled us to acquire this property, it was already written that we were becoming a school. The

naming was the fruit of a long discussion through time. The name itself, Gudskul, for example, was derived from gudang (warehouse). From my conversation with MG Pringgtono, that name came up because we were planning to establish a school in gudang.

**BARTO:** The name came from Serrum's program, Kelas Maraton. At that moment, Serrum was supposed to be the one developing knowledge-based programs, while ruru should take on the artistic development and GHH should focus on workshops and residencies. Forum Lenteng did film screenings. There were labor divisions between the collectives, based on the characteristics of each collective.

**FARID:** So, for you, the final strategy and decision to become a school, based on these previously mentioned parameters, is the right one or not?

**BARTO:** Formally, it's something we cannot even imagine right now. But if it's a strategy to see ourselves as a bank of resources and, further, to combine all these resources together, then it is an interesting proposal. Let's forget for a moment how we are running things right now, but school is actually an ideal proposition.

It is also necessary to revisit how collectivity works inside a collective of collectives. It's as if we are fused together, but it doesn't mean that each of these collectives has lost its characteristics. Through school, this ideal to work really together without cancelling each other out could be achieved. School could provide a suggestion on the regeneration issues: how to include more new people in our activities. None of us has a membership scheme. School can provide an alternative answer to this challenge. While many others also underwent similar trajectories, we first got involved through participating in certain workshops. Whether or not it's cross-generational is another matter but to provide an entry point for those who want to join our activities. Through the experience, we could assess one's characteristics and qualities.

**FARID:** Each of us works in formal educational institutions, me in Universitas Indonesia (UI) and you in Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ—Jakarta Arts Institute). Do you have any reflection on this fact, working at the same time in two different types of educational institutions—one is formal, and another is informal?

**BARTO:** Gudskul can be more interesting than something like IKJ only if Gudskul can get out of formalities. In the educational realm, Gudskul is similar to those initiatives coming out from those that are grassroots and community-based. They are very good when they can offer different values in society, without the trap of repeating the redundancy of the sanggar system.

Answering your question about centralization, IKJ itself doesn't show any current significant development, after more than fifty years of its establishment. The main problem for me is its dependency on industries. For example, its TV and Cinema department is the most developed and progressive exactly because of the demands of its industry. The market therefore drives the faculty. A different case entirely is happening to its Visual Arts Department. The industry doesn't have a specific need. Only certain study programs are attractive, such as Interior Design, Graphic Design, and Fashion Design. Besides these three, the other programs are not showing any sign of vitality or significant characteristics for any industry to look at. If Gudskul can take over this role, when our participants can be agents (as opposed to workers) in their particular fields, then Gudskul can have a compelling position compared to IKJ.

FARID: Do you think we need to go head-to-head? I personally think we are not in competition with these formal institutions. Both are running in parallel lines, as both have different things to offer.

BARTO: Formally, I agree. We cannot offer any degree. But I was thinking about our perspective towards Gudskul. But if we see what's already existing, it can be analogous to why *ruangrupa* was established. Because we were not catered to by any existing institution, we became self-sufficient as we provide for ourselves. If Gudskul can cater our own needs this way, I would be curious on how IKJ reacts.

If it's only about branding, other IKJ tutors knew about Gudskul and asked me several times about our operation. Since we cannot offer a degree, the tutors naturally don't feel threatened or challenged. They are leaving us alone as for now.

FARID: Do you think there are advantages for people like us to keep our positions in these formal schools? Isn't it better to leave them and to concentrate only on Gudskul?

BARTO: These institutions could still function as a meeting place with those who still hold their passion for something else, not only teaching. Since Gudskul is not a brand and has not fully developed its communication strategies, these schools can function as we need. There are people who we can meet and persuade to join our initiatives there.

FARID: So Cella, what's your story, in relation to Gudskul?

CELLA: I started being involved with OK. Pangan in 2017. I assisted Mbak Sari (Julia Sarisetiati of *ruangrupa*) and Renan (Laru-An from the Philippines). I went to Yogyakarta afterwards, finishing my master's degree in Anthropology in Universitas Gadjah Mada. I talked to Mbak Sari afterwards.

FARID: Why OK. Pangan?

CELLA: It relates to my master's which focused on food and farmers. When I heard about OK. Pangan, I felt like I had built relations and networks with the parties they were interested in. Mbak Sari was visiting Yogya, looking for vegan restaurants and organic markets. It was also at the point when I was actively taking part in organic markets and building communities. Before I moved to Yogya, in 2014 I worked for a company focusing on permaculture in Ubud, Bali.

Sari asked me to join OK. Pangan, as I was also stuck writing my thesis at that moment and as my supervisor didn't understand what my thesis was all about.

After I finished my thesis, Sari told me to come back to Jakarta. I thought that I didn't have any reason to come back at all. Barto contacted me soon afterwards. I told them that I would be interested in joining Gudskul. In March, Barto interviewed me to replace him. I followed how Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem turned into Gudskul via Instagram. I was thinking of joining as a participant, originally. The collective I was a part of at that moment was not a collective Gudskul imagined to be.

FARID: What does it mean, collective that Gudskul is not looking to be?

CELLA: In Yogya, I joined my boyfriend's collective, Studio Batu. It didn't have a program, just responded to whatever opportunity came their way. It's not really a collective. The people ganged up together for common interests, but each of us didn't have any initiative to create a collective program. There was a constant need for leadership. One person would come up with an idea, then others assisted. That's it. That one person was always the same one person. The projects were mainly commercial. It's more like a company, like a design firm or a production house. It started with a short film. But after several short movies, we didn't want to be typecasted. Not everyone liked making movies either. Some created visual performances, photography exhibitions, etc. Only recently we have started to have annual meetings. Each member also thinks about and comes up with a program. I'm still playing a supporting role for them. I do fundraising and grant-writing for them when they need assistance.

### III.

#### Criticism, criticism, criticism

FARID: What's your answer to certain criticism, such as knowing artist collectives' alignment to decentralization and democratization of art? Establishing a school can be seen as its opposite: centralizing and institutionalization.

BARTO: It's inevitable. Let's take our school and compare it to KUNCI's Study Forum and Collective, both examples exist in different corridors. KUNCI focuses on the experimental process of education, while Gudskul exists as a strategy towards sustainability.

Whether it's centralizing or not, it's a complicated answer. This dilemma is similar to something I've told Ade before: *ruru* (*ruangrupa*) should just break up, there is a fear of domination and becoming too big for our own sake. When we occupied Gudang Sarinah, it was seen as an institutionalization move by others by becoming that scale, holding that many resources and with responsibilities that big.

In this perspective, becoming a school is a way to keep ourselves in check. Although it might not happen instantly in this first year, our intention for the school is to keep expanding our network outside of the usual contexts—therefore suspects. If we got trapped in the ethical discourse of decentralization, for example, it would be difficult for us to move forward. Seeing ourselves as a pool of resources—funds, knowledge, space, and international relations—how could we share all these resources better? What kind of structure could we establish? With these accesses and wealth, with whom should we share it?

To answer all these challenges and reach our goals, the steps we took that others deemed centralizing and institutionalizing had to happen. The question is: what type of institution do we want to be? The institutional wokeness is a thing we should continuously ask ourselves.

Continuing the comparison to KUNCI: their school is an experiment in methods. We are not there yet, at least in this first year, the formats we are using are conventional: classes, lectures, workshops, you name it. Regular schools do it too, but our battle is in ethical responsibilities, relating directly to our existing programs and resource building. Our participants were asked from the beginning to contribute, by paying a tuition fee. Despite the amount, conceptually, this fact makes a lot of difference. How could we cater to others' needs, in this way? We don't know what kind of lives are waiting for our participants' future. What role can we play in shaping one's life?

FARID: Sometimes I'm afraid that after Gudskul our participants will work for others, and not support our ecosystem anymore. How are we feeling if they work for art fairs after Gudskul? We cannot offer them proper practical livability either? Should we think about *mencetak mereka yang siap pakai*, or actually we can stay true to the original intention to *membangun mereka yang siap memakai*? In this topic, my last question for you, who is leaving us, would be, which dream(s) of yours did we not attain as Gudskul?

BARTO: My wish for Gudskul is to be more experimental. Right now, it's still too rigid. Gudskul's core should be time. Time is the most important currency. Imagine

us nongkrong in the past. We went through endless sessions of nongkrong before each of us personally decided to focus on building this collective, while still sustaining ourselves financially. Gudskul can improve on this.

This is the crux of the problem: discipline. We are trying to build discipline, while we never have disciplinary indicators. We might change this in the future. For now, we are still holding classes with rigid and consistent schedules. We are asking for participants' commitments, while we still cannot explain to them why we are asking. The participants, on the other hand, are still trapped by their own ideas about how a school should be. Their expectations don't meet what we offer in this inaugural year.

Will a year be long enough for us? Why can't the participants choose what they want to learn, with whom, which collective they are willing to work with—Jakarta 32, GHH, or others? How do we develop collective strategies, concepts, and ideologies between us? The core should be in working together among these participants. We need a different format and different communication protocols for future participants. What we have not reached is the intention to locate new hopes and dreams that could sustain other forms of collectivities outside of our existing network. Their interests so far, from my interactions with them, are to experience working with ruru or Serrum. But why this will be fruitful for them is not clear yet. Hopefully we can be better in the coming years.

FARID: So, after ten months doing this, what do you think?

CELLA: There are a lot of overlaps. There are so many things to take care of. I manage everything, but not the participants themselves. I get spread thin. External elements of Gudskul, like multimedia, residency, have become some elements I need to be responsible for. To introduce Gudskul to the outside world, as well. But I like it.

I began in 2018 when a lot of things are ongoing, and the participants were busy doing their final presentations at the end of the year. I connected some exhibition spaces, like dia.lo.gue or Rubanah. I didn't come from an artistic background and needed to learn all elements. I continue to ask what Gudskul is, and what is my role in it? I haven't been able to do this properly. Even in Jakarta, I don't feel like I have learned enough. This is different from Barto, who already has built his networks.

FARID: What about your existing networks—the one you've built yourself throughout the years—are they useful for you?

CELLA: I haven't found how to use them here. I will try to use my networks in the future. Some of my former professors might be the right people for certain foci we have in Gudskul. After I told them about the initiative Sekolah Pagesangan (a food

store), Ampyang<sup>1</sup> might be interested to learn from them. It fits well with Serrum's Kurikulab as well. As in Gudskul, networks are abundant, I'd have to wait to play this more properly.

### Those "if onlys"

FARID: You've answered my previous question institutionally. What about personally? Why did you decide to leave us? I'm not saying which decision is better—to go or to stay—but why did you think it's better to be a curator in Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media compared to staying here and developing Gudskul, still? What is the desire YCAM caters to that Gudskul cannot?

BARTO: First, I think it's a working ethos. I still want to experiment with different types of projects. My position as a general manager for Gudskul is difficult for me to pursue. I've told MG and || Adibrata that I should not be a manager. Someone that's more detached from our initiatives could serve our intention to build a new institution better. The never-ending cycle continues otherwise.

I have no interest in managing a school. It's not clear, either, what type of institution we want to be. It would be more interesting if we invited someone that has been building an educational institution, so they could experiment with what we could be by modifying what has existed. Second, I'm still interested in working for curatorial projects. It's not an easy decision. I feel that Gudskul will strive even without me. Maybe it's even better for Gudskul for me to leave. There are still dependencies with figures, for example. I'm a bit worried about it. My departure might be a good challenge for us. It's difficult for me to divide my focus while still doing Gudskul. It requires full commitment, you almost cannot do anything else. If you do, all will be a mess.

It's difficult for all of us to sit together and divide labor horizontally. It's still a challenge, or maybe we don't need to do so. If we can figure out another system towards effective and efficient work ethics. Income is another thing. Certain wages follow certain responsibilities. I'm still imagining a different system.

FARID: Can you explain more about this system you're imagining?

BARTO: Imagine a developed learning system using Artist Collective Compound (ACC), studio-based and driven by visits. Each of us visit-participants to get updates. Wages for coordinators might not be needed this way, although we always deem

<sup>1</sup> Ampyang is the nickname of Angga Wijaya, a member of Serrum who is also responsible for the subject Art and Collective Study in Gudskul's regular program.

wages from our collectives are complimentary. It runs as a rewarding system. We have not been able to pay each other properly so far, but right now we have a stronger foundation. We can try to pay each other more properly.

In this way of thinking, by paying ourselves properly, we expect ourselves to focus more on what we are doing and drop the numerous other jobs each of us keep just to stay afloat. This intention was not fulfilled. We cannot do anything about it. The sensibility didn't come only from economic logic. It's our mode of practice, it has been a character. If we are changing this, we are asking ourselves to submit to employee mode of working. We start to compare and compete with each other. This hybridization process of our old mode of working with this new one that introduces a certain type of disciplinarity needs to be taken more seriously with care.

FARID: Are you still going to treat Gudskul as a network and develop interactions with us even when you're structurally out?

BARTO: I am still trying to do this. But I can only continue working with existing programs until 2020. I cannot initiate a new one. Only after 2020 I can initiate certain institutional collaborations between YCAM, who have similar interests in education and collectives with us. It should not be something difficult content-wise. But the big homework is to convince the board of the museum to render it a proper inter-institutional collaboration. If it's only residency programs, for example, it's easy. The next thing is to make it an institutionally-supported residency program. How to make this connection, so it's a reciprocal and sustained collaboration? I've started to discuss my position in YCAM with our friends here who focus on new media. How can we use my current position? How can I be useful for us, or for OK.Video, or our new media artists? What can I offer both to my network here and also what can we offer to YCAM? If the network is there, financially, I can work with other institutions. This idea, nevertheless, still needs to be tested. What kind of power will I have to bestow to others? What should I do to convince both people from here and there?

FARID: In my understanding, at least from ruangrupa's experience, we started everything from our individual interests—therefore networks. Like OK.Video, all of our programs started this way. Ideally, the one responsible for a program should bring their color into it. That's why I asked the previous question. Do you feel like a player already, or are you still feeling like you're getting to know the landscape?

CELLA: The first six months I felt like I couldn't let my color shine. I was trying to understand how things work around here. It took a lot of my energy. I'm just starting to find the meeting point between my own interests and Gudskul. I'm still looking for the right people to bring in. I have names, but there are a lot of distractions. Individual interventions are everywhere.

FARID: It's like life itself, no? It's like living in an RT (Rukun Tetangga). There are people forming an ecosystem...

CELLA: And not everyone is supportive...

FARID: Looking back, I needed two-three years to understand these dynamics and let them go. I saw many potentials in everything, but there are so many setbacks—most of them human resources related. It's not about thinking productively in the end. We are not a company. When I started to understand this, I could function better. I learned the ability to let go. Whether it's self-deception to not burn out of stress, I cannot say. This is my way to survive now.

CELLA: Make everyone's expectations on the same page. Exactly before Covid-19 work-from-home, all of us were living together in the house I'm living in right now. I just had that heart-to-heart conversations with complaints, dissatisfactions, frustrations. It's good to know where everyone is at right now. All of those are ticking time bombs. Other distractions are like those programs in Ekosistem that I'm interested in taking part in. Artist Collective Compound's programs that want Gudskul to participate, but there are so many! I feel like following these things have taken away my ability to manage collective study properly.

FARID: This is exactly the letting go abilities I was talking about before. It's actually good to understand my own limits, as well as enthusiasm and ambition.

CELLA: I follow what I understand as the flow. Like when I was asked to join a program just because I mistakenly entered a meeting room at the wrong time. I got involved in the current ruru Kids program because of that. It has become a chance for me to know more people in the Ekosistem properly. Sometimes people consider their relations to me strictly professional. I couldn't approach them just to simply hang out and sit down to talk either because of time. Eating together is hard because I am chased by things all the time. I like to hang around and play as well, but there are so many things to do, meetings I have to attend and decisions I have to make.

These things make the current participants see me as a functional person, people in GUDside<sup>2</sup> as well. I've never been able to approach them informally in a relaxed way. Working with them directly for events help.

2 GUDside is a studio complex Gudskul rents out to artists, designers, architects, publishers, musicians, and others. More info: <https://gudskul.art/gudside/>

## IV.

## Extras, or where the meat really is

FARID: Last question, I'm looking for anecdotes. What are the things you remember the most from Gudskul?

BARTO: I remember a meeting when our finance department was disturbed by the fact that there was no income from our participants. No one was paying their dues for the second semester in the beginning of May. The finance person complained to me, JJ, and MG. MG told her to talk with the participants. She asked the administrator to act on the issue, as it was her job to do so. The admin then asked me to draft an email template. I drafted one with the finance person. We sent the email to the participants. After a while, there had been no reply, so the admin came back to me for advice. I had the idea to send the same thing with the exact same wording, but with ALL CAPS this time. She did exactly that. The participants then protested, feeling mistreated.

I was just laughing at this fact; how the personality of an admin meets the personalities of the participants, while me, JJ, and MG, got caught in the middle. MG used the incident to tell the participants that they started it by not paying, while I realized that our administrators and the participants never talked to each other. They've been using us, who manage the whole operation, as bridges for communication. They just simply never meet.

It's funny for me, in comparison, to reflect on how I experienced schooling up to this point. Normally, those who teach and manage the content, don't need to meddle with administration matters. We don't know what's happening under the hood. This is a totally different scenario. What I did was laugh it off. I told the fuming participants that they deserve a bit of that—knowing how poor we are, why couldn't you contribute? Where else could I experience these types of situations?

There's another anecdote: an instructor didn't get paid according to agreement, and the amount listed was only half or even one-third of the agreed amount. The instructor complained to the finance person. The finance person insisted that it was as written in the contract. The finance person replied contracts were only formalities—for tax purposes, etc. Incomes should not be fluctuating based on the items written in the contract, such as presence and absentia. I got caught in the middle and again, I could only find how funny it was to negotiate between an employee mindset versus an administrative one. In the end, I negotiated with our finance lady for addendums. How instructors could still be paid in different schemes, outside of the formal norms. How off-hour meetings could be factored in, for example. Interestingly, this instructor showed WhatsApp conversations with the participants as her evidence. I find it amusing how these collective, organic sensibilities meet

institutional shifts. We are in the middle of it all. When should this be formalized, when should it be informal? All these could make a good sit-com.

FARID: If we are a reality show, it could be something else. What we are doing essentially is social experimenting

BARTO: Our problem is no one could reflect and write about this. KUNCI Collective made a book, for example, and MG was thinking to follow suit. I agree that all these stumbles, anecdotes, and learning experiences, would make a great story that could be compiled as a book.

FARID: It's better to compile these everyday stories as a book. People can learn from these more directly even.

BARTO: Yup, not the abstract conceptual methods. Reflect on this: participants that still expect old-school as a habit, where their teachers rarely get into class. On the other hand, instructors expect certain types of students. Remember when you gave them three references? None of them even dare to start reading the first pages of those references. I told them to put those references in context, reading the blurbs, reviews, and table of contents, to start. They gave up.

FARID: How did they give up?

BARTO: They asked me whether you could give them the materials using a different way to deliver. We have two options now: being really selective in choosing the participants, or we change our teaching habits completely. These reflections are actually really fruitful, critically.

Our tendency to hang out does not mean we can discuss things deeply. Entertaining formats could serve better as knowledge production methods. Maybe that's what is also happening in our formal art schools. They all want to hang out, not to study for their degrees. What kind of effort could we make to meet this situation? We let go of our own projections for them. We just cannot afford to become educational fundamentalists. Individual characteristics are curious.

FARID: But right now who has the time? We, as examples, spent like eight years or so hanging out together just to realize that we actually learn something by being together. Who else could waste this kind of time? Eight years, doing nothing, only talking nonsense.

BARTO: Other collectives also have different sensibilities. The participants coming from other collectives are more laidback. It could be seen as laziness, but it could

also be seen as realizing how collectivities work. Ambition is not fruitful. Cooking, for example, can be a form of work. It brings realities to utopia. We have so many experiments to do. We can change formats for different years this way.

documenta fifteen, on the other hand, is also a blessing for Gudskul. Not only in reputation, but also the fact that most of us are going to be less hands-on. Want it or not, we need to change our scheme. We cannot repeat this first-year format. Our schedule will not allow it. What kind of mechanism can absorb this fact?

## V.

FARID: Any other last words, burning issues for this discussion?

BARTO: Hmmm. Not really.

FARID: Making events is an alibi for us.

CELLA: Kreafest is my favorite thing to do so far. Although it has repeatedly faced threats to be cancelled. I knew our Ekosistem members better through this experience.

I asked Erby<sup>3</sup> how to best function while being involved here. She told me to follow and support their initiatives first. Don't expect to bring your own program and they will support you directly.

FARID: Don't do what our government does. Making their own events, while grass-roots events are already abundant and creating a competitive environment in the end. As a manager, do you want to bring any changes for our next batch?

CELLA: I think there is much room for improvement. Talking to Indras,<sup>4</sup> who are currently researching for a piece of writing about Gudskul, our participants are facing challenges from attendance to space. We were under renovation, so where our learning process was really unclear. They lost their space. No space to call their own. This really influenced their dynamics. It's difficult to build trust, both within themselves as a group and with those around them. A lot of us were not really around, as promised, either. Our previous year didn't face the renovation challenge in the beginning. This brings a lot of difference. For the next batch, space needs to

3 Bellina Erby is a part of Gudskul ecosystem who is responsible for OK.Video and manages Gudskul's multimedia team.

4 Indras Oktavia is Gudskul's librarian and archive coordinator.

be provided. A place they can call their own. Second, we should just make an event for and with them. Ask them to work directly with the whole ACC. That's what I think about. How do we make the introduction phase intense? If we lose it, it would take a long time to break the ice. If the foreplay takes too long it becomes boring.

FARID: Every year faces different problems. How the participants fight and what they dislike.

CELLA: Yes, I heard from them personally. I have reached the stage where I am letting go. I doubt whether I can trust the participants even after working with them for the residency program.

FARID: That's actually what collective works are about. We are funny and maybe dysfunctional. But I guess it is okay, not everything in this world needs to be functional. There are values in being dysfunctional.

CELLA: It reminds me of my joke I told to Gesya when I started. From my experience being active in university students' outdoor extracurricular organization, we used to prepare for a two-month event in a year. Right now, in Gudskul, we are preparing a year-long activity only for two months! What a flip! Gesya answered, "that's the reason we are so special!"

FARID: Oh, what about this, can you relate the fact you joined ruangrupa with your family background—being raised by a single parent?

BARTO: A fruitful tongkrongan. When I was a student in IKJ, it's basically also that looking for a place to hang out. I found it difficult to position myself there socially. ruangrupa fits. They are rejects, orphans. IKJ students are coming from privilege, they just look proletariat.

Even then, in ruangrupa it took me some time to get used to it. But I felt the difference even back then. Maybe it's analogous in frequency. There are those in ruangrupa being raised as having one or even no parents at all. There's almost no battle for domination here. All are beta-males. You've heard about sigma-males? From my understanding, they're loners. They don't need a herd, as they're self-sufficient. Alphas still need followers. Sigmas are jokers, the assassins. It's a new species, maybe a digital one.

FARID: It's like Panoramix in Asterix comics, I think. I want to say goodbye by saying congratulations for your new lives, both a new status and in a new place.

BARTO: Same to you. Thank you.





I.

Early in my academic career, I made a choice to move away from advisors and institutions that demonstrated homophobia and transphobia overtly or indirectly. Instead, I made a conscious decision to move toward individuals and communities that were alternative sites of learning. As a working artist and teacher, I continue to decenter the institutions that make up the art world in my life, pedagogy, and practice. I embrace relationality in the form of collaboration, participation, and lively group dynamics in my work and as a result, in my classroom. As a person whose parents did not go to college and as a transgender, queer person, my educational experiences are inspirations for my approach to teaching. I have learned from experience that many of my students also have very complex relationships with institutions. What does it mean to not fit into the walls of the university, the museum, the gallery in clear cut ways? How does difference from being white, male, cisgender, non-disabled, and of a certain class, both economic and social, create a friction that is not always articulated or able to be articulated by and for students within these walls?

I had no plans to continue my education when I graduated high school, but my parents convinced me to take classes at the local community college. My ultimate career goal was to be a secretary. I should mention here that I am a transgender man and was living as a woman at this time. An office job seemed like a good goal. But the death of my closest and only queer friend—and my brother's survival of the Columbine High School shootings the same year—pushed my desire to move away from the place I grew up and to reassess my goals.

II.

I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to start an Art Therapy program at Lesley University. Lesley was a women's college, and I was excited to be in an environment

that focused on women. While there, I took some art classes at the Art Institute of Boston and discovered that I just wanted to be an artist. After finishing my first year at Lesley, I took my tax refunds and went on a road trip from Littleton to visit a friend in Seattle. One night, while on a walk, I saw two men holding each other's hands, casually, as though it weren't a big deal. I had experienced street-level harassment for being queer so many times regardless of where I lived. I wanted the experience of not being harassed. So, I moved to Seattle to attend Cornish College of the Arts.

There, I got a job managing the apartment building I lived in. I filled it with queer and queer ally punks and artists. We shared a car that we used to go dumpster diving and would cook meals together nightly with the food we'd gathered. I had a sense of stability in community that I had never felt before that was built on shared politics and identity. We were more than a community, as many of us had strained relationships with our parents because of our queer identities. We were family.

At Cornish, John Wilson challenged me with his performance art class, and expanded my possibilities for art-making from objects into experiences. It was also around this time that I met my first transgender male friend, Memphis. In our long conversations about sex and gender, I began to realize that I was also transgender. Inspired by John Wilson's class and meeting Memphis, I decided to live as a man for a period of two weeks as a durational performance. After the two weeks were up, I did not stop presenting as a man, and I still haven't.

This decision, however, created difficulties with my school-work and personal life. I stopped talking to my family because of my gender identity for a couple of years. At school, the decision to use he/him pronouns and the name "Jaimes," meant coming out to my professors and classmates. This was in 2002, so things were really different. Trans people had not received widespread media attention then nor were there publicly visible transgender celebrity advocates. "Transgender" was associated with transfeminine and not transmasculine folks for most people. One of my professors refused to use he/him pronouns because he "couldn't see what that had to do with being a lesbian." This, among many other experiences at school, led me to transfer and "go stealth"—meaning I wouldn't tell anyone that I was transgender at my new school. Emerson College and the city of Boston would be my fresh start.

### III.

In Boston, I joined an art-research collective called "The Institute for Infinitely Small Things," and it changed the direction and scope of my personal work more than any academic program ever has. "The Institute," as we called it, was a group of around twenty-five people, from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds who designed interventionist research projects at the intersection of art, public space, and community in the form of videos, performances, design, and cartography. Our

process always began with lengthy discussions in the cramped office of an art gallery.. Listening to software engineers, anthropologists, art historians, designers, landscape architects, filmmakers, and others attempting to agree to an aesthetic and conceptual common ground taught me so much about how the logic of a discipline dictates the physical and conceptual form of a project. I loved my friends in The Institute, but they were also all straight people. Much like my life in Seattle, I had to look outside of the art community and education system to find a queer community.

One afternoon, I stopped by a friend's art gallery to borrow trash cans for a fundraiser I was organizing. Steve Bradley, an artist who was showing at the gallery, happened to be there. After telling him about my work, he encouraged me to apply to the MFA program at University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), where he taught. I had dismissed the idea of graduate school because I already had a lot of student loan debt and couldn't imagine taking out more loans. But Steve told me that the program at UMBC would offer tuition remission and a stipend. I always look back on this happenstance moment and feel fortunate that we were in the same place at the same time. It pays off to be involved with community because something as mundane as borrowing trash cans can change your life. A few months later, I was admitted into the MFA program with full-tuition remission, and a research assistantship. I was thrilled to move to Baltimore because I had visited for a performance with The Institute once before and witnessed what I had been looking for—queer artists making work about queer concerns who were integrated into Baltimore's larger art community.

At first, returning to a solo studio practice at UMBC in my MFA program was lonely after working collaboratively for so long, whether in the art community in Boston or queer community in Seattle. In my first year, I formed a collaborative group with some other graduate students called Services United. We made work that framed service in relation to industry, money, objects, and tools and showed in Baltimore for a couple of years. I also got involved with planning and curating the Transmodern Festival, an annual, artist-led festival of performance and experimental art in Baltimore. In my graduate program, however, if my work was collaborative or participatory, I was met with skepticism over authorship. Although I had been making this kind of work before my MFA program and knew artists who worked this way, I was unequipped with language to defend my projects against more traditional understandings of medium and process. Art historian Laura Spitale McGough's class and the encouragement of Mark Alice Durant at UMBC taught me to embrace my love of community and the ephemeral event as research.

Community-as-ecology; affective and physical energy; the potential of speculative imagination; and the power of the moment have undergirded my projects since. As a Fulbright grantee in Iceland, part of my research into energy systems and queerness included tours of power plants with a transwoman-engineer while in Reykjavík.

I collected stories about electricity from Icelanders all over the country, recorded interviews with artists who took part in a large protest against an Alcoa aluminum smelting plant, and dumpster dived with queer punks. Just like the ecology of an island, people can make supportive environments in conditions that may not seem habitable or hospitable. Back in Baltimore, I made Samesies Island with a group of friends, an imaginary island that functions as a utopia made by and for transgender men who love other transgender men. What started as a joke became a map of an island in the shape of a pregnant seahorse that marked all of the desires for, and needs of, our community into one space. Perfect health care systems for transpeople, a good barber, a trauma center, and psychological resources for overcoming toxic masculinity were available to all residents and visitors, as was training that prepared Samesies for the discrimination they would encounter outside of this utopia.

A third project that centered invisibilized communities was a yearlong commission for the Baltimore Museum of Art that was made in collaboration with The LGBT Health Resource Center. This unlikely collaboration between institutions presented a challenge and an opportunity for imagining the role of museums for LGBTQAI+ people. Three-hundred people attended the opening, including an elder transwoman who pointed out to me that it was the most queer people that had ever been in the BMA at the same time. Bringing the people I seek outside of the art world and bringing them into the Baltimore Museum of Art was a radical experience for me. I want to continue to make work that includes people who may not otherwise be included in art and art audiences rather than document and make work about them.

