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Fall 2018

## A Blade of Grass Magazine Issue 1: Where?

A Blade of Grass

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# A BLADE OF GRASS



**WHERE**

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A magazine about socially engaged art

Issue 1 — Fall 2018

Nurturing Socially  
Engaged Art

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**A BLADE OF GRASS**

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Opposite: 2017 African Fest held at ABOG Fellow Rick Lowe's *Victoria Square Project* in Athens, Greece. Photo: *Victoria Square Project* team

## Practicing Life: ABOG's New Magazine

**Deborah Fisher**  
Executive Director, A Blade of Grass

We embarked on the making of a magazine with such a simple intention. Field research about each project is a big component of the A Blade of Grass (ABOG) Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, and we learn so much from this research. We simply wanted to share this insight. And as happens often in our work, this simple and direct intention unfolded and spread into all these great questions and truly grand ideas about what exactly this insight is, how best to share it, and what we are sharing it for.

Field research gives us a tremendous amount of understanding of the texture and nuance of socially engaged art projects as they are enacted. We learn what exactly the artist is doing, how it feels, the sense the project makes to others, and what motivates others to participate. This is an important lens for us precisely because it's not an "evaluation of impact" or a similar attempt to justify financial

support. Rather, research is largely descriptive in nature, and in addition to asking specific questions that matter to the artist and help their work, it attempts to render the qualities of the convening mechanisms, relationships, power dynamics, applied ethics, and intentionality that drive a socially engaged art project. In this way, while research certainly serves an evaluative and knowledge-building function, it is deeply aligned with our work making documentary films, programs, and other content about socially engaged art — in that it is about making socially engaged art visible.

We rely on the perspective of the field researcher here at ABOG HQ because we, and we suspect you, are totally inspired by this idea that artists can make a social difference by sharing the creative process. But we are not on Elpidos Street in Athens with artist Rick Lowe or in the Lower Ninth Ward with artist jackie sumell. More often than not, we're in our offices, at WeWork in Dumbo, Brooklyn, hearing little snippets from artists all over the country and the world about the important work they are doing ... and are therefore highly susceptible to understanding only the concept of socially engaged art, and forgetting to develop any sort of deep curiosity about how the projects actually operate as collective or individual life practice. I do this all the time! I fall in love with the conceptual “elevator pitch” of a project, and then read the field research, and realize that I have misunderstood the work completely — usually by making it a little too grand and abstract in my head, and not drawing on the way that the idea is being enacted, sometimes through surprisingly small decisions and actions.

The perspective of field research is purposefully practical and quotidian — its job is to reveal that Rick Lowe is deep in his engagement practice when he makes time to play dominoes with his neighbors, or that jackie sumell is doing her work when she finds out that her seatmate on a flight builds jails, and engages in an intense and loving debate. We need field research because we don't live in a culture that can already see actions like playing dominoes with intentionality, or the decision to have a conversation, as doing the work.

What we hope to share within this magazine, then, is this perspective shift from the idea to its enactment. We want to share the aesthetic experience of seeing how a big idea is conjured into being, repeatedly, through regular practice of individual and collective actions and decisions. And we want to

share this perspective shift because it challenges and changes our own work and lives. When we take the perspective of the field researcher, who is not only invested in the ideas of the work but also in the practical steps taken toward living the ideas, the invitation of social practice snaps into focus. The artists featured here are inviting us to consider our own lives, decisions, and work in ways that increase love, justice, connection, equity, and meaning. They are saying or modeling that we each have an opportunity to increase these things by making different decisions, commitments, and priorities. This invitation to consider one's own contribution isn't always easy, particularly in a world that doesn't necessarily see or value the qualities of our actions and interactions. And it can feel in this challenging social and political moment like it's nowhere near enough. But I can say that taking the invitation of this work seriously and letting it change me is a rewarding, renewable source of joy and satisfaction (alongside moments of accountability and hard work) in my own life. This is truly the value of social practice. Engagement isn't just Rick's thing; the whole point is that he makes it everybody's thing. jackie is particularly good at acting on her convictions, but she certainly hasn't cornered that market. Their work, and social practice more generally, is an invitation to deeply consider the practice of life itself. For all of us.

Which brings me back to explaining why a magazine felt so simple and made so much sense, and why we are excited to share these ideas in this way. The magazine as a form, in addition to being a source of inspiring information, has a long history of addressing, articulating, and inspiring the practice of one's life. In the same way *Conde Nast Traveller* simultaneously provides information about travelling and cultivates a dream space in which readers can see themselves as travelers, or *Saveur* is just as much about being a cook as it is a cooking magazine, we want our magazine to simultaneously give information and context, and invite readers to consider their own ways of being, identity, and actions in the world. Our sense is that the first step toward doing that is to create something that sits squarely at the intersection of the grand idea and its quotidian implementation. We can never forget that visionaries propel the work of socially engaged art forward, but to get at that sense of how the work might change our own lives and efforts, we must resolutely turn and return to the direct experience of projects, in straightforward language. We also want to think broadly about context, and include known “magazine” forms like advice and astrology columns that are more explicitly about engagement. Each in its

own way refers readers back to their experience of life, perhaps drawing out that invitation to consider how this work impacts them.

That's the goal in all our work. Socially engaged art is fundamentally participatory in nature, and we make content about it for audiences most of whom are not actively participating in the projects that are being featured. This is a challenge! To do our work with integrity, we need to render and present socially engaged art projects in a way that enables readers and viewers to enter the projects while also preserving their fundamental complexity. By this we mean to do more than simply empathize. We have to enable access to the dialogical invitation at the core of socially engaged art: to consider one's own actions.

**We want to share the aesthetic experience of seeing how a big idea is conjured into being, repeatedly, through regular practice of individual and collective actions and decisions.**



Opposite: Rodricus Crawford volunteers as part of ABOG Fellow Jackie Sumell's *Solitary Gardens* building the frame of a new garden bed in New Orleans.  
Photo: Olivia Hunter

## Introduction to Issue #1

**Jan Cohen-Cruz**  
Director of Field Research, A Blade of Grass

We anchor this inaugural issue of our magazine in the question “Where,” lifting up the tendency of socially engaged art (SEA) to inhabit spaces not necessarily designed for aesthetic presentation. While “place” is a more evocative word, it is already laden with expectations of meaning. “Where” is more open — it may begin in mystery, or in so palpable a sense of the everyday as to be almost invisible; it only reveals itself when one experiences something there with the partners or participants with whom an artist has shaped it. “Where” is at the heart of SEA.

The first three contributions, by or about A Blade of Grass Fellows, explore the choice of “where” for socially engaged artists. For the past two decades, Rick Lowe’s art has usually been attached to a geographic context where “people live their lives.” He situates



himself as a social sculptor at places where people can come together to think about the growth and development of their communities “beyond just surviving.”

We consider not only the multiple “wheres” of the art project but also the vantage points of people looking at and commenting on Jackie Sumell’s *Solitary Gardens* from multiple perspectives: mine as field researcher; those of her partners; and that of curator Claire Tancons, self-described as both under- and over-identifying. What “where” means proves to be less factual than one might think. For me, the location of the gardens in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward magnifies the project, bringing visibility not only to people in solitary confinement but also to a whole neighborhood that has suffered neglect from officials since Hurricane Katrina. For the gardeners in solitary confinement who designed them, quoted here, the space is above all about freedom and natural growth. For others who worked on the project, it has been a revelation about state-mandated penal conditions that are themselves criminal. For curator Claire Tancons, experiencing the *Solitary Gardens* places her in danger of over-identification, as a person descended from enslaved people, and under-identification, given her class and education.

In an edited version of curator Dominic Willson’s *On Beginning to Curate Suzanne Lacy*, he ponders the particular challenges facing museums exhibiting art that was created for other very particular times and places. Willson names his challenge succinctly: “to present Lacy’s collaborative, ephemeral, and context-specific practice (nearly five decades of it) responsibly and in full, in an environment for which it was not intended and which was not designed to support it.”

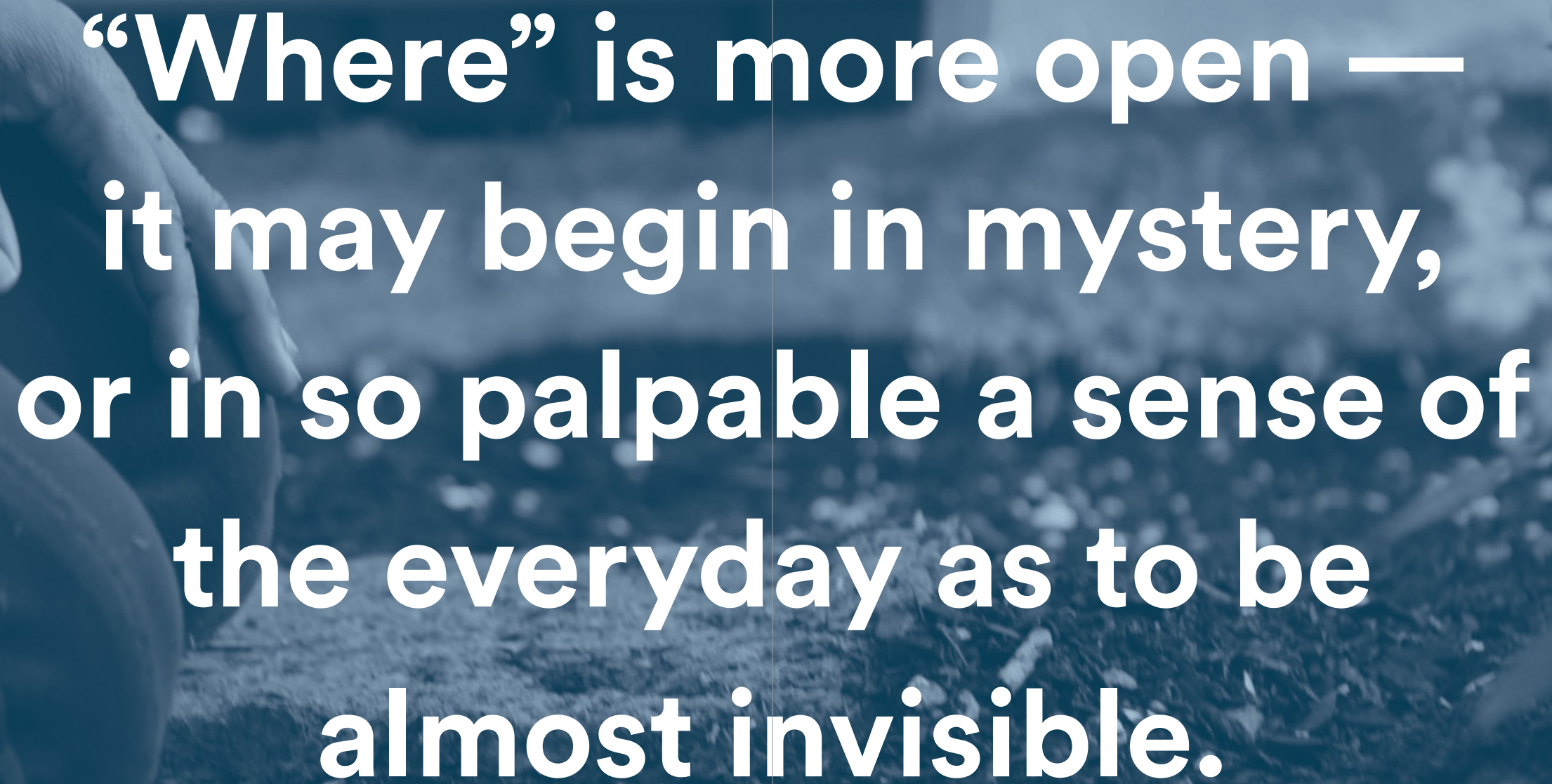
Michael Rohd’s interview with Roberto Bedoya, Maria Rosario Jackson, and Jamie Bennett on *The Future of Creative Placemaking* considers where this arts-centered approach to community development is headed, and extends our reach beyond the immediate A Blade of Grass community.

The concept of “where” makes visible a strong tradition of art blurring with life. We reprint critic and feminist Lucy Lippard’s 1976 essay, *This Is Art? The Alienation of the Avant Garde from the Audience*, as a reminder of socially engaged art’s connection to, yet difference from, the avant-garde. While both stretch art’s habitual boundaries, in socially engaged art, an extended “where” is joined at the hip to an extended “who.” Avant-garde artists,

Lippard notes, draw on alternative spaces so that “art recoups its ancient vitality in social life,” but do not necessarily give the same priority to audience. While appreciating the art evoked, Lippard points out that public vitality is not achieved by location alone.

We draw out the question of “where” quite broadly through the inclusion of a horoscope by ABOG Executive Director Deborah Fisher, locating us, as a US election season approaches, in celestial pulls that give us another means of interpreting this moment. We end with *Ask an Artist*, which will be a regular feature of the magazine, consisting of questions on the issue’s theme to an artist, in this case ABOG Fellow Brett Cook, and his responses.

This project is very much a work in progress. I’m lucky to be part of such a great cohort making it together: Sabrina Chin, Emma Colón, Karina Muranaga, Prerana Reddy, and Deborah Fisher. It’s a distinct pleasure to be part of such a skilled, generous, and committed team.

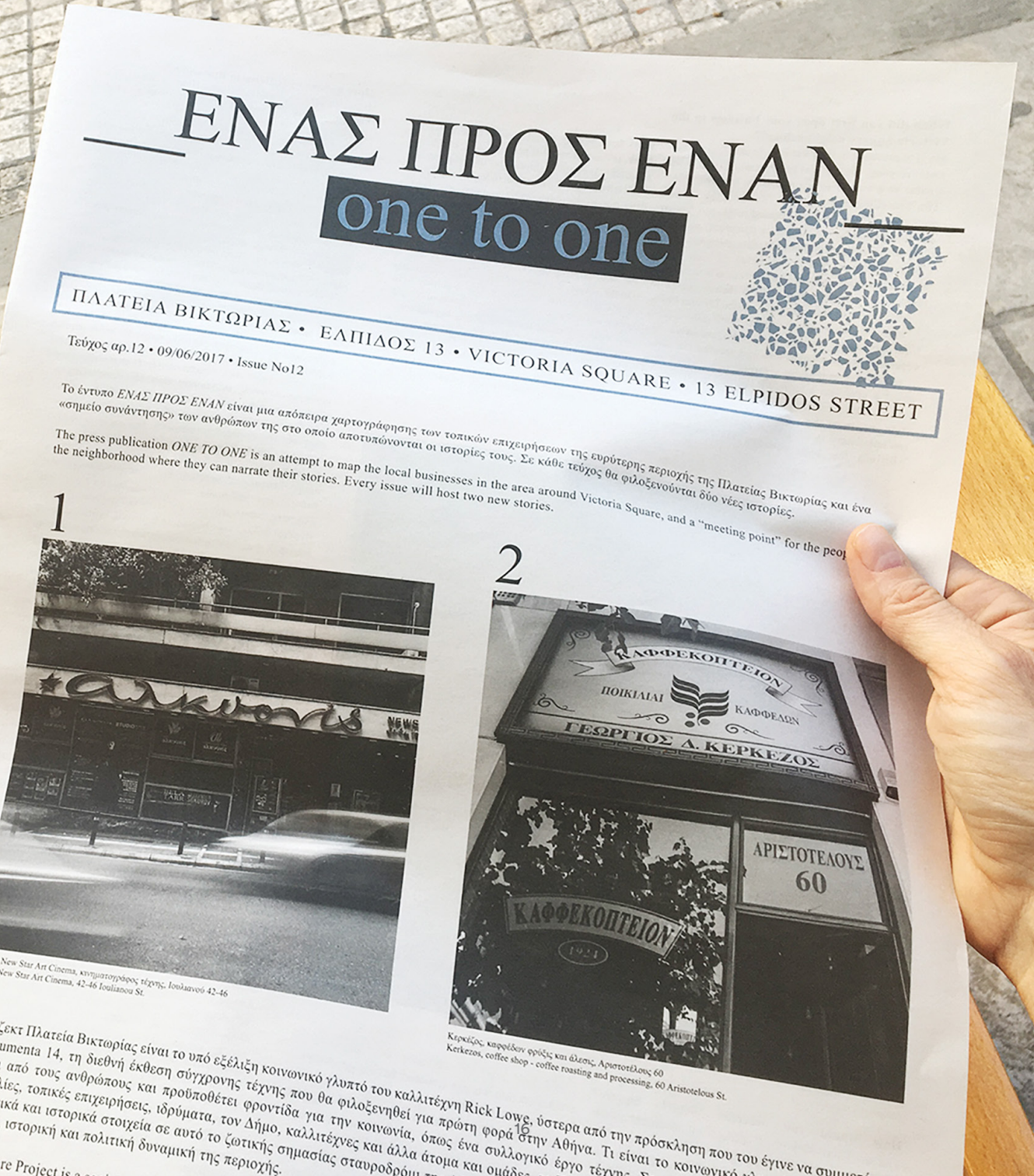
A close-up photograph of a person's hands sowing seeds into a garden bed. The hands are positioned on the left side of the frame, with one hand holding a small container and the other scattering seeds onto the soil. The background is a blurred garden bed with various plants and soil. The entire image has a blue tint. A vertical line runs down the center of the image.

**“Where” is more open —  
it may begin in mystery,  
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*Solitary Gardens* volunteer assists in seeding a new garden bed designed by an individual in solitary confinement. Photo: RAVA Films

Opposite: *Victoria Square Project* produces the newspaper *One to One* to map Victoria Square's surrounding neighborhood through interviews with local businesses. Photo: Deborah Fisher



# The Poetic Residue: An Interview with Rick Lowe

Jan Cohen-Cruz

Rick Lowe, best known for *Project Row Houses* in Houston, Texas, co-initiated the *Victoria Square Project* (VSP) in Athens, Greece, in 2017. VSP's newspaper, *One to One*, describes it like so:

*Working with various community initiatives, local businesses, institutions, the municipality, artists, and other individuals and groups, Victoria Square Project seeks to elevate the cultural and historical assets of this vital crossroads in Athens. Each participant helps us better understand the cultural, historical, and political dynamics in this area.*

**JAN COHEN-CRUZ: Rick, where do you do your work?**

**RICK LOWE:** I think of myself as not just a socially engaged, but a socially and community engaged artist. “Socially” alone is too broad; “community” gives it a focus. That community in my case is usually attached to a geographic context, a particular place. The kinds of issues I deal with play out through the place in which people live their lives. The work tries to create places within geographic communities where people come together to think about growth and development in their communities, that has a higher value than just surviving; rather, how they want to live in that place. *Project Row Houses* (PRH) has heightened people’s awareness about the context of that place and its assets, and figures out how to apply those assets there. Same with *Victoria Square Project* (VSP) — it provides a place that is a platform for people to think about their community’s assets and how they shape them [for that community’s good]. I think of these projects as nerve centers of their communities, bringing people together to be thoughtful.

**JAN: How do you situate your work vis-a-vis creative placemaking?**

**RICK:** That term is a little tricky because I like to think of places making themselves and the people there having the creativity within themselves to continue to make the places they are already making. It’s not bringing anything there but rather elevating people’s capacity to continue to do what they’re already doing, making their place. Creative placemaking sometimes elevates the role of the outsider coming in to make it happen. It’s a subtle difference to place myself to honor

the placemaking that’s already happening and the creative capacity already there. I work lightly within those communities to add a little focus on capacity.

**JAN: Such as?**

**RICK:** When I first went to the Victoria Square neighborhood, I met a group of immigrant women who had founded the Melissa Network, an organization to support other immigrant women and later, also refugees. I was drawn there because of the placemaking these women were already doing. I don’t go places where I’d have to bring placemaking. Once there, understanding how people are doing it, I try to add to it. There’s great work, great sensibilities, in Victoria Square, but I did see something I could bring. They were focusing mainly on immigrants and refugees, and I saw a tension with Greek natives so that’s the subtle difference — to bring native Athenians into this dialogue about how to deal with the circumstances of all these new refugees and immigrants coming into the city.

One of VSP’s goals has been to pull people together and focus on things I’ve had experience with that help sustain communities. One is getting to know the community, understanding its assets and challenges and leveraging them in conversations with policy makers and others who will impact neighborhood development. The richness of participation we’ve garnered has gathered a lot of attention. We recently brought architects, writers, and planners together who have not been part of the public conversation and live right on our street, Elpidos [which translates as “hope”]. Twenty-eight professionals worked together, seven hours a day,

seven days a week, on a mapping project to help rebuild neighborhood assets and learn how people feel about this place. Now we’re trying to distill that information, put it in a form, and get it out. Organizations and politicians are reaching out to us. ActionAid, a non-governmental development organization working in 45 countries including Greece, founded by Alexandra Mitsotakis, daughter of a former prime minister of Greece, is setting up a small office in our space, to make deeper local connections.

The current mayor announced his re-election at VSP to show he’s interested in bringing people together — that’s the future of Athens. Alexandra’s brother who

### **The current mayor announced his re-election at VSP to show he’s interested in bringing people together — that’s the future of Athens.**

is the leader of the conservative party in Greece and projected to be the next prime minister attended one of VSP’s events. They understand our overall message: you can have a culturally diverse city, but you have to show respect and encourage that diversity to be a part of the city. Valuing diversity is needed throughout the city, appreciating what refugees and immigrants can bring, and VSP is becoming symbolic of that.

**JAN: Where does art fit in VSP?**

**RICK:** First, it’s interesting that VSP came out of documenta 14, an exhibition that happens every five years, usually in

Kassel, Germany. In 2017, the director split the exhibition between Kassel and Athens, and requested artists to do projects and exhibitions in both. Being a part of documenta was a sign [of recognition] from an art world perspective about [the value of] someone like me, who does not work within a traditional art framework. Having me in a major international venue helps the field, and creates more opportunities for artists like me, and for me. But projects that start with large-scale institutional support have their own challenges. There are grand expectations, and just because the project is associated with a large-scale institution doesn’t mean it’s getting large-scale support. And you have to carry the weight of that institution even as projects like this have to be nimble.

I started the research for the project for documenta in 2016, a year before the opening date. For me, research and implementation merge at a certain point. VSP kicked off publicly for the community in January 2017, but its documenta opening was not until April 2017, with a three-month “run.” I realized that the project opened up opportunities it couldn’t attain in that timeframe. It clearly had to continue beyond documenta, and here it is summer 2018, and the project is still going, seeking non-profit status to raise money.

Second, I try not to put art in this mystical place that’s beyond other activities. People come together around sports events and all kinds of things. On one hand, VSP is much like any community development work. On the other hand, like most art, it has a lot to do with intention. Which means the practical outcomes are important but the symbolic things

are more important, what you are trying to explore beyond the practical. VSP's practical outcome is to have a policy that integrates new people with existing folks. That can be reached in different ways. My concern [as an artist] is what's deeper than the practical outcome: are people empowered, and do they see their own voice in this thing? Is there a poetic relationship that adds value for people there, not just an outcome from the mayor's office?

At VSP, this happens through many projects. For example, we bring African drumming into the neighborhood, which causes some contention. It's loud; some like it, some don't. But the next day we have a Greek poetry reading maybe, and have someone bring up the African drumming in that context. There's a conversation. People aren't left in their separate experience of what it means to them but understand it in a community context. They leave with something deeper than if they just went for a practical end, say outlawing African drumming, which would not have led to a deeper understanding of what African drumming is.

Civic actions, like changing the name of a street, don't have to be art projects. But if artists are doing it, they try to create some symbolic residue that will create an experience of the street name so people carry it much deeper. In our *Project Row Houses* neighborhood [in Houston, TX], a street name was changed from a confederate soldier to Emancipation Street, after a local park. It was not an art project, there's no poetic residue behind it. No one understands the poetry around changing that name. That's lost now. If we were changing a street name

as an art project, there'd have been a focus on generating things of symbolic value. It could have been a musician making a song about it that came out of the process of organizing. If the story of the street is not told it gets lost, it's just a bureaucratic function of changing a street name. Stories can be told in many ways, not just in traditional art forms like songs or murals. Art projects tease out a higher value beyond a practical function through somehow telling the story in a way that lingers.

*Rick Lowe identifies his medium as social sculpture. He co-founded Project Row Houses, an ongoing transformation of a segment of the Third Ward in Houston, more than 20 years ago. In 2017, he co-founded the Victoria Square Project in Athens, Greece, out of his participation in documenta 14.*

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# Multiple Views on *Solitary Gardens*

Opposite: Garden designed by Kenny Zulu Whitmore and installed in the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans. Photo: *Solitary Gardens* team

How socially engaged art is perceived differs depending on one's subjective position and experience with the physical locations of the project itself.

We begin with my commentary as Director of Field Research for *A Blade of Grass*, regularly checking in with the artist and making independent observations of the work. This is followed by a mosaic of reflections by people directly involved in making the project, from those in solitary confinement who designed the gardens to those on the outside who helped build and plant the garden plots in New Orleans. The article concludes with curator Claire Tancons' longer musing, shaped by both her professional education and her personal history as a descendant of enslaved people who worked plantations in the Caribbean.

We see, too, that the "wheres" revealed by a socially engaged art project are not just its physical location but also what it reveals elsewhere, in this case the conditions of solitary confinement.

## The Garden and the Seed

Jan Cohen-Cruz

Driving through the Lower Ninth Ward, which has suffered forced desertion and institutional neglect since Hurricane Katrina flattened it in 2005, I pass a house here, overgrown brush there, but not one grocery store, laundromat, or cafe. So it is a special joy to reach a patch of narrow gardens, each designed by a different “solitary gardener” — a person doing time in solitary confinement — built and maintained by sumell and her team.

Those incarcerated in the United States, especially in solitary confinement, similarly suffer institutional neglect. They are frequently locked up in places invisible to the general public and difficult to get to, with failing economies, places that have a hard time saying no to job opportunities. sumell herself became aware of solitary confinement only by accident. In 2001, while an art student, she attended a talk because she had a crush on the organizer. The speaker, Robert

A painting of Herman Wallace by Langston Allston on the original site of *Solitary Gardens* in the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans. Photo: Olivia Hunter



King Wilkerson, had just completed 29 years in solitary in a 6-by-9-foot cell in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, AKA Angola, on a wrongful conviction. The experience shook her to the core: “I met a man who introduced me to a malevolent human construct that I had never known existed.” She asked Wilkerson how she could help. He said, “Write my comrades,” the other two “Angola Three,” also wrongfully convicted and at the time still behind bars: Albert Woodhall, who would spend

Herman got out of prison October 1, 2013 and died October 4 of liver cancer. Grieving his death, sumell reached out to various prison support networks such as Solitary Watch to contact people in solitary confinement and invite them to design gardens the size of their cells. sumell sent those interested a template marking the fixed items in the cell — the bed, toilet, sink, desk, and chair — with the remaining space available for planting. She provided a menu of flowers and plants

**The “where” of the *Solitary Gardens* is both the nearly invisible social iniquity of solitary confinement and how that is made visible by its near opposite twin, the gardens.**

44 years in solitary, and Herman Wallace, who would spend 41. Compare this, notes sumell, to the 12-day international bar for solitary confinement, after which irreparable damage occurs to spirit and body.