## VI.

My experience in academia as a student was characterized by two levels of misrecognition: first, being misgendered or discriminated against because there was not enough awareness of transgender people; and second, being forced into a box of traditional definitions of artist, process, and medium in the early days of social practice's integration into art school education. For these reasons, I aim to leave space for my students to tell me who they are as people and as artists in ways that I cannot anticipate. I aim to open a space for the possibility of their agency rather than close down options due to the predominance of preexisting categories. I use the classroom as an environment for collaboration and constructive conversation, employing the skills that I learned from working in and with different communities. I invoke the spirit of the queer, punk communities in which I lived to teach students how to take risks, seek out untraditional processes for gathering materials, and work in collaborative interdisciplinary groups. I lean upon the strengths of being the "only one like me" in a room to encourage students to use their unique differences, specific histories, and varied experiences to make work. Emphasizing that one of art's

goals is to reach an audience, we work together to think through how to make space for all our idiosyncratic variations in the world.

I personalize the classroom by tailoring readings to each student's interests to give them the longer intellectual and artistic histories of their stakes and reinforce the validity of their projects and place them on the future of a discursive timeline. In addition to taking risks, I also encourage students to fail. Operating through collaborative and participatory modes has made me better at anticipating failure and more graceful when I unexpectedly fail. I understand how scary it can be to fail, and academic training can prevent students from taking risks because failure might mean a bad grade. I use my experience to help students avoid failures that I have learned from, to learn to adapt when things don't work out as expected, and to think of failure as a learning tool. I make the classroom a space where students talk to each other about their work in progress through presentations and small group discussions. This creates a classroom ecology that helps students feel safe in taking risks and use failure as a learning tool, both in their work and in each other's work.

I feel like I've done a good job if students are working on self-designed projects at the end of the semester; if they know a little bit about each other's work, perspective, and process; and if they are invested despite the ever-present risk of failure that is inherent to art making.

My investments as an educator go hand in hand with making sacrifices as an adjunct. I taught four to five classes a semester, sometimes at up to three institutions at a time for years after completing my MFA. Even with this "full-time" course load, I was not making enough to pay my bills and would ration food in the long summer and winter breaks. Teaching twice as many classes as many full-time professors, I was too busy to work somewhere else. This is the life of many adjuncts, and it is a disservice to the educators and to the students whose professors are too tired and hungry to be fully dedicated to teaching.

I could not sustain working as a full-time adjunct. As a compromise, and much to my disappointment, I took a full-time job working in a field that, while not art-related, is creative. I have health insurance, I can pay my bills, and I still teach one to two adjunct classes a semester. I like to joke that my full-time job pays for my teaching and art habits. I apply for full-time positions every year but am not willing to compromise living in a place where I won't be safe as a queer person and where I may not be able to access healthcare as a transgender person. I have been told by mentors that being a transgender queer man does not count as diversity, and I hold many thoughts and resignations about this; and at the same time I feel that someone who has congruent alienating experiences with academia that can connect with alienated students should be the person in the classroom, even if it isn't me. Academia is a home for me where I get to do things that I love doing, and it is sometimes a hostile environment, where I cannot survive as is.







## Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative

### I.

I am a product of two very different worlds. My mother was born on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Ashland, Montana, a citizen of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, and a strong, resilient, American Indian woman. She was born on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Ashland, Montana and lived there until Father Emmett G. Hoffmann—a Catholic priest and missionary who devoted his life to the Northern Cheyenne people—helped adopt her shortly after her birth and took her to live with him and my mothers' adopted mother Mary McGarvey. She continued to live in Montana and spent time on the reservation with my grandfather, Father Emmett Hoffmann, as he worked tirelessly to improve the impoverished conditions the Northern Cheyenne people faced.

My mother eventually left Cheyenne country to live in Bayonne, New Jersey with her mother Mary. She married my father, an American of German and Italian descent, and moved first to Bricktown and later to Point Pleasant, an archetypal East Coast, beach town where they would raise my sister Cara-George, my brother Justin, and me. But even though I grew up in the middle-class suburbs of Point Pleasant, American Indian country was never far from my heart or mind. My family made regular trips back to the Cheyenne Reservation to visit my mother's extended family.

I can remember following my grandfather around the reservation, watching him interact with members of our tribal community. My grandfather was a Capuchin priest at the St. Labre Indian School. I spent a lot of time with him on the campus, which welcomed students from the Crow and Northern Cheyenne tribes. One of my grandfather's passions was overseeing the construction of new buildings and facilities for the school, and I remember one instance where I overheard someone say that had my grandfather not been a Capuchin Priest, he probably would have been an architect. His Indian name was Soaring Eagle, and I always liked that name be-

cause, for me, it spoke to the way my grandfather always emphasized the importance of having a long-term vision for success.

Whenever my family travelled to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, I blended into the community with ease. My entire childhood was characterized by an ingrained sense of duality, which would serve me well later in my professional life. In Point Pleasant, I was just another kid in the neighborhood, riding bikes, going to the beach, and partaking in all the activities associated with typical suburban youth. When I was at the reservation, I was just another Indian child, playing with the other children and experiencing the realities of American Indian life.

I realize now that one of the most remarkable things about my childhood was how easily I was accepted in the two very different communities I called home. In Point Pleasant, I was the only mixed-race child in my group of friends, but I was never treated differently due to my American Indian heritage. None of the white kids in the neighborhood questioned my identity or asked me to explain myself. I was accepted for who I was, no questions asked. That same sense of acceptance extended to the Reservation. Every time I was there, the members of the tribe looked at me as if I was just another Indian. I fell in with kids my age and formed relationships with those around me. No one stopped to ask whether I had an authentic connection to the reservation and its people. Ironically, it wasn't until I attended college at the University of Hartford that those in my immediate social circle began asking me about my background and sense of identity. Only then was I forced to consider how my parents' very different heritages and my upbringing in both the American suburbs and on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation informed who I was and how I self-identified.

Despite that sense of acceptance and the ease with which I would transition between the two worlds I knew, I was aware of the stark differences between my life in Point Pleasant and the living conditions on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. The differences between those two places made a lasting impression on me and helped determine the career path I would eventually pursue. The rampant poverty I saw on the Reservation brought into sharp relief the quality of life my Jersey friends and I were fortunate enough to experience. On the Reservation, I played in dilapidated housing and on abandoned streets. The lack of formal infrastructure and community-planning was astounding. There was no sense of place or cohesion of vision within the built environment. The entire Reservation seemed like it had been thrown together in the most haphazard manner without any thought given to how space can affect the lives of those who occupy it. In Point Pleasant, it seemed as if the location and purpose of every physical structure, from well-manicured homes to the classic Point Pleasant Boardwalk, had been thought through. From this perspective, the two communities could not have been more different.

## II.

Life on the Reservation also introduced me to the indispensable roles that art, craft, and making play in American Indian culture. In Point Pleasant, my father kept a workshop in his garage where he would make various things with his hands. Other than that, making wasn't an integral part of everyday life in the New Jersey suburbs. The opposite was true on the Reservation, where making and artistry were present in so many aspects of daily life. One of the most interesting characteristics about Indian Country is that on many reservations over two-thirds of the people still make their primary living through making—we are creators. Making jewelry, food, or art and engaging in other creative endeavors constitute a way of life for American Indian tribes. The lack of access to formal education and traditional career paths requires tribal members to be entrepreneurial and continue the maker tradition. It is a way to make ends meet in communities with few alternatives.

Spending time on the Reservation also emphasized, in the way only primary experiences can, the important role art and making play in helping these communities honor the legacies and conflicted histories of their tribes, while simultaneously carrying those legacies into the future. For years, American society has paid minimal attention to the customs and traditions of the people who originally called these lands that are now the United States home. The culture and art I experienced on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation helped me to understand how every act of making doubles as an act of cultural preservation and stewardship and how an act of making confers a sense of ownership and pride on the individual artisan or maker.

As I grew older, I discovered that I was a visual learner. I possess strong visual acuity and a capacity to learn through doing. These strengths would eventually lead me to pursue studies in architecture. I earned a bachelor's in architectural engineering and a master's degree in architecture. Architecture is a unique field that, simply put, requires practitioners to balance artistic sensibilities with pragmatic strategies. Every sketch I've ever made and every design I've shepherded from concept through construction has been born of a need to solve real-world problems in the most aesthetically pleasing ways possible. And it has always been important to me to ensure that the work I deliver honors the people I'm working with. Architects must think like artists and act like planners. They must consider the ramifications of every decision they make while simultaneously striving to design and produce work that derives its sense of place from local cultures and communities.

After graduating with my master's degree, I split the early part of my career between private architecture practices, academic work, and the not-for-profit world. I honed the skills I acquired as a student and began to consider how these skills could benefit the communities of my ancestors. What I came to realize is that I would only find a sense of personal fulfillment in my career if I used my skills to elevate the voices of those most at risk, like the members of my extended family who were forced

to live in third world conditions on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. I wanted to practice architecture in a way that would improve Indigenous communities, and I wanted to educate Native and non-Native students about the hardships along with the beauty our nation's first peoples face on a daily basis.

This desire inspires my work today as both a practitioner of architecture and an educator. My creative energies spring from the opportunities this dual career affords me, and I am never more creatively engaged than when I am involved with projects that allow me either to directly improve the lives of this country's forgotten Indigenous people, or educate students about American Indian populations.

### III.

As the executive director of the non-profit Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative (SNCC), I work with American Indian tribes to design sustainable futures for the many generations to come. My colleagues and I deliberately include members of these tribes in the creative process; we work "with" not "for" so that American Indians can become the architects of their own visions and futures.

As an educator, I've held positions as a visiting professor and artist at institutions like The George Washington University's Corcoran School of the Arts & Design and Arizona State University's Construction in Indian Country, which is administered through the Del E. Webb School of Construction. When I'm in the classroom, I blend the traditional, Western, euro-centric pedagogy—the basis of our country's educational system and the education I received—with knowledge and stories gleaned from the time I've spent visiting with and learning from American Indian elders in Indigenous communities across this nation.

One of the most humbling aspects of my work have been the opportunities I've had to collaborate with tribal members. Their input is necessary to the creative process because the insights they provide help me and my team develop culturally responsive designs and ideas that evoke an authentic sense of place. The structures we design on tribal lands marry the complex and, many times, conflicted traditions of Western architecture with our Indigenous histories and cultures, all of which speak to American Indians' resilience and self-determination to thrive in the face of continuing adversity.

There's a push and pull—some might say resistance—to this sort of design process and, in many ways, an inherent creative tension that makes the work so unique. Sometimes a structure may look more Western and other times it will more intentionally reflect the look and feel of traditional, tribal design. It all depends on the specific context of the building or space in question, and context is something my colleagues and I constantly seek to understand. If, for example, we are designing a firehouse, we might look for a way to acknowledge the lookout towers American Indian tribes once built to protect their lands. We are constantly asking questions

and challenging assumptions. How does a design strike the perfect balance between Western ideology and American Indian ideology? How does a designer relate the function of the building with its form or context within a specific culture? Can the look and feel of the tipi and tipi circles of our nomadic tribes be appropriately replicated in urban contexts? These are important questions because we know that striking an appropriate balance will create an authentic sense of place. Without that sense of place, homogeneity has a tendency to creep in, detracting from architecture's power to positively impact people and influence daily life.

#### IV.

Striking that perfect balance, which in many accounts may never be achieved and evoking an authentic sense of place, is best done through the deliberate integration of local arts and culture with place. I've always found inspiration in American Indian art, which has a special ability to shed light on the true nature of the American Indian experience. Artists like T.C. Cannon and Fritz Scholder created bodies of work that show the picturesque beauty of life in Indian country without masking the hardships and struggles confronting tribal communities. The honesty and emotional depth of their individual artistic visions engage viewers in a dialogue about what it means to be an American Indian in this country. The works open the door to healing by acknowledging the histories and totality of the experience.

That honesty and emotional depth can also be found in the works of local tribal artists. In 2013, SNCC partnered with the Santo Domingo Tribal Housing Authority, a non-profit developer responsible for providing affordable housing to residents of the Santo Domingo Pueblo, also known as the Kewa Pueblo, a tribal community in New Mexico. We worked with the housing authority to develop forty-one units of affordable housing and the accompanying Santo Domingo Heritage Arts Trail, a one-and-a-half mile walking trail with integrated art nodes where artists from the Santo Domingo tribe can showcase their traditional and contemporary artwork. This is a community where 75 percent of the tribe's population are self-employed artisans. Some produce pottery, others work as silversmiths, bead workers, or shell workers. All are crafts people in some capacity. The Arts Trail not only functions as a safe place for pedestrian passage in a community where cars are a luxury, but it also raises awareness of the Santo Domingo community's artistic culture and speaks to the rich artistic heritage of the tribe's artisans and makers.

Projects like this deliberately blend art and local culture with established practices of architecture, planning, and design; they provide insight into the many ways that art makes a difference in the lives of people, especially people living in at-risk, American Indian communities. The work we did with the Santo Domingo Pueblo demonstrates the power that architecture and art have to positively change a community for good. Our work provides a strong example of why it is important to sup-

port good design within American Indian communities. Far too often, these communities are left out of the conversation when it comes to architecture and community planning. The SNCC, now the Sustainable Native Communities Design Lab within MASS Design Group is planning the design and eventual construction of a trail in Crawford, Nebraska. This trail is at the location of the Fort Robinson Massacre, a tragic encounter between the United States Army and members of the Northern Cheyenne tribe that resulted in the unjust deaths of between thirty-two and sixty-four Northern Cheyenne people. We want the trail to initiate a greater conversation about the tragedy and how the United States has failed to properly acknowledge the genocide of our nation's Indigenous peoples. To do this, we plan to work with Northern Cheyenne tribal elders, artists, and cultural bearers to evoke this story in an authentic, culturally responsive way.

## V.

Using pedagogy in an authentic and culturally responsive way is also something I seek to do as an educator. My identity as a citizen of both the Northern Cheyenne Nation and the United States of America has led me to create curricula that include aspects from both parts of my personal heritage. I am grateful for the education I received from grade school through my graduate work, but I also recognize that my formal education is derived from a Western, euro-centric approach to pedagogy that does not incorporate the traditional or contemporary knowledge and practices of American Indian tribes.

When I first started teaching in the academy, I approached pedagogy in a very formal way. I based my courses in the same French Beaux Arts approach to architecture and art in which I was instructed. But over the years, as I've had more opportunities to work with American Indian communities, I've made a conscious and concerted effort to include Native stories and ideas into the curricula I use. And I've made a point of challenging students to think about their work within the constraints of a broader social context. A seminar I developed at George Washington University's Corcoran School of the Arts & Design focused on asking students to contemplate how they, as artists and designers, either use or do not use their skills for social good. I wanted the students to consider whether they were trying to achieve something more than aesthetic appeal through their work. I worked with them to assess whether they were (or were not) consciously impacting a broader swath of society group of people and integrating their work into a larger conversation about the direction our society is taking. The readings used in this seminar were compiled from a range of social activists like Martin Luther King Jr., Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and others. These thinkers were intended to invite every student to question the social contract our society hinges upon and whether that social contract has adequately included perspectives from marginalized communities.

The academy has always excelled at training students in formal disciplines. Now, we must impart the importance of considering how we as artists and designers can use our talents to spark conversations about congenital inequities within our society. And we must spark these conversations in the public space. Teaching the seminar at the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design helped me realize how connected our lives are. The issues American Indian communities face resemble issues found in other communities, and the work being done to address these problems is related. It's important to frame the conversations we have in ways that stress the commonalities that link us together. In the past, we as American Indians have not had enough opportunities to tell our own stories, to develop our own narratives. Providing tribal communities with the proper support so that we feel empowered to make our voices heard can help remedy these complex situations.

When I reflect on my life and career, I return to that sense of duality and acceptance I grew up with as a child. Today, I find myself pivoting between two different yet related worlds: the architecture and planning work I do within Indian Country and my work within our Western-oriented education system. I connect the two as best I can, to allow things I've learned from practice to shape the courses I teach. I use lessons and ideas I've acquired in the classroom to reconsider how my colleagues and I can help improve the everyday lives and experiences of those living in extreme poverty in Indian Country.

One of the things I carry with me from my childhood is the importance of acceptance. I was always grateful for the acceptance I felt in both Point Pleasant and the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. I try to extend that same sense of acceptance to my students and to the American Indian tribes I work with. I work hard to listen to tribal members and to integrate their points of view into the design process.

## VI.

When I first began work with the Santo Domingo Pueblo, I got a firsthand glimpse at how a longstanding legacy of disenfranchisement can affect certain members of American Indian communities. From the onset of the project, we held planning meetings at the Pueblo's local community center to solicit feedback and ideas from residents. At these meetings, I noticed that certain attendees always refrained from speaking up. No matter what I did as a facilitator, I couldn't get these individuals to participate in the discussions we held. Their attendance indicated a genuine interest in the project, but their steadfast refusal to speak reflected a shared sense of futility, a hesitancy to try to influence the development of their own community.

So one day, I decided to hold a planning meeting outside the community center. We went on a walking tour of the various sites within the pueblo that were slated for development, and I asked for every person to share their perspectives about the history, about the present and about the future. I was pleasantly surprised that so many

of the people who at previous gatherings had refused to voice opinions spoke-up and became active participants in the planning process. A change in setting coupled with concerted efforts to make each attendee feel a sense of belonging and empowerment completely altered the dynamic. Rather than a conversation predominated by just a few voices. An unadulterated, group discussion ensued, and I learned much more than in previous gatherings about what needed to be done to support the community move forward.

In hindsight, I shouldn't have been too surprised that certain residents of Santo Domingo were hesitant to make their voices heard at our initial planning meetings. For years, American Indian communities across the country have been and continue to be silenced by the federal government of the United States, which had no interest in listening to their members or including their ideas into plans for the future of their communities. This long-standing pattern of exclusion embedded a sense of distrust and disillusionment within many American Indians, and as a result it's not uncommon for American Indian communities to treat any and all outsiders with a healthy combination of skepticism and detachment. As a citizen of a different tribe, I was an outsider within the Santo Domingo community, and it required all my creativity and many entreaties of goodwill in order to earn the trust of the Pueblo's residents.

That experience taught me much, and it has since influenced my teaching style. When I'm in the classroom, one of the most important things I do as an educator is to empower all my students to become active participants in the learning process. I especially want those students who come from historically disenfranchised populations to understand that the classroom is a place where their voices should not be constrained in any way. They should instead seek to speak up and share their experiences and ideas without fear. I am sensitive to the ways that minority students have absorbed the historic traumas inflicted upon their communities from those in power. A critical part of my teaching style is supporting these students to move past those experiences and speak from a place of strength.

Ultimately, I hope we as a country can do a better job of listening to our Indigenous populations. Our society has a responsibility to elevate the voices and cultures of our American Indian communities and to incorporate our shared histories, stories, and heritages into the historical record. Remembering those who have been forgotten in the past will help us create a more honest and unified country. We can do this through the power of expression, which lies at the heart of art and culture. Art is one of the world's most powerful mediums because it represents the connection between personal ideals and communal values. The more we elevate the understanding of these ideals and values through American Indian art and culture, the better positioned we will be to increase a sense of understanding between our Native and non-Native communities. Only then will we be able to create spaces for healing, places for love, and a future that reflects this ongoing experiment we call the United States of America.

6)

tell our teachers that we  
are finished



## Related Tactics + Art Practical

DR. ALAN GRANT: I have a theory that there are two kinds of boys. There are those that want to be astronomers and those that want to be astronauts. The astronomer or the paleontologist gets to study these amazing things from a place of complete safety.

PAUL KIRBY: But then you never get to go into space.

DR. ALAN GRANT: Exactly. That's the difference between imagining and seeing: to be able to touch them.

[Majestic dinosaurs come into view]

—*Jurassic Park III*, 2001

### I.

In movie-academia, the world is a passionate, hornet's nest of grand ideas, where deep thoughts and rigorous pursuit clash against pedestrian reality, typically in a flurry of chalk dust billowing off mahogany framed chalkboards, free and safe. This, after all, is at the heart of academic tenure, to be free and to think without fear of persecution while sporting artistically disheveled, tweed jackets. Here is where we may all imagine. But a movie-professor has never looked like me, and I have never worn tweed. I am not Dr. Alan Grant, a middle-aged, cis-gendered, straight, white guy and movie-paleontologist who, upon his first visit to Jurassic Park, learned quickly that “seeing” a dinosaur was definitely more terrifying than imagining one, because—duh. Academia is not always safe, at least not for people like me. I have

been an artist-academic for over a decade—both kinds of “boys”—and like many, we are here in this space, there is no more chalk, and I am the imagined-turned-seen they are too afraid to touch.

Academia and traditional spaces of learning were always an integral part of my multigenerational, college family. I knew I would attend college before I realized I would be an artist and academic. Like many middle-class families, college was a normalized conclusion, a cultural expectation, and a financial possibility. Teaching one to trust and believe the system is a generational project. I grew up hearing stories about college; it is where my parents met and started dating. Most of their siblings and my grandparents not only graduated college, but nearly all from the University of Washington. What’s more, if you grew up in the North End of Seattle, UW’s campus was likely a prominent backdrop, whether you were a student or not. It is not unusual to drive past everyday on your commute; you might stroll through the quad to see the cherry blossoms in bloom or the massive arboretum; or you might go to an event on campus or watch a football game. We even crashed a frat party or two in high school.

The Seattle I grew up in was visibly segregated. Active until the sixties, racially restrictive covenant laws have wreaked generational havoc on the city; white folks in the north and people of color in the CD (Central District) and South End. It is a profoundly complex experience to be raised by an interracial family in an acutely segregated city, where the conceit is progressive politics and “pretty diverse demographics.” My parents were in their early 30s, straight and white and were part of a large population of Americans who adopted babies from industrialized South Korea. I was adopted in the summer of 1981 from Seoul, Korea where I lived in foster care for six months after being found on the side of the road in a basket. Adoption culture at the time encouraged assimilation strategies as the most productive approach to parenting a transnational adoptee, so we neither avoided nor sought out articulating these conditions. All in all, I was deeply loved and unequivocally cared for in spite of difference, but I was by no means safe.

## II.

Segregation is deeply insidious. It makes one’s world small and homogenous—dangerous. So college was an early pathway for me to an almost instantaneously bigger world. Whitewashed histories and experiences were amplified. For the first time, I didn’t have to imagine myself in the world. I was there. In my freshman year, I enrolled in a lower-level American history class, “Modern American Civilization since 1877.” The course had over one-hundred undergraduates and was taught by Professor Stephanie Camp, a feminist historian, who at the time specialized in the Antebellum South and strategies enslaved women employed to resist captivity. She was brilliant and spoke with this professorial assurance that was refreshingly accessible to me.

In the history department and throughout high school, most of my teachers were older, white men, many from whom I learned incredible amounts of information that nevertheless validated narratives of victors, progress, and triumph. Professor Camp offered us critical readings on these perspectives. Most were new to me, and her version of United States history made me realize the bias of my previous education but most importantly how to question who benefits from this knowledge formation. What systems of power are at work? I often think of these questions as my Due North. It is what guides my work in the classroom and broader practice. Learning that I should, and, more so, *could* ask these questions propelled me towards being an academic, and the responsibility to follow lines of inquiry that are hard, messy, uncomfortable—unsafe—is one reason that keeps me there.

One day in a study section, a student asked our graduate TA what they should call Professor Camp. “Like, should we call her Stephanie? What do we *call* her?” This comment seemed to resonate because the entire class erupted into general musings about how to address her before the flustered TA redirected the discussion. The next lecture, Professor Camp stood at the podium, clasped her hands together in front of her abdomen, and calmly addressed us, “I’ve been told there is some confusion about what to call me. You can either call me Doctor or Professor, but I really won’t answer to anything else.” Her unyielding words sucked the air out of the room. Two young, white men were so offended they immediately jumped out of their seats and left class. Without a second breath, she commenced her lecture.

I think back on this moment often. At the time, I recall feeling impressed by her self-possession and what I then considered a demand for respect—she was a badass. But at 19, I truly did not understand the complex implications for a scholar with multiple Ivy League degrees and countless accolades, who also happened to identify as a woman of color, to be confronted by a room of largely white undergrads demanding she clarify, more so, justify her position. This of course wasn’t about a job title but about whether or not she belonged; was she legitimate or to be believed? What bodies can be trusted? Professor Camp was not something my class could imagine.

She didn’t lecture us and expose our racist, sexist, and ageist biases, although she had every right. She quickly and gracefully made herself visible and forced us to see her. It was a patient act of generosity and tolerance that is at the heart of teaching, made at her expense. Our ignorance had no right to demand she carry the burden of proof or to make it her sacrifice. Yet, she did. I am sure this wasn’t the first or last time. When your job is to undo, and the mere presence of your body jeopardizes what has been done, how can you escape without harm? Professor Camp conjured the invisible and modeled seeing. This was a teaching moment I have spent decades learning from though a lesson I would guess most of my fellow classmates didn’t get. But academia has never been about everyone.

I have lived my versions and relived Professor Camp’s experience too many times to note in this essay, and the bruises of disbelief have a relentless and solitary ache.

She was someone who modeled for me early on how I might negotiate academia that is not just about demanding macho respect or being a badass. I have long given up proffering lazy, patriarchal qualifications of being nor will I take on someone's discriminatory attitudes and dissolve it into myself as I used to do when I first started teaching and was afraid of being too messy. Now my work in the classroom and in broader practice is rooted in and about creating space for criticality, trust, and strategic generosity because in academia I have found I am still able to do so. It is part of why I find academia productive, in spite of itself.

This approach counters and intervenes in a neoliberal radical individualism that is rampant in small, private art schools, art departments, and the art world at large, fostered by myths of the lone, (cough, male, cough) artist-genius that still seem to carry weight in broader culture. These principles breed hostile competitiveness, promote separatism, and prioritize distrust. This is largely antithetical to how artists routinely build informal networks of survival and mirror the strategies those in power have historically used to divide and conquer the other. For decades, I have watched artists use their two most transferable skills—creative thinking and resourcefulness—to build systems of support across socio-economic backgrounds and positionalities. It is the greatest tool artists have and while others may spend their time waiting for the institution to give them their due, we've already been over here using its tools to build something for us.

### III.

In 2015, Weston Teruya, Nathan Watson, and I formed Related Tactics, a collective that facilitates projects at the intersection of race, art, and culture. We met in grad school in the early 2000s when it was the beginning of living in the world, post-9/11, post-culture wars, post-identity art, post-1993 Whitney Biennial, post-multiculturalism. We built a friendship and casual collaboration spanning fifteen years that, amongst many reasons, was grounded in our experience negotiating academia together as students of color, when latent white supremacist thought was at the early stages of being teased to the surface of culture. Then was not now.

Our work was often too political; too much about race and gender; too "didactic"; not relatable—as if it is the job of the artist to be relatable. We were taught to code our work and language for fear that we would be pigeonholed as "[fill in the blank] artists" or, god forbid, community artists. Though not articulated this way, we were taught that to survive as artists of color meant to embody white supremacist ideals lest our stories or experiences implicate a viewer and drive them away. We needed to make our work palatable to "broader" art audiences. Code and confound our histories and experiences in abstraction or non-figurative work. Erase any legible evidence of us. So we did. But even when we had scrubbed away the residue of our

thick, messy, Brown histories that span oceans and time, our bodies were still read onto our work without consent.

Related Tactics was formed in 2015, long after graduate school. We were all working as adjuncts and arts administrators in various capacities in the grueling economic reality of the San Francisco Bay Area. Trump had not yet been elected but the air was thick with looming chaos. You could touch it. Neoliberal blowback and backlash to a post-race, Obama-era culture was in full swing. Arts funding was shifting to prioritize community, equity, and inclusion—buzzwords that began to sneak into funding requirements and mission statements in both meaningful and empty ways. At the time I was also serving on Southern Exposure’s curatorial committee, a local, arts nonprofit, and had become exhausted and frustrated by the troubling question, “Where are all of the artists of color?” This was an attitude not unique to SoEx but the broader art world. It positioned me and many of my colleagues of color as responsible for enacting the fraught paradox of “gatekeeper.” While I do choose to take on the community responsibility to amplify other artists of color, must that mean I perilously also do the white institution’s work of “diversity”?

Related Tactics as a formal collective grew out of this question “For whom do we work?” Nate, Weston, and I all choose to operate within the system, academia, and arts institutions. It is a treacherous site, as unsafe as they come, but not unlike other sectors or landscapes. Our collective trust grew out of an immediate necessity for mutual support while we were in graduate school, and, despite academia being a site of duress, it also supplied us with tools of navigation. We learned not just how to make art for the contemporary market but how to be artists in a complex world and advocate for our community and each other. Of course, most of this wasn’t on the syllabus, but in school we learned that critical arts discourse was not just theoretical or imagined. It was unpredictable, lived, and real. We didn’t just learn subjects; rather we learned how and why certain paradigms were taught. We learned about power, the oppressive impact of white/cis/straight guilt, and the danger of allies. We learned that we are all colonizers, but that does not mean we are the same or that we will enact knowledge with the same care.

We formalized because we wanted to harness the unyielding discomfort that grows out of systemic pain and unknowing. Could it be leveraged outward? How might our community possess and reinterpret this unpredictable and thorny support so the institution may not capture it? And, if so, may it be on our terms and for our benefit? Can we utilize un-safeness for our own good?

#### IV.

I call this “giving away our access.” Sometimes this means turning an invitation for a solo project into one that includes over fifty other artists of color. We have donated our own money and Related Tactics artist fees to support emerging artists of color

through paid opportunities. We have paid conference fees, bought work, and always hire people for their skills. We acknowledge that as a collective and as individuals, we have the capacity and privilege to make these economic choices largely because of our institutional access and support. It is access to the institution and our choice to be there that allows us to give it away. It is not for everyone, by its and my own admission, but without it we could not do what we do.

What can't happen in dollars happens in the less quantifiable community labor, meaning time supporting an informal network that operates in the shadows of the institution. While the academe still benefits from a small circle of those in the know, I happily—no, gleefully—share the map. In collectivity, it is more possible to make the institution work for us until it no longer requires evidence to justify our belonging. For me, this manifests as a sharing of knowledge and an unwavering fidelity to transparency. I take on countless outside mentoring of students of color because they deserve nuanced support; I hold extra classes to breakdown arcane academic hiring; I reveal pay scales and teach budget workshops; I have even held a writer's workshop for a group of largely former students of color in my living room because writing from certain subjectivities is complex in a way that has yet fully developed within the academe. I speak plainly about the systems of power that give institutions their authority and all of us that give the institution its meaning. If it's not academia it will be something else. I choose to mobilize my access from the center and not just to undo it but so we may do with it whatever the hell we want.