Wallace was a member of the Black Panther Party, and like them, believed he was placed on the planet to “serve the people.” jackie developed a 12-year relationship with Wallace that led to her creation of *Herman’s House*, an exhibition and documentary feature emerging from his response to her question, “What sort of house does a man who has lived in a 6-by-9-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?” Wallace’s designs featured a garden. He had tried to grow plants in his cell but they withered and died. He realized that he was subject to the same conditions: trying to cultivate life and hope for the future even while facing life in solitary. The house expressed both his hope to one day be free and his desire to contribute to a center for other people.

including veggies, vines, and hedges that grow well in New Orleans, though they could also request plants not on her list.

By February 2018, seven men in solitary had each designed a garden that jackie and volunteers built and planted. They take pictures and write the gardeners about how their gardens are doing, like what survived a late frost (Jesse’s pansies) and what did not (Zulu’s catnip). sumell and her team are planting three more garden beds in the New Orleans location and going cross-country educating people about the situation, producing more gardens designed by people in solitary.

The “where” of the *Solitary Gardens* is both the nearly invisible social iniquity of solitary confinement and how that is made visible by its near opposite twin, the gardens. Why does sumell respond to solitary confinement by growing gardens? Why not inhabit a political or purely aesthetic context?

sumell’s art plays a role in the prison abolition movement through its symbolic relationship to impermanence, undermining the prison industrial complex’s intention to make punishment permanent, like “life without parole.” Unlike prison cells whose concrete floors and iron bars communicate inflexibility, gardens wear away. sumell replaced the original wooden garden bed frames with a mix she calls “(r)evolutionary mortar,” made from sugarcane, tobacco, cotton, and indigo — crops that enslaved people arduously farmed. The message, through the decomposing garden bed frames and the fraying ropes that stand in for bars, is, “this can change.” Change is organic and natural. This will not always be.

The garden is both art, offering individual design choices including form, color, and composition, and culture, “agri-culture,” linked to the ecosystem from which it emerges. It reconnects us to the earth, where we come from and where we’ll return, and to the joy, beauty, and usefulness of what comes from it. It is bigger than our individual lives and may outlive us. Along with sumell’s education programs and informal conversations, it offers a broad perspective from which to reflect on the conditions that give rise to the acts that land people in solitary, and perhaps makes a space for compassion.

By chance, on a plane, sumell met a man who builds jails. She knew she would not convince him to change his views on prison in that short ride. But their conversation led her to produce seed packets as a small part of a one-to-one interaction, the beginning of a dialogue about prison abolition. Each packet pictures a plant, including kale, nettles, and dandelions, whose seeds

are contained within, and text with contemplative questions and information about that plant’s history. Each is so beautifully designed that someone is not likely to toss it away; the conversation, too, might extend beyond that one moment. The seed packets are yet another “where” of this project, continuing more intimately the work the gardens do in public.



Slavery did not end, as is commonly believed, in 1865; it merely evolved. The 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution includes a strategic exception to the abolition of slavery for those “duly convicted of a crime.” Prisons in the United States are filled with people of color “duly convicted of a crime” at a rate almost eight times higher than whites. Thus, conversations surrounding prison abolition are required in order to facilitate authentic possibilities for a non-racist, non-exploitative, non-hierarchical democratic order.

Of the 2.2 million incarcerated people in the United States, 80,000 to 100,000 are subjected to indefinite solitary confinement everyday.

People are isolated for a minimum of 23 hours per day in a 6'x9' (or smaller) concrete and steel cell. No judge or jury places an individual in solitary confinement; the decision is

made solely by prison officials. The devastating, and often irreparable, effects of solitary confinement include, but are not limited to, alienation, dehumanization, despair, disorientation, paranoia, and suicidality.

Solitary confinement is torture and has been defined as such by the United Nations, the American Civil Liberties Union, and human rights watchdogs around the world. It remains one of the most concentrated forms of punishment in the United States, making anti-solitary work a paramount target for true abolition.

— *Solitary Gardens* Team

## Collaborators’ Perspectives

Jan Cohen-Cruz

People in various circumstances have been touched by the *Solitary Gardens* — in prison, as workday participants, on school trips, by living nearby. Their insights about the gardens’ meaning suggests why artists do socially engaged art.

Foremost among sumell’s collaborators are the solitary gardeners. Kenny Zulu Whitmore got involved in the garden “through camaraderie with jackie and to help preserve the legacy of a warrior and former Black Panther, my mentor and

comrade Herman Wallace.” For Michael Le’Blanc, “Working with the public on the *Gardens* adds a feeling of self-worth [in contrast to] the typical worthlessness misnomer ascribed to us by the judicial and penal systems [ ... ] and allows us to speak from our personality, perspective, and position as people rather than irrelevant prisoners.” For Jesse Wilson, “It not only aids my heart to imagine the garden growing and the entirety of ecology associated with it, it aids the humanity of those who get involved,



*Solitary Gardens* collaborator Rodricus Crawford.  
Photo: Olivia Hunter

especially the children. There is such an awakening in the soil, to smell and experience the natural truth that fills the heart that grows seeds.”

People who provide the *Gardens* with professional services often become advocates. Bob Snead, Executive Director of Press Street/Antenna Gallery, who provides printing services to the project, emphasized that “a lot of folks with different opinions connect to the garden; it’s approachable as a format. Even if they think prisons are acceptable, the garden allows them to contemplate what it means to be in solitary confinement.” Woodworkers Kris and Leslie built the original wooden garden structures and later learned with sumell to build the organic mixture that breaks down faster, serving sumell’s purpose to mirror the hope that solitary confinement, too, will wear away. Engaging with jackie and

the *Gardens* has caused the couple to think about people in solitary differently, especially by seeing their actual living space marked out, so limiting of any movement and so inhumane. They appreciate that jackie both raises awareness of people on the outside and connects with people in solitary.

Mr. Woodfox, of the Angola Three, is now a prison reform activist on the outside. He described jackie’s creative work, both *Herman’s House* and the *Solitary Gardens*, as “giving society a look into the mind of a man trapped in a prison cell.” The *Gardens* are ongoing and fixed in that place, so sustain an opportunity to know people like Herman, even when they have passed.

Mary Okoth, who helps sumell keep everything organized, was moved by the *Gardens’* intersection of art, nature, and criminal justice to go to social work



school. Imani, jackie’s assistant in 2015, emphasized “the strength of these three men fighting injustice and state oppression, developing rapports with people outside.” She’s as struck by the *Gardens’* visual impact as by its investment in a black neighborhood that has been neglected especially since Hurricane Katrina.

jackie hosts occasional volunteer workdays, getting the word out in the immediate surroundings and via social media, both to tend and expand the gardens and educate people about solitary confinement. Local kids playing there learn what it means and enjoy the food it produces. Jacqui Gibson Clark, a co-counselor with a racial equity focus, attended a work day and was moved to tears, especially by the physical experience of making the mortar with materials that enslaved people historically labored over: “When you look at the size of the garden bed, sort cotton, or cut sugarcane to use in the mortar for the garden beds, you can imagine yourself there. Angola was a plantation before it was a prison; this is plantation work. It all comes together. You can’t look anywhere and avoid the legacy of slavery.” jackie invites volunteers to write to the gardeners, so the incarcerated designers learn that people have seen and appreciated their gardens.

Clark sees *Solitary Gardens* as a “strong, compassionate, and action-oriented” way to engage around racism. “Rather than being about agreeing or not, the activities

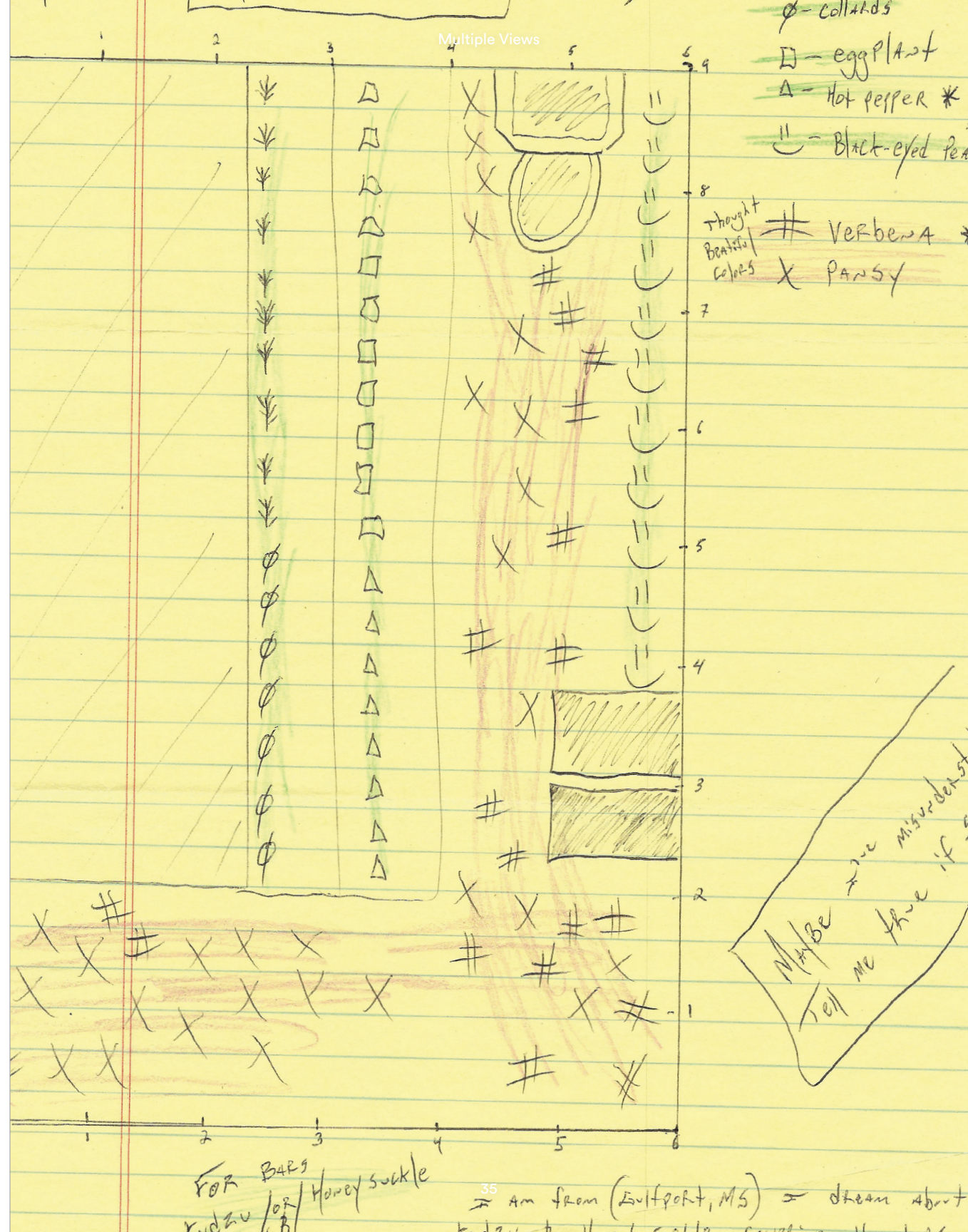
at the gardens are corporal, as are slavery and racism. The *Gardens* contrast with the language of opposition, which is often violent and escalates from saying something offensive to a fist, a knife, a gun, a bomb. The garden is a thing we’re building that’s going to go away, practicing impermanence while talking about peace and what we all deserve. It’s a new way.”

Opposite: ABOG Fellow jackie sumell (right) builds the frame of a new garden bed with students at Xavier University in New Orleans. Photo: RAVA Films

It not only aids my heart to imagine the garden growing and the entirety of ecology associated with it, it aids the humanity of those who get involved[.]

— Jesse Wilson,  
Solitary Gardener

Following: Wilson's original garden design and written correspondence with the Solitary Gardens team. His garden continues to grow in New Orleans under the care of sumell and her collaborators. Photos courtesy of the Solitary Gardens team.



3-27-17

MARY

It is as if a miracle has manifested itself before my eyes - I was dreaming of the garden, I was there on the slab of concrete that is my bed, I was surrounded by green! The smell was life! The sparkle of colors sparkled in the flowers, one was close to me, I leaned down to look into it & noticed the center a translucent sort of portal, I could not enter as my hands & my ankles were chained in the "4-point" position to the slab, but I could see into the world it exposed, there were many people at a long table outside, they were surrounded by 6'x9' garden beds, they were feasting in love upon the foods grown within them - I saw my okra in a tumba, & in jars pickled on the table - I saw many things I struggle to convey, But I know one that I can try to - It struck me that foods like okra & peas are foods that found their way here on slave ships - The musical Prophecy of brother **BOB** filled my ears "O yes, pirates, they Rob I, Sold I to the Merchant ship"

Kudzu came to life & grew around me - I was cocooned in warm green - I awoke with the taste of honey suckle in my mouth - I made wud & gave salat -

Truly I am not sure if you know how powerful such a project is in love - Its beautifully merciful to imagine a garden that in some small way





Sugarcane crops grown by sumell and her team in New Orleans will be used to make the (r)evolutionary mortar for future garden beds.  
Photo: Solitary Gardens team

## Solitary Musings

Claire Tancons

A first-person account of the contemporary experience of enslavement and imprisonment in an African diasporic timescape laid bare in jackie sumell's remedial plantations.

An art historian/cultural critic placed in the position of field researcher, I am compelled to look back at the position of the artist/activist as ethnographer — the latter position identified and cautioned against by art critic Hal Foster over two decades ago (*The Return of the Real*, 1996). In being thrust into conditions of participant observation, I am acutely aware of the impending dangers of both

over-identification, as a woman of African descent and enslaved ancestry, and of self-othering, as a non-incarcerated observer with the privilege of a higher education. I wonder how jackie feels about this, in relationship with her own background, and how she averts accusations of self-righteousness common to social justice art projects.

Parallel to the publication of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010), the release of Ava duVernay's *13th* (2016), Jenji Kohan's ongoing television series *Orange is the New Black* (2013–present), and the art patron Agnes Gund and funding body The Ford Foundation's creation of the Art for Justice Fund, artists have contributed to the fight for criminal justice reform with heightened intensity over the last couple of years. Their works call attention to the inhuman conditions of mass incarceration by laying bare its infrastructure of confinement, culture of debasement, and economy of exploitation. Artists have delimited the perimeter of 6-by-9-foot prison cells and donned orange jumpsuits in public (Sherrill Roland, *The Jumpsuit Project*, 2012–ongoing), locked themselves in cages (Lech Szporer, *The Cage Project*, 2015), recorded the “acoustics of confinement” (Andrea Fraser, *Down the River*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016), and tallied the numbers of the prison industrial complex (Cameron Rowland, *91020000*, Artists Space, 2016).

jackie herself began by building a wooden replica of Closed Cell Restriction “accommodation” (CCR), which she first presented within an art context as part of the inaugural edition of Prospect New Orleans, the international contemporary art biennial, in 2007–2008. How did jackie develop work away from a mimetic representation of the conditions of incarceration to what I would call an organic model of cultural rehabilitation and human liberation with the *Solitary Gardens*?

The vestigial references to the original solitary confinement cell footprint — the 6-by-9-foot size and front façade of prison cell bars of the garden beds — are

overcome by the organicity of matter, the very raw materials of the project such as the sugarcane and cotton plants, and the experimental compounds into which they are turned, like the (r)evolutionary mortar. Further, through their generative qualities, these organic materials are actualized into instruments of transformation appealing for a revision of the fixity of punishment and the necessity for redemption. Having experienced it firsthand during a sugarcane harvest, and currently observing the resistance of the slab of it jackie gave me that I have since placed out in the open on my balcony, I can attest to both the malleability and the strength of the (r)evolutionary mortar. If jackie's choice of the garden could be understood as a natural extension of *Herman's House*, her focus on plant life through permaculture and gardening while furthering her conceptual approach to the structural dismantlement of mass incarceration helps us make the connection with slavery and the mundanity of its reenactment in the prison industrial complex (PIC). Using slave crops as building material for the garden beds really did push the envelope however, or, to use a more apt metaphor, expand her terrain of action beyond a simple critique of the PIC.

There's an anecdote I'd like to share that is informative about how I situate myself in the conversation about incarceration. In 2009, I went to Robben Island, South Africa, where a former inmate took me on a tour of the infamous carceral complex in which Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid political prisoners were kept. Entering the cells gave me the chills, learning that disinformation campaigns ran through forged letters to break the prisoners' morale left me angry,

but nothing made me reel as much as being told that the quantity and quality of food given to prisoners depended on their classification as “white,” “colored,” or “bantu,” a segregationist practice thus reinstating the very racial hierarchies of apartheid the imprisoned had been locked up for fighting against in the first place, within their very organic constitution, the foundation of their incarnated beings. A pretty literal application of Food Apartheid! What I find so profound about the *Solitary Gardens* is the way in which the partition of the plot between sugarcane and cotton on the outskirts to define its boundaries, and the *Solitary Gardens* beds right across, allows jackie to expose at once two historical sides

American DNA is not just metaphorical but truly real. For moral deprivation and physical degradation have organically affected our constitution as human beings.

This further puts in sharp relief how important the analogy between the natural plant cycle and wo/man's “life seasons” is. Having entered the jailhouse as greenwood, King, Woodfox, and Wallace came out as grown trees, and, in the case of Wallace, came out as dead wood, living for just a few days after being released and then returned to earth.

To go back to sugarcane and cotton cultivation and field research ... another anecdote, recent this one, stemming from

### **[T]hrough their generative qualities, these organic materials are actualized into instruments of transformation[.]**

of slave life: forced labor around crop cultivation on the one hand, and gardening one's own plot in the tradition of slave gardens (gardens that slaves were allowed to cultivate for their own sustenance, typically on Sunday).

To speak of the latter historical practice of the slave garden, I'm really peeved at how the solitary gardeners cannot enjoy the fruit of their labor and the taste of the freedom they vicariously acquire through our labor, as the produce we grow for them is not allowed on prison grounds. How to reconcile this practice of liberation through the cultivation of the *Solitary Gardens* with the prohibition imposed by the prison complex? This operation of liberation deferred and freedom denied makes clear how the common saying according to which slavery is part of the

a brief dialogue I had with one of the volunteers who had come to participate in the harvest and had readily grabbed a cutlass to chop down cane shoots. At some point he said how he had enjoyed “the privilege of cutting cane,” and I heard myself respond to him, “well, what you think of as a privilege today was my great-grandfather's daily toll as a slave.” I was a bit taken aback by what I was quick to think of as naivete, but just a split second later just as surprised by the rawness of my reaction. I was born and grew up in Guadeloupe, in the French West Indies, surrounded by sugarcane fields which are omnipresent on the island and over which my enslaved forebears more than certainly toiled. To go back to where I began with the necessity to acknowledge one's positionality and intentionality within socially engaged



projects: because *Solitary Gardens* is such a fundamentally embodied practice — from planting, to harvesting, to consuming produce — it is conducive to more unselfconscious interactions that can put in high relief so many of the privileges we don't necessarily acknowledge as such. These include the volunteer's privilege to participate in field labor as a young white man and my privilege to contribute field research as an educated black woman raised by middle class parents (both of those characterizations being gross oversimplifications). This is nothing new to anyone with a longstanding experience of activism as an engaged artist like jackie. But how differently do such interactions play out at the *Solitary Gardens*, and what kinds of new dialogues do they generate? How can our more unselfconscious social selves and more conscientious political subjectivities at once produce and release seeds for change? And how do jackie's

*Solitary Gardens* come closer to achieving that than most social justice oriented works? Neither the artist, the art historian, the ethnographer, nor the field researcher can. Only the solitary gardeners on the inside and in the outside can, sifting soil through their fingers as others do, and so that others yet may never again have to stick their hands through metal bars to reach our humanity.



Inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola work the fields under the watchful eye of an armed guard in August 1978. Photo courtesy of G. Andrew Boyd/*The Times-Picayune* file.

*Claire Tancons, a scholar invested in the discourse and practice of the postcolonial politics of production and exhibition, is currently a curator (with Zoe Butt and Omar Kholeif) for Sharjah Biennial 14: Leaving the Echo Chamber, slated to open in 2019.*





Participants in ABOG Fellow Suzanne Lacy's project *De tu Puño y Letra* in Quito, Ecuador. Photo: Christoph Hirtz

## Where Are We and What Time Is It? On Beginning to Curate Suzanne Lacy

Dominic Willsdon

This excerpted version of Willsdon's essay about curating the retrospective, *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here*, provides insightful ramifications for exhibiting socially engaged art in museums more generally.

With Rudolf Frieling and Lucía Sanromán, I am co-curating a retrospective of the art of Suzanne Lacy. We are, as I write (in October 2017), nearer the beginning of our process than the end. The exhibition, a collaboration between the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), is due to open in San Francisco in Spring 2019, and it has been a bit more than a

year since our work began in earnest. The project poses some rare challenges to museum protocols. We need to present Lacy's collaborative, ephemeral, and context-specific practice (nearly five decades of it) responsibly and in full, in an environment for which it was not intended and which was not designed to support it. Although the exhibition has the standard goals of a solo retrospective —

to collate and historicize the artist's works, provide an optimal experience of them, assess their abiding value, and make them public in new ways — achieving them will require that we apply some non-standard methods. While this type of retrospective is a familiar format, Lacy's art requires that some of its basic assumptions be rethought. There is, for one thing, a question of materials: what set of acts, objects, and agents constitutes a work? There is also a question of authorship: what does it mean to apply the single name "Suzanne Lacy" to an exhibition of projects created by so many participants and collaborators, including many other artists, and how should those others be involved and recognized now? And there is a question of history: how can we look back at these projects, which were impelled by the politics of particular times and places, and find ways to experience today what they have meant and still can mean in our present? There are questions of aesthetics as well: what does it mean to reconcile such a practice with the museum's predominant art history (of painting, sculpture, and photography)? And how should this work be produced and presented as art? It is still rare, in art museums, to face such questions, but it is becoming less so. In recent years there have been a number of artists working in socially engaged, process-driven ways who have received solo museum shows: for instance, Allan Kaprow, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mel Chin, and Paul Ramírez Jonas. There was also a partial survey show focused on Lacy herself in Milan in 2014. Certainly, solutions developed for these examples and other projects may be applied to ours, just as the solutions developed for our project may, we hope, be applied to others in the future. As curators of Suzanne Lacy

we have an opportunity to contribute to a nascent, broad, collective effort to make time and space for art such as hers in museums, which is to say in the public history of art.

[...]

Lacy's projects were not designed for museums and vice versa. One way to make it possible to show such projects in an optimal way in museums would be to design and create new manifestations of those projects for the museum. Down this path we meet a fundamental question: what would it mean to produce a retrospective that is guided not by the task of remembrance but by the task of creating an exhibition that is an event in the here and now (of 2019), supported by anterior materials? This would lead us to take, as a starting point, the specificity of our "now" — politically, culturally — and the specificity of our institutional settings.

[...]

[C]urating Suzanne Lacy requires us to ask some questions for which existing models of curating performance (or video, drawing, archives, etc.) do not provide answers. How should those participants be involved and represented in both the exhibition-making process and its presentation? And beyond this, which aspects of any given project still live? And which can be or should be brought to life?

So far, we are asking these questions primarily with respect to *The Oakland Projects* (1991–2001), a series of projects over ten years that embody a continuous, evolving set of concerns — especially in relation to youth, race, and public policy. We chose to focus on *The*



Code 33: *Emergency, Clear the Air*, 1999, by Suzanne Lacy, Unique Holland, and Julio Morales, was one of eight major works in Lacy's series *The Oakland Projects*. Photo courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.

*Oakland Projects*, of course, because they are the major body of work that Lacy created in the San Francisco Bay Area, so their history is local to us. Inasmuch as reassembling any of Lacy's works of collective action might mean drawing again on the experience and understanding of those who participated originally, we wanted to treat *The Oakland Projects* in a deeper, more expansive way.

[...]

[O]ur approach in this first phase has been this: we have distanced ourselves as curators and Lacy as artist from the process, and instead engaged two

researchers, both still Oakland residents who were collaborators on *The Oakland Projects* and who have had since the 1990s roles that allow them to bring relevant perspectives and expertise (from outside art) to bear on the research process and goals. Unique Holland first participated in *The Oakland Projects* as a fifteen-year-old and became, in time, a named artist-collaborator, and until recently worked as director of communications and public affairs for the Alameda County Office of Education. Moriah Ulinskas was a youth media producer on *Code 33* and is now an archivist and researcher in Public History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Each is pursuing a different,

complementary research path. Holland is describing a set of relationships between individuals, representing the participant groups that stand behind *The Oakland Projects*. Ulinskas is describing a set of institutional relationships with youth policy at the center — in some ways, this can be a portrait of the institutional infrastructure of Oakland in the 1990s; the organizations (city, schools, funders, etc.) that were comprised by the landscape into which Lacy's *The Oakland Projects* intervened. In this way, we are inviting

re-present them now, in 2019? What can it mean and what will it take to update them, and who should be the agents of this updating?

[ ... ]

The motivation for “rethinking” a past work (Lacy prefers to speak of it in this way, rather than using terms such as re-creating, revisiting, reworking, etc.) may be either or both of two things: political timeliness or artistic potential. In the

**The answer lies in presenting two contexts at the same time, in being able to hold in our minds the reality that the work is dated and yet persists.**

perspectives that are at the same time inside and outside the frame of *The Oakland Projects*. We want to surface perspectives that are not aligned with ours nor Lacy's, perspectives that are not even framed by the projects themselves.

We have come to see Oakland as the protagonist of *The Oakland Projects*. If the central issues were youth, race, and policing, we are now asking how these issues have and have not changed since the 1990s. Oakland has changed — not least in terms of its demographics and the active organizations and agencies that function in support of public life. The public conversation about race and society has changed as well. *The Oakland Projects* were devised and produced in response to representations, in the media and politics, of teenagers as a threat. Having identified the context in which *The Oakland Projects* originated, we now ask what is the environment in which we can

course of the conversations at ICI,<sup>1</sup> she touched on the fact that she sees new or unrealized artistic possibilities in the idea or premise of such rethinkings; that it seems valuable/appropriate to return to earlier projects taking into account a different political context — new reasons, new needs. We do not yet know whether any works in the retrospective will be subject to such revision, but we do know that Lacy is currently, and probably permanently, disinclined to rethink *The Oakland Projects* in this way, at least through her own agency. This may be partly because the youth experience has changed so much, and partly because of current political conditions. Today it is impossible that a white artist could

<sup>1</sup> The ICI is the Independent Curators International, which co-organized and hosted a two-day convening of curators, critics, and artists in New York on questions of museum presentation. (ed.)

directly choreograph such interactions and representations the way she did in the 1990s.