Like many of my colleagues and mentors, I was an adjunct for around five years before my first full-time position. During this time I worked across six different institutions, teaching in multiple humanities and arts departments at large research institutions, community colleges, private art schools, and for-profit institutions. I took any teaching job I could hustle and ended up intersecting with countless student populations. Many semesters ago I found myself on an air base teaching Art Appreciation. One year I taught nine courses over both the semester and quarter, hundreds of students, four graduate TAs, mentored eighteen grad and undergrad advisees, picked up part time work on the weekends, and maintained my publishing and creative practice. This was an especially brutal year where I drove over an hour to a morning class in Davis, California then zipped 150 miles down to Santa Cruz, California for a late afternoon class twice a week.

This schedule wreaked havoc on my health and personal life. To be a full-time adjunct is a demoralizing, isolating, and exhausting experience. I had many moments where I questioned if this was a sustainable pathway. Where do I do my best work, and how can it be a healthy part of my life as a whole? Where am I most useful? What do I need for my own research and what is practice? For whom is my work? What is my value? While I do not think there are finite answers to these questions, I often revisit them in order to calibrate and reflect, particularly the ways that my labor is interfacing with institutional entities like academia. While I do not wish my adjunct

experience on anyone, this particular stage of my academic career is where I learned how to really teach. It reinforced for me that teaching art, writing, and critical thinking to college-aged adults has real impact and is a deeply meaningful experience if you can survive it.

## V.

In 2016 I accepted a position as Associate Professor of Visual and Critical Studies that came with an administrative position as the Executive Director of Art Practical, a West Coast arts publishing organization housed at California College of the Arts. Our small team consisted of a determined and hardworking group of artists, writers, publishers, and curators who believed arts discourse played a role in a healthy arts ecosystem. This was an opportunity to center the experiences of marginalized voices using resources that might not otherwise be afforded or accessed and to create as many pathways to leadership and a living wage as possible.

We did this by shifting the organization and online journal to be more people forward, focused on telling and archiving the stories and experiences of artists, not just the artworks they created. There was one driving question: what art world were we creating with our content? We created an audio-video channel that hosted hours of podcasts and videos telling the stories of local artists, cultural criticism, and intergenerational perspectives. Art Practical published its first book, *Decolonizing Culture* by Anuradha Vikram. This was Vikram's first book, a pointed collection of essays about race and gender within contemporary art and culture. Podcasts and books were particularly important to me because it began to address concerns around access and audience, but we also leveraged institutional resources, such as professional-grade audio booths and other technology that in the current market would be unattainable for a small org like ours.

Culturally, it allowed us to position ourselves as a college press because Art Practical is published by CCA. My goal was to "give away" tangible, but also more abstract, social resources. For instance an adjunct does not have the same access to institutional resources as a full-time colleague but theoretically is expected to engage research as if they do. How does an adjunct navigate this paradox and as always, who benefits the most from this closed system? In projects like *Related Tactics*, I am able to share personal opportunities and resources achieved through my own institutional pathway, but working at Art Practical allowed me to give away the institution itself.

The institution is here, all around me, as it always has been. I choose to do my work within these walls because it is its own gatekeeper to systems called success, professional, and credible where we are still not seen and barely imagined. While many of my colleagues work outside these systems building something new and separate, I have chosen to be here because academia is a site of recognition. While

academia might self-segregate, it is a function and operation of our broader world. So even in my small ways, I will create the art world I want to see so that we may be seen because of it, both inside the white walls of academia and outside—in neither place are we safe.





## Occupy Museums

### I.

Art is not a practical career, and people generally know this. Anyone who takes it up ought to eventually make peace with this fact, but that's not me. Instead, the contrasting demands of artistic practice and the market economy have seemed in such jarring opposition that, eventually, they became the subject of my work and remade my practice; extracted me from the studio; pushed me out onto the streets; pulled me out of my solo career as a maker and into collaborative organizing. Along the way, the horizon became social revolution rather than aesthetic invention.

I maintained an artist identity through years of political action, quietly returning to the studio for creative nourishment while building a practice and reputation based on collective direct action. This activism meant challenging art world elites directly as few artists have a chance to do; it was cathartic. Yet this didn't prevent a shadow from creeping in when called to explain my role to others—or to myself. Reaching my 40s, I noticed that I began to wonder about the connection between the public shaming of trustees and presidents who preside over museums and the private sense of shame I've felt as an artist struggling into my middle age for a dignified social role. I've concluded that in order to contribute artistically or politically, it's necessary to investigate shame itself.

Artists put ourselves into extremely vulnerable positions. We present personal visions, often weird ones, to institutional gatekeepers, who, if we're lucky, present them to an audience for some kind of social transaction, hopefully acceptance and financial support. It's a high-risk endeavor and means the possibility of a very personal failure. The trope of the failed artist is a victim of their outsized ego. But personalizing this shame is precisely the trap.

Economic conditions and an inability to articulate them, especially in relation to artists' romanticized and relatively privileged positions, constitute the deeper source of shame. Vying for a mainstream, art career means overinvestment. There's

an apparent necessity to live in expensive cities where the opportunities of the art industry lie, but where artists face unaffordable rents and the threat of displacement. Then there's the maxed-out loans and credit card traps, the requirement for degrees, studio space, and expensive materials versus a meager-earning career. And because the goal is time for often open-ended creative development rather than time converted to earnings, artists are likely to be expendable when we double as wage-workers. As a result, I've been caught, and many artists are caught, in a spiral oscillating between the poles of personal creative failure and economic precariousness. Creativity and the economic compound each other.

Yet there's a misunderstanding when it comes to specifying community struggles, as to whether that necessitates victimhood and arguing for status as a protected group. United States artists are seen as overwhelmingly white and more likely to hail from comfortable classes than working-class or immigrant backgrounds. Besides, many workers struggle with labor devaluation and obsolescence in a global economy. How are artists exceptional? Many workers take risks to organize. What's stopping artists from unionizing to better our working conditions as nurses or teachers do? It's tempting and common to dismiss artists' struggles as privileged whining. But a dismissal misses the opportunity to understand a condition in which perhaps the vast majority of Americans find ourselves, which touches on the inner life of capitalism.

Shame is an internalization of laws: divine, natural or social ones, depending on one's worldview. It's most often associated with religions, Catholicism or Judaism—human narratives that begin with Adam and Eve's shame at the discovery of their own sinful nakedness in the Garden of Eden.

This shame was a positive attribute. If one didn't feel it, bad behavior and then divine punishment would likely ensue and still today being "shameless" isn't a virtue. Ever since 2016 Trump's shamelessness has been much discussed with commenters, concluding with *The Guardian* claiming that "Trump has taught us that shame performs a vital democratic function—and how dangerous is the man who feels none of it."

However shame within our current belief system, which is the belief in the market economy masquerading as democracy, holds up not so much the values of the Bible as transactional values, but the failure to earn a prosperous or living wage is shameful; so is failure to invest at the right time, failure to consume expensive brands or catch the attention of wealthy people, and most of all, failure to pay back or renegotiate debts.

The political Left practically defines itself as not accepting these as personal failures even though I imagine that most people in the US feel personally ashamed about their inferiority concerning these standards, and artists who trade in personal visions personalize the failure more. But capitalism is well known for its habit of creating a class of losers by design, so rejecting the personalization of market failures

makes sense. But shame is not just an economic challenge, it puts one's identity at stake, and identity is a construct comprised of both historical and emotional dimensions. Navigating this emotional territory in public and private is the work of the present moment, especially since social media has transferred both identities and emotions into both market currencies and political footballs on a level not seen in generations. Today's public spaces online and off are filled with acts of shaming.

But even though shame is wielded publicly it gnaws away on the inside. It gets its power from taboo and self-censorship, from the powerlessness of having to silently lift impossibly heavy social weight. Shame therefore needs to be publicly exposed, and the iceberg needs to be lifted into the sun to melt. That's where art comes in. Art is good at making murky and difficult things visible.

## II.

I write about *Debtfair* as a member of a group, Occupy Museums, who developed it over a few years and presented it collectively at the Whitney Biennial in 2017. Our intention was to start up a national conversation about art and structural shame. We felt the Whitney was the best place to do it because it's a crown jewel for a gilded version of New York that The museum stands for global wealth that sweeps precarity, struggle, and abjection under the rug just as the old Chelsea—of drag queens and nightclubs, factories, and workers in the manufacturing industries—was sanitized by luxury brand temples, high-end hotels, jet-setting tourists, and mega-galleries. In *Debtfair* we would lift up the museum's rug to expose the conditions of one of its primary communities: working artists.

*Debtfair* is an exhibition of artworks clustered inside wall openings according to the debts the artists owe. It's also a slideshow of paintings and sculptures paired up like diptychs with statements about artists' economic realities. Contemporary art, often mute and open for interpretation, is in fact pre-interpreted by the "frame" around it, whether it's a high-end white box gallery telling us the art is expensive and chic or a linguistically-coded, curatorial text telling us its politically and intellectually important, or a café or community-space wall telling us it might be pretty or well-meaning but nothing to take too seriously. We wanted to make the struggle itself a frame for the work and bring economic reality to the same retinal and visual level as the art. So a quilt-like network of different colored wobbly bullseyes painted in acrylic by artist Nina Bovasso was paired with the words:

I got into debt because I really needed more money, and I made an investment into a company that I thought was going to make me a lot of money, so I made the mistake of skipping a few rent payments to pay for the investment. The business investment did not make any money at all, and now my son and I are on the verge of ejec-

tion. I feel terrible about this, I feel like I am failing as a responsible parent. I am trying my best, but I need help.

Everywhere you could see the internalization of a hard-edged economy into the attempt to live a creative daily life. It made for a puzzling contrast: artists leading Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde double lives, such as the will to creative play versus financial entrapment. Gazing at the clustered artworks in *Debtfair*, one stared at hard evidence that creative freedom is a human drive, but after reading the artist's confessions, the paintings transformed into dangerous lures. Debt was the line and hook. Debt had snagged artists by creative aspirations and lashed them to the financial system on the bank's terms. Artists recounted how debt transformed the aesthetics and meaning of their art over time.

We concentrated on debt because it's a basic tissue of capitalism. Almost everyone has it, but the different types of debt articulate class positions. These range from payday loans that oppress the poor, to good and bad mortgages and student debt, to the high tech "fixed income assets" that personal debts are bundled together at scale to securitize investments, making the 1 percent richer each day. We wanted to map these relations to the art community because, if art is a search for freedom, the ballooning of private debt in the last few decades has produced a labyrinth that artists must somehow escape.

Reading through what sometimes feel like confessions, which can be seen on [debtfair.org](http://debtfair.org), you begin to think differently about what art is. You get a sense that individual artistic expression answers a need to be seen in the herculean task of surviving capitalism. And this, we thought, was where the iceberg could begin to melt. Occupy Museums would match this emotional visibility, which heals individuals and forms relationships with another kind of visibility, one that expose the issue powerfully in the media. Yet, as I learned from the Whitney Biennial, the politics of visibility is a double-edged sword.

Visibility lies at the heart of activist tactics. Movements from LGBTQIA+ rights to immigrant's rights employs visibility that pulls the narratives of marginalized groups into the spotlight where the larger public gains familiarity and ultimately replaces prejudice with respect for the rights of fellow citizens. The contemporary logic of visibility also includes acts of exposure. If something is revealed as unjust—as we saw in the police violence videos that sparked Black Lives Matter—it's supposed to automatically open an issue up for debate and ultimately reform, acting as "evidence" in a society governed by laws which activist demand be are informed by ethics and governed by democratic process. But visibility has gatekeepers. It depends on institutions the media mostly, and, in the case of the arts, the white walls and social infrastructure of museums. The Whitney Biennial is a machine that produces visibility but with conditions.

Yet it would be disingenuous to say that it was simply a strategic thing to bring *Debtfair* to the Whitney. Exhibiting there activated something extremely complicated inside of me, a place of unexamined desire, a vulnerable place. It exposed how profoundly my identity as an artist had formed around the need for institutional acceptance. This desire would seem to be in contradiction because my work with Occupy Museums had been all about working against this desire and reversing the one-sided relationships that artists have with museums. I spent years shaming the elites that preside over them in order to spark a taking-back of museums as democratic public space and to encourage others to do it as well. Now our group was invited in to spread our message. We knew full well that museums can run progressive apps on plutocratic hardware. But we were in a murky situation, amplified by the political change of the 2016 election. And for me, a sense of social shame lay at the root. This requires me to relate some background.

### III.

I grew up in a Buddhist residential community before enrolling in art school, subsequently emerging into adulthood while embracing the creative and spiritual search as an utmost value. Hitting the job market, I quickly intuited how personhood links to professional and economic status, and my life goals began to shift. I realized I had to cling to a professional identity and a steady resume to avoid being a “loser” within my social class. And this meant internalizing the authority of galleries and museums because they could guarantee my status as a professional artist. I was just out of art school and temping in Boston in the year 2000 where I walked around the city with a fake chef’s hat handing out flyers for a soon-to-fail dot com that was supposed to disrupt restaurants. That afternoon I perceived the trap for artists in the economy. In trying to spend as much time as possible developing one’s artwork, there would be not enough time to develop a reasonable career, so there would be really only one high-risk play.<sup>1</sup>

How then to escape this trap? It required faith, which was the faith that the world of art was a bit exceptional to the rest of the economy. Sure, it was all about money

- I Mindless, shit jobs were the immediate solution, but one paid a price for them. Without full time investment to move up the ladder, they would become more and more humiliating and less sustainable, which has proven true in the present, teaching as an adjunct. And as I moved around the city observing people of all ages working shit jobs like data entry, holding up sandwich boards, bagging in supermarkets, working at big box stores, wheeling around other people’s babies, I came to feel that capitalism is a parasite on personal dignity, shaming the less-fortunate and laying the trap for high-risk strivers like artists until they come to believe deep inside themselves that they are losers.

in some circles, but the larger art world of academia, smaller art spaces, public facing museums, and art projects added up to a different value system, which was the value of visibility to a public and to peers and of the creation and circulation of meaning. And the relationship of the artist to the public was the key, where the existence of an audience stood as proof of complete personhood for the artist.

So I gazed up at the sky in my dot-com chef's dunce cap and wondered how to obtain an audience that would follow and support my work. The answer seemed to lie in a chain of institutions.

The first step was finding a gallery that would sustain me until curators took notice. Then biennials. An academic position would help shield me from market frivolity and solidify the institutional foundation. The final step would depend on museums to enter the art historical canon and to commune with future publics. Artistic faith dictated that only museums could save my soul. That was where personal success and public contributions fused, and shame fully dissolved into triumph and deathlessness. Riches would follow naturally. This mythology is still intact today in all parts of the art field including, perhaps and especially among artist-activists. It's also the shiniest lure hooking aspiring artists into debt. And it over-empowers museums because only museums can convert the public into audience and certify the transaction between artistic production and its reception. Museums play the role ratings agencies play in the world of finance.

But just as I was launching my attempted institutional ascent into the public eye with solo gallery exhibitions out of grad school, 2008 happened. The abuse of power by the actual ratings agencies revealed the extent to which the United States was operating as a corporate oligarchy. As a result, the vertical logic of museum worship now made little sense to me. Direct democracy resonated deeper.

As a consequence, I joined the Occupy Wall Street Movement and soon helped to form Occupy Museums, a group that connected the self-organizing spirit of the park and the calling out of financial elites to the world of art. For a few months at the height of the movement, it seemed that playing the game but its old rules was a thing of the past. The old rules stated that everyone competes against everyone for visibility and the favor of the collector class and to be careful not to bite the hand that feeds you too hard. The new rules stated to gather together with strangers and hold public space and to find points of unity with those frustrated or shut out of the game. Channeling collective anger in public space was cathartic.

I posted the Following the Occupy Museums manifesto on Facebook in October 2011. It began, "The game is up: we see through the pyramid schemes of the temples of cultural elitism controlled by the 1 percent." I spent years in collaboration focused on organizing around tactics to make museums feel the fear of an activated public who would no longer stand for the brand-washing, art-laundering, and union-busting practices of the collector class who sit on the boards of trustees. Eventually focusing on powerful elites felt like an obsession and a niche practice,

and we wanted to address the much larger bottom of the pyramid. That meant organizing artists according to their economic conditions as exemplified in *Debtfair*.

The dissolution of the movement had landed our movement-oriented work into a smaller sphere. Within just a few years, what had begun in the streets circulated inside museums, not in galleries or on the market, and the shift made sense for me. I was, after all, committed to the work of museums and not only using them for political purposes. But moving toward the inside I found myself increasingly entwined in the logic of reputation and institutional visibility: of professionalism. The awkwardness of this entwinement became clear when the political language of the urban Left shifted away from an urgent concern around financial inequality and Occupy Museum's critique began to wane on the coasts. The shift revealed how much Occupy Museum's collective work had been tied to the aftershock of 2008, but it also revealed how art activism is not unlike other types of art that have their moments. Then, when we brought *Debtfair* to the Whitney Museum, a political whiplash revealed a kind of shame I wasn't anticipating—white shame.

#### IV.

The political climate of 2017 rested on a totally reoriented notion of victimhood following the series of police shootings, the Standing Rock Movement, and then the election of Trump. Black and Brown struggles were newly visible to the mainstream, but their identities were under attack from the highest world power and needed more than understanding. They needed protection. For the Left, it was time to make the struggle for racial equality, which had, in previous decades, often been a domain of tokenization and lip-service and as concrete as possible. It became crucial to see and hear those victimized and to follow their lead. In this context the struggles of artists or even of debtors did not seem like an issue to be prioritized. But the concept of victimhood was not a simple one.

It became disturbingly clear that different victimhood narratives were produced simultaneously. Straight, white men were painted as both racist patriarchs “punching down” on various groups and also as victims of the globalist, coastal-political elites themselves. This surreal double-read on events proved possible in the same country, in the same year. It seemed like victimhood production was undergoing an arms race with a bright line, dividing territories and the mapping tactic of *Debtfair* did not fit easily into the picture.

Occupy Museums conceptualized *Debtfair* (in my personal view at least) as an attempt to discover political structure and nuance, positing that debt maps power relations across social and racial and territorial boundaries. We had included groups of Puerto Rican debtors, racially diverse groups struggling with credit card debt and student loan debt. The project complicated the idea of art as an act of privilege, and it took time to absorb; it requested attention. But the attention economy that

Trump energized did not deal in nuance. In the post-election moment with white supremacist marches and anti-immigrant laws being passed, outrage was more appropriate.

Yet perhaps the biggest challenge to the framework of *Debtfair* was the rising lens of privilege and how it relates to art. Isn't a life devoted to creative freedom the ultimate privilege? Even if you could prove that art doesn't fit well within capitalism for most people, isn't the concept of privilege practically defined by the choice for a life that isn't practical when so many others are forced into jobs and conditions they never asked for? There's a working-class notion that pursuing art full time is selfish. This intends to shame people into adopting the value of simple hard work and the identity that goes with it. This forms the identity of worker, a traditionally Left identity, but one on a long decline since the 1960s.

But the president's mobilization of white identity politics and targeting of ethnic minorities made the racial aspect of privilege absolutely central. Whiteness means unearned status. If artists are privileged, then white artists are doubly privileged. Creating a political map that included both white artists and artists of color, without centrally calling attention to this division, was no longer politically possible because outrage became a limited resource. One needed a measure for deciding how much outrage to allot a given issue. Privilege became an important meter to allocate resistance energies. So most art world politics shifted from the Occupy-era horizon of organizing large solidarity groups, toward the politics of representation by diversifying collections and institutional hires while knocking out leading figures connected to oppressing women and minority groups.

Despite steps toward equality of access, the horizon for artist solidarity (for example, organizing artist debt collectives) appeared dim for a number of reasons. For one, the dimensions of the moment revealed political limitations in the figure of the artists who offers their work and their identities to a market driven by the ultra-wealthy. While museum workers began to unionize, artists seemed to further fragment.

The focus on the identity of the artists—a focus that sometimes appeared as essentialist—struck me as a zero-sum game with groups competing with each other for a shrinking pie, that is, what amounted to crumbs tossed out by plutocrats, making solidarity across the lines undesirable. The continued expansion of capitalism into the realm of the self also deteriorated the project of solidarity.

Ceasing essential work or threatening to do so is an effective traditional tool of workers. But artists are not traditional workers. We make work, which is often simply esoteric problems. Much of the work we do is focused on the interior. We're deeply invested in self but there are two dimensions to the art self. There's the internal creative well to draw from, and then the necessity to externalize the self as a brand, a small company that circulates in the markets. The internal experience is relevant to our discussion about shame. The combination of focus, creative autonomy, and

physicality of art practice promotes a flow or alpha state. This allows artists to create a highly articulated relationship to their own intuition. It's a place that is not reliant on social acknowledgment. It's free from shame.

On the other hand, there's the brand-self that needs to be invested in by the public. We float ourselves onto the market, compelled to navigate and compete. We look the other way when the market absorbs our personal brand, made visible by market tools like *artfacts.net* converting artists into stocks. This is how we forfeit all political power.

## V.

We had set up *Debtfair* so the art community could reimagine their relationship to the market and rethink political power through the lens of debt. But a discussion about power and finance didn't emerge from the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Instead, a single debate arose: why did a white painter think it was ok to represent Black death and suffering? The context was the 2016 democratic primary, particularly Bernie Sander's inability to attract Black votes. Economic inequality politics were now met with skepticism read by many as an attempt to derail the momentum of racial justice.

Consequently, as the race and representation debate raged on around "Open Casket," a painting by Dana Shutz that was included in the Whitney Biennial in 2016, raged on, *Debtfair* met a critical silence, and, just as being in the Whitney activated an unexamined need for institutional acknowledgment, the silence stung personally. Note that I am only describing my own thought process as a single Occupy Museums member; other members have different backgrounds and different experiences.

For me, it caused a short circuit between recognizing my white privilege—for example, as someone unlikely to face random police violence or not see myself in the halls of power, and mourning the loss of what I had unconsciously expected from it. I experienced a kind of silencing or de-platforming without being called out and this activated a sense of victimhood.

This was a dangerously easy emotion to call up because I had already come to narrate the story of the art community as potential victims and had tapped into a kind of victimhood in my formation as an activist. From Occupy Wall Street days, I had employed this underdog identity, a voice of the 99 percent, which made it easy to ignore my own privilege, and it became the basis for a political intuition that green-lighted action made it okay to shout in public. It had continued into the anti-gentrification struggle in New York City, which was personal. But now I recognized this self-identification as victim to be an embarrassing social mistake out of tune with the larger social landscape. It was time for painful reflections and having prominent, but silent political work at the Whitney Biennial was an awkward time for that.

Maybe it is the backstory of my artist-activist identity, that is, facing a string of capitalist humiliations beginning with the fake chef's hat and the story that convert-

ed my shame into an anti-elite warrior. Maybe I had it backwards. Maybe the expectations of success and subtle assumptions of cultural superiority built into whiteness were generating crocodile's tears. Maybe I had self-styled myself as a victim and champion of victims precisely not to give up my unearned power.

Now whiteness, which previously has appeared as almost the lack of an identity, appeared in the identity market. I perceived the stock of cis white men in progressive spheres losing value as protests called out the lack of representation of women and people of color in academic jobs, museum shows, and among curators eliciting white guilt and institutional reckoning. As a new father, I felt a strong drive to stabilize myself institutionally and had been applying for a full-time college job for a decade without any luck. Now that higher education institutions were forced to get serious about equitable hires, I felt a deep sense of despair about attaining the artistic personhood that depended on institutions, a desire which I had never managed to shake.

I caught myself falling into a trap, one that could lead eventually to resentment and would dangerously personalize the structural crisis as if my own needs were pitted against my values and as if I had lost touch with anyone's struggles besides my own. I recognized shame at the core of this infestation, the old, shameful fear of being a loser, which was perhaps itself the result of the assumptions of professional success baked into whiteness. This complicated my enthusiasm for the historical reckoning that was unfolding on the Left regarding racial equality, even if it was one I had actively supported.

Discovering a problematic and wounded person that I was made it difficult to continue the thing I seemed to be best at, which, ironically, was shaming, because now a white male activist screaming with indignant rage didn't seem like a viable position anymore—at least not anymore on the Left, and it wasn't emotionally viable either because I was too afflicted with my own shame to shame someone else.

Twitter founder Jack Dorsey admitted that the platform was built to reward shaming. It has become the social norm, and although Twitter has wielded itself for social justice, it has not always aimed at the powerful. My identity crisis following the Whitney Biennial could have been an effect of not being careful enough with shaming and investing into the outrage economy without grounding the currency in self-examination.

In *Debtfair*, we shamed Larry Fink, the head of BlackRock, Inc., the world's largest holder of private debt who is also on the board of MoMA. We put his name and resume, which tied him directly to Trump, on the Whitney wall and targeted him in direct actions while wearing printed masks of his face. Previously we had shamed museum trustees, for example, an action to oppose renaming the public space in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as "Koch Plaza." I had even confronted David Koch himself, by accident, as he unexpectedly walked down the museum steps with a bodyguard while we sat on the steps preparing the action against him. Seeing a real

person standing in for the abstract “target” was a bit of a shock. It wasn’t that he had a warm vibe in person. Certainly Koch, the father of the recent Far Right and a main funder of climate-change denial, deserves to be shamed in public. But I also realized in that moment that shaming, as politically justified as it may be, creates and may even depend on dehumanization. Shaming can be an essential democratic tool when a public discredits those that have abused power, but it is equally essential to examine one’s own privilege and motivation first. One needs a generous and well-examined heart to wield shame in a nondestructive way.

## VI.

Understanding the power of shame has impacted my pedagogical approach. I came to see that in the current climate, with the dual elephants of student debt crisis and structural racism parked in the room, artistic pedagogy could easily stagnate in the space between escaping from reality into the interior or the zero-sum game of the branded self-floated onto markets. Students know that their chances at success are too limited, and I think they figured out that privilege, rather than merit, likely determines their chances even if it was unspoken. As a professor whose salary was paid by their debt, I was meshed into the awkward risk they had taken.

Yet my work could be described as a critical stance toward the framework for art precisely because I believe in its intrinsic value. And, since art taps into these dual spheres connecting the personal to the public, I began to sense a value in teaching it. I was thinking about structural shame in the form of debt the students took on, such as the intimate power relations with financial institutions that ultimately occupied one’s interior life. In a climate ruled by financial data that buzzes with shame and anxiety, learning to create art could mean unlearning shame.

Even though the condition is real, the faith in it is where the negative power comes from. The act of making, which is where a vision dances between the mind and reality, makes a rich interior life. The joy of teaching is sensing this rich life growing within students. I reasoned that basing one’s worldview on this richness rather than the default of market logic could be liberating but only if it didn’t crash into the violence of the debt markets, precarious job markets, and art markets upon first launch.

But that can resolve only through large scale structural change in society. I decided to concentrate on nurturing a shame-free space of experimentation in my classes. The political power of the endeavor was unlocked when it flowed from the private universe into public space where it could activate shame-free places in others. Instead of thinking of art pedagogy as making artists battle-ready for the markets I focused on crafting a shame-free practice in the transition from private to public. And it was possible to set conditions where this worked within the social sphere of

the class. But transition from the private world into the larger world spatially, temporally, institutionally is the hard part.

\*\*\*\*\*

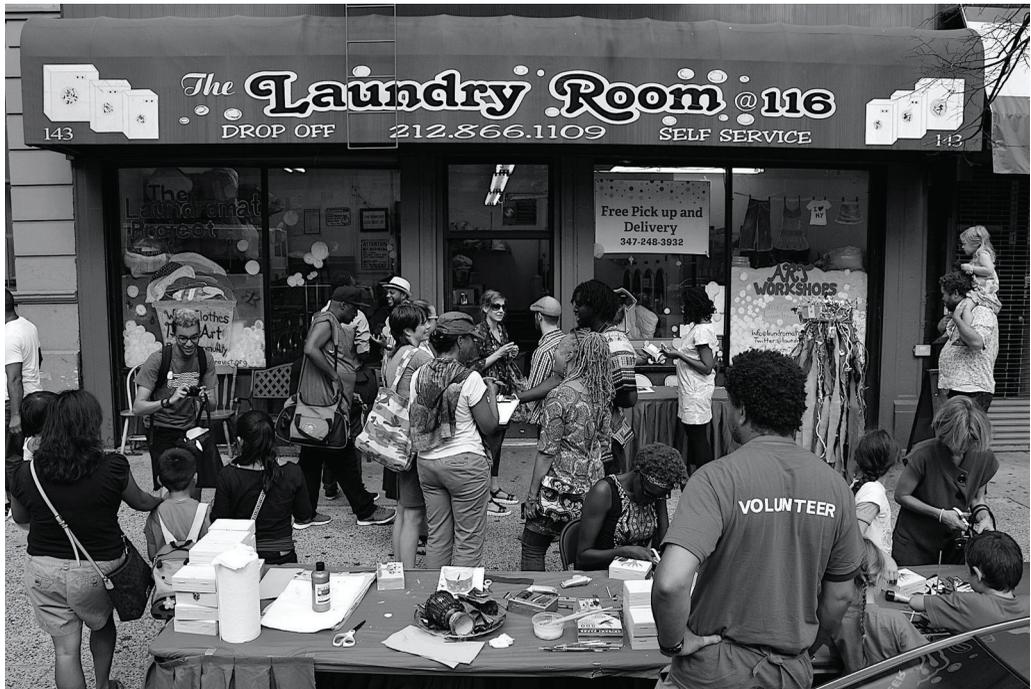
Writing this, I've assumed that shame is something to escape from. Debtfair maps how shame can manifest as financial power governing over our inner lives and decreeing silence. Yet maybe we can think of shame differently.

Maybe shame is a sensor for the connection between the private and public notions of self. Maybe we can use this sensor as an instrument for solidarity rather than allowing it to be used as an instrument by the powerful who impose the shame of a racist law enforcement system or an extractive debt system over our individual and collective body.

I was reading about Claudette Colvin who refused to give up her seat and went to jail months before Rosa Parks. She was 15 at the time, and when she became pregnant soon after, it was decided this was too shameful—bad optics—and the action depended on visibility. She would not make a good icon to rally the movement around. But her brave action was seen. It shamed other civil rights activists into ramping up the desegregation campaign, and they subsequently planned the successful Rosa Parks action.