[ ... ]

Related to Oakland, [City of Oakland's Cultural Affairs Manager Roberto] Bedoya (and others) pointed to displacement as the most urgent social and political issue now, characterizing it as a current form of violence and as an erasure of black social life in the city (over the last ten years there has been a 20 percent decline in Oakland's African American population and a rise in its Hispanic population). The complexities of accounting for the shifts in national and transnational youth culture in gentrifying cities such as Oakland — including anti-youth government policies, media politics, youths and violence (as recipients and perpetrators), creative expressions and protests, the rise of technology, and new forms of onslaught and resistance to black culture — offer a monumental example of the challenges of rethinking Lacy's socially engaged work. The strands of such conversations lead toward a single question or proposition: what if a retrospective of Suzanne Lacy were to take place as fully as possible in the present? Are there ways in which this could be a “living exhibition” that aims to address contemporary issues, or abiding issues in their contemporary manifestations? This is a matter of making it new, for our time and place. How can we avoid the sense of “we weren't there” that can be induced by an exhibition of past actions (the risk of exhibitions of performance)? The answer lies in presenting two contexts at the same time, in being able to hold in our minds the reality that the work is dated and yet persists. These are art projects that are

not over; you can visit them and their legacies at different points along the way, and the issues that prompted them — violence against women; race, youth, and the state; immigration; the culture of the white working class, and other matters — are as present today as ever. We need to historicize and dehistoricize the work simultaneously. We can't be there, but we are here.

[ ... ]

In the exhibition's initial San Francisco presentation it must be reconciled within two very different institutions: YBCA and SFMOMA. [ ... ] YBCA is animated by an aspiration to social remedy. This is rooted in its origins, having emerged from the ruptures caused by the redevelopment struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Today YBCA tells its story in the language of civic and community action. It is also a non-collecting institution (therefore not anchored by material art objects) and a multidisciplinary and solely contemporary venue at which live programming is at least as present as visual art. Suzanne Lacy will be relatively at home within its program, which tends to explore political, civic, and pedagogical practices: practices that in various ways are leaving art. This year, for example, they have presented the work of Lynn Hersmann Leeson, Tania Bruguera, Erick Meyenberg, Estudio Teddy Cruz + Fonna Forman, and Damon Rich and Jae Shin (Hector). Given this context YBCA is a more hospitable environment for Lacy's practice than SFMOMA. It is more accommodating of live experience, claimed results, and sources outside art — indeed, YBCA is most comfortable with these dimensions of art practice. We have both venues to contend with, and we face the question of how to organize a single

exhibition across them. Our plan is to reassemble *The Oakland Projects* at YBCA — perhaps alongside *The Skin of Memory* (1999) and the projects about youth issues that Lacy organized in Vancouver, *Turning Point* (1995) and *Under Construction* (1997). These projects originated in the same period and among Lacy's works most programmatically connect art to public policy. Returning Lacy to art at YBCA is a movement toward the live, the present, and the political. This context asks most of us, as curators, in terms of reassembly and translation of Lacy's work for the present. It asks that we make good on YBCA's claims to civic engagement and art for and in our time. And of course presenting *The Oakland Projects* not in Oakland but in the neighboring city of San Francisco presents its own questions. For instance, what is the responsibility of the neighbor?

[...]

SFMOMA seems like a less hospitable context in which to consider Lacy's practice as art. To introduce Lacy's art here is to ask of it some questions which are not so often asked, questions about aesthetics and art history. And what aesthetics and art history in particular? SFMOMA's predominant aesthetic regime comprises late modernist abstraction, expressionist figuration, post-Pop and post-conceptual painting, plus various traditions of photography (including social documentary and vernacular, but excluding, at least until very recently, uses of photography in conceptual art). SFMOMA is primarily designed with the interests of these forms in mind. The museum's program does include media art (Rudolf Frieling's sphere) and performance and public dialogue (parts of my sphere), but these are less

visible and, let us admit, relatively minor areas of activity. Is the project of a solo retrospective of an artist working in these minor forms an elevation of those forms? A departure for SFMOMA? An experiment in performing a different institutionality? Or even an attempt to confront this genre of art practice with the histories of art since the 1960s that museums of modern and contemporary art primarily present and acquire? Yes, it is. But it is also an elaboration in quite different directions of the impulse behind the major, resident forms.

If, as I suggested, the production of forms is as much a part of Lacy's work as is the facilitation of process, we have to ask about the aesthetic character of those forms. The museum should be the place where this can become visible in a new way, a way that extends its history of art. Introducing Lacy to the predominant aesthetic regime of SFMOMA, we might find both difference and complementarity — with California Conceptualism, no doubt, and with the picturing of the topography of the West and vernacular traditions (which is to say, practices that are local, popular, and utilitarian), with the exploration of the post-Pop body, and latterly, at least, the "face of our time" typologies of photographers such as August Sander and Zanele Muholi that we see in the Brierfield (*The Square and the Circle*) and Quito (*De tu Puño y Letra*) projects this year. Let's even suggest that Lacy's art shares a chromosome with SFMOMA's most prevalent aesthetic regime: the post-minimal aesthetics of

Opposite: *Code 33: Emergency, Clear the Air*, 1999, by Suzanne Lacy, Unique Holland, and Julio Morales. Photos courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.



artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Sol LeWitt, and Richard Serra. Think of the use of primary colors — for Lacy, especially red and yellow, plus black and white — from *In Mourning and Rage*, through *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind, The Crystal Quilt*, and so many other projects to the present. Think of the use of geometry and repetition. There is perhaps (we will see) an aesthetic complementarity combined with an essential difference, which is to do with the contingency, mobility, and agency of the forms in Lacy's art — since, of course, her forms are composed of people, not inanimate materials. There is a tension between the regimented and the unregimented. Lacy's monochromes and geometries contain an ungovernable element, an element of disobedience. The museum should offer the opportunity to

**The work is not over. Our task is neither to deny nor collapse the gaps, in time and space, spanned by this practice, but to represent what is in-between[.]**

foreground this. Lacy is the author of the aesthetic (though it can be developed collaboratively with other artists, e.g., Leslie Labowitz or Susan Steinman), but it admits the lives of others. She may direct them to wear a certain color and walk in a straight line, and if they do not quite do this, so be it. This is post-minimal art that vibrates with the contingency of the social. Imagine *Between the Door and the Street* as a vast yellow monochrome, torn into strips and distributed among women in a Brooklyn street. Beyond matters of shape and color, think about

how the social functions differently, how labor is structured in Lacy's process compared to LeWitt's, how public space, and time, is produced differently in her work compared to that of Serra — and, of course, think of Lacy's advocacy for "new genre public art" in *Mapping the Terrain*. There she struck beyond a debate on public art in the United States, on plunk art, within which Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) was the lead example. Lacy does not leave art, her practice is a non-art activity of a different order to art such as that on view at SFMOMA. It is that same art, but agitated by life. Our task, with the artist and others, is to reconcile this art to the museum and, more importantly, reconcile the museum to it.

In any encounter with art such as Lacy's, there can be a feeling that something is missing. Some integral act, object, or agent is either no longer present, now out of sight, or still to be produced. It is an experience that may seem, unsatisfyingly, more like encountering life than art. We know that, with all variants of post-conceptual art practice, it is part of the work that some element is evidently absent. Yet the feeling of absence in an encounter, at any moment, with Lacy's practice is different, and may seem lacking in a more matter-of-fact way. The audience for this art may feel not that a full and satisfying art presence is impossible but that it has been possible, and we merely missed it. That is a trap. Encountering these projects, in any of their forms, we are no more present to ourselves and to each other than in life, but also no less so. No particular way of representing this work can capture it, because they all do. Nothing is fully present, and nothing can be fully absent. The work is not over. Our task is neither

to deny nor collapse the gaps, in time and space, spanned by this practice, but to represent what is in-between and leave it open for what is to come — not least for artists coming up who may find here a curriculum for their own work. What must be there is the agitation — that cannot be missing. It is going to be hard to evoke the discord and friction proper to process and the agitation proper to form. Without not only the presence but also the evidence of this agitation, the project will have failed.

*Dominic Willsdon is the Leanne and George Roberts Curator of Education and Public Practice at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Read the entire essay in "Discuss Forums" on the A Blade of Grass website.*

# The Future of Creative Placemaking

Michael Rohd interviews  
Roberto Bedoya,  
Maria Rosario Jackson,  
and Jamie Bennett

Creative placemaking is the intentional and integrated role of art in place-based community planning and development. In 2011, ArtPlace America was created to help grow the creative placemaking field, and in 2020, as always intended, it will culminate. The term creative placemaking has been critiqued by some as: 1) suggesting that the people and cultures rooted in a place had not already made it; 2) initially lacking a clear statement of values regarding who was meant to benefit from the community development of which the arts and culture were a part. The national conversation that has ensued is furthered in this interview.

**MICHAEL ROHD:** Roberto, you run the Department of Cultural Affairs in Oakland, California, and have put together a cultural plan for that city's future. Since you have been very involved in the discourse around creative placemaking by bringing the term "creative place-keeping" into the conversation pretty forcefully, I wonder if and how in your plan you have engaged with the notion of creative placemaking or keeping, how that idea moves into the future of Oakland's arts and culture and civic world?

**ROBERTO BEDOYA:** It's pretty central. My community, as a whole, loves the language of "place-keeping" more than "placemaking;" the Mayor likes place-keeping, too. When I did my "clenched-fist" moment of being a ... contrarian, it was to have a counter-narrative to the dominant ways creative placemaking was initially put out into the world. I find a little more integration between the two terms now. But the number one challenge is that, if not every major city, [many are] going through intense gentrification and displacement — or among my activist community, "replacement." Replacing black folks with white folks, to be blunt, [and that] gets played out in civic discourse. The notion of place-keeping has currency here. The trap around place-keeping is sentimentality — "I want the old days" — and it's not thoughtful. What are we trying to keep, and how, so it stays fresh and new? I think the future of creative placemaking is people not as intensely problematizing it, but trying to figure out the actions associated with placemaking or keeping, to create agency and a notion of civic commitment.

**MICHAEL:** Is there one action or recommendation in that plan that particularly speaks to where you hope that work will go?

**ROBERTO:** Sure. In some ways it's nothing new and in some ways it is. When I was in Tucson [as Executive Director of the Tuscon Pima Arts Council], I did a place initiative, and I'm going to replicate that here. The title of this [cultural development] plan is "Belonging in Oakland." That model of artists and arts organizations dealing with civic issues is not new for me, but it is for Oakland. If the number one concern I heard from community folks was the feeling of losing neighborhood connections and neighborhood identity, what can I do in my shop to strengthen social networks as a means to slow down the machinery of displacement or capitalism? If you have strong social networks, then it becomes something else. The Neighborhood Voice Initiative will be one way [to strengthen social networks]. We are also going to pilot artists-in-residence in three government departments — Transportation, Planning and Building, and Race and Equity. And artists will be part of the creative problem-solving team. That goes back to the civic commons. We like that term here. We'll see where it leads.

I thought I would get the biggest pushback on the plan from my arts community. Because it's not so much about artists, arts organizations, and grant-making, which are not on the sidelines but not in the center of what we are trying to do. We are looking at culture, at expressive life. It's creative placemaking in a broad

civic context of culture, and also includes arts and arts organizations. Which implies more, all that language of intersectionality plus disciplinary, dot, dot, dot ...

**MICHAEL:** Thank you. Maria, as Roberto is working in one particular city system, you have played really different roles in the journey of creative placemaking, both with Kresge Foundation and now with Arizona State University. Your focus, which really impacted Kresge, involves making sure work is addressing inequity and dealing with interventions and systems, not just one-off, project-based approaches. As people ask about the future of creative placemaking, how would you like to see artists, designers, and cultural workers think about their relationship to place, and an ethics at the heart of this work?

**MARIA ROSARIO JACKSON:** The debate about creative placemaking versus place-keeping has been really useful to lift up things that needed to be talked about. The idea of placemaking though, particularly for communities that have been historically disenfranchised, is still valid. That particularly low-income communities should only be hunkered down in keeping something and not liberated to make seems problematic. The debate about the terms brings into relief how placemaking with an equity focus actually opens the door for people who are economically vulnerable and have been historically impacted, and helps create agency. If the practice calls for active engagement with power in the making of your place, that's good.

Placemaking as a term, because it hasn't been without controversy, has also caused artists and designers to have to think

about how they show up in the world and what their roles could be. That extends to institutions that help train and educate artists and designers if they go the route of formal education. [Creative placemaking] has had an important impact that one might think of as systemic just by virtue of introducing the term — whether it's loved or reviled. Some of the ways in which creative placemaking summons artists to show up, particularly when there is an equity focus involved, are not altogether new — to deal directly with social issues, with residents in communities. It's lifted up that way of being an artist and given it more legitimacy.

**MICHAEL:** Jamie, having your leadership at ArtPlace and being out there all over the country and the world — in terms of the future of creative placemaking (whether or not this term is, as Maria just put it so well, both beloved and reviled) — what is your hope for the legacy? Or [what do you see as] at least the next decade of work that is impelled or initiated by what's happening right now?

**JAMIE BENNETT:** It took me a while at ArtPlace to get my head around the idea that we are not dedicated to the phrase “creative placemaking” but rather to the practice of artists and non-artists coming together to help continually build communities that are equitable, healthy, and sustainable. It's been powerful in conversations with Roberto to unpack why I use the language I use. Talking about the history of placemaking goes back to Jane Jacobs who, with Holly White and others, had this notion of community planning and development that was human-centric. It always began with the residents, was comprehensive and holistic; we don't live our lives or create systems in silos.



Roberto Bedoya's place-based priorities as Executive Director of the Tucson Pima Arts Council can be seen in the 2012 PLACE Initiative grant awarded to the Tucson Chinese Association for *Beyond Groceries*, a project exploring the historic relationship between Chinese grocers and their multi-ethnic neighborhoods in Tucson, Arizona. The project collected oral histories and artifacts of the cultural and economic legacy of the grocers and culminated in a mobile 'Rolling History' bus tour celebrating the inclusive history of these communities by visiting historic grocery stores like *La Primavera*. Photo: Tucson Chinese Association

It was locally informed. It doesn't look the same in Phoenix as in Los Angeles. The “creative” [part of the term] is an invitation for artists to join their neighbors in community planning and development. That's the practice that we are committed to. The reason to create an organization and a framework is to help make that work legible to funders and policymakers. This work has been going on as long as humans have been gathering together, but it often hasn't been recognized by the people who hold power and resources.

I was recently at a conference that the Stavros Niarchos Foundation put on, with people from different academic and professional backgrounds. An anthropologist reminded me that art and culture may well have been created when human beings harnessed fire. It used to be that the sun came up, human beings woke up, were productive, hunted, gathered, reproduced. The sun went down and you went to bed to get ready for the next day. But when we harnessed fire and were able to extend the day, story and song were

invented. That process was in some way marked as being separate from things that are productive and may have been the moment that arts and culture was made a little bit separate from work. I think, I hope, that our legacy is making folks understand that arts and culture is not always separate from work. That it is itself work, and it sometimes can be productive. My hope for the legacy is that the people who hold power in our communities, like elected officials and city managers, recognize the very real work that artists can do bringing their knowledge, skills, and ability to bear on things that are useful for the overall community.

**MICHAEL:** How does someone new to this broad cross-sector world of creative placemaking/keeping align themselves with voices and actions moving towards equity and sustainability, and not accidentally find their own work deployed in the service of an accumulation of capital or status quo system?

**JAMIE:** *Party People*, by [the theater company] UNIVERSES, is about a generational conversation between Black Panther elders, their children, and grandchildren. One of the female Black Panther elders tells the younger generation, “Our belief was always that there are no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent values.” [My] point is, I wouldn’t ask people to go out and look for voices that are dedicated to those things, but to think about their actions and how their actions can actually lead towards that. We often slate people and what they do, and forgive certain things if we like the people who are doing them. How do you figure out if your actions contributed toward healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities?

Professor Andrew Taylor at American University reminded me that the first rule of systems thinking is that there is no such thing as side effects, there are only effects. If you are experiencing something as a side effect, it means you haven’t drawn the boundaries of your system widely enough. Many people say, “I’m making an economic development play, and there is an unfortunate side effect that people are displaced or replaced,” to borrow from Roberto. We need to draw the boundaries of our system wide enough that we understand that those are not unrelated or accidental, but part of one system.

**MICHAEL:** Roberto, you work in the system of a city, but with lots of partners inside and outside it. In terms of what Jamie just offered about side effects versus effects, how do you make decisions in Oakland, for Oakland, around the kind of partnerships that your plan invites folks towards versus partnerships where the effects are not what you want to contribute towards?

**ROBERTO:** I think about side effects a lot, mainly because I am a person of color in America, and I’m seen as a side effect. I know side effects and how they operate. I think about how the politics of othering, to shift gears a bit, is an operation in civic society. Jeremy Liu [Senior Fellow for Arts, Culture and Equitable Development, PolicyLink] has asked me to help them look at creative placemaking or place-keeping in the context of human rights and property rights: if it is a property rights or a human rights movement, given the changing nature of my city and development that is out of control, and how communities of color historically — given trauma, slavery, and othering — our

bodies are still seen as property rights. We have no human rights. Redlining and the history of planning still sees us as property — not that renters have the right to actually live in a rent stabilized apartment. Sixty percent of Oakland’s housing stock is for renters. What does that mean [in terms of] displacement? Going back to Maria about understanding the power dynamics in placemaking or place-keeping and what my drive is, how you create agency and voice and assert human rights is woven into the work I do.

Here’s a sidebar about power, with a little joke. I talk about the entanglement of wills: public, poetic, and political. Inside of that, when I talk to artists, I say, your will

**MICHAEL:** To use that to bump over to Maria, as we come to the end [of this conversation]. I feel like all of us, whether it’s at a city, foundation, university, or the intersection of systems that Jamie works in, are often trying to figure out the sequence of strategies that will move things forward. But discovery is also in the work of the artist. Discovery doesn’t always look or feel like a sucker punch, but when we are in the context of power and sometimes subversion, critique, or challenge, the sucker punch feels part of the artist’s role. As you have looked back and forward about creative placemaking, how much is it about collaboration and discovery, and how much about surprise and challenge?

### What about imagination gets woven into a community development process and called out, made legible? — Maria Rosario Jackson

in this entanglement is poetic will. How do you imagine the park that didn’t exist? You put it out there, and then you need to mobilize people and get elected officials behind it. That’s the entanglement of wills. Artists often feel like they don’t have any agency when they rub up against policy and urban planning. I constantly need to say, no, your greatest power is your imagination. Now, you also need to know how systems work. And I say, what you are sending out there with your clenched fist is totally legit. Someone like me is in the position where I have to arm wrestle, let’s say with the developer. At the end of the day there’s a handshake. So there’s the fist, arm wrestling, and the handshake. I told this to the Mayor and she goes, “Oh, you forgot something — the sucker punch!”

**MARIA:** I think it’s both and looking forward 15 or 20 years, if this work is successful and has some traction within a community development frame, what are the kinds of roles that we’ll understand as healthy to the change process? Do artists then have the ability, invitation, skill set, training, and validation system that allows for those contributions? What are they? What about imagination gets woven into a community development process and called out, made legible? Are there new roles that we envision, not just in community development but also in criminal justice, public safety, and social welfare? And to your question of the sucker punch, is this idea of questioning and challenging something that as a society we can expect and invite? Do we have the appetite for artists contributing



critique and challenges? Fast-forward 15–20 years, what are the places where artists and others can plug in, in ways that are really legitimate, not just at the margins or in a one-off?

**MICHAEL:** That’s awesome. Roberto, a closing thought on the future of creative placemaking?

**ROBERTO:** Now that the plan is done, I’m struggling with how I operationalize belonging. Partly it’s in making equitable places. I’m not going to use the language of placemaking and place-keeping. I want to drop back from that a little. But I’m struggling a little in how I understand my own authority and privilege as a city manager. When I have a community meeting at the library, how do I mobilize or prompt the future thinking of community that needs to be generated from the stakeholder community? My stakeholder community can be a world of policymakers. But the stakeholder community of a neighborhood watch group is an interesting community. How do I work in that space? Because I can sit here and admire and love all your thoughts. And I can have a meeting with my boss and say, “Here’s what phase two looks like.” The struggle right now for me is, how do I operationalize decentralized planning around community? It’s not my role in government but the notion of governance in the placemaking processes and what that governance system looks like if it includes the Boys and Girls Club and the artist and the urban planner and the city official.

**MICHAEL:** Jamie, any last thoughts?

**JAMIE:** Two things. Going back to the notion of critique and collaboration, particularly those of us who are deeply invested in the arts and culture sector often equate artists with halos, whereas artists are as fallible as any other human beings. In collaborations among artists and non-artists to build healthy, equitable, and sustainable community, I hope that both sides are open to critique and correction. That is a little bit of a negative note, so I don’t want that to be my last word.

So, one other thing. As part of our community development investment, Lyz Crane and several colleagues visited some 21 different ArtPlace organizations all over the country. In every community they visited, the leaders they met with said the same two things. One, what their community needed more than anything else was social cohesion. And two — in a tone of voice that you would use to say the sun is going to come up tomorrow — that they believe that arts and culture can deliver social cohesion. So, I’m really excited about the appetite and eagerness at this moment for these collaborations. Opportunities exist, and I’m excited to watch as artists and arts organizations step up and seize them.

**MICHAEL:** I am so grateful to the three of you for making this time.

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# This Is Art? The Alienation of the Avant Garde from the Audience\*

Lucy R. Lippard

We reprint Lippard's essay for its insightful use of "where" to suggest the avant-garde's connection to and difference from socially engaged art.

Reprinted from Lucy R. Lippard's *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, with her permission. New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1984, pp. 73-79.

*A tall white room, high over lower Manhattan; it is empty, even of light fixtures and window frames; wind, air and sky fill the space. "You must be kidding. Where's the art?" "It's nothing, nothing at all." "I kind of like it — all that emptiness." "Is this a hoax?"*

The empty room is a work of art by California artist Michael Asher. The quotes are some public responses to his 1976 exhibition. For me, Asher's show was moving and beautiful, articulating interior and exterior spaces, their boundaries, mergings, light and shadow into a particularly subtle experience. But I have been a contemporary art critic for over a decade. To a general public there is, indeed, nothing there.

The alienation of the avant garde from a broad audience and the contemporary artist's indifference to this situation are causalities of Modernism (the evolutionary theory of art which has dominated this century). The current art public is the rich and educated class attracted to status as often as to esthetics. A still smaller percentage of this group participates in the rituals of the "art world" — an incestuous network in which contemporary art is generated by other art, exposed, bought and sold, until it reaches the only available outlet to a somewhat broader public — the museum. Once there, it is greeted by the laity with

bafflement, outrage, intimidation, and occasionally with genuine excitement. For in the field of contemporary art, almost everybody is the laity — not just the mythical men and women in the street with their assumed preferences for lurid sunsets and bug-eyed ballerinas, but the great majority of every socioeconomic class.

Art for art's sake, concentrating on form and ignoring content, is an acquired taste. The entire history of modern art in Western civilization is that of an essentially intimate and private art, an art of "precious objects" on sale for those raised to "appreciate" them and the privileged enough to acquire them. ("Let's face it. The public is imbecile in every country," wrote Futurist Umberto Boccioni in 1912.) Through that same history runs a parallel thread of the loftiest idealism, the desire expressed by artists themselves that art might recoup its ancient vitality in social life, that art might change perception and thereby the world. I count myself as part of this starry-eyed troupe, and it is a melancholy task to have to report that the history of Modernism is in fact the history of antagonism against the same bourgeois establishment which, in the process, has become its prime audience. Having no history of involvement with the "masses," new art has consistently ignored its own aspirations. There are chasms between the class that demands "culture," artists

who are making “art,” and the virtually unarticulated needs of everybody else.

*A crowded concrete plaza in Manhattan’s financial district, surrounded by skyscrapers, a few trees, four of which are white, four stories high, made of fiberglass, and patterned with heavy black lines.*

The gawky *Four Trees* is a sculpture by Jean Dubuffet, sponsored by the Chase Manhattan Bank. It is one of the few public artworks in New York which avoids a faceless decorator’s appliance look. One day last January, fifty-one passersby were interviewed in the plaza by Williams College student Mike Glier — twenty-seven of them “professionals” and twenty-four “nonprofessionals.” Half of them liked the sculpture and half didn’t. Eight thought the trees looked like giant mushrooms; the man who sweeps the plaza was reminded of a cave or “something from way back before I was born.” A “prancing courier” thought of cutout cookies. A new mother said, “It looks like the inside of a body and bones.” Children loved it and saw it as “a sandwich with a bite taken out of it” and “blown-up live stuff with black lines on it.” Two men described as “down and out” were angered by the \$500,000 price tag and would have preferred a statue of General Grant.

Dubuffet himself — a wine merchant who became an artist late in life — plays a contradictory role; wealthy, literate and worldly, he presents an “anticultural” stance, attempting to achieve a childlike innocence by borrowing from the art of “primitive” peoples, of the “naïves,” and of the insane. If *Four Trees* is a successful provocation, his painting *Beard of Uncertain Returns*, in the Museum of Modern Art, has in two surveys been

the least popular work viewed, evoking comments like, “He doesn’t take himself of his audience seriously; he doesn’t believe in anything and his art is alienated.” The degree of abstraction may explain this. Representational art is preferred by the public across the board unless, as in *Four Trees*, there is an imagistic handle that allows the viewer to enter by some other means, the most useful of which is association — free, and frequently pointed. (As Brian O’Doherty has remarked, “shrewd common sense is the unconsulted public’s only remaining weapon when confronted with ‘elitist’ monuments;” he cites a smooth mound of black marble outside a San Francisco bank which was christened “the banker’s heart.”) But association is rejected and, if possible, suppressed by most avant-garde artists, who feel it is irrelevant to their

**There are chasms between the class that demands “culture,” artists who are making “art,” and the virtually unarticulated needs of everybody else.**

formal intentions. Thereby, unconsciously or not, they raise a major obstacle to their work’s reaching a broader audience.

Right now, “public art” means to most people blown-up private art outdoors — looming Calder’s and mountainous Moore’s — cultural weapons with which to bludgeon “improvement” into the unruly classes. Both big business and the avant garde are now aware that art seen in a familiar space has a communicative advantage over art seen in artificial cultural contexts, such as museums and



*Group of Four Trees*, Jean Dubuffet, New York, NY. Photo: Sabrina Chin

galleries. A college class interviewing on New York streets last year found that outdoors, people are less concerned with value judgements and more with their own opinions, whereas in the more detached and loaded indoor situations, this confidence is undermined. It is not surprising, then, that the majority of those rare artists making an effort to reach out have gone to the streets, where the audience can be caught unawares.