Shame then is a kind of accountability in the biblical sense almost, but in this case to the collective, social body rather than to God. When we see a person being free or fearless, or catching fire creatively and tapping into something deep, we are pushed to examine what holds us back and to take on the necessary and risky work that we might otherwise justify away. Perhaps we feel shame because we want to tap into the same energy, and be able to activate others in turn, to pull ourselves collectively out of lethargy and impossibility.

Shame is not an intrinsically friendly force. We must learn to listen to it while not internalizing it. I'll try thinking of it as a push toward individual and collective emancipation. And emancipation is that artistic value that is invisible to both the financial economy and the outrage economy. This is the invisibility I can aspire to.





## The Laundromat Project *Towards Joy and Justice: A Creative Entrepreneur Mines Her Legacy of Art, Laundry, and Social Change*

*for Paula and Vera*

In 1999 I blueprinted The Laundromat Project as a nonprofit arts organization committed to bringing art to where people already are, particularly people of color living on low incomes.

A quick tutorial in Philadelphia's art sector helped me understand the ways art could be a vehicle for liberation and freedom on one hand, but also the ways in which the non-profit cultural economy was a fundamentally broken system. Most of my career in philanthropy and arts management has been spent attending to this double-sided coin, with The Laundromat Project as a place to start. In fact, for many years I thought the pursuit of this organization's goals—to democratize art making and leverage it as a tool for cultural autobiography—was the catalyst for my career in arts and culture. In retrospect the path to my creative life began unfolding long before The LP was a seed in my belly.

### Laundry

When I launched The Laundromat Project I described my mission as making visual art more accessible to Black communities. My goal was to create a space that would change the way art is experienced by removing the geographic, financial, and cultural barriers that might prevent Black audiences from enjoying mainstream cultural institutions. Organizing public art projects in local laundromats is accessible in every way. I believed making and experiencing visual art could be conduits for cultural preservation, social critique, problem-solving, and self-determination. This level of transformation would only be possible if art and artists were broadly accessible

to communities in meaningful ways over a sustained period of time. Accordingly, I shaped The LP to use the familiar space of laundromats as a de facto community forum that brought artists of color in deeper relationship with their neighbors. By siting their creative practice in their neighborhoods, we redefined the notion of an artist residency. We hosted informal classes and staged public art projects in laundromats that were designed to facilitate dialogue about the current state of their neighborhoods (whether it was a lack of open, green spaces or the cultural erasure and loss of affordable housing brought on by gentrification). Workshops were just long enough for someone to join while they waited for their clothes to dry. Church ladies in their Sunday best sat down to make art alongside fathers with their pre-school children. Summer weekends in Bed-Stuy, Harlem, and the South Bronx meant a weekly dose of inspiration, exploration, and conversation led by professional teaching artists... all at the corner coin-op.

I didn't want people to just look at art, I wanted them to fully experience it—talk back to it, poke and prod it, make it, own it. The ability to do all of this at the corner coin-op demystifies the art-making process, re-defines what it means to be an artist, and brings art into the context of our everyday lives. And for communities of color I understood this not as a novel “nice to have” but rather, as a critical necessity for tapping into our power to shape our own lives. In the words of Robin Kelley: All change begins with a vision.<sup>1</sup> And I believe making art is a practice space for learning how to locate and manifest that vision.

I was able to set The LP's vision into motion, ultimately with support from local and national funders alike, but much of The LP's earliest days were filled with doubting responses and outright dismissal for funding. I learned the hard way how the art sector pivots on access to or possession of existing wealth, and how fragile ventures become when you have neither. It was also clear, then and now, that The Laundromat Project was ahead of its time. While socially engaged art making is centuries old and long practiced in communities of color, it has only been in the last decade that this way of working has received greater attention and investment.

Bringing arts programming to area Laundromats was an innovation on what had become conventional models of increasing arts access (e.g., murals, “plop and drop” public art projects, pay as you wish days at museums, and “outreach” activities that felt more like bussing than meaningful engagement with communities). The trajectory of public art and of alternative art spaces prior to 1999 did not yet trouble the fundamental experience of art as a thing to be made and consumed by a special set of human beings. They changed the setting, the geography, but their art forms (painting, sculpture, even installation) remained fairly in tact. Lifting up

1 Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

the process by which a work of art gets conceived as having equal weight to the final results; foregrounding the presence of an artist as a witness and facilitator for how folks engage with their ideas (rather than as an invisible hand)—these were radical notions in the realm of mainstream art institutions and certainly the art marketplace. The idea of public art (e.g. murals, park statues, etc.) as part of a “museum without walls” advanced access to art. But The LP took it further by redefining where and what public space is, or who this mythical Public actually includes. The LP walks in the footsteps of *bottle trees* and what Roberto Bedoya calls *rasquachification*.<sup>2</sup> It also requires artists to reconsider their practice so that it’s not about creating objects or performances that move in one-direction—i.e. here is my gift to you, do with it what you will. Instead it asks artists to cultivate a more dynamic, active exchange with their neighbors specifically. To mine the wisdom of their own community, and to consider the full context (physical, cultural, historical) in which their work would participate (rather than artists seeing their neighbors as the participants in a world of their creation). Site specificity for The LP meant more than unconventional design of exhibit spaces. It required generous artists willing to donate their work in a sense—offering it up to be altered by their communities. It required an expansion of skill sets beyond the technique of their craft. Things like community mapping, deep listening, community organizing, and a comprehensive power analysis allow artists to create work that is generative and resonant.

I am proud to say that The LP has fostered a new generation of artists deeply committed to applying their creative practice to the social challenges of our time. Our flagship program, *Create Change*, boasts accomplished alumni, many of whom experienced the program as a launch pad for their current success. Among our 167 alum are Tomie Arai, Stephanie Dinkins, Michael Premo, Rudy Shepherd, Bayeté Ross Smith, Shinique Smith, and Betty Yu. Since 2006 we have produced nearly seventy public art projects that have ranged from teaching urban farming in a Staten Island washeteria to transforming a Washington Heights laundry into an ESOL classroom for Spanish-speaking residents.

Looking back, it’s crazy to know The Laundromat Project was an organization that almost never came into being, not because of funding, but because I started down a very different professional path. Neither of my degrees are in studio art or art history. Instead my academic training was interdisciplinary, with a significant focus on the African Diaspora. And my first job out of Columbia was working for Procter and Gamble’s Mid-Atlantic office in what they called Customer Business Develop-

2 To learn more about this Chicano practice of reclaiming public/private space, see *Spatial Justice: Rasquachification, Race and the City*, a Creative Time Report written by Roberto Bedoya: <http://creativetimereports.org/2014/09/15/spatial-justice-rasquachification-race-and-the-city/>

ment, a blend of sales and management consulting. It didn't take long to realize that while I had an interest in and natural talent for business, I was not put on the planet to sell Folgers or Bounty paper towels. I cannot think of a more absurd period in my life than the years I donned a wrist full of silver bangles and long, natty dreads with heels and pinstripe suits as I sold Cover Girl in Amish country. What in the whole entire hell?

Of course, the shift from working for a corporate giant to founding a grassroots arts organization didn't happen overnight. Once I got clear that I was not fulfilling my purpose on this planet, I stockpiled a few months of paychecks before quitting my job. I sold most of my possessions, packed up my ego, and moved back home. Effectively starting all over again, my once-sterling resume meant very little to Philadelphia's art community. So I interned and volunteered and hustled until I acquired the background necessary for doors to open...and more importantly until I became clear about what I wanted to do with my life. My very first stop was a six-month "internship" at the Painted Bride Art Center. I worked the same sixty-hour work week as the rest of the staff—even without earning a dime. To be clear, this was not a case of exploitation; no one asked me to give so much of my time. I was a woman on a mission and The Bride's E.D., Laurel Raczka, gave me unlimited space to find my wings.

The Bride is a long-standing avant-garde performing arts center with a gallery that has a history of presenting boundary-pushing visual art. The Bride was where I was introduced to the work of Renee Cox and Ursula Rucker and the art students of Graterford Prison. I met Ted Joans, Lorene Cary, and Gayle Isa while there. I built a lasting network of artists and art professionals who would become collaborators and co-conspirators throughout my career. I learned the art of producing, directing, marketing, and programming artist performances. I soaked up every last drop of inspiration and learning The Bride had to offer until I exhausted my savings and needed paying employment. Then I temp-ed around town as a secretary, which gave me plenty of free time and just enough income to both rent an apartment downtown and take printmaking classes—first at Fleisher Art Memorial and Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, then at University of the Arts. Temping also led to a short-lived role as the administrator for a small family foundation focused on supporting Philadelphia's mid-sized arts institutions. Without knowing it I was pursuing a practical education in arts administration and cultivating a promising studio practice in non-toxic, relief print methods. I had moved to (then affordable) Rittenhouse Square and found a cluster of used book stores that introduced me to a world of artists and art movements Columbia's common core didn't cover. I discovered Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum: An Installation* and Deborah Willis's *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, but also Deborah Wye's *Committed to Print* and stray pamphlets of German Expressionist woodcuts.

For twenty-four months I enjoyed this decidedly romantic existence—haunting cafés, making linocuts and monotypes, keeping journals of all that I observed while

working in Philly's art community. And most of all I talked any and everyone's ears off about the ideas I was wrestling with (how to bring art to where people already are; how to interrupt daily life and create meaning from the mundane). Their feedback helped me clarify my mission, but more importantly reminded me that I needed to figure out how to pay for all these grandiose ideas. By 1999 I had blueprinted the business model for The Laundromat Project. And when I reached the limits of what guerilla-style learning could do to get The LP off the ground, I headed to grad school using The LP's blueprint as my application material.

### Legacy

I have often described those two years (1998–1999) as an awakening of sorts—the catalyst for an improbable career in the arts—but in retrospect a creative path was inevitable. On one hand, when it was time to choose a professional direction I never once considered the arts. I don't mean I thought about it and then rejected the idea. It wasn't even on my radar. Ironically I've been surrounded by art since the womb.

When I was a little girl my mother earned income by working in technology and later in libraries, but her true calling is as an artist. I grew up with her drawing pads and notebooks lying around the house, wearing the clothing she made, eating food that seemed just short of culinary acrobatics given our limited budget. As a kid art catalogues dotted our bookshelves. Jacob Lawrence posters hung in our hallway. We went to the art museum when it featured exhibits of Black artists (which admittedly was rare). All of my schools gave art education—visual, performing, and literary—as much priority as math and science. And once the school day ended I took classes in all forms: jazz dance at Philadanco, piano and drum lessons at Maplewood Music Studio, silkscreen at Prints in Progress.

And then there was the way we lived.

I would describe my early childhood as a working-class existence. Nonetheless as a single parent my mother magically scraped together tuition for private school from the time I was in nursery school until eighth grade, and then again when I went to Columbia...all while putting herself through school at night. My mother graduated from college the same year I graduated from high school. (Almost ten years later, my then 60-something, de facto step-father got his BA in Film from Tisch. It was the same year I started my graduate work in Africana Studies at NYU.) To be clear, I never starved, never wondered where we'd sleep as a child, but I do remember many a dinner of cornmeal porridge and my mother carrying a kerosene heater from room to room because heating the whole house was too expensive. I was raised by Miss Marty's, the Afterschool Ladies, and a community of women. My mom's friends became her sister-wives, my grandmother my second parent. Using a pencil and her high school education, I watched my Grandma keep detailed financial records in a dime store, Snoopy notebook wrapped with a rubber band. Despite (or as a result

of) entering the workforce late in life and living on a fixed income, she was a master at transforming a nickel into five dollars—balancing trips to Saks’s shoe section and “staycations” in the local Marriot with careful coupon clipping and shopping the supermarket circular. This capacity to enjoy a high quality of life despite limited financial means was a family trait she passed on to all of her children, myself included.

Creativity is my family’s operating system. Foregoing structures that didn’t work (marriage, heterosexual co-parenting) they fashioned ones that did (create-your-own-adventure relationship norms and a village of mamas); seeing possibilities otherwise unnoticed (returning to school as a middle-aged adult living in the dorms with twenty-somethings) and cobbling together limited resources they produced inspired outcomes (don’t sleep on cornmeal porridge or the beautiful stair step of parent and child in school simultaneously). The way all of my parents moved in the world was a series of small, revolutionary acts. As source material their lives set me up to have nothing short of an artist’s brain—to see things perpendicular to the tide.

Yet there was a different current pulling on me at the same time.

My mother’s family is from Barbados; both her parents were the first in their families to be raised in the United States. And while that makes me third generation (and so, more American than Caribbean), I was no less raised as an immigrant child. My mother and grandmother’s belief in education as the great equalizer—the single conduit to all opportunities—was almost religious in its fervor. It was a lesson they learned from my great grandfather who left Barbados for Brooklyn in the early 1900s. Arlington applied his third-grade education and craft as a tailor to his new world by opening a dry-cleaning business in Bed-Stuy and acquiring real estate in the area. Using the proceeds of both, he brought his family to the United States, one by one. When I learned my lineage I realized how I inherited a capacity for entrepreneurship, but more significantly the grace by which I existed, period. The fact that my life was the product of sacrifices made by forebears (bloodline and not), generated a sense of commitment not only to my own family but to Black people everywhere. But as a post-Civil Rights baby too young to join the anti-Apartheid movement, there was no clear outlet for my ambitions to be of service to my larger community. Instead the tacit message communicated to me (and the rest of Black children raised in the Reagan-era) was that being a credit to the race and repaying your debt to your family meant getting good grades...in order to get into a good school...in order to get a good job.

Unintentionally, but no less effectively, money had been held up as the antidote to my family’s sacrifices and to the collective injustice of racism. If I got that holy grail “good job” I could rest easy that I had done my duty and made my community proud. But community pride did not solve anyone’s poverty. Slowly it became clear I had absorbed a well-meaning, race-inspired (but no less evil) version of trickle-down economics, which I needed exorcised and quick. The minute I took money out of the equation and asked what I would give my time to for free art immediately

surfaced as my response. It took a moment to discern in what respect (art history, art therapy, making art?), but soon thereafter, The Laundromat Project was born of this twin aspiration: to make a difference in the lives of my people in a way that also brought me joy.

### Social Change

To create an organization is to stay in a permanent learning posture, and there is no question that I made a ton of mistakes along the way, so almost twenty years after conceiving the vision for The LP I am grateful to know the organization continues to thrive. After solidifying The LP's programming and operating model and demonstrating its impact, I finally secured enough funding to hire Kemi Ilesanmi as its first full-time Executive Director in 2013. It had always been my goal to work myself out of a job, having witnessed the mutually harmful effects of Founder Syndrome in so many otherwise successful non-profit arts organizations. For years The LP was my "5-9." I functioned as its first Executive Director while at times simultaneously playing a leadership role on the board, all while maintaining full-time leadership roles for other institutions. It was a labor of love and evidence of my commitment, but also a recipe for burnout and deeply unfair to the team of people who I hired to be full-time resources for the organization—chief among them, Petrushka Bazin Larsen who became the organization's first full-time program staff in 2009 (moving from Program Associate to Program Director over her five-year tenure). Of all the people who came into the life of this project, The LP would not exist without Petrushka. Moving from pilot to full-on proof of concept was possible in part because of her ebullient brand of resourcefulness and creative problem solving, not to mention insight in working with artists and communities.

From its inception The LP has attracted wildly talented and equally generous people who loved the organization as if it were their own creation. And on a personal level, The LP has been my greatest teacher. In trying to provide a pathway for artists and communities to be in meaningful dialogue, I was able to clarify for myself what a creative life could look like far beyond a studio practice (the first thing to go once The LP got off the ground). Institution building became an act of social sculpture. My writing practice quickly eclipsed making prints. Witnessing the brilliance of The LP's many alumni expanded my definition of art production and the many ways art can take shape. Striving to provide a framework for our artists to do a rigorous power and privilege analysis before engaging their neighbors in their artistic vision forced me to develop my own literacy in racial justice and cultural equity. In the best sense of the term 'founder syndrome' I cannot extricate myself from the DNA of The LP. I seeded it with my own values and in turn it continues to teach me new ways of being.

I am not part of The LP's daily life anymore. After fifteen years of service I went on sabbatical from my post as Board Chair, confident in the capacity of Kemi and the

rest of the leadership team, who have continued to evolve the organization's scope and focus. The new challenge before me is how to sustain my own mission and purpose with the same levels of integrity (and joy!) as I did when the organization was my daily preoccupation. Given the urgency of the times we live in and the state of emergency so many of us feel, I find it necessary to ask if working in the arts remains enough. Am I making enough difference in the world through a field that is still seen as frivolous, that is not yet understood and resourced as an essential component of our daily lives? And if the answer is yes, what are the conditions I require to stay in this sector? What am I willing to contribute to bring them about? Where is my energy best spent?

In 2016 I vowed to be less patient...to be unwilling to accept a slow time table for racial equity (in our field, in the world), to suffer fewer fools in general, and to expect nothing less than 100% ally behavior from white colleagues or be ready to remove them from my contacts list. 2016 underlined how important it is for me to hold my peers to account for the changes required in our own field and to continue to champion artists who seek to shift the larger conditions in which we all live. But it also meant holding myself accountable in equal measure. Digging in the crates I have to call on the creative practices The LP fostered for me:

- Perpetual curiosity and deep listening.
- An endless clamoring for purpose.
- A fluency in moving past fear.
- Creating opportunities for spacious pause and reflection, ideally in the absence of a specific objective.
- The wherewithal to take a series of leaps (mostly into financial uncertainty and the loss of ego which simultaneously requires having short- and long-term financial plans).

I don't yet know what lies ahead, but thanks to the journey of founding The LP and discerning the depths of my own personal heritage I have an updated, more expansive mission: to deploy creative strategies towards the achievement of racial justice. How this mission manifests into my next adventure is a story still unfolding.





## The Icebox Project Space

### I.

I grew up on a small farm in rural southern New Jersey, at the foot of the Delaware Memorial Bridge. Most of my memories from that time are now more like impressions or stories that I've grown accustomed to telling myself. A sharp, blue light reflecting from the surrounding meadow and a constant rustling of tall, dried marsh grasses in the fall and winter surrounded the wide, open spaces that I learned to navigate at a young age. Perhaps one of the more persistent, and untellable, non-verbal feelings I have from this time is that of a constant physical interaction with my surroundings, a strange kind of learning of how far apart things are in the landscape, where to walk and where not to, what derelict structures were hidden in what lot of trees. I suppose I think of these experiences as early spatial learning, which had to do as much with developing a sense of volume and measurement as it did with texture, sensations, and interconnections.

As an undergraduate in an Art History course at the Cooper Union, Professor Dore Ashton asked each member of our class to share our first memory of art making. Mine was of covering a barn threshold with assorted upholstery tacks that had been collected in an old coffee can. I was at an age where I could barely hold the tack hammer, but I remember the distinct urge to cover the entire timber with these amazingly mismatched and decorative objects. As the tacks became worn, they also became polished, and they were continually tread over for all the years that I spent around that barn. They may still be there—I don't know. Professor Ashton did not believe me, asserted that surely my first experience would have been drawing and essentially accused me of being obtuse. This is one of many instances that I now look to as times when teachers, mentors, and peers have decided that a teaching moment was at hand and that I needed to understand that I was wrong. What has stuck with me more than anything is how much each of these instances has taught

me regarding the nature of my experiences and how necessary it is to do things the wrong way, to not get it, to be obtuse.

## II.

I moved to New York City to attend art school at The Cooper Union in 1997, and, while I mainly took painting classes, I was never required to declare a major. First, I lived at the end of St. Mark's Place, then on Rivington Street a few blocks from ABC No Rio, and then on Johnson Avenue in Bushwick. Every year I had to move farther and farther away from Manhattan because of ever-increasing rent. I ended up leaving the city in 2003. While I found the culture and community that was not readily available in my childhood, I struggled with the lack of the ability to know place—the constant moving created a provisional undercurrent to day-to-day living. Throughout this period and during my time in art school and for years afterwards, I worked a series of odd jobs, mostly in construction, steel fabrication, and art handling. Around 2001 I spent a year working on and off for a major contemporary gallery in Soho, mostly doing carpentry and custom builds for the artists exhibiting there. It was an incredible opportunity to work with so many artists producing large-scale, category-pushing work, but the hectic pace and importance placed on spectacle, on partying, and on exposure wore me out. Many would have been energized, but I found myself sapped of the desire to continue with the endless outrageousness. On one notable occasion, a fellow gallery worker had to go and wake up an exhibiting artist for their own opening reception. They arrived in pajamas with a nosebleed.

By 2007 I had relocated to Philadelphia after a few years spent in Iowa City, and had finished graduate school at Tyler School of Art in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. It was then that I began working at Crane Arts, a former plumbing pipe factory that was being converted into artists' studios and exhibition spaces. I was doing heavy construction in the various spaces throughout the building, adding stairwells, welding awnings, rebuilding floors, from replacing the joists upwards. Around this time, I began teaching as an adjunct, first some drawing and painting and then later primarily three-dimensional design-type classes in foundation settings. I had transitioned from teaching with a focus on what I'd learned from my degrees—the fundamentals of drawing and painting—to teaching what I knew from life and work experience. Every student left my courses with a working knowledge of how to use a woodshop. In particular, I focused on presenting the order of operations necessary to transform store-bought material to custom needs. Students were usually surprised to learn that I was considered a painter. Of course, I don't really see these divisions as being distinct, but institutions have a way of enforcing categories and making students—and slowly the teachers that guide them—think that painters are painters, sculptors are sculptors, video belongs to sculpture departments, and so on. Over time, these divisions have become more obvious as something to push against. Perhaps the next

best thing to changing an institution is changing how we interface with it, a repositioning of attitudes. This is part of why I have always been an adjunct instructor: to maintain the freedom to work from outside of the academic environment and, in my case, to bring a perspective tuned to what is happening right now in Philadelphia, free of committee work and curriculum obligations. Unfortunately, I see adjuncts being widely treated as low-wage workers, which creates an ever-growing bandaid without attention to sustainability and respect to the fact that someone can play a vital role in academia without committing their life to it and its constraints.

### III.

In 2012, Tim Belknap and I held our first exhibition at The Icebox. The Icebox had already existed as an exhibition space but was used primarily as a venue for hire. A gap appeared in the schedule, and we proposed something that would need the space for two to three days—including setup and take down: *The 2012 Philadelphia Pickup Truck Expo*. For the exhibition, we invited artists who drove pickup trucks to park their vehicles in The Icebox on a Friday and to create, in twenty-four hours, a work that existed in the utility bed. Saturday we hosted a reception and exhibition. I turned my truck into a sales rack and invited local artists to create plein-air paintings in the preceding twenty-four hours, all to be sold for \$79.99 each. Artists included John Roebas, Rebecca Saylor Sack, Christopher Davison, Dustin Campbell, and Fabian Lopez. Tim turned his truck into an RC car racetrack, filling the bed of his truck with dirt, creating ramps and obstacles, and inviting visitors to compete via carnival barkers poised on chairs next to the track. Erin Riley set up a loom in the back of her truck, Second State Press used a truck as a block-printing machine, Matt Giel constructed a camera obscura, and the Kali Yuga Zoo Brigade constructed a life-size replica of a Tomahawk missile atop three pickups stationed in the parking lot outside, which brought the attention of a Philadelphia Police helicopter for about an hour Saturday afternoon. The one-day exhibition drew between four-hundred and five-hundred visitors, combining the feeling of an auto show with the ridiculous kind of artistic freedom that comes with putting everything together under such short time constraints. Among the many conversations that led to the show, one item that came up over and over was the idea of initializing a situation where everyone could get away from their typical practice, while also working around something that was essential in their day-to-day practice and lives.

The next show we hosted, *Language for the Common Landfill*, spanned a week and perhaps took the idea of built spontaneity a bit farther. The exhibition now exists as a book, but was planned to be a show that existed as a book-in-the-making. Over the course of the week, we enlisted volunteers randomly to collect trash bags from city streets and deliver them to the back door of the gallery. We weren't aware of where the bags were coming from until after the exhibition, as a basic map was kept

of collection sites. Tim and I photographed each bag as a plain portrait, and then emptied and sanitized the contents, discarding all organic material. What remained of each bag was placed on an individual, colored tarp, placed on the floor of The Icebox. At the time, the Icebox measured 100 × 50 feet—we have since added storage space, making our exhibition footprint 72 × 50 feet—and the entire floor was covered with these color-coded debris plots.

We invited nearly forty artists, writers, and musicians to visit the space, choose a plot of garbage, and use text therein to create a new text piece. No new text was allowed to be used; all text used had to be sourced from the contents of the chosen trash bag. We set up a writing lab in our foyer space and displayed the entries on the walls as they were completed. The completed book was over 160 pages, with each entry consisting of a photo of an individual garbage bag and the related text piece. We were trying to present city trash pickup night as a collective narrative of the lives of Philadelphia's inhabitants. The participatory re-ordering of text helped to shuffle the deck, to interject voice into the mundane without disregarding the significance of our collective everyday waste. We had almost no resources available except a space, and that played a large part in the formation of the exhibition. We used what was at hand and actually designed and proofed the book in Microsoft Word—perhaps the worst piece of software one could have chosen to layout such a complicated and long publication. *Language for the Common Landfill* remains one of my favorite objects, a testament to using the wrong things to make such a singular object of obscurity.

By this time, we were confident that we could host a more standard, month-long exhibition, while still focusing on exploring what constitutes a show. Our first standard length exhibit, *Winter Down*, took place in January of 2013, and centered around the idea that the Philadelphia area's Barnes Foundation was a sort of science fiction, a museum that forever presented the singular philosophy of its creator, and would always control the way in which visitors could or would see the works it contains. Our interpretation of this idea centered upon a 10 × 10-foot chamber constructed in the center of the exhibition space, with a 25-foot wood and cable suspension bridge being the only means of entry. Once inside, viewers were presented with a brightly lit, salon-style exhibit that featured the works of Becky Suss, Beth Livenessperger, Amy Lincoln, Douglas Witmer, and Mike Stifel. The paintings included were almost all landscapes and still lifes, windows to natural settings far removed. Mike Stifel's small steam-powered machines ran every ten minutes, animating the space with motion, clicks, and hisses. Later, in May of 2013, we hosted a significant exhibition of large-scale inflatables by Chicago-based artist Claire Ashley, and, by the end of that show, Tim and I were able to negotiate for full directorship of The Icebox, allowing us to program year-round and create a mission to follow.

## IV.

Teaching during this time, I found myself asking my students on the first day of classes, “what’s the last best piece of art that you’ve seen?” I had expected to hear about Manga, Animal Collective shows, graffiti, derelict buildings, or shows on Netflix, but instead I was met with confusion and silence, mumbling replies about Monet. Any sense of adventure seemed to be absent, and it felt very foreign to me. In response, we began hosting something we called the 3D Olympics in The Icebox each semester, creating a series of events that students would collaborate and compete in, ranging from building a paper tower (ceilings are 20 feet) to Rube Goldberg-style chain reaction. Each iteration involved seventy-five to one-hundred students; we made custom trophies and generally laughed the entire time. In this way, we continued to use the exhibition space as a place for expansion, for exploring new possibilities, guarding against received opinion, and providing some much-needed relief from institutional expectations.

We hosted three Pickup Truck Expos and a number of video festivals, interactive curatorial events, and much more over the next few years. When Philadelphia galleries banded together to create Citywide, a unified exhibition schedule, where spaces traded and inhabited each other. We created a publication called Never Edition that showcased Philadelphia’s critical writing and shipped copies to forty artist-run galleries across the country over three editions.

In 2015, I experienced a personal health crisis, nearly died, and was forced to stop teaching abruptly. Most of my focus went towards The Icebox. After recovering from my illness, I felt a new commitment to programming with a focus on marginalized communities and even more so to partnering and helping develop projects as a holistic process. I was a queer teenager and queer throughout most of my twenties, without question. I had partners of both sexes. It’s part of the reason I headed to New York and to art school. Time changes things, and I don’t outwardly present as queer anymore, but it remains a formative part of who I am and how I came to be. Perhaps my changing relationship to my own queer identity and how this has been both public and private at different times, was part of what led me to re-examine my role as a director of an art space and to feel a need to actively provide support. As a younger artist, I felt isolated, and I think an exhibition space can be a place for community in a meaningful way. Since 2015, The Icebox has implemented a paid, video residency, an open-ended, sound-based residency, and has partnered with the Leeway Foundation to offer a residency for women and trans-identifying artists. We work closely with residents, assisting with scaling up production and concept to expand and fit the large volume of our space, without the bureaucracy or baggage associated with larger institutions and museums.

## V.

We have likewise continued to shift our programming to focus on actualization, self-determination and inclusion through experimental thinking and non-traditional formats. In 2017, the Icebox hosted *Distance ≠ Time*, an interactive technological landscape, integrating various media forms, contemporary technology and social consciousness. The show combined projects from two collectives, Culture Industry [dot] Club and Philadelphia's Black Quantum Futurism. Culture Industry [dot] Club (Sophie Elana Hodara, Zachary Kaiser, and Gabi Schaffzin) presented the Dr. Pawel Norway Dream Machine, which existed as both performance and interactive installation, where biometric data recorded as body temperature, skin conductivity and an EEG was fed into a program that scraped the internet for corresponding video material, which was then compiled resulting video into a new, individualized "dream."

At the same time, Black Quantum Futurism (Camae Ayawa and Rasheedah Phillips), presented *Time Camp OOI*, a selection of physical and time-based works curated to accompany programming that explored time, alternative temporalities, and temporal shifts from various disciplines and cultural traditions, with a particular focus on the experiences of queer communities and people of color. With over thirty-four artists contributing to the physical exhibition, and nearly twenty different presenters, *Time Camp OOI* unified collective narratives through the concept that time is plastic—that our sense of ourselves is defined through choice and the navigation of context. Through that process, the shape of the self becomes the shape of the future. An engagement with speculative fiction drove many of the works involved, such as Nadahada's postapocalyptic beach odyssey *Endangered! The Interwoven World of Toxic Creatures*. But nearly as many works focused on the immediate present and on the individual condition, such as in M. Mohamed's *Black Girl on the Internet*, a collection of online messages directed to the eponymous subject. The symposium portion of *Time Camp OOI* drew participants from across the country, with workshops on botany, writing, healing and visioning, classes on yoga as time travel, sound-based meditation sessions guided by Camae Ayawa, and closed with concerts on each evening. For these two days, The Icebox effectively became a think tank and congregation of future-seeking, consciousness-expanding iconoclasts. Here, theory was put into practice, allowing all participants to focus on the many aspects of shaping a vision of the future, while sharing and connecting their own histories.

Among the many ways in which we imagine time travel, perhaps the least considered or least appreciated is the act of coming together and sharing experience, traditions, aspirations, and histories that defy linear categorizations. In October 2019, we continued to push the scope and scale of our programming, we hosted the East Coast premiere of *Killjoy's Kastle*. The exhibition was modeled after traditional haunted houses but existed as a holistic installation, featuring interactive performance from dozens of artists each night it was open. Created by artists Allyson

Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, *Killjoy's Kastle* reflected a lesbian-feminist critique of queer histories, while being constructed entirely by members of the local, queer community. According to the artists, “the project is specifically inspired by current anxiety over changing social and personal landscapes, especially for the LGBTQIA+ communities. *Killjoy's Kastle* aims to activate a litany of current and historical stereotypes, reflecting back to the world the myriad ways in which women and non-normative individuals are made into monsters by mainstream society.” It was the largest project we embarked upon, and certainly reflected the collaborative empowerment that we've committed to developing.

## VI.

The work that we do at The Icebox has brought interesting shifts in my own personal studio practice, as did the shift in my health and my career that I experienced in 2015. Leaving academia for a period gave me a reason to re-evaluate where I had set boundaries for myself. I have always been a painter and an object maker, with my degrees having been in painting. I had been focused on perception as an observable state for many years and was making imagistic work that attempted to faithfully depict moments of un-clarity, such as blurred vision, seeing in the dark, visual misunderstandings. The work was almost always received as abstract, even though I rarely ever talked about it in those terms. This never sat quite right, and, as I reflect back on the projects that we have completed at the gallery, it feels clear that I was finding ways to investigate the manner in which the everyday rubs against itself, the innate stories in garbage, vehicles, places, and settings. As I began to actively focus on building relationships with artists through developmental processes like residencies, I felt the need to drop a certain mediation from my studio work and began to focus on the immediate surroundings in my life. I now paint representational works on shaped plywood, with the scale being at a 1:1 ratio and shape defined by object. I find a certain sense of compassion in painting folded sheets, blankets, pants, and people sleeping. The narratives contained are un-clever, un-demanding, and very much about physical presence. I have shifted my focus towards mundane, everyday moments—a reification of the laundry pile with the understanding that how we touch the world and our surroundings is how we will be handled as well.

I've started teaching again, as well, in more advanced courses with older students. I'm doing my best to focus on the idea of letting the world in, that our means are not our ends, that our everyday is our everything. I don't know how to square this with commercial pressures, but I have hope that these students can see that the way they want to make art, to experience art, can be the way it exists. All of the wrong things are real, and it's a part of who we are.

*Ryan McCartney left the Icebox amicably in 2020, while relocating to Saint Louis.*







Shani Peters New Orleans LA +

Joseph Cuillier III New Orleans LA

## The Black School

### I.

The Black School (TBS) is an experimental art school teaching, Black/POC students and allies to become agents of change through art workshops on radical Black politics and public projects that address local community needs. The school is heavily influenced by the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Movement and by the Black Panther Party's Liberation Schools. TBS initiated programming in 2015 and is administered by Joseph Cuillier and myself, Shani Peters. We are professional and life partners. We each bring to our collaboration experience as adjunct professors and K-12 teaching artists and train in fields outside of art and education. The concept for the school was one Joseph was building out into reality before we met and was something that we easily bonded over once we did. We are both practicing artists coming from Black families with educator legacies; the connection of pedagogy, politics, and art was mutually clear to us. Like many other artists we found ourselves teaching art as ways of making ends meet through artist careers in an industry that habitually undercompensates its own driving force. In the following paragraphs, I will track parts of our path towards our work together in TBS, highlight our influences and methodology for it, and close by discussing some of our goals going forward and hopes for artist and educator communities at large in the future. Our contribution to this volume is concluded by a tool poem originally written by Joseph in 2015 and revised in 2018.

I never expected to “live off my art.” Growing up I had no realistic concept of what a contemporary artist career could even be. My parents had advanced degrees and made certain to take their children to museums regularly, but art museums were never a part of that circuit. Looking back I understand that those choices were largely informed by the institutional art world's underestimation of Black culture. Further, my parents emphasized career paths that ensured a steady, reliable income. So even

though I had always been a creative child and had received praise for those talents, I never imagined Art as a career option. This is a socialized perspective shared by many POC, of all generations, whose talents and ways of thinking make them likely candidates for careers in the arts, though their economic realities do not. Coming from this place, I signed on for a Communication concentration as an undergraduate student. I worked internships and jobs in government and municipal finance, but along the way realized I needed a dramatic shift in direction if I was ever going to get gratification out of my work. I researched my options and thought that if I could get myself into an MFA program then at least I could have a few years of creative satisfaction while in school, then bridge that degree with my work experience and perhaps work for an arts non-profit down the line.

I was fortunate that to that point my life offered me enough of a sense of security to feel I was afforded a few years of personal creative satisfaction. It was a pleasant surprise for me that following grad school, I was able to find traction for my independent art practice. I was accepted into a residency at The Center for Book Arts immediately following graduation and got my work into a few Chelsea group shows that helped me establish a professional record. That was enough to pave the way for a somewhat consistent stream of promising, though definitely unprofitable opportunities. As things turned out, picking up teaching-artist gigs fit more naturally into that flow than a 9–5 commitment to any one organization could have.

Teaching also complemented one of the primary guiding philosophical urges of my practice. For as long as I've made art, connecting it to people who typically were not traversing the museum and gallery circuit, has been a priority for me and often a catalyst for work and projects I design. My work has always reflected the life I've lived and experiences I've had. Exhibiting that work to audiences who overwhelmingly do not share those experiences is unfulfilling to me. People appreciate art produced from cultures foreign to their own. Everyday, popular music is the most glaring example of this fact. The highly-exclusive aura that exists in the art world and the history of white supremacy is associated with making the current "art-going" status quo impossible for me to accept.

Whether making object-based studio work or imagining social engagement projects, I have always found it necessary to determine ways of ensuring my work extends beyond traditional white-wall spaces. In this direction, it has been gratifying for me to find that teaching allows me to fulfill these urges, often with greater success than the tricky business of executing genuinely accessible, community art projects. At the end of a class there is no question if the lesson has "found its audience" or not. As long as one student is present, I reach someone, and as long as I'm doing my job with any integrity, that gesture is appreciated. Teaching has always given me a unique source of energy and rewarding sense of appreciation from the students I work with, even in those very difficult moments when teaching in both

youth and academic settings has left me feeling rundown and underappreciated by art exhibitors or funders.

## II.

After seven to eight years of teaching, I had firmly established that I liked teaching for more than just a means of subsidizing my art practice, but the thought of launching an education-based art project didn't make sense for me until I met Joseph. On my own, such a project felt like a daunting challenge that could easily run the risk of disrupting that functioning interrelated balance I had found. Together, however it felt a.) doable(!) in terms of sheer energy, time commitment, and the range of expertise we possessed between us, and b.) like a way to take my teaching practice to the level of autonomy that had been missing to that point. Through non-profit and museum-teaching, artist engagements, working predominantly with New York City public school students, I was always able to teach something that felt of merit to me. But there are limits to what can be pulled out of someone else's mission or exhibition program.

As a team, Joseph and I decide whose work The Black School will reference and what social topics we may discuss. In fact, by way of the agile model we have developed, our students determine what issues their work will address and what esthetic form it will take. We employ our amassed experience, the resources we are able to access, and our network to other POC artists whose work and ideology overlap with our goals to present students a range of art making mediums they may use to address the social matters most pressing on their minds and various communities. It's an adaptive methodology that keeps *OUR* efforts relevant and rooted in our students' lives. It is easier for us, as educators, to draw connections to the histories and tactic-based knowledge sets we seek to inform, or better inform, our students. The autonomy I sought for myself in launching an independent education program led to the creation of a program that builds itself upon a foundation of student choice.

Like many decolonialist educators, we base much pedagogical theory in the work of Paulo Freire, who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Chiefly the recognition that a student has as much knowledge to offer a class as a teacher and that to organize a curriculum without providing space for that knowledge is to replicate the same institutional models of oppression that we are working to break from. We view our students not as empty vessels but as human beings who are experts in their own social realities. We teach students how to use art as a tool to transform reality. By combining traditional art mediums with activist organizing tactics we are developing an educational model that is based in cultural organizing.

TBS is deeply influenced by Civil Rights-era Freedom Schools and the Liberation Schools of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. From the Freedom Schools we reflect lessons that offer practical skills for opposing unjust, social and inher-

ently racist norms in United States society. From the Liberation Schools we reflect programming and outreach that extends to the entire Black community, not only grade-school age. We extend the work of filling in the gaps missed by standard United States educational institutions by placing focused attention on the histories and cultures of African Diasporan and other historically oppressed people.

We draw influence from the work of bell hooks, from whom we center a fundamental recognition of the preeminent role of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy within all of the challenges our communities are faced. hooks' extensive writing offers many relevant lessons, but standouts include frameworks for progressive teaching within a structure built on inherently biased ideals and precedents for questioning and unlearning the ways in which Black American culture has reinterpreted these ideals in uniquely detrimental.

Our final core pedagogical influences come from our families. Joseph's grandfather, Joseph Cuillier, Sr. was a grade-school math teacher and later a school-board member in the segregated New Orleans school system between 1950s and 1970s. His focus and commitment to education was so great that he sought his bachelor's and master's degrees in Education from the Historically Black, Xavier University, during a time when the New Orleans school district did not even hire black teachers. Under his influence Joseph's father also became an educator and is now a high-school administrator in the Houston, Texas area. Cuillier Jr. has raised his own children on the strong advice to at least begin their collegiate careers with HBCUs as a means of easing the delicate transition of a young Black person's life from their understanding family home into the cruel reality of our consistently anti-Black, US society. Joseph III took this advice to heart and has benefited from as a graduate of Prairie View State University.

My mother and my father demonstrated a high valuation of civic duty to educate through their work lives. My mother worked between local government and early childhood advocacy and served on our local school board in Lansing, Michigan, during my high school years. My father taught middle school in Detroit during the 1970s while earning his PhD. He went on to teach at universities all over the state, and retired from the Eastern Michigan University's African American Studies Department after twenty-five years just a few years ago. From him, I learned the seamless flow of teaching and learning Black history through the exploration of Black culture.

### III.

My dad never sat on his laurels as an educator. From one year to the next he was always developing new curriculums and partnerships with other school departments and student interest groups. He taught history courses centered in hip hop, film, poetry, literature, and even through the lens of Black athletics. It was only outside of the home that I learned that society made separations between "fine art" and

“urban culture” or that history was typically taught in terms of dates, military battles, and government legislation. He showed me that learning, through the lives and artistic production of actual people of the past and present, is far more engaging and genuine than through the assumed authority of textbooks and institutional models.

We bridge our historical and artistic lessons to popular Black culture by acknowledging and praising the avant-garde style and visual culture our students bring into our workshops. The wholesale rip-off of African Diasporan cultures from Matisse and Picasso to Iggy Azalea has been widely documented and, yet, Black youth culture, the ever-renewing source of this creativity, remains relegated to the descriptive realm of “low-end,” “street,” “ghetto,” and “primitive.”

Please don't mistake my identification of this pedagogical strategy as merely a tool to be employed. It is a tool, but it is also deeply felt and only effective from an educator who is able to feel this sense of appreciation and express it genuinely—particularly in an education system that has suffered the massive defunding of arts education and the privatization of arts nonprofits and small organizations not unlike our own. It is critical to be able to draw on the creative energy that young people are able to develop, apart from formal, steady art training. The students we meet have typically experienced some art programming, but it is almost always short-term and/or under-resourced. A foundation of traditional anatomically correct drawing, clay molding, or color blending skills is not expected and does not stop students from making aesthetically compelling work. Many professional contemporary artists' practices have nothing to do with those traditional skill sets. We most often find ourselves working in more immediate methods; collage, printmaking, fashion, photography, and written/text-based approaches. In all cases and mediums, we find that encouragement of students' personal style sensibilities bridges the gap of training they may not have already acquired.

Another hurdle our programming must overcome—in addition to correcting the preconceived, societal notion that Black and POC youth do not understand aesthetic quality—is the widely held notion that individuals cannot effectively impact social change. These messages come discretely from a popular media that is more interested in its consumers buying ever-more without question and from individuals who have been tangibly and/or emotionally overwhelmed by forces of greed and injustice and therefore convinced that nothing can be done to change things. We understand and acknowledge this position, but we also know the balance of fight and beauty that our personal, social-centered, creative paths have enabled for us. Balancing social action and creative energy actually feels good and empowering. Sharing that truth with our students, along with countless historical examples of Black activists shifting society through their strategic actions, help overcome the impression that social problems are too overwhelming to be corrected.

Considering the context of the Black American's socio-political history; the importance of access to space for the wanderings of one's own mind; and respect

for the outcomes of it cannot be overstated. A capitalist society does not teach its youth to value this, certainly not unless some corporation somewhere is able to exploit it. And within such a society, marginalized people, whose labor and energy were literally exploited to lay the foundations for that “civilization,” are taught to feel the least entitled to the “luxury” of imaginative art making. To counter this reality, we pair opportunities to create meditative drawings, freeform cut and collage, and abstract, paper-folding activities with dialogue around the inherently anti-human tenants of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and alternatives to these systems of injustice. By pairing lectures on radical politics with hands-on, open-ended art-making—as well as time for literal meditation and reflective thinking—we aim to strike a sustainable balance of social grounding and creative exploration. The work we make with students is designed explicitly to go back into their communities and clearly speak to social change. Art associated with this grave challenge is difficult to accomplish, but our experience has taught us that the widest foundation we can lay out is imaginative exploration, historical awareness, skill, and love enables the greatest results.

#### IV.

In addition to youth-targeted workshops, a significant goal of our work is community-wide programming and interconnection. Discord between traditional K-12 schools and the families of their students in Black and POC communities is vast and deeply rooted. It is as related to the history of slavery and the undervaluation of anyone not wealthy and/or of European descent in this country, as it is to any bad education policy implemented in the last forty years. In creating an alternative, self-determined, Black-centered, education model, our desire is to design impactful programming that is welcoming and attractive to our middle and high school-aged students and their families. We understand that we create Black culture together, young and old, in perpetual relationships and reference to one another and our ancestors. Our goal is to create space and opportunity to honor and celebrate this culture together. We can better use our shared culture to heal and rejuvenate our communities. This is a holistic effort, not limited to any one age segment, creative discipline, or form of social action.

As a new organization, most of our programming thus far has operated in the form of in- and after-school programming. We are actively building out a broader reach and most significantly have done so by hosting three annual Black Love Festivals (BLF) in Brooklyn. BLF is a free, one-day, community celebration that is open to the public and centered on the goal of creating a gathering space for all people who share in love for the well-being and self-determination of the Black community. The festival is multifunctional. It is an exhibition of artwork made by TBS student artists over a one year span; it is an open-air concert featuring an eclectic mix of hip hop,

rock, R&B performers and DJs sharing a progressive political agenda in line with the festival's vision; it features the work of similarly-minded visual artists whose projects are public-facing and suitable to a festival environment; and it includes art-making workshops lead by student artists teaching techniques they have learned from TBS programming. BLF is a space to bring our students, their families, and our entire community together around the focused intent of love. As TBS grows, we are working to increase opportunities to make space for overlap and focus in the form of a physical home for our programming that will operate as an open door community hub.

Beyond TBS-led workshops and events, we have identified ways to share a significant element of our education programming with anyone who is interested through our The Black School Process Deck. The Deck is an interactive methodology tool for brainstorming and designing creative activism projects. The Deck can be used in an art-making capacity to help individuals, classes, and organizers explore how art can activate change on a local level. Through a series of questions and choices participants identify issues of primary significance to them, define the terms and context around those issues and design impactful projects. We began brainstorming the idea for this Deck as a way to strengthen weak points we identified in our own programming after its first year. The Deck helps push classroom conversations and idea generation from surface level to incisive. The Deck provides vocabulary for the elements of society often unaddressed in the K–12 curriculum. The Deck is unique in its pairing of political content with formal aesthetic and curatorial terminology. By making this tool public, we are experimenting with ways of scaling up our efforts beyond the reach of our geographic and limited personnel. Sales of the Deck contribute to a long-term increased and self-sustaining programming capacity.

## V.

Making our Process Deck available for sale is one of a variety of ways in which we are working to align our mission with an independently earned revenue stream for our programming and its participants. We have recently launched The Black School: Studio, a creative technology studio using graphic design, new media, digital fabrication, and radical, education models to design local based solutions for issues in Black communities. As an extension of TBS's current workshop-based model, TBS: Studio builds toward a sustainable model of commission-based revenue and alumni employment opportunities. The launch of this initiative is supported by a partnership with The Bronx Museum of Art who is serving as host and inaugural client.

We are glad to have gained the institutional support we have received so far but recognize the need for other sources for long-term sustenance. Similarly, we do not desire to remain in a cycle of imagining—programming one workshop, semester, or engagement at a time. Beyond these industry-centered limitations, history teaches us that the United States has never provided reliable, quality support of any form for

its Black citizens, certainly not those seeking radical change to the circumstances we have met on this land. It is from this truth that the African diasporic concept of self-determination is derived and why it is such an endlessly coveted goal. If educators expect to convince individuals we encounter that self-determination is truly a goal practical enough to work towards, then we must demonstrate our own realistic efforts towards it. We don't expect young people from generationally poor families to believe they can make art and support themselves if we don't offer them possibilities; nor do we expect to sustain anti-capitalist work, in a capitalist society without reliable streams of independent capital. We know better than to expect these things just as the communities our work is designed to serve do. We owe it to our community to demonstrate our understanding accordingly.

The Black School asks our students to conduct themselves as agents of change in their own communities. We must also live up to this expectation. We must remain mindful of these realities in our work in and outside TBS. We will continue to create revenue models for our programming and to pay the young student artists our project helps us reach. When we do receive institutional support, we must continue to share that support with other artists who can serve as examples to our students. We must continue to find ways of pushing institutions to fund more efforts in support and love of Black people.

Further, we have to push back against societal and institutional impulses that do not financially support artists in general—not to speak of Black people, Black artists, and our young would-be Black artists. If we collectively continue to accept the status quo of the “starving artist” lifestyle, and of art workers perpetually giving their labor away for exposure, cultural capital, and other mythical promises that don't actually put real food in real stomachs, then we are all complicit in the continuation of an art world that is actually only accessible to people born into wealthy families. At the rates adjunct pay and appointments are going, the same is increasingly true for access into academic careers. There are glaring realities that our society's art and education sectors are being navigated differently by everyone but that particularly impact and limit people from Black and POC families. If we do not institute structural change to shift this financially unsustainable landscape, then efforts to center love of Black and POC students in education will always be running an uphill race.

## How to Build a Black School

*By Joseph Cuillier III*

This manual is published to assist in the development and completion of Black School construction projects.

This manual replaces the previous Manual for Planning and Construction of Black School Buildings published by the Department of Education. The old manual has failed at its duty to educate our children, only serving to reinforce white supremacy.

Unfortunately there is no armour for the everyday minutiae of surviving America

### I. Educational Objectives: Mission Statement

We can all fly too high.  
We are our own standard of beauty.

We are the spit and blood at the bottom of the boat.  
But there are no certificates for doing difficult with style.

### II. Laws, Rules, and Building Codes Pertaining to Black School Construction

All prior laws regarding the construction of Black School buildings are hereby abolished due to the failures of every major American institution, local and state government, federal government, the economic system, the justice system, the healthcare system, and the education system, with regards to the welfare of our community.

The community will build the school.  
We will make our own.

We are pouring water on unjust structures.  
Paper mache pillars wet by the rain.

### III. Site Selection: Community Building

The school will be at the center of the community.

We are the sound of the drum.  
We are sentimental fatalists, beautiful and repulsive.

But there are no standing ovations for the unlovable.

#### IV. Building Materials and Construction: Material Things

The Black School demands complete ownership of our communities, including all property and businesses, political, justice, educational, and healthcare systems, agriculture and farming, energy production, and all other institutions and industries. The facts of history have proven whites undeserving, ill-equipped, or outright malicious in their stewardship of what is rightfully ours, therefore these properties will be returned to us so that we may determine our own destinies.

We are makers of keys.  
A communion of stars.

#### V. Support Structures: Spiritual Things

Knowledge of self allows us the ability to live in communion with others. We achieve knowledge of self through our study of spirituality, philosophy, history, and religion.

We are our ancestors' revenge.

#### VI. Instructional Elements of The Black School: Curriculum

We are our own history, our true history.  
We are no place. We are nowhere. We were always there.

#### VII. The Classroom

The Black School schedule must vary from school to school, depending on the needs of the students and the local community:

9:00-9:30 Meditation and Chanting

Because freedom is a reason to sing.

9:30-12:00 Art and Design

12:00-1:00 Lunch

1:00-2:00 Music, Dance, and Performance

2:00-3:00 History

3:00-4:00 Spirituality and Philosophy

We are the aggressive beauty of speed, the thud of progress.  
We ain't scared no more because all the scared niggas dead.

### VIII. Health, Safety, and Security

Here stands a monument to our dear teacher, Malcolm.  
We are self-determined.

### IX. Construction Agreement: The Social Contract

The Black School will mandate political participation for all.

We're not martyrs, not anymore.  
We're whole.

### X. Presenting The Black School Building Project to the Public

We are breaking through the underground.  
We don't need anyone.  
We are independent.

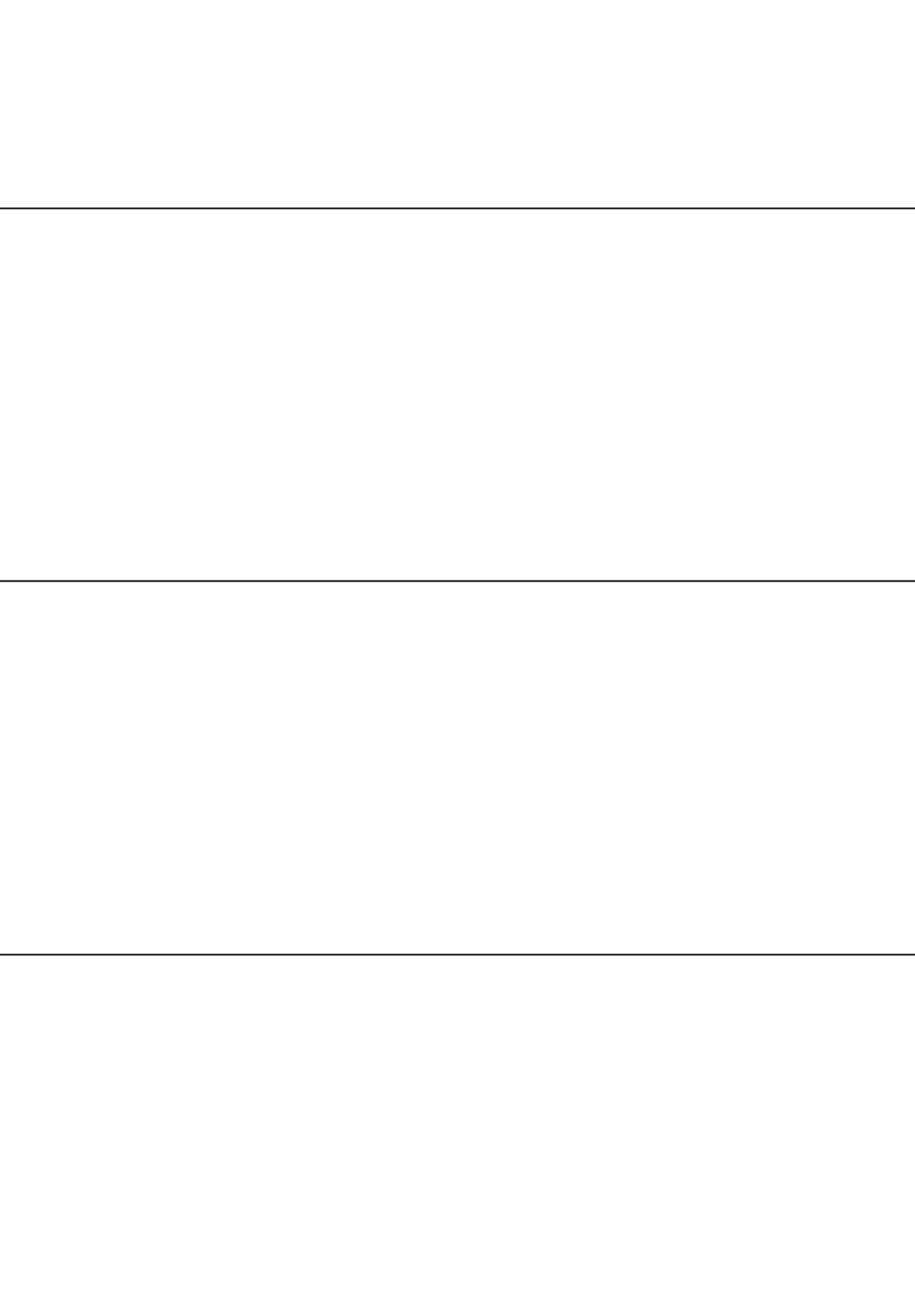


# **BACK- MATTER**

---

---

---



## Conclusion

### The Watershed Moment

The year of Covid-19 has led to the deaths of over half a million people through the gross mismanagement of this global pandemic by the 45th President of the United States; the public murder of African American George Floyd by a White police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota; the single term of the 45th POTUS following a landslide loss; and the siege of the United States Capitol by groups of self-described “patriots” to disrupt confirmation of the 46th POTUS by the Electoral College, based on the myth of an election win stolen from the 45th POTUS.

Moreover, the 45th POTUS revealed and amplified an unrestrained, white nationalist, patriarchal, pro-business, upper-class, tax-cutting rhetoric and agenda. There were also daily acts of reality distortion aided by the abuse of social media and conservative news outlets barely resembling journalism. The political chauvinism of legislators from Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee enabled the mendacity of the American oligarchy in shameless ways. The Covid-19 year also underscored the immortality of the Confederate States of America at the legislative branch of the federal government with bold acts of voter suppression during the 2020 presidential election and after.

The actions of the 45th POTUS also amplified the white supremacist origins of the nation rooted in the “Cornerstone Speech” given by the slaveholding Vice President of the Confederate States of America Alexander Stephens in 1861. In describing what he called “Our new government,” Stephens wrote, “its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government is the first in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”

The white supremacist bedrock of this 160-year-old “cornerstone” of the nation is at the core of race-based, structural inequalities that continue to impact the lives of Black people and groups of racialized and disposable others in the United States. Some of the foundational expressions of American white supremacy are the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Black Codes of 1865 that legalized policing of newly freed slaves, the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, and the circulation of pseudo-scientific myths about racial and gender inferiority weaponized through higher education, amplified through journalism, and normalized through public policy and popular culture.

One-hundred-sixty years after the Cornerstone Speech by Alexander Stephens, the first “Homeland Threat Assessment” published by the Department of Homeland Security declared, “racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists (WSEs)—will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland.” Also, the Center for Disease Control has declared that racism is a public health threat disproportionately impacting Black people in the United States. Despite the facts supporting this assessment, there is a sizable group of people across race, class, gender, and educational levels who equivocate over the presence and the threat of white supremacy in the United States. Moreover, there are people asserting that anyone citing, challenging, and/or critiquing white supremacy is being divisive, wildly racist, and anti-American. One popular meme is, “racism is so American that when you protest racism, people think you are protesting America.” In fact, one of the most durable myths of the project of American white supremacy is that the reality of race-based, structural inequalities are themselves myths.

The arrest and murder of George Floyd by police in broad daylight before a crowd of witnesses and the lens of a mobile phone’s video camera exposed and amplified the persistence of white supremacist hierarchy in American life in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Multi-racial student demands on academic leaders to address the racial myopia of their institutional cultures followed the street protests of Floyd’s murder. Sincere and heartfelt letters were written by college presidents in response to the eight-minutes and forty-six seconds of that took one more Black life in the name of the law. But too many academic leaders were failed by the limits of their scholarly and social literacies at the intersection of race and rights in their written responses to the minutes and seconds that brought global comprehension, if not consensus, over how little Black life matters in America—if only for a moment.

One college president wrote a letter to their campus community and the nation that stands above all others in my view. The letter written by Prairie View A&M University President Dr. Ruth Simmons to her university community began with uncommon and much-needed candor:

I write to you today out of a profound sense of apprehension about what the future could hold for our students, our community, and the nation. I know that, as an educational leader, I am expected to demonstrate hopefulness at all times, but the events of the last days have moved and dismayed me in unexpected ways. At watershed moments such as this, I've concluded that it is better to be forthright, for how else are we to advance the cause of truth and justice if we fail to be honest with ourselves?

Being “forthright,” advancing “truth and justice,” and choosing “to be honest with ourselves” was followed by a set of specific actions for the campus community. The first action goes beyond the community of Prairie View A&M University. Dr. Simmons wrote, “we must cease equivocation about the root causes of the current social upheaval that divides the country.” Though she did not state it directly, white supremacy, the ideological, political, economic, religious, and philosophical arguments for it, and violence in the name of patriotism and “protect and serve” is one of the root causes of “the social upheaval that divides the country.” Dr. Simmons’s decision to advance racial “truth and justice” in this moment of truth drew a historic \$50 million dollar gift to Prairie View A&M University by writer and philanthropist McKenzie Scott. The gift will support action items that include a mandatory course on the histories of race, class, and gender in the United States, as well as the Ruth Simmons Center for Race and Justice at Prairie View A&M.

But the pre- and post-Covid-19 fiscal precarity and structural instability of American higher education was revealed when Mills College, a 169-year-old college for women, announced it would no longer be a degree-granting institution. Also, five universities under the aegis of the State of Pennsylvania will fire one-hundred full-time tenured and non-tenured faculty at the end of the year. These decisions are a serious crossroad for higher education with long-term implications.