For the most part, however, contemporary artists who have ventured “out there” and found sites and sights to revitalize their art have been more successful in bringing these awarenesses back into the art world than in bringing art out to the world. For example, when so-called Conceptual Art emerged around 1968, it was welcomed

as a blow at the “precious object,” but none of us took into account that these Xeroxed texts or random snapshots documenting ideas or activities or works of art existing elsewhere would be of no interest whatsoever to a broader public. They were, in fact, smoothly absorbed into the art market and are now only slightly less expensive than oils and marbles. The perversity (and failure) of offering unwanted avant-garde art for the price of wanted schlock bears out in retrospect art historian Linda Nochlin’s depressing suggestion that, admirable as the move to get art out of the museums and into the streets may be, it can also be seen as “the ultimate act of avant-garde hubris.”

“I know very few artists who can even imagine the possibility of an art which

is both good and more widely social,” says painter R. B. Kitaj. “The road ahead is blocked among us by so many failures of imagination.” It is also blocked by the rationalization that it is reactionary to try and contact the proletariat, who must “make their own art;” and these failures are sustained by an underlying fear, well justified but rarely admitted, that “the masses” will reject us if we leave the ivory walls and go out there with our present baggage — our art, our criticism, even our attitudes to life.

*A vacant ground-floor storefront right off Times Square. A sign in the window reads, “Work for the Unemployed.” From time to time someone wanders in hopefully and finds a dim, abandoned space, empty except for a chair, a tape-recorder, and a supervisor who gently advises that this is not an employment office; it is art. If the visitor remains, she hears a long, disembodied monologue on tape about*

**The art world has come to mistrust accessibility. Art that communicates easily is often understood only on a playful or superficial level and appears to lack the profundity that makes other, more hermetic art endure.**

*the artist’s political convictions. A crumb is thrown to accessibility; near the door is a pile of small, crudely bold black-and-white linocut handouts; “Want to Get Your Boss Off Your Back? Stand Up”; “Everyone Who Is Employed Is Being Robbed”; “Wages a Form of Slavery.”*

Art like this perhaps courageous but singularly ineffective and even insulting piece by Saul Ostrow simply parodies the valid dialectic between the real and the

art world, becoming a picturesque gesture rather than a commitment. Just as it is not a matter of jazzing up factories or city walls so that art improves the working environment without doing anything about fundamental social inequities, neither is it a matter of gratuitously provoking ideas without being willing to follow them through. It doesn’t help that “serious” artists are terrified that their art might be seen as “entertainment” — an unfortunate situation originating in understandable opposition to the sixties’ buying public’s consumption of art as a “fun thing.” The art world has come to mistrust accessibility. Art that communicates easily is often understood only on a playful or superficial level and appears to lack the profundity that makes other, more hermetic art endure.

Though art in general is something people would really like to like, contemporary art cannot meet the challenge because

it isn’t accessible, even physically. In its place are the flower paintings, Paris-in-the-rain scenes, cats on black velvet, Spanish dancers and moonlit harbors found in shopping malls, frame stores and art festivals all over America. “The art is counterfeit, but the need is authentic,” as Baruch Kirschenbaum of the Rhode Island School of Design has pointed out. Workers in Minneapolis, interviewed about art by artist Don Celender’s students, bore this out. The large majority felt that “people

need art,” “It brings us closer to what we really are,” and “It makes the world seem brighter.”

Sounds fine until taste again rears its ugly head. When asked what art the respondents had in their homes, their answers ranged from an occasional abstract painting to antique furniture, a ceramic duck, *Blue Boy*, *The End of the Trail*, a stuffed pheasant, a print of the Lord’s Prayer, “optic art, lamps, couch and chairs,” candles, driftwood, “bubblegum acrylics,” finger paintings of fishes, statues of saints, “oil paintings which I appreciate because they look hard to do,” yarn paintings, “pictures of artificial flowers,” and a great many reproductions of “scenery.”

In 1967, according to the International Council on Museums (ICOM) report, people liked art that was relaxing, calming, comfortable, conservative and realistic, art that was already familiar to them through the media and reproduction. Animals and birds were liked, fish less so; deep space was preferred to two-dimensional decoration. Direct stares in portraits and emphatically sexual images were rejected, as were both drab colors and very hot, bright ones, vertiginous views, dazzling light, and “childishness” (the “my-six-year-old-could-do-that” syndrome). People tend to be lost when there is no recognizable subject matter or to confuse the subject matter with the painting itself. (A friend overheard one well-dressed woman in the Metropolitan Museum standing in front of a Degas ballet painting say to another, “Why my daughter dances better than that!”)

Anything the least bit radical was seen as a put-on by artists who “don’t care if

ordinary people understand them.” The 507 ICOM respondents wholeheartedly rejected art that was in any way disturbing in subject, that referred to social problems or suggested any negative aspect of life. The report concluded that “What is common on television in the way of violence and other distortions is not, in their view, equally acceptable as subject matter for painting” — an indication as to how far art has been removed from life.

Where do people get this “average” taste? In most cases it is a product of the media, which are certainly to blame for spreading the word that contemporary art is “news” for its peculiarities rather than for its virtues. (One survey even discovered horizontal paintings were much preferred over verticals and suspected a connection with the shape of TV and movie screens, though the walls of a house are also suggested.) Taste is also — to a lesser extent — affected by what is seen in museums, and *how* it is seen. One of Celender’s respondents liked “old artworks because they’re more classy,” and class and intimidation are certainly factors in the public image of museums; along, of course, with boredom and mystification.

*A truck full of Puerto-Rican teenagers from New York’s Lower East Side is going past the Metropolitan Museum; one kid asks the driver, “Hey, man, is that City Hall?”*

The Met’s pseudo-classical design is identical to that of law courts and government offices, hardly inspiring confidence or conveying a welcome to the underclasses. Once museums were free, at least. Now, though tax-exempt, most have “discretionary admission” fees. Prominently displayed signs “suggest” that you pay at least \$1.50 a head. The less

comfortable the visitor is in befountained, bedraped and bepillared halls, the more likely s/he is to pay the demanded fee than to hand over the penny that is equally legitimate. The richer you are and the more at ease in your society, the less humiliating it is to “play poor.”

*A Black family in their Sunday best hesitates before the cashier at the Met, reluctantly turns back and leaves, despite the protestations of a concerned middle-class visitor who tries to convince them they can pay a dime.*

Another survey found that many more people would visit museums if there were no charge. At the same time that museums all over the country were patting themselves on the back for increased attendance figures, the ICOM report said that these figures merely “mask facts of a more disquieting nature — namely, a visit to a museum does not guarantee understanding or acceptance of the art in it.” Long lines formed for popular shows like Calder’s mobiles or the Mona Lisa actually lead to impossible viewing conditions and *increase* alienation. There is little popular or “low art” in museums because if it *is* truly popular it is not considered “high art;” it doesn’t get into the art history books and it is not given to the museums by the rich. (God forbid the rabble should choose its own art.)

There is, however, one art with a large audience that cannot be accused of going ignored, or of avoiding provocative subject matter. The inner-city mural movement, on New York’s Lower East Side, Chicago’s South Side, L.A.’s, San Francisco’s and Santa Fe’s barrios, has become an effective public art precisely by dealing with local life and welcoming

art as an arena in which to expose it. The community murals, varying widely in style, subject and “quality,” are on the whole consciously opposed to art for art’s sake, though they too have an art-historical model to which they look — the Mexican mural movement of the ‘30s and ‘40s. They can provide an outlet for destructive energies, a catalyst for action to improve the quality of urban life, and they assert the presence of a politically invisible population. At their best, they do so by the same means the avant garde itself admires most: directness, simplicity, strength and personal commitment.

The audience for the murals is ready-made and ready to empathize and act. In the Mexican tradition, pictures take the place of words. Content ranges from bitter social comment (against drugs, inflation, absentee landlords, corrupt cops) to pride in heritage, culture, race and sex. Some derive their power from conviction alone, others from considerable artistry; the artists are frequently not professionals and the apprentices are youths from the communities. The murals are in some senses a regional art (cement roots instead of grass roots), their makers uninterested in the kind of “universal quality” that reaches museums. They claim their own context; their audience is basically alienated from ruling-class culture and is unaware of most intellectual stereotypes and expectations about art.

A Watts Neighborhood Arts Council report on art and welfare from 1973 quotes a survey in which the vast majority of respondents identified “culture” with a *total experience*, including “education, learning, life style, refinement, anything uplifting, historical background, customs and traditions, progress and

development,” in that order. When the Decentralization Committee of the Art Workers’ Coalition circulated a questionnaire in the South Bronx in 1970 to determine what the community would like in a local art center, the replies included basketball, sewing, and day care as often as anything conventionally considered art. At the same time, the art world, trying to bridge the gap between art and life, has claimed for the art context aspects of and references to basketball, sewing, and social systems, not to mention didactic display, unaltered objects bought in stores, street actions, primitive rituals, boxing, toys, real estate and ecology, physics, sociology, and so forth.

*Context* has become a much-dependend-upon concept in visual esthetics since the mid-‘60s. It is used to defend the activities of the far-out artist against the response, “But this isn’t art.” The argument goes that if “it” is seen in a museum, gallery, or art magazine, then it is art no matter how bad or antiart or nonart it may appear. This simple solution to the no-longer-burning question “What is Art?” is a reasonable one and makes sense within the art world, though it is invisible and incomprehensible to most of the audience. Ironically, however, the “context” concept, in fact, serves to further confine art within the art world by fixing its validity there. If it communicates, and satisfies the esthetic needs of its immediate audience, who cares what it’s called?

Yet, when doubts are expressed within the art world about the ability of contemporary art to communicate, the need for artists to choose their own audiences and be responsible to them, the reply is instant defensiveness on the order of “Artists are free; Artists work

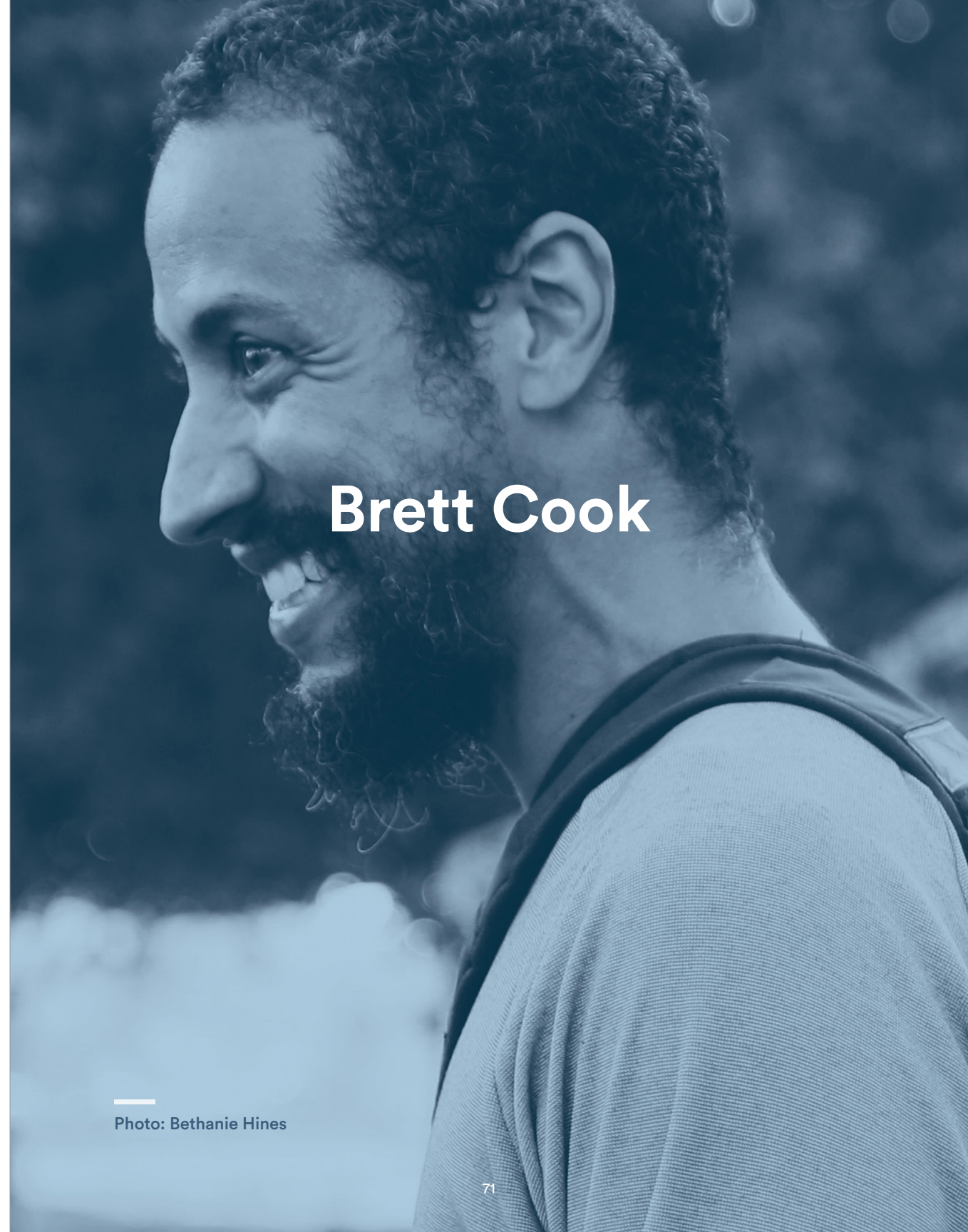
only for themselves; Artists don’t make art to please anybody,” and even “Art is not communication.” Nevertheless, it is patently ridiculous for any of us — artists and critics — to work under the illusion that we are not making products for a specific consumer — the international art audience, for whom fashion plays a huge part in success and failure. Those artists who refuse to consider a new audience for their work are simply accepting the existing one.