With that said, degree-granting art and design schools are also at a crossroad of multiple stress points within and beyond their walls that require the attention of trustees, administrators, and faculty without the gift of time and the institutional norms a pre-Covid-19 world offered them. The uncertain state of the San Francisco Art Institute, the closing of Memphis College of Art in 2020, the closing of St. Paul’s College of Visual Art in 2015, and the Emory University Visual Arts Program in 2012 are major indicators of the precarity of art and design education. But at these crossroads lie a constellation of opportunities for any one of the remaining institutions to go beyond reform and pursue the reinvention of elite, art and design schools and culture. Disrupting the stasis of legacy pedagogies and faculty cultures; recruiting and retaining international students from Africa, India, and South America; increasing domestic student populations beyond upper-class households; diversifying the fiscal streams of tuition through remote learning models; planning for a decline

in traditional college-age students through non-degree offerings and night-school platforms; building more robust gown-to-town relations as hubs for creative public and private ventures; developing for-profit spaces for media production; more relevant and effective, twenty-first-century, pre-college programs; and contributing to transforming and dismantling the effects of separate and unequal K–12 education are just some post-Covid-19 gateways for leadership in art and design schools.

But there have been troubling and familiar stories written about racial tensions in art and design school cultures over the last year. Most administrative responses had several things in common, such as letters of apology to Black, Indigenous, and so-called People of Color, and with expressions of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Diversity, equity, and inclusion committees were formed, anti-racist book reading lists were created, scholarships were funded, DEI consultants and coordinators were hired along with cluster searches for non-white faculty.

While Black advancement in higher education is certainly due in part to diversity initiatives, the place that Black faculty, staff, and administrators have in higher education is also due to what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called “the language of the unheard.” In higher education, administrators heard the volume of the “unheard” in the streets following Dr. King’s assassination in 1968. These administrators responded with various race-literate initiatives until the 1978 us Supreme Court decision “Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke” declared that correcting past, race-based discrimination through race-based, admission quotas illegal. Desegregating predominantly white colleges and universities could only be for the purpose of “diversity” rather than addressing past discrimination in higher education. The “purpose of diversity” being to serve a white-student majority through “contact” with students from different class, regional, gender, and ethnic backgrounds.

The Bakke decision was based upon a misleading “reverse discrimination” argument that opposed racial desegregation efforts in college admissions and gave American higher education a race-neutral path for college admissions policies. The benefit of diversity to higher education was discussed in the majority opinion of the court, written by Justice Lewis Powell: “A farm boy from Idaho can bring something to Harvard College that a Bostonian cannot offer. Similarly, a Black student can usually bring something that a white person cannot offer.” But Justice Powell was blind to the fact that there were quite possibly more farm boys from Idaho in predominantly white colleges and universities than Black students in 1978. But New York University Professor Pamela Newkirk’s research reveals how diversity initiatives have become an enduring and successful business model profiting from racial bias in higher education. *Diversity, Inc.: The Failed Promise of a Billion-Dollar Business* also tells the story of how and why diversity is a failed project yet remains the default containment strategy for the clash between a non-white presence in higher education and a white-identified faculty majority.

The challenges to racial, cultural, and curricular desegregation have made the diversity consultants—who are hired to help manage reactionary, academic cultures and a relatively small number of so-called “diversity” faculty—the prime beneficiaries of diversity initiatives. Despite the best efforts of some very sincere people in difficult roles as diversity officers, institutional trauma remains a reality in the lives of Black students, staff, and faculty in predominantly white colleges and universities and in the memories of Black alumni. But the racial illiteracy and ignorance of the majority of white faculty and students is perhaps the biggest incitement of diversity initiatives in American higher education over forty years after Bakke.

Diversity initiatives have successfully mandated respect for human “difference,” pronoun usage, and non-gender-binary lavatory facilities and has encouraged personal expression and social engineering that changes the appearance of student, faculty, and administrative populations. But diversity to the academy is like paint to a house. The appearance is changed, but the structure remains the same. To be sure, there has been little to no direct correlation between diversity initiatives and significant and effective racial bias reduction in higher education, especially in the lives of Black students, staff, and faculty. There has also been relatively scant attention to the correlation between legacy pedagogies, curricula, cultures, and racial bias in higher education.

Most art and design schools remain safe houses for underinformed views, opinions, analysis, and illiteracies about race, class, and gender in the name of creative and academic freedom. A-lan Holt, Director of the Institute for Diversity in the Arts at Stanford University, has said, “while we tend to think of the arts as a more welcoming space,” she says that in reality, there is massive inequality. “It’s a very liberal space in theory, but it is also steeped in a lot of traditional exclusionary practices reflected in what art is able to be presented as but also in the leadership that makes up the art world.”

The outcome of diversity initiatives in art and design schools over the last forty years has been dismal. In 2020, Vice Provost for Graduate Studies Stacey Salazar at the Maryland Institute College of Art wrote an overview of art in American higher education for the workbook *Making & Being*. Their findings reveal that “only 38 percent of women professors are tenured.” In comparison, “a mere 5 percent of full professors are African American, Hispanic, or Native American.” Also, “the majority of senior, tenured professors are white men who began as professors in the 1970s.”

The conduct expected of Black art and design students and faculty in the twenty-first-century context of “diversity” has been to be what the sociologist Professor Ted Thornhill terms “racially palatable.” In other words, these students should be grateful to be admitted to their schools, to withhold critiques of white supremacy in the creation of visual, material, and media culture and to be silent on racism in the institution in exchange for scholarship support. Professor Thornhill writes, “white

gatekeepers (and gatekeepers of whiteness) are increasingly inclined to screen Blacks to ‘weed out’ those they perceive as too concerned with race and racism.”

Black students who commonly take the biggest risks citing racism and the myopia of white supremacy in the classroom are subject to the harshest critique and have the most to lose when doing so. Reactions from white-identified faculty and students that ostracize and isolate these students are factors contributing to their lower retention and graduation rates. Critiques of white supremacy in art, design, and the world should not come from vulnerable Black students, faculty or administrators alone. The most relevant response to the tensions at the intersection of race and art and design education is replacing race-neutral, diversity initiatives with race-literate initiatives and paths for curricular and cultural disruption in art and design education.

Disruption in this context means amplifying the ideas, scholarship, and work of underexposed, non-white, and non-male, thought-leaders while also comparing, contrasting, and contradicting the overexposed beliefs of white males and white-identified others. Building literacy on the invention of race and the invention of white people, the role of art and design in undergirding the project of white supremacy in the world should be additional features of disruption in art and design education.

For my white-identified colleagues unsettled by the term white supremacy and the charge to unlearn it, this ideology is not limited to white-identified “bodies.” Billions of dollars in the global sales of skin-lightening creams should clarify the unlearning of how to view the world and the people in it through the lenses of white supremacy is not just a task for you. The myths of white supremacy and racial inferiority are regularly circulated by people across social classes, genders, and ethnicities, and a great deal of these people are college-educated. Moreover, white supremacy is neither an identity nor a racial epithet. White supremacy is a descriptive term for an embedded political, religious, and philosophical ideology at a structural, institutional, and global scale. Moreover, a socially literate Art and Design school community comprehends the motives and myths of White supremacist ideology in the past and present of the United States and the world, the race-based structural inequalities that are political, cultural, and economic by-products of this ideology, and the role of Art and Design in maintaining and disrupting these motives and myths.

But a disturbing trend is the uninformed clustering of non-white identified but ethnically unrelated groups of people with complex, contradictory, and at times conflicting histories, cultures, politics, priorities, values, identities, and status on the racial totem of white supremacy through the term BIPOC. These five letters, like the term “diversity,” amount to yet another phrase of rhetorical misdirection sidestepping the unseen, unheard, unspoken, and underlying problem in art and design schools, the nation, and the world—the ideological, political, social, and cultural “cornerstone” of white supremacy.

Artist Alfredo Jaar has said that “images are not innocent.” Consequently, the ideological, conceptual, aesthetic, political, and academic vocabularies of art and design play key roles in maintaining the myths of white supremacy through the production of visual, material, and media culture. So, all students in art and design must begin and/or continue the lifetime act of unlearning and dismantling white supremacy through each year of study. But these students need socially, historically, culturally, and racially literate studio and liberal arts faculty with intersectional knowledge bases beyond the racial literacy workshops, the cannon of art history, and beyond Euro-Western theory to be relevant twenty-first-century teachers and mentors.

Accrediting bodies also have an essential role in transforming curricular and pedagogical cultures of art and design schools by setting new metrics for accreditation that require student literacies and curricular content at the intersection of race, gender, and class in art and design and in the worlds beyond art and design. Additionally, qualitative and in-depth external audits of faculty handbooks that often have a calcifying effect on faculty cultures and protect abusers of “academic freedom” must become part of the accreditation process.

To be clear, a specific focus on Black students in art and design education is neither dismissive of structural inequalities nor biases impacting other groups in the racial hierarchy of white supremacy. In fact, the actions of two philanthropic leaders in art and design education underscores why attention to the recruitment and retention of Black students will ultimately be in the long-term interests of *all* students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

Otis College of Art and Design announced a groundbreaking initiative focused on addressing Black student issues there. Chair of the Otis Board of Trustees Meilee Ney contributed \$1 million to support anti-racism initiatives at the college. “I made my donation because racial injustice is something I feel strongly about,” says Ney. “Systemic racism within our educational, financial, and societal institutions disproportionately affects Black communities and can create additional obstacles for students, faculty, and staff.”

Dean of Student Affairs Nicholas Negrete said Otis took a “data-driven approach” to identify which groups of students needed the most attention. The school learned the students with the lowest-than-average retention and graduation rates at Otis were African American students. “We made a point to say we’re focusing on Black students now,” Negrete said. “We want to make sure we’re focused on student body populations that we haven’t served well historically. Let’s figure out how to do this well, so when we do expand, we have a good model to go off of.”

Days after announcement of the gift to Otis, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) announced a \$5 million gift from philanthropist Eileen Harris Norton that recognizes the role of Black faculty in the retention issues impacting Black art and design students by establishing the Charles Gaines Faculty Chair. Norton said the following about Gaines, “Charles is an amazing artist and has been an important

teacher for a generation of younger artists,” Norton said. “He deserves much recognition for his talent and for what he has given to his students and the larger world. He has been an underrecognized presence, and I want his influence to be known and brought to a wider audience.” What should also be recognized is the effective role Black faculty have on most students in art and design.

The press release about the Norton gift further states, “as arts organizations around the world grapple with the historic underrepresentation of non-white artists, California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) is striving to acknowledge and overcome the legacy of white supremacy in its systems and practices.”

Consider the significance and meaning of the following statistics. According to 2020 demographic data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the last us Census determined that 12 percent of the United States population is Black. Nationwide, 56 percent of Division One male college basketball student-athletes are Black. Forty-six percent of women playing Division One college basketball are Black. These statistics reflect an intentional, unopposed, race-literate effort to attract, identify, recruit, and underwrite the cultivation of elite, basketball talent among Black youth that starts early in their lives.

Moreover, there are few people opposing the attention on Black students in basketball at the Division One collegiate level with charges of reverse racism. Even fewer complain that efforts to cultivate this talent denies equal opportunity to white students or any other group of students. And neither is it said there are too many Black basketball players in collegiate athletics or in the National Basketball Association at the professional level.

The world freely and regularly appropriates art, design, language, music, thought, and style produced by Black artists and designers globally. Moreover, the current market and media attention to Black creative and intellectual excellence is evidence of this fact. The esteemed playwright and theatre director George C. Wolfe once wrote “God created Black people and Black people created style.” So, it should be clear that Black people are not better at basketball than setting trends in art and design—and style, yet less than 5 percent of students graduating from art and design schools are Black. For schools with Black student percentages above 5 percent, their percentage remains in the single digits with retention challenges for those students accounting for lower graduation rates.

Among the member institutions accredited by the Association of Independent Colleges of art and design, fewer than 1 percent of art and design students are Indigenous. Last year Art Center College of Design, founded in 1930, recognized its Black alumni through a survey exhibition of their work. A total of three-hundred former students amount to 1 percent of all its graduates over ninety years. The contradiction between the income, interest, and resources committed to developing elite, Black, basketball talent against the comparably meager efforts to cultivate

elite, Black artists and designers in the United States goes beyond what some consider the “special interest issue” of Black students in higher education.

I believe we’re living in what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once called “powerful days,” particularly in cities filling with people fleeing from war, economic, political, social, and civic collapse. The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs reports that in 2050, 68 percent of the world population will be living in urban areas. Currently, 55 percent of the world’s population lives in urban areas. Notably “Urban” has become a coded and raced term describing cities with large Black communities living at or below the poverty level in the context of the United States. The issues defined as “urban,” from environmental toxicity, food insecurity, homelessness, residential redlining, and the outcomes of separate and unequal education and health-care access emerge from the terrorizing management of Black lives in American cities since the Great Migration of Black people from the white supremacist violence of the agrarian South to the industrial North in the 1930s.

There is a generation of young Black people from urban communities with an Afrofuturist vision leading a remixed Civil Rights Movement 4.0 that is intergenerational, transgendered, transracial, and solution-focused. This vision is also in pursuit of peace and justice for all through confronting and dismantling “the root causes of the current social upheaval that divides the country.”

Lest we forget that these are the grandchildren of grandparents who responded to American white supremacist violence with non-violent political education and organizing—and their lives. These are the persons whose great-great grandparents were denied status of human beings as slaves—persons who fought on both sides of the American Civil War and the slavery question that caused it and persons whose love and labor for this nation was neither returned nor paid. These are the people who lived in faithful, steadfast pursuit of a more perfect union in all of its hypocrisy, complexities, and contradictions through an intellectual, spiritual, creative, and courageous, Black radical tradition. And lest we forget the role of one grandchild in Georgia, who led a coalition of voters to ensure the 45th POTUS would not become the 46th POTUS.

Many of these grand- and great-grandchildren have also made a commitment to pursue a more perfect union through non-violent acts of creativity, community, and innovation as artists, designers, thinkers, and leaders by any means necessary in and out of art and design schools. However, most of these students are priced out of access to the human, material, social resources, and advantages of art in higher education. The price of these financial and institutional barriers to Black students however is much higher than the cost of tuition socially and culturally.

Artists and designers provide a vital mirror to society through a wide range of conceptual, creative, intellectual, material, spatial, and aesthetic vocabularies. So consider how much the world is unable to see, feel, know, and comprehend

through the visual material and media culture not being made, the design problems not solved, and the lives and human potential lost because more Black students are on college basketball courts than in art and design schools.

There is a greater good that can come from leading more Black students to art and design education with the same amount of enthusiasm, effort, money, and resources as the nation brings to cultivating elite basketball players. The enthusiasm, effort, money, and resources for this effort will require large-scale, philanthropic efforts from individuals and institutions who comprehend the role these grand-and great-grandchildren would play in transforming art and design education as a path to transforming people, neighborhoods, nations, and this chapter of the human story.

There are emerging alternative schools with curricular and pedagogical models that conventional art and design schools would be wise to adopt—or risk irrelevance. These alternative models offer multiple paths toward the seemingly impossible task of transforming art and design education. It is time to restructure, re-vision, redirect, and disrupt the cultures of traditional, tuition-driven, degree-granting art and design schools. The question is, which school will take the lead that others will follow—and lead *boldly*?

Consider this. In 1977 pioneering Black feminist thought leaders Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Denita Frazier, were primary authors of the Combahee River Women's Collective Statement. They wrote that “the destruction of all the systems of oppression” will be when Black women are truly free. In other words, when Black women are free—all will be free.

A commonly unknown fact is that art in higher education is demographically gendered feminine. Consequently the majority of students in art and design schools are women—which means the majority of Black students in art and design schools are Black women.

So, imagine just one leader in art and design education fully comprehending how patriarchy and white supremacy uniquely impact Black women at personal, social, and structural levels in the world—and in the worlds of art and design. Now imagine the status and experiences of Black women as students, faculty, administrators, staff, and alumni becoming the leading indicator of the health and quality of a truly transformed and reimagined art and design school culture. Imagine that—*boldly*.

As the thought-leading musician, composer, and sonic architect Sun Ra once said, “the possible has been tried and has failed. Now it's time to try the impossible.”

George Cicsle Baltimore MD †

Tim Doud American University, Washington DC †

Zoë Charlton American University, Washington DC

## Afterwords

### I.

GEORGE CICSLE: In *Out of Place: Artists, Pedagogy, and Purpose*, what's the concern you have that you wanted to unpack?

ZOË CHARLTON: Pedagogy happens everywhere. Pedagogy is a collaborative act, and it's also a form of care. The contributors in this book convey how their individual experience, expertise, and embodied knowledge are brought into their pedagogy. Learning and teaching happens in conditional, relational, and politicized spaces.

TIM DOUD: Most institutions of higher learning are founded upon legacies of exclusion. Inequities persist because the conditions that created those histories aren't fully confronted, evaluated, and dismantled in favor of protecting privilege and historical power.

ZC: A multi-book volume that I think every BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and ALAANA (African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, and Native American) academic needs in their library is the *Presumed Incompetent* series. The essays are first-person accounts by womyn of color working in academia. People from communities who experience marginalization or have been minoritized or undervoiced in predominantly white, cis, het, and ableist academic spaces have much to contribute to the ongoing conversations about anti-bias. The artists-scholars in *Out of Place* add depth and nuance to these conversations through their practices and pedagogical initiatives.

GC: Talk about your relationship with pedagogy and why this is so important both to the academic community and the art community. What should we walk away from this book as it relates to your own pedagogy as artists and academics?

TD: What are the different paths people have taken in our field? What are different examples of or approaches to pedagogy today? We wanted to understand more about projects that could act as models for people in our field, whether they are learners or teachers.

We know that academic institutions can't serve every kind of student or teacher. When I've talked with recruiters for art programs, they understand that art schools and universities attract different kinds of learners. Even though we work at a university, must everyone work in the same framework? And how is the curriculum revised? Some of the structures in place in both arts schools and universities serve another generation of artists and thinkers. Is the traditional academic route the only model? Who talks about pedagogy?

zc: At American University (AU), we return to questions around pursuit and politics. We ask who is being privileged and who is being served? We were not entirely satisfied with what we perceived as the status quo at our job, and we know folks contend with issues like this at every institution. We wanted to figure out how we could change the dynamic.

GC: I love your title *Out of Place*, and your subtitle talks about artists and pedagogy, but your last word is purpose. It is an inherent critique or a deconstruction, like you say, of institutions, whether schools, museums, the art world, the gallery system, the list goes on and on. Your kaleidoscope of contributors is taking all this apart and examining it. However, more than questioning and critiquing it, the most important for me personally, my interest in working with you, is that the book is trying to re-purpose, restructure, or re-vision through these conversations you've had with your artists.

TD: There are contributors who engage in institutional critique and many of the projects, because the ways they function, contradict, or subvert the kinds of institutions you mention. There are also contributors in this book whose projects, while initiated outside of academia, now hold academic positions. Those artists maintain their external projects. I appreciate your comments on the title because the title is meant to be read in more than one way. "Out of Place" is also "acting out."

GC: We could have a whole riff just on the title. "Out" has all kinds of meanings, that is, as an outsider or out as in gay. What does "acting out" mean beyond place? We don't talk a lot today about the role of place for artists, teachers, and working in the

community. What place means inherently is not just a physical manifestation. Place is defined by the community.

zc: Place is defined as a community *by* the community. Sometimes it's out of the place, going beyond the institution, beyond the framework. "Acting out" is recognizing that the culture of the place may not be tolerant of all types of individuality. The culture of a place may enforce respectability politics that are meant to "keep you in your place." For many of the contributors, the experience of not fitting in perfectly has made them develop strategies to better navigate the systems at their jobs, build alliances, or start their own artist-run initiatives. This is how they "act out" beyond the places they find themselves.

gc: I understand completely. In my own pedagogy, the most important question is why? My first question to you was why the book?

The book, of course, is divided into three concrete types of artists and their practices both within and outside academia. When we originally spoke, the two of you identified yourself as fitting into one of those three, mainly, though not exclusively. However, your experience isn't limited to only one of them, is it? The more I've gotten to know both of you, and now having conversations, I think the reason I wanted to have this interrogation with you is I felt your collaborative work with 'sindikit and your individual practices. Curricular work in academia and in your studio are the thesis or vision for your book.

zc: 'sindikit became the place where we understood our shared values, and it gave us a way to work together beyond job related responsibilities. Exhibiting together was another way that we activated our values. Co-teaching and curriculum-building activates those values of collaboration within an institution that talks a lot about collaboration, but it doesn't always provide a sustainable structure to do it.

gc: You both just made my argument for me about how you reflect two of the three types of artists you talk about in your book. The first one, 'sindikit, fits into projects outside of academia and the other are academics who do impactful work within academia. You move away from the silos because of your innovative curriculum development, the relationships you've been forming with the Washington, DC arts community, and the artists you bring into the studio program.

Through 'sindikit, as teachers at AU, and as individual artists, you address and intersect all three categories. We know your work is interdisciplinary, and what you're doing within academia is a huge part of it. I wanted to have this conversation to acknowledge you are all three of these, including both as 'sindikit and in the individual work you do in academia. I don't want to lose sight of that. In your book you have a lot of artists who were doing pedagogical projects, not in academia but much like

'sindikit. They are engaging models for us to look at in museums, the university, and the art world systems. It's what 'sindikit does.

zc: George, at one point you asked how we came to talk about 'sindikit as a collaboration. It's a place of overlap in the content between Tim and me. We started 'sindikit in 2016 with projects that paired artists who were at different points of their careers and from different parts of the country. Each year our collaboration has a different focus: artist projects and curated exhibitions; collaborative community conversations; and programming with other artist-run initiatives (ARIs), nationally and internationally. In 2020, Covid-19 restrictions moved us to host all of our panel conversations, a performance series, and curatorial projects online. This year in 2021, we're connecting 'sindikit programming with what we're doing at AU.

GC: In the third artist category of cultural projects, they call themselves artists, not academics. It's another bridge.

TD: In those projects, the artists are making projects that engage in pedagogy. That goes back to 'sindikit. If one compares the 'sindikit project to other projects or institutions, one finds that each isn't entirely the same and doesn't need to be.

zc: The artists in the first section of the book, like Lisi Raskin, Michael Ray Charles, and Lauren Frances Adams convey the importance of pursuing inter- and transdisciplinary research and how it frames their thinking and teaching.

With great intention, Tim and I wanted to teach outside of our academic unit. We want to move between centers and departments at our institution in similar ways that we work within our local art ecosystem. That decision was about relevancy and context and bringing artists' thinking into the rest of the university. We are building affiliations with other schools, programs, and centers in support of inter- and transdisciplinary work. For us to be part of the changes within academia means that we have to be invested in what happens in other parts of the university system. We were inspired by Kenneth Bailey, a contributor in the second section of the book, who said artists should find themselves in other disciplines and industries. The way we artists think can be very useful in other academic units and fields.

TD: I love that you mentioned Kenneth Bailey. Kenneth came to us through a community outside of our own department and university. Like 'sindikit, we use our resources at AU to ask questions around issues and artists that we don't necessarily know or understand. Kenny was invited to AU through a collaboration with Transformer, an art organization in D.C. The director, Victoria Reis, introduced him to us. We made a framework for Victoria to bring artists to us. The series was called *Do You Know Where Your Art Comes From?* We knew some of the artists within the networks

that Victoria explored, which emphasized the deep overlaps in art ecosystems in and out of academia. The sections were called *Locally Sourced*, *Southern Constellations*, *Socially Engaged Art*, and *Martha Wilson and the Franklin Furnace*. When Kenneth spoke with our students, he made a plea for them to use the skills they're developing as artists, outside of their own field. Artists think differently, approach pedagogy differently. A formal sculptor can bring skills and a way of seeing that operates outside of the norm and outside of the field of art. And that's a good thing. Kenny's appeal to our students had a huge impact on us.

ZC: Kenny's comment has become a great foundation for us.

TD: He told students not to stay in place, go out of your discipline.

GC: He told them to go "Out of Place."

## II.

GC: Could you speak to what 'sindikit's values are and what drives that work?

ZC: When we founded 'sindikitin 2016, we defined our values. They are Inclusion and Belonging; Respect; Bridge Building and Access; Accountability; and Stewardship and Mentorship. Our values came out of recognizing how we live and work in multiple communities beyond the institution.

TD: And there's a real value in working beyond one's own institution. It makes me think about access in and to academic and museum spaces. How do people get into these larger institutions? There is no easy entry.

ZC: Access into these places seems fairly opaque, and Tim and I are a part of some of them! The statistics are there: in 2017, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that Black faculty at United States colleges represented 6 percent, and Latinx faculty was 5 percent. At AU, in the College of Arts and Sciences, this percentage was 6.20 percent for Black faculty and 6.95 percent for Latinx faculty in 2017. The curriculum and culture reflects this underrepresentation. I recognize that AU and the Studio Art program need to do better. Our aligned values require that we teach more expansively to address the imbalance in representation. 'sindikit grew out of wanting to do more with programming in our academic unit.

TD: These statistics need to be addressed at all universities and arts schools. Our MFA program recognizes these imbalances and compensates by utilizing our visiting artist program to bring many different identities and positionalities to our students.

Small departments don't have a big turn over in faculty positions. We didn't understand until we'd been in our positions for a while that individual faculty members can affect changes in the ways universities hire. Antagonism can be fuel. I say this to my students often. Claire Bishop's article on relational aesthetics and antagonism is a great example.

zC: Nobody deliberately moves towards antagonism; it's not considered "a professional" way to behave. But there is a lot of change that can happen under that antagonistic framework.

### III.

gC: Why do you talk about 'sindikit as a project?

zC: We call 'sindikit a project because there's flexibility in that word. "Project" connotes possibilities, modification, evolution, experimental, and something that can be altered even after installed. When something is a project, there's space for failure.

We refer to everything as a project. This reflects the conditional, relational, and contextual. Things change: thinking changes, work changes, approaches change. Projects and the ideas that lead to them are not final. We wanted flexibility built into the projects. When we say there's a pursuit, that implies a passion, something worth following, worth chasing. Tim likes to say we came into art out of a love of doing, of pursuing something. We don't always know what that exact pursuit is, but when we get close to it, it generates more things that we want to pursue.

TD: We engage with artists that we're interested in but don't necessarily know or understand their artwork. The studio visits and first conversations have become very important. When visiting artists' studios, we look for what is discarded or not taken as seriously. When I was a grad student at the School of Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), I visited a professor, Susanna Coffey's, studio. At the time she was known primarily as an abstract painter. In her studio, she had a bunch of small paintings, all on the floor, most of them turned around so the fronts of the paintings weren't visible. They were meticulously painted self-portraits. She wasn't taking them very seriously at the time, but she had an impulse to make them. Eventually the portraits became central to her practice. That was a formative experience. Something I've talked with Zoë about frequently.

Another inspiration for 'sindikit was Lars von Trier's *The Five Obstructions*. Von Trier asked another filmmaker to remake one of his films five times and gave the filmmaker a different set of obstructions for each iteration. We liked the idea of people making projects outside of what they typically make or what they are known to make.

The von Trier film was a template. Foundationally, we're interested in research in ways that brings us back to why we started making art to begin with. Most artists aren't drawn to the field because they want to become good professionals.

When artists wanted to turn a project into a gallery show, we resisted. We avoided using the words gallery or exhibition. 'sindikit started as a framework for artwork to be made but over time we understood it as our collaborative art project, something that can be shaped and changed. Importantly, it is a self-funded project. We didn't want the project to smack of commerce.

Michelle Grabner's project, *The Suburban*, was an influence. We respected the idea of someone doing a curatorial project while indicating something about the artist herself. Grabner's artwork engages in ideas around suburbia. Her project gives artists the opportunity to make a project in her backyard without commercial concerns. *The Suburban* was originally situated in Grabner's backyard in the suburbs of Chicago. As a full-time academic and active artist, she did not have to open a project space, but for every artist that does, DIY projects open up opportunities for other artists to show their work.

zc: 'sindikit is a collaborative research art project where we invite artists whose practice, process, or artwork expands our own thinking. We share specific interests around gender, sexuality, race, the economies of identities and objects. We often research artists who may use similar materials or media, or engage similar themes, or use the same kinds of tools, but work differently. This is where 'sindikit as research is intimately connected to teaching: we ask our grad students to study other artists' methodologies and think critically about their process and their solutions. This intentional kind of study is something that happens beyond school. It makes artists aware of what's being made, it builds rigor and context for the work, and most importantly, it encourages citation.

gc: The 'sindikit project is a work in progress, subject to change. I like your acknowledgement of how research fits in, not just the creative process of an artist but also in academia where you are and how that plays a big role with 'sindikit. The conversation around research today always resides in the university system, but now it's being deeply discussed in art schools. Which is something new for people realizing the role in place of research, not just in the creative process but also how we all function in R&D (Research and Development).

td: 'sindikit is a replicable model. Artists can take different career paths and make opportunities for artists and for themselves. Since we have been in academia, much has changed, particularly around tenure. There are fewer jobs and more artists going through grad programs. And at the same time Professional Practices plays a larger role in the art-school curriculum. Our field resembles our culture: key institutions,

and the visibility that comes with those institutions, can open doors. A person from a marginalized community who doesn't have an entryway or knowledge of the field is at a disadvantage. Many artists decry gatekeeping but many still want to be acknowledged by the same institutions that are critiqued. *But the one thing an artist can actually control is context.* Making context.

Our project gives artists a context with other artists, often with similar concerns. Artist-run projects open up different paths. We, as artists, can suffer from wanting the same things and taking the same paths. That becomes monocultural.

zc: Tim, you're talking about the current systems and structures that are in place that serve to maintain the status quo, that is, change the optics and the numbers but not transform the systems of support to enable people to truly thrive. Adding one or two or three or four "diverse" persons is not enough. At 'sindikit, inclusion is a foundational politic.

Most folks think about inclusion as an add-on, like as a way to decolonize their curriculum. When you recognize the narrowness that you're working in, you have to get to the root of exclusionary practices and teaching and rebuild from there. And that is a painful process to critically look at the systems of support, the foundation, and the inequities inherent in policies. That's a lot of reckoning for everybody involved.

#### IV.

gc: I wanted to talk about 'sindikit and stewardship and mentorship. It's been five years now, that you've been working together and within the community. You're sharing resources with other people, supporting communities and ideas in the area. You have reached the point of building an art collection that is an offshoot of your stewardship and mentorship.

zc: Stewardship and mentorship are two different things. Another way we engage in stewardship is through a shared collection. Stewardship is taking care of something or someone. How do you become a steward? That's different from being a collector. We're not about collecting people or identities or things. We're about stewarding and caring for people and objects—and this is a continuous learning process. And we are serious about objects! We started a 'sindikit collection to further the ways we can support artists through stewardship of their work. There are sixteen artists' works in the collection.

How do we try, to the best of our abilities and available resources, to take care of their needs and the objects or experiences folks are making? For instance, Jaimes Mayhew is a non-discipline-specific artist, curator, and community organizer based in Baltimore, Maryland. Jaimes, Tim, and I are stewards of each other. We have col-

laborated on the Friday Performance Series (FPS), one of the 'sindikit projects that is a curatorial and stewardship program. Jaimes has agency with the FPS, it is his program. What Tim and I do is help take care of content and programs that are important to him.

TD: The work Jaimes did with the Friday Performance Series in 2020–21 allowed 'sindikit to go virtual during the Covid-19 pandemic. He gave performance artists from different parts of the country a platform and we were able to provide funding. Many of the artists Jaimes approached to perform don't typically perform. While the rest of the world was getting Zoom fatigue, Jaimes asked artists to embrace the Zoom space as a venue. The series met the objective to be experimental; it was particularly exciting when artists like Helina Metaferia, Lee Walton, and Erick Antonio Benitez took on Zoom as a space. We all recognized the value, limitations, and lack of social contract when one is using Zoom. We made a decision to share the 'sindikit platform with Jaimes, and Jaimes shared the platform with many other artists.

While we are talking about collaboration, mentorship, and institution building, can you talk about how you started The Contemporary?

GC: I always talk to my students about things like collaboration which was important at both The Contemporary and at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and when you work with partners.

I always try to make sure people understand there's different levels of relationships. If you start to use the word collaboration, it's the ultimate one, and you can't use it without understanding its implications, not just the commitment, dedication, and your relationship, but also giving up the power. It's giving that over completely to someone. If not, then say this is an association with someone or in partnership with someone. If you go to that level, they involve the values in the process and decision-making agreement. What happens if you're not going to agree and you have a conflict, what is the system to go through that? You have that up front if you're having a collaboration. If not, and you're working with a museum and they have all the money, the buck stops with them.

Being in those situations with The Contemporary we developed Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) that weren't just about marketing the project, everyone's responsibilities, and the practical things like finances, but, most importantly, the decision-making process. What happens when there's conflict? That had to be on paper and address the whole concept of a democratic, consensus-building distinction. That is certainly how I ran MICA's Curatorial Practice grad program. Because I had many students, you can imagine that they just bucked against that because they wanted to be told what to do. So it resonates very much to me. People don't take that word collaboration so easily nowadays.

TD: We've never talked about what brought you to this field. How are you here?

GC: I'm only here due to, like what you've also talked about, mentors and teachers in my life. I grew up in a working-class family, and we didn't go to museums or know artists. But I was very fortunate in college to be exposed to some teachers who became my mentors, originally in theater and dance and then in visual arts. As a result, it opened up and connected my life to what they were doing. It happened through other people sharing and being kind and generous enough to let me in. To witness, as artists, what that was. For me it was very tempting to be an artist. I worked for six years as an artist and studied with the best, but I realized I was not an artist because I know the difference of what an artist is, and I was not an artist. But I knew I was creative, and that creativity was being able to be and talk with artists and their work. As well as to be allowed to be inside their heads.

GC: Questions we haven't thought about or concerns either of you want to make sure we capture?

TD: We haven't talked about an important component of what we do at 'sindikit. There was another significant motivation in developing 'sindikit. Artists want to talk about their work, and they want to hear what other people think about their work. Since the inception of the project we have employed different ways to talk with artists or be in dialog with their work.

zC: Yeah, we do this in three ways—'sindikit dinners, artist conversations and interviews, and collaborations with art orgs and other artist-run initiatives. The dinners are the part of the project we most enjoy. The structure of this dinner is important in that it focuses the conversations and allows eight to twelve guests to contribute information towards a single topic. There's no side-talking. All questions or comments must be directed towards the group. This ensures that everyone is actively listening to the person who is talking. These dinner conversations rely on conviviality to bridge social differences. They provide a way to talk about the ideas in an artist's project in a group and relate it to topical, socio-political, and historical events.

TD: As an example, we collaborated with a small, critically minded, artist-run gallery in Cleveland, Ohio called The Muted Horn, to host a 'sindikit dinner. We provided reading material and dinner conversation focused on Derrida's philosophy on hospitality.

zC: How did you come to a philosophy of inclusion at The Contemporary and at MICA? Something that struck us is how you built the program and how you build

community. What does it mean to build programs in different spaces and in both instances—you led with curiosity, pedagogy, and community in mind?

GC: Without question, my work at The Contemporary and MICA's undergraduate and graduate, curatorial programs was about both envisioning and building them. However, the building was not just mine. I pose the question where I can and state the obvious of what's going on in the art world or in education.

The Contemporary was founded during the culture wars of the late eighties and early nineties, as a critique of the museum field, questioning what and why they were doing and who was making those decisions. Every project we attempted to look at models with artists who were working with, for, and by communities, not in contemporary art communities, and how that might be possible. We weren't saying the temple shouldn't exist or that we should blow up the temple, which I'm sure was a question for some.

But the people around me—my students in particular, the artists, or the other teachers—are who I rely on and look to for the answers. I'm always providing more questions than answers to them. I'm looking for them to help me understand what people's interests are, what they love, and what they would gravitate to. What are the needs of the community? To be honest, I never look to the art community since they are the default audience.

zc: Especially when the immediate art community that comes to exhibitions and programming is already on board with what you're doing. I guess it's back to the questions of relevance and context, right?

GC: Exactly. We know why the art community cares, which has to do with what we love and gravitate towards as a whole community. The Contemporary and MICA didn't need to be part of that. I didn't want to question if the museum shouldn't exist. Instead, I was questioning what is there at museums for the people who are not invested as artists, art historians, or collectors?

I would talk to my students about my Aunt Doris. We all have an "Aunt Doris." Would Aunt Doris care? The three of us know why we care about the artwork and the artist. We feel and know it, whether from our mentors, influences, family, or ourselves as artists, curators, or teachers. I became more concerned with "Aunt Doris" and the other 96 percent of the population of the world that was missing out. How can you connect what artists are doing to people's everyday life, like Aunt Doris? Is there a way to do that? Well, I believe for artists like yourselves, this is what your practice is about and connecting beyond.

zc: Artist initiatives and organizations like Beta-Local are asking this, as well as The Black School, Side by Side, and Wendy DesChene and Jeff Schmuki with their en-

terprise PlantBot Genetics. With 'sindikit, the questions and conversations we have often move us into new and difficult discussions. This has influenced our teaching; it's especially evident in the content we bring into the classroom and shows up in the classes we develop.

TD: Gudskul is another good example of what you are talking about because they are a collective of collectives. Gudskul is a public learning space with a focus on collective study and grassroots, eco-system building. They share resources. They engage their neighborhood, and nongkrong (hanging out) is part of Gudskul's ethos. It is a project that meets people where they are and understands the value of a variety of people being in the same room.

GC: I'm not a creator, but I work with creators. One learns to surround themselves as a curator or educator with the brightest, the best, and the most creative. Those people then build that world or system or organization like The Contemporary. Every time I talk about The Contemporary in presentations, I'm constantly saying we, we, we. My students say, who's the "we"? I say "Well, I name everyone, including staff, board, artists, our I4O volunteers and partners from the different communities. That's the we that made it possible." Yes, it starts with someone. You've both talked about this before. It starts with a seed, but someone has to bring the water for the seed to emerge.

zc: One of the best outcomes of a 'sindikit project can be finding access points into different ways of working through ideas for artists and creating spaces for that thinking to be public. On our campus, it's finding ways to make the work—artist's labor and things and experiences we make—central and visible in a variety of disciplines. And for us, it is finding ways to challenge our own narrow viewpoints and productivity as artists so our *walking and talking* are stronger.

TD: We initiated the 'sindikit project in order to work outside of the university. The project made us think about time, particularly taking time: slowing things down, reflecting what it means to work both in and outside of the university. 'sindikit is now entering the university through university centers, programs, and classes. In the current phase of the project, 'sindikit is nomadic. As Zoë mentioned, we bring content to various venues, museums, and art centers. Our capacity to empower 'sindikit makes us think about consent, and the lack of permission, in the various spaces we inhabit. Universities today are talking about whose voices historically dominate collective discourse. These conversations center on decolonization, structural racism, and gender.

One of the things that we hear in higher education is "because that's the way it is" or "that's the way it has always been done." In this country, the "way it is" is cen-

tered in whiteness and white history. It is hard to change institutions and institutional thinking. Most of the people in the book share a similar educational trajectory. And, thus, by historical university definitions, the “what it is” or the permission here is white, white, white. Universities invest in the kinds of pedagogy that historically exclude voices that exist outside “permissible” boundaries. We work in a university, itself, a European-styled, institution. Universities are in the business of passing on culturally mandated information. Sometimes it takes going outside of a system, the university system in our case, to understand how we limit ourselves within that system. That is the price of admission.



## Contributor Biographies

**Alexandria Smith** is a mixed media visual artist based in London and New York. She earned her BFA in Illustration from Syracuse University, her MA in Art Education from New York University, and MFA in Fine Arts from Parsons School of Design The New School. She is the recipient of numerous awards including the Queens Museum/Jerome Foundation Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner Grant, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Fellowship, the Virginia A. Myers Fellowship at the University of Iowa, and the Fine Arts Work Center Fellowship. She has been awarded residencies including MacDowell, Bemis, Yaddo, and LMCC Process Space. Smith's recent exhibitions include her first solo museum exhibit, *Monuments to an Effigy* at the Queens Museum in New York City and a site-specific commission for the Davis Museum at Wellesley College. Alexandria has a forthcoming solo exhibit at the Currier Museum of Art and group exhibits at Lisson Gallery London and Gagosian Gallery New York City. She is currently Head of Painting at the Royal College of Art in London.

**Alexis Granwell** is a Philadelphia-based artist. She teaches drawing at The University of Pennsylvania and sculpture and graduate studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She was co-director of Tiger Strikes Asteroid Philadelphia from 2014-2019 and a member since its founding in 2009. Granwell is a recipient of The Independence Foundation Fine Arts Fellowship Grant for 2015. She has been awarded residencies at the I-Park Foundation, Ragdale, and Jentel. Exhibitions include Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Underdonk, BravinLee Programs, Ortega y Gasset Projects, Field Projects, Dickinson College, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Europos Parkas Museum. Her work has been reviewed in *Hyperallergic*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Two Coats of Paint*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Granwell received an MFA from The University of Pennsylvania in 2007 and a BFA in Painting from Boston University in 2003.

**Antoine Williams's** interdisciplinary practice is an investigation of power and the body. Heavily influenced by science fiction and critical race theory, Williams has created his own mythology about the complexities of contemporary Black life. An artist-educator, Williams received his BFA from the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, and his MFA from UNC, Chapel Hill. He is a member of the North Carolina Black Artists for Liberation. He has exhibited at Smack Mellon Brooklyn, 21c Museum, Elsewhere Museum, The McColl Center of Art and Innovation, and the California Museum of Photography. He attended the 2020 Center for Afrofuturist Studies artist residency and took part in the 2021 Drawing Center viewing program. He is a recipient of the 2017 Joan Mitchell Award for Painters and Sculptors and the 2018 Harpo Foundation Grant Award. He's given talks at Auburn University and UNC, Chapel Hill. Williams is an associate professor of art at Guilford College.

**Bill Gaskins** explores questions about visual and media culture in the twenty-first century through photography and media from an interdisciplinary professional and academic foundation that includes his body of arts and culture writing framed through photography, cinema, the history of photography, visual and material culture, and American and African American Studies scholarship. His relevance as a contemporary artist has garnered attention through books, catalogs, solo and group exhibitions at major venues including the Crocker Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Smithsonian Institution. Bill Gaskins is also an informed and inspired professor, acknowledged by his students and peers for his insightful and transformative approaches to teaching and learning. He is presently Director of the Graduate Program in Photography + Media & Society at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

**Caroline Woolard** is Assistant Professor of Sculpture at the University of Hartford and employs sculpture, immersive installation, and online networks to imagine and enact systems of mutual aid and collaboration. Her work has been featured twice on *New York Close Up* (2014, 2016), a digital film series produced by *Art21* and broadcast on PBS. Woolard was the 2018–20 inaugural Walentas Fellow at Moore College of Art and Design and her work has been commissioned by and exhibited in major national and international museums, including at MoMA, the Whitney Museum, and Creative Time. Woolard is a core member of BFAMFAPhD.

**Carmen Papalia** uses organizing strategies and improvisation to address his access to public space, the art institution, and visual culture. His work, which takes forms ranging from collaborative performance to public intervention, is a response to the barriers and biases of the medical model of disability. As a convener, he establishes welcoming spaces where those from historically marginalized groups realize their desires for participation through processes rooted in activism, performance, and in-

stitutional critique. Papalia is a 2019 and 2020 Sobey Art Award recipient. His work has been featured at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Tate Liverpool, the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, and Gallery Gachet, among others.

**Christopher Robbins** has lived and worked in London, Tokyo, West Africa, the Fiji Islands, the United States, and former Yugoslavia, working on the uneasy cusp of public art, international development, and community organizing. As a way of probing the troubling power dynamics he witnessed in his cross-cultural work, he co-founded the Ghana ThinkTank in 2006. With the mission “Developing the First World,” they collect problems in the so-called “developed” world and send them to think tanks they established in Cuba, Ghana, Iran, Mexico, El Salvador, and the us prison system to analyze and solve. (The network continues to grow.) Then they work with the communities where the problems originated to implement those solutions, whether they seem impractical or brilliant. Christopher Robbins has an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and is the Director of the School of Art & Design at SUNY Purchase College.

**Dan Devening** is an artist, educator, and curator based in Chicago. He is currently Adjunct Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and in 2008 he completed a fifteen-year position as Senior Lecturer at Northwestern University. His work has been extensively exhibited nationally including recent two-person shows at 65Grand in Chicago and Geary Contemporary in New York and group projects in Los Angeles, Cincinnati, and Washington, DC among several other cities in the United States. Internationally, he’s shown in Tokyo, Berlin, Cologne, Amsterdam, Vienna, Brussels, and Melbourne, among many others. As a curator, he has produced exhibitions in Chicago at the Hyde Park Art Center, the Block Museum of Art, and the Evanston Art Center. Internationally his curated projects have been featured in Tokyo, Berlin, Dusseldorf, and Leipzig. In 2007 he inaugurated Devening Projects, a gallery project featuring exhibitions, installations, and events by emerging and established international artists.

**Daniel Coleman** (he/they) is a Mixed-Black, transmasculine, non-binary, and queer artist-scholar. They are currently an Assistant Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

**Elliott P. Montgomery** is a design researcher, strategist, and educator whose work focuses on speculative inquiries at the confluence of social, technological, and environmental impact. He is an Assistant Professor at Parsons School of Design The New School, teaching in the MFA Transdisciplinary Design Program and across the School of Design Strategies. He is also the co-founder of the Extrapolation Factory, an award-winning design-futures research studio based in Brooklyn. He was

previously a design research resident at the U.S. Department of Energy's Advanced Research Projects Agency, Energy as well receiving the Graham Foundation's Individual Grant and the Shed's Open Call commission. He holds a master's in Design Interactions from the Royal College of Art in London and a bachelor's in Industrial Design from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

**farid rakun**, trained as an architect (B.Arch from Universitas Indonesia and M.Arch from Cranbrook Academy of Art), wears different hats, depending on who's asking. A visiting lecturer in the Architecture Department of Universitas Indonesia, he is also a part of the artists' collective *ruangrupa*, with whom he co-curated *TRANSaction: Sonsbeek 2016* in Arnhem, The Netherlands. Currently, *ruangrupa* serves as the first collective artistic director for *documenta* for its fifteenth edition in Kassel in 2022.

**George Ciscle** has mounted groundbreaking exhibitions, created community arts programs, and taught fine arts and humanities courses for fifty years. He trained as a sculptor, studying with Isamu Noguchi. For fifteen years he developed high-school interdisciplinary curriculum and work-study programs for the educationally disadvantaged. In 1985, he opened the George Ciscle Gallery where he promoted the careers of young and emerging artists. From 1989–96 Ciscle was the founder and director of *The Contemporary*, an “un-museum,” which challenges existing conventions for exhibiting art in non-traditional sites, focusing its exhibitions and outreach on connecting artists' works with people's everyday lives. As Curator-in-Residence at Maryland Institute College of Art from 1997–2017, he continued to develop new models for connecting art, artists, and audiences by creating the Exhibition Development Seminar, Curatorial Studies Concentration and the MFA in Curatorial Practice.

**George Scheer** is an artist-founder, director, and cultural policy advocate who fosters creative communities at the intersection of aesthetics and social change. Scheer is the Executive Director of the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans and co-founder of *Elsewhere*, an experimental museum and artist residency in North Carolina. As a cultural critic, George writes about arts, cultural policy, urbanization, and place. Other projects include *Kulturpark*, a public investigation of an abandoned amusement park in East Berlin, and *South Elm Projects*, a curated series of public art commissions. Scheer holds a BA from the University of Pennsylvania in Political Communications, MA in Critical Theory and Visual Culture from Duke University, and a PhD in Communication and Performance Studies from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

**Heather Hart**, based in New York City, is an Assistant Professor at Rutgers University and an interdisciplinary artist exploring the power in thresholds, questioning

dominant narratives, and creating alternatives to them through viewer activation. She has been awarded grants from Anonymous Was A Woman, Graham Foundation, Joan Mitchell Foundation, Jerome Foundation, New York Film Academy, and Harpo Foundation. Hart has exhibited at Queens Museum, Storm King Art Center, The Kohler Art Center, Eastern Illinois University, Seattle Art Museum, Brooklyn Museum, and University of Toronto, Scarborough. She studied at Skowhegan, Whitney Independent Study Program, Cornish College of the Arts, Princeton University and received her MFA from Rutgers University.

**Jaimes Mayhew** is an interdisciplinary artist whose work is collaborative, and based in his interests of land use, speculative futures, and queer ecology. Mayhew's work has been shown nationally and internationally, and he has received awards and grants from the Fulbright Commission of Iceland, Saul Zaentz Innovation Fund, The Contemporary Baltimore's Grit Fund, The Maryland State Arts Council, and the Baltimore Museum of Art and Provisions Library. Mayhew's collaborative and solo work has been shown at Baltimore Museum of Art, Eyebeam in New York City, Mass MoCa in Massachusetts, Conflux Festival in Brooklyn, Chapel of St. Cecilia in Brooklyn, New York, This Is Not a Gateway in London, 808 Gallery in Boston, Transmodern Festival in Baltimore, Goucher College in Baltimore, George Mason University in Fairfax, and Hoffmannsgallerí Reykjavík in Iceland among others. Mayhew lives in Baltimore and teaches at American University in Washington, DC.

**Janelle Iglesias** is an assistant professor at the University of California, San Diego. She works with and through objects on site-responsive projects in a variety of contexts. Her individual practice is invested in the poetics, history, and agency of everyday things and materials. An alumna of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, her work has been supported by the Harpo, Joan Mitchell, Pollock-Krasner, and Jerome Foundations, the latter of which supported field research in the rainforests of West Papua on the constructions of bowerbirds.

**Jeff Schmuki** was raised in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, an environment of extremes that nurtured a unique relationship to the fragile landscape and respect for our limited natural resources. Concerned with a broad range of environmental stressors and wasteful practices, a wide variety of sculptural processes and operations are connected to green issues. Traditional and contemporary sculpture techniques are frequently paired with various creative operations and tactics emphasizing audience participation in artworks' physical or conceptual realization. Jeff has exhibited and completed projects at CRETA Rome Italy, Seoul Art Space South Korea, and Contemporary Craft PA. His recent collaborative work, PlantBot Genetics, has been awarded National Endowment for the Arts funding and Pulitzer Foundation Grants for exhibitions or programming, including the Carnegie Museum of Art, De

Hortus Botanicus Netherlands, the Bach Modern Austria, the New Gallery Canada, and Marfa Dialogues St. Louis. In addition, Jeff is the recipient of several honors, including Pollock-Krasner and Joan Mitchell Foundation Grants.

**Jen Delos Reyes** is a creative laborer, educator, radical community arts organizer, and author of countless emails. Defiantly optimistic, a friend to all birds, and a proponent that our institutions can become tender and vulnerable. Delos Reyes currently lives and works in Chicago where she is the Associate Director of the School of Art & Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**jina valentine** is based in Chicago and is an Associate Professor of Printmedia at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her interdisciplinary practice is informed by the intuitive strategies of American folk artists and traditional craft techniques, and she interweaves histories latent within found texts, objects, narratives, and spaces. She has exhibited at venues including Drawing Center, The Studio Museum in Harlem, CUE Foundation, MCA Chicago, DiRosa Preserve, Southern Exposure, and Marlborough Gallery. Her work has received recognition and support from Art Matters, Joan Mitchell Foundation, and Graham Foundation. valentine received her BFA from Carnegie Mellon University and her MFA from Stanford University.

**Joseph Cuillier III** (b. 1988, New Orleans) is Co-Director and Creative Director of The Black School and is a New Orleans-based multidisciplinary artist, designer, educator, and the co-director of Black Love Fest. His work engages with textile art and fashion as Black architecture, abstraction as a technology, and Black radical pedagogy. His practice, intersecting social practice, installation, fiber, design, and education, centers on deconstructing history and creating counter narratives. He achieved an MFA from the Pratt Institute and has been a faculty member at Parsons School of Design The New School and the Pratt Institute. His work has been exhibited and presented internationally in galleries and museums, including The Studio Museum, New Museum, Bronx Museum, and MoMA Library. Cuillier has been an artist-in-residence and fellow at Sweet Water Foundation, Ideas City NOLA, Antenna, New Museum, The Laundromat Project, and A Blade of Grass.

Dr. **Jordan Amirkhani** is an art historian, curator, and critic currently based in Washington, DC, where she is a Professorial Lecturer in Art History at American University. She has published scholarship on the Franco-Cuban painter and polemicist Francis Picabia, Mequitta Ahuja, Crow artist Wendy Red Star, and the Nashville-based photographer Vesna Pavlović. Recent curatorial projects include *Identity Measures*, an exhibition of twenty-three southeastern artists for the Contemporary Art Center of New Orleans and the 2021 Atlanta Biennial, *Of Care and Destruction*, which featured thirty-four artists working and making across the southeast United States.

Jordan's art criticism and writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art Practical*, *Baltimore Arts*, *X-Tra*, *MOMUS*, and *Burnaway*. Her emphasis on contextualizing contemporary art and artists working in the American Southeast garnered her a prestigious Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation "Short-Form" Writing Grant in 2017 and three nominations for The Rabkin Prize in Arts Journalism in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

**Joseph Kunkel**, a citizen of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, is a Principal at MASS Design Group, where he directs the Sustainable Native Communities Design Lab based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He is a community designer and educator, focused on sustainable development practices throughout Indian Country. His work includes exemplary Indian housing projects and processes nationwide. This research work has developed into emerging best practices, leading to an online Healthy Homes Road Map for tribal housing development funded by HUD's PD&R Office. His professional career has centered on community-based design, material research, fabrication, and construction. In 2019 Joseph was awarded an Obama Fellowship for his work with indigenous communities. Prior to his recognition from the Obama Foundation, Joseph received a Rauschenberg SEED grant from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and a 2019 Creative Capital Award. Joseph is a Fellow of the inaugural class of the Civil Society Fellowship, a partnership of ADL and The Aspen Institute, and a member of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

**Ken Gonzales-Day** is a Los Angeles-based artist whose interdisciplinary practice considers the historical construction of race and the limits of representational systems ranging from lynching photographs to museum displays. His widely exhibited *Erased Lynching Series* (ongoing), along with the publication of *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935* at Duke University Press, 2006, transformed the understanding of racialized violence in the US and raised awareness of the lynching of Latinxs, Native Americans, Asians, African-Americans, and others to contextualize anti-immigration histories within the larger discussion of racial formation so central to this historical moment. Works from *Profiled* at LACMA in 2011 have been exhibited internationally and grew out of research into the history of racial depiction found in historic exhibitions and educational museum displays. In 2017, Gonzales-Day received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in photography and holds the Fletcher Jones Chair in Art at Scripps College.

**Kenneth Bailey** is the co-founder of the Design Studio for Social Intervention (ds4si). His interests focus on the research and development of design tools for marginalized communities to address complex social issues. With over three decades of experience in community practice, Bailey brings a unique perspective on the ethics of design in relation to community engagement, the arts, and cultural action. Projects he has produced at ds4si include *Action Lab* (2012–2014), *Public Kitchen*

(2011–18), *Social Emergency Response Center* in 2018, and *People's Redevelopment Authority* also in 2018. He's one of the authors of ds4si's book *Ideas Arrangements Effects*. He is currently pursuing an MFA at Bennington College.

**Lauren Frances Adams** is a painter who lives and works in Baltimore. She earned her BFA at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and her MFA at Carnegie Mellon University. She grew up in North Carolina on a pig farm. Her work engages political and social histories through iconic images and domestic ornament. Her work has been exhibited across the United States at museums, university galleries, and artist-run spaces, with an upcoming 2021 project at the Baltimore Museum of Art. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and has held residencies at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris and the Sacatar Foundation in Brazil. She is the recipient of a Joan Mitchell Foundation MFA Award, and a 2016 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award. Americans for the Arts recognized projects she co-produced in 2011 and 2017 as "outstanding public art." Her work has been published in *Frieze*, *BmoreArt*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *Artslant*, and *Hyperallergic*.

**Leonhard "Barto" Bartolomeus** is a curator at Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media in Japan. In 2012, after graduating from the Jakarta Institute of Art, Barto joined ruangrupa, which mutated into Gudskul Ekosistem afterwards. His curatorial projects in recent years have started to focus on open education and collaborative projects. In 2017, alongside several curators in Jakarta, Semarang, and Surabaya, he formed a curatorial collective, Kolektif Kurator Kampung. Outside of his professional affiliations, he still passionately pursues independent research and collaborative projects outside of Indonesia. He currently lives and works in Yamaguchi, Japan.

**Lisa Iglesias** is an associate professor at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Her independent work explores expansive histories and potentials of drawing and painting and takes into consideration the translation of patterns, images, and gestures across materials. Iglesias's practice has been supported by the New York Film Academy and residencies at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, among others. Lisa divides her time between western Massachusetts and Queens, New York with travel projects in a variety of destinations, including recent long-term residences in the Dominican Republic, Finland, and Malta.

**Lisi Raskin:** For the last decade, I have been practicing ways of being that embrace what I now understand to have always been my trans and disabled embodiment. I have reshaped my creative and curricular practices into solo and together adventures that support me as I unlearn assimilationist and settler, white supremacist patterns of relation. I focus my energy on endeavors, including art making, that are responsive

and accountable to the needs of my body and community rather than exhibition schedules. I am ever in search of co-conspirators whose lived practices are rooted in mutuality, reciprocity, radical love, and care. Currently, I am working on a book about engaged and inclusive pedagogy. I am a member of the rock band Peebls with whom I have loved, laughed, cooked, and eaten in the process of co-authoring a demo album of intersectional propaganda for children of all ages.

**Marcellina Dwi Kencana Putri** is the manager of Gudskul. She studied International Relations and has a post-graduate degree in Cultural Anthropology. Previously, she was a producer in Studio Batu, a Yogyakarta-based collective and served as a co-curator for OK. Pangan, Media Art Festival in 2017, where she found her main interest in food. She has never been able to resist having a dessert after a meal and finds cooking a therapeutic way to keep her sanity intact.

**Maria del Carmen Montoya** operates in the contested ground between art and social activism. Her primary medium is the communal process of making meaning. She seeks ways to catalyze this natural social phenomenon with situations that insist on the power of human-scale intervention in the presumed inevitability of everyday life. Her methodology is dialogic and collaborative. She believes that art can be a potent crucible for social change. Thus, her work is often about resistance and challenging norms, inverting power hierarchies and breaking rules, but she also traffics in beauty, memory, humor, and other potentially radical forces for activating communities. She is a core member of Ghana ThinkTank, an international artist collective that “develops the first world” by flipping traditional power dynamics and asking people living in the so-called “third world” to intervene into the lives of the people living in the alleged “developed” world. Their innovative approach to public art reveals blind spots between otherwise disconnected cultures and challenges assumptions about who is “needy.”

**Michael Ray Charles** is the Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen Distinguished Professor of Painting at the University of Houston. His work is regularly shown in major venues in the United States and abroad, including the first major retrospective of his work at the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston in 1997. In 2001, Charles was part of the first group of artists to participate in the PBS series titled *Art 21*. Charles was a consultant on the making of the Spike Lee film *Bamboozled* (2000). Charles was listed as one of the top future African American scholars under the age of 40 in *Black Issues in Higher Education* in 2003 and has been a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts.

**Michele Carlson** is a multidisciplinary practitioner working across the fields of art, writing, publishing, and collective practice. She has exhibited her work na-

tionally and has received residencies at Vermont Studio Center, Kala Art Institute, and Montalvo Center for the Arts. She is a founding member of the arts collective Related Tactics with Weston Teruya and Nathan Watson. Formed in 2015, Related Tactics works at the intersection of race and culture with projects supported by the Wexner Arts Center, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, University of San Francisco Thacher Gallery, and Southern Exposure Gallery in San Francisco. They were recently awarded the 2020–21 Print Public residency at Kala Art Institute and the 2021 Craft Research Fund—Artist Fellowship by the Center for Craft, North Carolina. She is currently an Associate Professor of Printmaking at George Washington University.

**Noah Fischer** is a Brooklyn-based artist whose work intersects with politics through a practice of drawing, writing, organizing, performance, and sculpture. The Occupy Wall Street movement was key to his political understanding, questioning the inequity structured into cultural institutions through groups like Occupy Museums and Global Ultra Luxury Faction/Gulf Labor. Fischer's writings have appeared in bills handed out at direct actions and his essays have been published in *Hyperallergic*, *Frieze*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, *Brooklyn Rail*, and *October*. Fischer's solo and collaborative work has been exhibited with and without invitation at Guggenheim, MoMA, Brooklyn Museum, ZKM Center for Art and Media, the 56th Venice Biennale, 7th Berlin Biennale, and 2017 Whitney Biennial. Fischer's interest in politics is currently taking the form of writing a speculative fiction novel about direct democracy.

**Pablo Guardiola** is a visual artist who works mainly with objects, photography, and writing. His work focuses on the production of varied modes of reading and narration and how they are perceived and interpreted. He has a BA in History from the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras and an MFA from the San Francisco Arts Institute. He has exhibited his work in the little tree gallery, Galería de la Raza, Romer Young Gallery, San Francisco Arts Commission, Embajada, and El lobi, among others. Since 2013, he has co-directed Beta-Local in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

**Patricia Nguyễn**, PhD, is an artist, educator, and scholar born and raised in Chicago. She is an assistant professor in Asian American Studies and the Council for Race and Ethnic Studies at Northwestern University, where she earned her PhD in Performance Studies. Through embodied research, performance, installation, and community-based praxis, she explores ecologies of freedom, migration, borders, and war to reveal histories of violence and imagine abolitionist futures. Community engagement is a fundamental ethos of social justice work and her practice as an artist with over fifteen years of experience. She critically engages with publics through curated happenings as sites of performance interventions and platforms for dialogue, healing, and community building. She has exhibited and performed at the

Nha San Collective in Vietnam, Mission Cultural Center, Prague Quadrennial, Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Dr. Nguyễn is also cofounder and executive director of Axis Lab, an arts and architecture organization. Her published work appears in *Women Studies Quarterly*, *Harvard Kennedy School's Asian American Policy Review*, *Women and Performance*, and *The Funambulist*. Dr. Nguyễn is also an award-winning memorial designer for the Chicago Torture Justice Memorial Project, the first monument in the United States to honor survivors of police violence.

**Risë Wilson** is Paula's daughter, Vera's granddaughter, and Adelaide's great-granddaughter. When her people were stolen across the Atlantic, they were dropped in Barbados and Virginia, but Wilson's flesh was formed on the land of the Lenape, more commonly referred to as Philadelphia. Wilson is a product of the constellation of plant-magic, lies, constraints, stardust, tree-mothers, complexities, resistance, and surrender that inform Black life on this land. In 1999 she founded The Laundromat Project, an award-winning organization that connects artists and communities of color to their capacity to envision the world in which we all want to live and the skill sets to make it so. She currently serves as the Senior Advisor for the Art for Justice Fund while also planning to launch a new cultural space that combines art, activism, and healing practices. Her work in all its forms is preoccupied with dislodging herself from the bear traps of oppression so that she might help her kinfolk do the same.

**Roz Crews** is an artist, educator, and writer whose practice explores the many ways that people around her exist in relationship to one another. Recent projects have examined the dominant strategies and methods of research enforced by academic institutions, schemes, and scams of capitalism, and the ways authorship and labor are discussed in the context of a specific art gallery. Her work manifests as publications, performances, conversations, essays, and exhibitions, and she shares it in traditional art spaces—but also in hotels, bars, college dorms, and riverbanks. As part of her studies about the oppressive qualities of schools, she is currently working as a full-time art teacher at a public elementary school in Gainesville, Florida.

**Rudy Lemcke** is a multidisciplinary artist and curator who lives and works in San Francisco. He holds a degree in Philosophy from the University of Louvain in Belgium and a degree in Web Design and Technology from San Francisco State Multimedia Studies Program. His artwork has been exhibited internationally in venues such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, DeYoung Museum, Pacific Film Archive/University Art Museum, Berkeley, San Francisco Art Institute / Walter McBean Gallery, Camerawork, New Langton Arts, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, University Art Gallery, Stoney Brook University, New York, Grey Art Gallery in New York, Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, Florida, The Contemporary Arts Center

in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal. His curatorial work includes a trilogy of projects titled *The Turning*, *Queerly* and includes the exhibitions *From Self to Selfie* in 2017, *A History of Violence* in 2018, and *Precarious Lives* in 2019.

**Ryan McCartney** is a curator, educator, and artist living and working in Saint Louis. Born in 1979, Ryan was raised in rural Salem County of southern New Jersey on an estuary of the Delaware Bay. McCartney's early upbringing was in a now vanishing landscape, one of endless tidal marshes and tall grasses. Based in Philadelphia from 2005–20, Ryan served as one of the first two directors of the Icebox Project Space, with his co-director and friend, Timothy Belknap beginning in 2013. Ryan sought to push the Icebox to reach new communities and audiences through a focus on radically inclusive curation and personal outreach. Each year at the Icebox, McCartney curated and coordinated year-round, visual art programming and performance and produced small-run, artist's publications and artists' audio recordings as a continuation of the idea that the gallery space should be a platform for departures, rather than an end in and of itself.

**Shani Peters** is Co-Director and Director of Education of The Black School, and is a multidisciplinary artist based in New Orleans. She holds a BA from Michigan State University and an MFA from the City College of New York. Peters has presented work in the US and abroad at the New Museum, The Studio Museum, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, Seoul Art Space Geumcheon in South Korea, and the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Harare. Selected residencies include those hosted by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, The Laundromat Project in New York City, and Project Row Houses in Texas. Her collaborative and solo work has been supported by the Mellon Foundation, Creative Capital, the Rauschenberg Foundation, Rema Hort Mann Foundation, and the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Peters is a university and museum educator, focusing her teaching at the intersection of art, design, and social change. She has been a part-time faculty at Parsons School of Design The New School, the Pratt Institute, and The City College of New York.

**Stephanie Dinkins** is a transmedia artist who creates platforms for dialog about race, gender, aging, and our future histories. Dinkins's art practice employs emerging technologies, documentary practices, and social collaboration toward equity and community sovereignty. She is particularly driven to work with communities of color to co-create more equitable, values-grounded social and technological ecosystems. Dinkins exhibits and publicly advocates for equitable AI internationally. Her work has been generously supported by fellowships, grants, and residencies from United States Artist, The Knight Foundation, Berggruen Institute, Onassis Founda-

tion, Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, Creative Capital, Sundance New Frontiers Story Lab, Eyebeam, Data & Society, Pioneer Works, NEW INC, and The Laundromat Project. Dinkins is a professor at Stony Brook University where she holds the Kusama Endowed Chair in Art.

**Susan Jahoda** is Professor of Art at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Jahoda is an artist, educator, and organizer whose work includes video, photography, text, performance, installation, and research-based collaborative projects. Works have been produced for venues in London, Paris, Basel, New York, Seoul, and Moscow. Jahoda is a core member of BFAMFAPhD and the Pedagogy Group, collectives of socially engaged artists and educators based in New York City.

**Tim Doud** received his MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Exhibitions include Curator's Office, Washington, DC, the Tacoma Art Museum in Tacoma, Kemper Contemporary Art Museum in Kansas City, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC, PSI Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Artists Space in New York City, the Frye Art Gallery in Seattle, Art Basel, Galerie Brusberg in Berlin, MC Magma in Milan, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. He has received grants from The National Endowment for the Arts (Arts Midwest), and The Pollock-Krasner Art Foundation. Commission for the Arts and Humanities. He has participated in residencies at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, the Banff Centre in Alberta, the Sharpe/Walentas Studio Program in Brooklyn, New York. Doud is currently a professor at American University, Washington, DC and is co-founder of 'sindikit, a collaborative, research-centered, art initiative.

**Tina Takemoto** is an artist, writer, and filmmaker who explores hidden dimensions of same-sex intimacy in Asian American history. Takemoto manipulates archival and found footage through performance and labor-intensive processes of painting, scratching, and lifting 35mm and 16mm emulsion. By engaging tactile dimensions of the archive, Takemoto conjures up immersive queer historical fantasies. Takemoto has exhibited widely and received grants from Art Matters, ArtPlace, Fleishhacker Foundation, and San Francisco Arts Commission. Takemoto was awarded the Grand Jury Prize for Best Experimental Film at Slamdance and the Best Experimental Film Jury Award at Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival. Screenings include Ann Arbor, Anthology Film Archive, BFI Flare, CAAMfest, Outfest, Queer Forever! in Hanoi, and Xposed Queer Film Festival in Berlin. Takemoto is Dean of Humanities and Sciences at California College of the Arts.

**Tony Cruz Pabón** is a Puerto Rican artist who lives and works in San Juan. His work stretches across the mediums of drawing, animation, and photography. During the last years his work has been shown in *Artefact: Parallel Crossings* at STUK Leuven,

Belgium in 2019, *We don't need another hero*, 10th Berlin Biennale in 2018, Fotovniembre in Tenerife in 2017, Spain, *Spirit Levels* at the Center for Contemporary Art in Glasgow in 2014, the III Trienal Poli/Gráfica in San Juan in 2012, *The Peripatetic School: Itinerant Drawing from Latin America* at the Drawing Room in London in 2011, and at the Casas Riegner Gallery in Bogotá, Colombia in 2011. He is also Co-Founder of Beta-Local, a cultural space, production program, and an experimental education project in San Juan.

**Wendy DesChene** is a Canadian artist and graduated with an MFA in Painting from Tyler School of Art and immediately incorporated materials that would support her activist inspired works. Weary of the limitations placed on art by institutions, she began to invite audience participation into her installations. The outcome was a community collaborative exhibition titled *wysiwyg* that has toured eleven different communities, including the Art League of Houston, the Minnesota State University, the Art Academy of Cincinnati, and The Henry Street Settlement of New York. Other collaborative-based projects have been presented at the Soap Factory and the Tomio Koyama Gallery of Japan. Wendy is the recipient of several fellowships including being twice awarded a Canada Council Travel Grant. Her recent collaborative work, *PlantBot Genetics*, with artist Jeff Schmuki, has been awarded National Endowment for the Arts and Pulitzer Foundation Grants for exhibitions and/or programming at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, the Goethe Institute in Egypt, the Bach Modern in Austria, the New Gallery of Canada, and Marfa Dialogues in St. Louis.

**Whitney Mashburn** is a Boston-based independent curator and writer whose work resides at the intersection of contemporary art and disability justice. Her current work includes *Holding Space* from 2021–present, a burgeoning curatorial project to bear witness to the lived experiences of those marginalized by chronic illness; *Let's Keep in Touch* (2016–present), a multi-phased, collaborative investigation of tactile aesthetics with social practice artist, Carmen Papalia; and collaborations with Minerva Projects and *My Dearest Friends Project* from 2020–21. She holds an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies in Art, an MA in Disability Studies, and a BA in History of Art and Studio Art. Her current research investigates chronic and invisible illness, access as a ritual act of care, communal support, tactile aesthetics, social accessibility, disability activism in curating, meaningful inclusion, and the role of dialogue in social practice and institutional critique. Upcoming 2021–22 exhibitions are in London, Vancouver, Grand Rapids, and Boston.

**Zoë Charlton** creates figure drawings, collages, installations, and animations that depict her subject's relationship to culturally loaded objects and landscapes. Charlton received her MFA degree from the University of Texas, Austin and participated in residencies at Artpace Residency in Texas, McColl Center for Art + Innovation in

North Carolina, and the Skowhegan School of Painting in Maine. Museum collections include The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, and Studio Museum in Harlem, New York City. Charlton is a professor in the Department of Art at American University in Washington, DC. She holds a seat on the Maryland State Arts Council, is a board member at the Washington Project for the Arts in Washington, DC, and is co-founder of 'sindikit, a collaborative, research-centered, art initiative.



## Project Biographies

**Art Practical**, founded in 2009, is a visual arts publishing organization based in San Francisco that is people-forward and equitable. They publish with passion, rigor, and integrity through initiatives that include online arts discourse, podcasts, books, educational programs, and public events. As a platform, Art Practical embraces these many forms to connect diverse regional voices and amplify underrepresented perspectives from the Bay Area and broader West Coast. Art Practical is committed to educational partnerships and continues to provide professional development, financial support, and mentorship to those coming next because it will take more than us to make the art world we hope to see.

**Axis Lab** is an arts and architecture community organization based on Argyle Street in Uptown Chicago. Axis Lab engages in educational programming, urban design, culinary curating, and other multidisciplinary approaches to advocate for ethical development for immigrants and refugees.

**BFAMFAPhD** is a collective formed in 2012 to make art, reports, and teaching tools to advocate for cultural equity in the United States. The work of the collective is to bring people together to analyze and reimagine relationships of power in the arts.

**Beta-Local** is a Puerto Rican non-profit organization dedicated to supporting and promoting art practices through various projects and programs.

**Black Lunch Table Project** is an ongoing collaborative project founded by artists jina valentine and Heather Hart. The project was first staged in 2005 at the artist residency Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and became a nonprofit organization in 2019. The BLT has since taken the form of community roundtables, online oral history archive, and Wikipedia events. BLT has been hosted by Storm King Art Center in New York, Dorchester Projects in Chicago, Bemis Center for Con-

temporary Arts in Omaha, the Creative Time in Brooklyn, Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan, University of Toronto, Scarborough, Elsewhere Museum in Greensboro, the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans, the McColl Center for Art + Innovation in Charlotte, Wa Na Wari in Seattle, and Funda Arts Centre in Soweto, among others. Black Lunch Table is funded by The Andy Warhol Foundation for Art, the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, the Wikipedia Foundation, and Creative Capital, among others, including generous individual donors.

**The Black School** is an experimental art school teaching Black and PoC students and allies to become agents of change through art workshops on radical Black politics and public interventions that address local community needs. Founded by Joseph Cuillier III and Shani Peters, TBS has facilitated over one-hundred workshops and hosted three annual Black Love Festivals to date.

**The Center for Undisciplined Research** was a nine-month, decentralized “center” housed by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth from 2017–18. It was initiated by artist in residence Roz Crews and created in collaboration with administration, faculty, students, and community members. Based out of the Star Store in downtown New Bedford, the Center was a student focused research collective and itinerant space that toed the boundaries of art and its capacity to serve as a tool for making meaning in the world.

**Devening Projects** was established in 2007 and features a diverse group of emerging and established international artists. Focused on site-specific installations and energetic artist pairings, Devening Projects is the anchor of a growing gallery scene on Chicago’s West Side. Devening Projects also publishes experimental artists’ editions and multiples.

**ds4si** is an artistic research and development outfit for the improvement of civil society and everyday life. The Design Studio for Social Intervention is dedicated to changing how social justice is imagined, developed, and deployed here in the United States.

**Elsewhere** is a museum and artist residency set in a three-floor, former thrift store. With people and things, they build collaborative futures. Elsewhere’s Living Museum provides a unique cultural anchor for downtown Greensboro, North Carolina and is a destination for local, national, and global visitors. The Museum presents a changing, interactive environment of artworks, objects, and programs that inspire new ways to look at and re-purpose recent cultural surplus. By activating contemporary memory, an experience at Elsewhere brings new concepts, perspectives,

and life practices to visitors. Elsewhere strives to provide creative, educational, and memorable experiences to all who visit the museum.

**Ghana ThinkTank** is an international collective that “develops the first world” by flipping traditional power dynamics, asking the “third world” to intervene into the lives of the people living in the so-called “developed” world. They collect problems from communities throughout the United States and Europe and send them to think tanks created in “developing” communities. The think tanks—which include a group of bike mechanics in Ghana, a rural radio station in El Salvador, Sudanese refugees seeking asylum in Israel, an artist collective in Iran, and a group of incarcerated girls in the Boston penal system, among others—propose solutions, which are then implemented in the “first world.” Ghana ThinkTank’s innovative approach to public art reveals blind spots between otherwise disconnected cultures, challenges assumptions about who is “needy,” and turns the idea of expertise on its head. Ghana ThinkTank is managed by John Ewing, Maria Del Carmen Montoya, and Christopher Robbins. It was founded in 2006 by Christopher Robbins, John Ewing, and Matey Odonkor. Maria Del Carmen Montoya joined in 2009.

**Gudskul** is an education knowledge-sharing platform formed in 2018 by three Jakarta-based collectives: ruangrupa, Serrum, and Grafis Huru Hara. Gudskul sincerely believes in sharing and working together as two vital elements in developing Indonesian contemporary art and culture. Gudskul is open to anyone who is interested in co-learning, developing collective-based artistic practices, and art-making with a focus on collaboration.

**The Icebox Project Space** was established in Philadelphia in 2013 by directors Timothy Belknap and Ryan McCartney. At nearly 3,000 square feet, with twenty-foot ceilings and a concrete floor, the Icebox is in many ways an ideal arena for contemporary art. Originally an oversized, walk-in freezer for frozen fish, the adaptable, utilitarian space easily shifts from visual art, to performance, to sound, and to immersive video projection, thanks to its permanent video system capable of projecting continuous image at 20’92” feet. Belknap and McCartney saw this space as a perfect opportunity to create a project platform for artists of all kinds, where ideas could develop at an institutional scale without the restrictions and expectations of museums or commercial galleries. Moreover, the directors established their mission: to facilitate projects that are a betterment of the community and to push for social change, to work with artists that are pushing against something, whether it is oppressive institutions, the construction of identity, or even the creative process itself.

**Las Hermanas Iglesias.** As the children of Norwegian and Dominican immigrants who grew up in Queens, New York City, Las Hermanas Iglesias's project-based, trans-disciplinary work explores issues of hybridity, social participation, and trans-national identities. Their collective has fluidly evolved to include a number of team efforts and variations, including steady collaborations with their mother, Bodhild. Las Hermanas Iglesias, as mothers, creators, and educators, produce artworks that disrupt borders, engage absurdity, and promote the benefits of working together. Their collaborations have been shown at Queens Museum, El Museo del Barrio, Abrons Art Center, New Mexico State University Art Museum, and The Utah Museum of Fine Arts, among others. As a team, they've been artists in residence at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Paris Program, Fanoon: Center for Print Research at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar, The New Roots Foundation in Guatemala, and the Textile Arts Center in Brooklyn, New York.

**The Laundromat Project** is an arts organization that advances artists and neighbors as change agents in their own communities. TLP makes art and culture in community while fostering leadership among neighbors through celebrated Create Change artist development programs and creative community-building initiatives across New York City. The idea of a laundromat as a primary place for engagement has expanded over time. It now serves as a metaphor for a variety of settings in which artists and neighbors transform their lives and surroundings. This includes community gardens, public plazas, and local cultural organizations, among others.

**Occupy Museums** was formed to challenge economic and social injustice propagated by cultural institutions. It was initiated from the Arts and Culture working Group in Zuccotti Park in October 2011.

**Peebls** is a collaborative music and art project oriented towards producing "intersectional feminist propaganda music for children of all ages." Peebls grew from a classroom setting that served as an introduction to stand-point feminism and engaged pedagogy starting in the Spring of 2015 in Philadelphia. These political and ideological positions are inherently practice-based, so the group employs a prefigurative politics in order to literally un-form, form again, and reform what is already at hand. This ethic and aesthetic guides everything from their approach to creating music, videos, and costumes to the maintenance of their working relationships and their continued unlearning of oppressive behaviors and relearning of liberatory practices. The group is composed of artists Joanna Bellettiere, Teresa Cervantes, Maia Chao, Filipe de Sousa, Jorge Galvan, Maria Leguizamo, Lisi Raskin, Kelsey Skaroff, Daniel Stern, and Daniel Zentmeyer. Working from Providence, Philadelphia, New York City, and Bogota, they are motivated by the desire to sneak "into the main-frame and rearrange the brain of the world and ourselves."

**PlantBot Genetics**, founded by Wendy DesChene and Jeff Schmuki, operates under the guise of PlantBot Genetics, Inc., a parody of Big Agricultural Firms who skillfully manipulate current food production and distribution systems. PlantBot Genetics combines tactical media and public space to promote critical thinking and political action on environmental issues. By imitating actual corporate practice, they underscore the potential consequences of the global corporatization of agriculture, the natural environment, and public space. The Monsantra Project (monsantra.com) explores the lack of transparency and corporate “grafting” of food production and distribution by releasing humorous next-generation, robot-plant hybrids to prompt critical discussion on the environmental costs of intensive agricultural practices. PlantBot Genetics has exhibited at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, the Pulitzer Foundation for Art in St Louis, and the Goethe Institute of Cairo. Recent exhibitions include *Biophilia* at the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum of Art at Hollins University in Roanoke, *New Ecology* at the Lakkos Art Center in Heraklion, and *Fresh Off the Farm*, Field and Fork Farm at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

**Queer Conversations on Culture and the Arts** brings together locally and nationally renowned artists, writers, filmmakers, and scholars for a series of conversations to discuss a broad range of LGBTQIA+ topics in the humanities, architecture, design, and the arts. QCCA is an on-going collaboration between the Queer Cultural Center, California College of the Arts, and University of California, Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design.

**Related Tactics** is an artistic collaboration between artists and cultural workers Michele Carlson, Weston Teruya, and Nathan Watson. Formed in 2015, Related Tactics projects are made at the intersection of race and culture. Their projects explore the connections between art, movements for social justice, and the public through trans-disciplinary exchanges, collective making, and dialog. Related Tactics is also a conceptual space and platform that employs curatorial strategies as artistic gestures to create opportunities within communities and construct space for collective voice. They confront systemic and institutional racism or inequities that influence our immediate socio-cultural lived experience—a practice that benefits from collective support and sharing knowledge or resources. They do this through collaboration and critical thought strategically implemented amongst and for communities of color and the diaspora. There are many community members that make their work possible. They work loosely between the San Francisco and Washington, DC areas. Their projects have been exhibited and supported by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Wexner Center for the Arts, University of San Francisco Thacher Gallery, Berkeley Art Center, Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery at Parsons School of Design The New School, Southern Exposure Gallery, Alternative Exposure Grants, and the Chinese Cultural Center. Related Tactics was announced

as Kala Art Institute's 2021–22 Print Public artists and the 2021–22 Craft Research Center Artist Fellows by the Center for Craft in Asheville.

**Side by Side** is a micro-residency for BIPOC artists in a 550-square-foot, one-bedroom dwelling with wheelchair access on a quiet street in a post-industrial corridor of McKinley Park in Chicago. Attached to the home of Jen Delos Reyes, Side by Side offers deeply rooted space for artists to rejuvenate, while meaningfully connecting with neighbors and the Chicago arts community through intimate public programming. This holistic, sustainable, social infrastructure rejects dominant art world practices and is committed to connecting the support of our lives to the care of our communities. This project will model that our daily lives and arts and culture can and should exist side by side.

**'sindikit** is developed by artists Zoë Charlton and Tim Doud and is both an extension of their individual practices and their collaborative art project. It is a platform used to organize and curate artist projects and exhibitions, conduct studio visits, give joint artist talks, moderate panels, and develop programming as a team. They created the 'sindikit project to engage their research interests in gender, sexuality, race, and the economy of things. 'sindikit's interest in the intersections of art, community, and education makes it crucial for them to work both in and outside of university systems. The pursuit of 'sindikit is to foster community conversations among culture activators, local, national, international artists, and arts allies that have a stake in discussing socio-political and cultural issues. The social capital of the 'sindikit project is collaboration, cooperation, trust, and generosity between artists.

**Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative** works to provide solutions for culturally appropriate, green, and affordable housing on tribal trust land. They work with American Indian communities to develop a roadmap to sustainable development. Through technical assistance and research of best practices, they can help a community to reduce their impact on the natural world, gain self-sufficiency and provide healthy and affordable housing. They help to build capacity through building relationships, focusing on core values specific to each place and rooted in the spirit, the community, and the land. Their collaborative is a developing network of tribal housing advocates, emerging American Indian designers, community designers, and sustainability advocates.

**Tiger Strikes Asteroid** is a non-profit network of independently programmed, artist-run exhibition spaces with locations in Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Greenville. Their goal is to collectively bring people together, expand connections, and create community through artist-initiated exhibitions, projects, and curatorial opportunities. They seek to build an ethos of cooperative achieve-

ment in the visual arts, creating the physical and emotional space for artists to show their work and exchange ideas on their own terms. Their artist-run model expands the artist's role beyond that of studio practitioner to include the roles of curator, critic, and community developer and provides an alternate model to the conventions of the current commercial art market. They foster relationships between artists from all career-stages, centering underrepresented work and voices, and offer new contexts for the work of mid-career and established artists.



## Figures

- p. 21:** 'sindikit portrait, “Miami Is Nice (Baltimore),” 2017. Courtesy of 'sindikit.
- p. 31:** “The Been Believers,” 63 × 69 in., acrylic, oil, and oil stick on canvas, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.
- p. 39:** “Democracies Can Fail...,” For Freedoms, Billboard, Nashville, TN, 2018. Photo credit: Clifford Pickett and Alyssa Meadows.
- p. 47:** “Germinal-Jackson Lee Monument” (“Still Life with Fruit and Nuts” by Robert Duncanson [1848] with speculative offering left at the monument after its removal. Background: Celebrants at the Jackson Lee Monument pedestal, Baltimore / Confederate women mourners at Stonewall Jackson’s grave / Chertertown, Maryland colonial wallpaper pattern), acrylic on birch panels, August 2017. Courtesy of the artist.
- p. 59:** Adapted image from Lisi Raskin, (*Some of*) *The Mechanics of Critique*, animation, 13’19”, 2019. Image used to explain how to denaturalize and decode certain words and their ideological function within the context of art school critique. The animation explains this process in greater detail. Courtesy of the artist.
- p. 73:** “Every World Is A Head, Every Head is a World,” 21 × 16 in, color lithography, aquatint etching, collage, and blind embossment, 2020. Courtesy of Flatbed Press and the artist.
- p. 83:** Axis Lab’s “Baseline: Argyle Is Alive” summer festival featuring Tsukasa Taiko, June 2017. Photo credit: Peter Nguyen.
- p. 93:** Top: “Douglas Crimp: Before Pictures,” Queer Conversations on Culture and the Arts, California College of the Arts, 2016. Photo credit: Rudy Lemcke; bottom: “Immemorial,” documentation of performance at de Young Museum for Day Without Art, 1992. Artwork © Rudy Lemcke, photograph © Rink Foto.
- p. 105:** BFAMFAPhD, Diagram of the Solidarity Economy by Topos Graphics for Making and Being by BFAMAPhD, dimensions variable, 2018.
- p. 125:** “Scavenger (5),” 24 × 18 in., archival pigment print, flashe, and collage on yupo paper mounted on panel, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

- p. 139:** “The Energy Pilots,” size variable, mixed media, 2011. Photo credit: Elliott P. Montgomery.
- p. 147:** Illustrated rendering of the exterior of Side by Side. Illustration by June Ahn.
- p. 153:** “Competitions (There is no bad weather),” Las Hermanas Iglesias and Boddhild Iglesias, 2015. Photo credit: Marie-Noële Guex. In 2008, Las Hermanas Iglesias commenced their ongoing Competitions project, in which they face off against each other in amateur contests both conventional and absurd. Existing primarily as a private exchange between the two artists, the performances are documented and exhibited as video and still images. The image of “Competitions (There is no bad weather)” (2015) documents the first time Las Hermanas performed a series of competitions in front of a live audience. Staged as a rematch, the sisters competed in a collaged sequence of actions that reference family dynamics as well as game shows, beauty pageants, and sporting events.
- p. 169:** Grace Oller and Roz Crews discussing their collaborative project, *Anonymous Question Mark*, as part of the Foundations in Art Theory and Education conference in Columbus, Ohio, 2019. Photo courtesy of the artist.
- p. 179:** “Seed Space Show,” from the exhibition *PlantBot Genetics: Monsantra*, Seed Space, Nashville, TN, 2016. Photo credit: Wendy DesChene.
- p. 189:** “Not the Only One, Avatar: Becoming,” process screenshot, 2020. Photo credit: Stephanie Dinkins with Jessa Gillespie.
- p. 201:** Studio image, sculptures left to right: “Gently Outwards,” 70 × 40 × 15 in., handmade paper, paper mache, linen pulp paint, wood, 2021; “Full Bloom,” 40 × 36 × 14 in., handmade paper, paper mache, linen pulp paint, 2021; “Looking On,” 66 × 18 × 16 in., handmade paper, paper mache, linen pulp paint, plaster, wood, 2021. Photo credit: Constance Mensh.
- p. 211:** Casa del Sargento, with Cabezudos from Agua, Sol y Sereno, right after Hurricane María. 2017. Photo credit: Beta-Local.
- p. 221:** Black Lunch Table: Artists’ Roundtable, Joan Mitchell Center, New Orleans, LA, 2016. Photo credit: Blaze Edwards c. 2016.
- p. 233:** “Let’s Keep in Touch,” Queens Museum, Queens, NY. Organized by Jeff Kasper and Social Practice Queens (SPC), as part of Access/Points from CUE Art Foundation, November 12, 2017. Photo credit: Vanessa Teran.
- p. 243:** Smallie Michelle (dancer). Choreography: “Moving Colors of Life.” Photo credit: Cara Bostrom.
- p. 251:** Top: Daniel Coleman, “Warriors: Beyond Unicorns and Erasures,” video still of performance documentation, October 2018, Aurora San Miquel. Photo courtesy of Elsewhere; bottom: Antoine Williams, “Because They Believe in Unicorns,” 120 × 48 × 120 in. surplus WWII military tents, wood, thread, marker, collage, and acrylic on sheet-rock, 2016. Photo courtesy of Elsewhere.
- p. 265:** Work session with think tank of African refugees outside their internment camp (Negev Desert, Israel), 2014. Photo credit: Yael Ravid.

- p. 281:** A drone shot of Gudskul Ekosistem location. Jakarta, Indonesia, 2018. Photo credit: Gudskul/Jin Panji.
- p. 297:** “Queer Quotidian Bed,” wood, foam, fibers, 2016, site specific installation, Baltimore Museum of Art. Photo credit: Jill Fannon.
- p. 305:** *Bridging Boundaries* exhibition by Joseph Kunkel, Washington, DC, Corcoran School of Art & Design, George Washington University, May 2018. Photo credit: Joseph Kunkel.
- p. 315:** Anonymous response card contributed to Ready at Berkeley Art Center 2019, exhibited at Wexner Center for the Arts 2021. Photo courtesy of Related Tactics.
- p. 325:** Occupy Museums, Museum of Modern Art, 2017. Photo credit: Zaid Islam.
- p. 339:** Courtesy of The Laundromat Project. Photo credit: Ray Llanos.
- p. 349:** “Kill|joy’s Kastle,” 2019. Courtesy of Icebox Project Space.
- p. 359:** “Black Space: Pyramid Workshop,” 2019. Photo credit: Argenis Apolinario.