*Lucy R. Lippard is a writer, activist, sometime-curator, and author of 24 books on contemporary art and cultural criticism.*

\*This essay was written early in 1976 as a much longer piece; a short version was published under the same title by *Seven Days* in its first preview issue (Feb. 14, 1977), and for this version, a few sections from the unpublished long version have been reinserted. The surveys consulted for this article were ICOM (A Zacks, D. F. Cameron, and D. S. Abbey), “Public Attitudes Toward Modern Art,” *Museum 2*, no. ¾ (1969); Don Celender and students at Macalester College, *The Opinions of Working People Concerning the Arts* (New York; O. K. Harris Gallery, 1975); George Nash, “Art Museums as Perceived by the Public,” *Curator 18*, no. 1 (1975); Williams College students directed by Lucy R. Lippard, *What Do You See? Think? Say? Private and Public Responses to Art* (Williamstown, Mass. 1976).

## Ask an Artist

Are you facing a complex situation in your socially engaged practice, trying to make the most of an opportunity, or parsing a new idea? Submit your questions to *Ask an Artist* for advice! In this issue, Brett Cook responds to where-related inquiries.



**Brett Cook**

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Photo: Bethanie Hines

Dear Brett,

I am currently touring an installation and public engagement project that seeks to understand the source of racism and related oppressions through the lens of European history and my own family. Wherever it travels, which is primarily schools, I try to bring together departments and organize opportunities for conversation and response to the work.

My experience is that diversity departments are often excited about bringing the project to their school but can't locate an appropriate space to display it because the school galleries have their own agenda which is not aligned — they want to focus on disenfranchised artists, student work, or faculty work, or feel that the subject matter is not appropriate or they have already focused on whiteness. Can you offer any advice on how to bridge this gap when I approach schools? Related to this, do you have any thoughts about collaborating with multiple departments?

Anne Mavor

Portland, OR

Dear Anne,

Thank you for your question, and congratulations on the opportunities to share your important work to understand racism. It reminds me of a project I did when I co-taught a course at an urban public high school to curate a show from a blue chip art collection. The course featured dialogues around race, gender, and class based on artwork from the collection and involved partnerships with multiple non-profit art spaces. In retrospect, one of my significant demands was to base the project and myself at the school and not at the art spaces. These art spaces were the primary funders and held power in the project in many forms.

By being embedded in the school, I expanded my job description in ways the art spaces would have never expected: weekly three-hour staff meetings, afterschool professional development exercises, and chaperoning school dances. Through this, I became part of the culture of the school, a part of the ecosystem, learning from the faculty, students, and staff so that they could trust, learn, and advocate with me. These were relationships that could only be built over time, and the ability to bridge these spaces — between the different departments of the school and the art spaces — was based on the quality of these relationships.

So, while the exhibition and class appeared to be the goal of the project, it was the relationship-building across departments that was really the art and lasting residue of the project. This was also what made the project successful. It was through personal relationships across disciplines that the faculty and staff became willing advocates and collaborators and grew the course and exhibition into a school-wide arts integration initiative. The additional rewards of those personal relationships included insights about spaces for display and exposure that, even in my well-intended and experienced perspective, I simply couldn't have previously imagined.

I wasn't using my power as the artist to dictate what was good for the school or art spaces or convince them about what they should do, or even how they should enter into a relationship. Instead, through the process, we built relations where we could negotiate and share power to create something for our mutual benefit. This happened within the school as well as between the school and the art spaces.

Inquiry into how our own actions create suffering in others and sharing those reflections is courageous work. This brings the gift of a greater challenge to modify those behaviors in ourselves and the spaces we work. While American society is desperate for an enlightened history lesson and some collective restorative justice to address our racist past, it is daily actions by individuals and institutions that reinforce asymmetries of power and sustain our collective suffering. How we embody dialogue as a relational process in our work and our lives bares witness to the dream of liberating the oppressed in all of us.

Brett

Dear Brett,

I've worked a lot on socially engaged projects with people in a range of locations, and often the commissioner or project partner is keen to base the project around the community's immediate "where."

I understand why this approach is often suggested, as these projects often play on local histories, past industries, or local areas of intrigue or beauty. I've been thinking recently that this can also bring up bad memories or foster an inward-looking attitude. My question is, how can you base a project around a broader, more universal "where" that lets people leave their everyday and look outwards? If the context is broader than the immediate doorstep, how can you capture people's interest?

Dan Russell

Gateshead, UK

In our next issue, artist Dread Scott will respond to questions around the theme of "who."

Send your questions to:  
info@abladeofgrass.org

Dear Dan,

It is easy to imagine that for many people — including arts funders and commissioners — starting from where we are makes sense. The immediate "where" appears as something tangible and finite. And like you allude to, this "where" is also beset with all sorts of habits of perception and misperception. With deep looking and dialogue, it can also become obvious that within any recognition of the sameness of "here," there are also infinite differences that can catapult participants beyond our individual limitations of geography, culture, space, and time.

A foundational part of socially engaged work, for me, is generating the conditions of this deep looking and finding out what we participants individually and collectively define as important. What is something valuable here? How do we make sense of that value? What are the different types of expertise in the group that can enhance our collective learning and transformation as we come to understand these values? This inquiry becomes a vehicle to reassess any preconceived notions of "where" we may be.

To create space for a dialogical process, I work to purposely create an environment where people can learn. This is an environment where those "immediate doorsteps" you speak of can extend in endless directions through inquiry into self, and through dialogue with others. I try to build the environment intentionally: some of that is physical, some intellectual, some emotional, and some spiritual. Part of building a fertile learning environment is simply modeling, or being acutely responsible for my actions. That might mean we're simply going to speak to each other using first names out of respect and equality. It might mean repeatedly making time to assess our expectations, so that it becomes apparent we have a shared agenda. As a guest to a community, it might mean recognizing part of my expertise and role in the collaboration is offering context from outside, and being the excuse, if not the catalyst, for outward perspectives and impacts — with respect for the natives, of course.

When I was younger, I used to think collaboration meant, "I have an idea, you can help me do it, and we'll call it collaboration." At this point, I think of collaboration as a reciprocal contribution by all participants to both the conceptual process and product. Through this process, we are co-creating a new "where" representative of everyone's interest because it reflects the "I" and the "We." In the ongoing discovery process that is collaboration, dialogue, deep listening, and learning constantly occur. The best results of collaborative processes are less about capturing a singular essence or a pre-defined notion, and more about reflecting an array of evolved ideas and new ways of being, both from here at our doorstep, and beyond.

Brett



# One Sky

## Astrology for Election Day

Deborah Fisher



### Disclaimer

The great thing about an astrology column is that it doesn't require the reader to commit to believing in astrology. It's just a permissive space that you can choose to be open to if it speaks to your circumstances in a helpful way.

In this way, astrology is a lot like art, and in fact, I am not even a real astrologer. I began studying divination techniques like astrology because I wanted to change my relationship to art — be more open to its potential. Like astrology, tarot, or palm reading, art is a completely graspable mundane system that anybody can study and do. And at the same time, the purpose of art, like these techniques, can be to do truly ambitious things like redeem, transform, transcend, and expand our awareness and consciousness.

We want a lot out of art, and I wanted to be more open to that desire. So I learned how to tell the future.

## November 6–8, 2018

There is some particularly interesting astrology right around Election Day here in the United States. On November 6, the South Node moves into Capricorn and the North Node moves into Cancer. The nodes of the moon are points in space exactly 180 degrees apart that help astrologers and astronomers predict eclipses. For thousands of years astrologers have thought of them as symbolizing destiny or fate — the way one hand reaches for its future while the other lets go of its past or karmic lot.

The South Node moving into Capricorn on Election Day certainly feels relevant. It symbolizes the karmic debt that we are being asked to purify and release. It feels like decreasing power, rejection, asceticism, and abstinence. I am not going to predict specific election outcomes ... but I will say that Capricorn symbolizes leadership, governance, structure, order, and authority. The South Node entering this sign could initiate a process of rejecting an authority figure, decreasing institutional power, or even a population's rejection of its government. It's interesting that this ingress of the nodes is followed up the very next day by Uranus, the planet that symbolizes a big lightning bolt of erratic change, moving into the particularly intense initiating, warring, and change-loving sign of Aries.

What might this intense change be? I can't say. But by November 8, both of the good luck charm planets will be auspiciously placed. Venus will have already been in Libra, the sign that it rules, for some

time. Venus symbolizes the powers of pleasure, affection, and attraction, and she will be operating in a sign that symbolizes things like justice, mutual understanding, balance and harmony, making a fertile, harmonious relationship with Mars in Aquarius that amplifies, or maybe fertilizes, these themes of equality and community. And Jupiter will have moved into Sagittarius, the sign of its exaltation. Jupiter symbolizes God, justice, knowledge, a more spiritual take on leadership, and good fortune. It will be powerfully placed in the sign of philosophy, knowledge, truth-seeking, clear-sight, and understanding.

## Your Sky

The individual signs are *where* you can imagine these big themes resonating in your personal life. If you know your rising sign, you can read for both.

### Aries

With Uranus in Aries, you might be inspired to change how you dress, or perhaps endure a challenge to your ego. You might want to start focusing on the loving feelings you can get from your home or family, and maybe let go of a particularly rigid or structured aspect of your boss, job, or career path.

### Taurus

Like Allan Kaprow, you might decide to release a dogmatic aspect of your schooling, professional training, or religious upbringing, and instead reach for the more intimate lessons of your daily life. You might also particularly enjoy your health routines, and make good habits easily at this time.

### Gemini

You could wriggle out of an oppressive debt or otherwise restructure your life so that you're a little less financially dependent, and nourish your own savings account instead. It's possible that your creative life is feeling great right now, but watch out for intense changes with your friendships, community organizing group, activist circle, or other stakeholders.

### Cancer

It's possible you're carefully considering the power dynamics in your committed partnerships that no longer serve you as you retreat into protecting, nourishing, or caring for yourself ... but don't get too comfortable. Uranus in Aries is about to throw some curve balls at your career or life path, and you have to be ready to swing at them.

### Leo

You might be trying to control your health, workout routine, or eating habits a little too much, and this might be generating a similarly unproductive pull toward overindulgence. Despite this mundane seesaw, try to zoom out. Spiritual or intellectual breakthroughs are in your air, and might particularly manifest in your creative life.

### Virgo

You might be finding your studio practice or another creative endeavor stifling and rule-bound, and could find new inspiration by nurturing a community. This might create a feeling of indebtedness that is surprising or unwelcome, but at the same time you might also feel like your worth has been somehow increased.

### Libra

It probably feels good to be you in this moment, even though there is a lot of intense change on the horizon in your relationships. There might also be rigid or oppressive aspects of your home life, foundations, and birth family that don't serve you, and that you might be seeking to understand (or bury) by nurturing your work life or career.

### Scorpio

An adventure, course of study, or religious pursuit could release you from the day-to-day grind, an oppressive commute, or more mundane communication. The upside is that you stand a chance of coming into the money to do it! The downside is that your health could become quite erratic.

### Sagittarius

You are feeling lucky, and friendships, community groups, and organizing are all feeling really satisfying right now. Cherish this while you work on releasing yourself from structures that tie you to money ... even if it means taking comfort in a loan, cooperative living situation, or couch surfing.

### Capricorn

It's a big time for you. Structure, authority, and leadership are a big part of how you project yourself to the world, and you're maybe being called upon to get way softer and more vulnerable than you ever thought you could in a committed relationship. Take solace in your career, it still needs your rigor.

### Aquarius

You might be pulling yourself out of what could be a pattern of thinking that you are your past actions, and are being asked to reach for simple nourishing habits that place you in the present, like brushing your teeth or cooking meals. Your community is there to help you in this, and it will be easy to find intellectual or spiritual guidance as well.

### Pisces

You might feel like letting go of all the systems, expectations, and rigor you've developed within your friendship circle, community organizing project, or activist network, and reaching for all the love and intimacy you can find in your own art, with children, or with another small-scale creative endeavor.

**A Blade of Grass believes in the power of socially engaged art and artists to participate meaningfully in creating a more equitable and compassionate future.**

**We provide direct financial support to artists who collaborate with communities to generate exchanges, experiences, and structures that enact social change. We also create greater visibility for the socially engaged art field by producing multimedia content, public programs, and research about this work.**

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We are eager to know your thoughts on this first issue as well as on the initiative of an ABOG Magazine more broadly.

Email letters to the editor to:  
[jcohencruz@abladeofgrass.org](mailto:jcohencruz@abladeofgrass.org)

Participants in ABOG Fellow Suzanne Lacy's project *De tu Puño y Letra* in Quito, Ecuador. Photo: Christoph Hirtz

# Contributor Bios

**Jan Cohen-Cruz**, Director of Field Research for A Blade of Grass, was director of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life (2007–2012) and co-founder and editor of its journal, *Public*. A longtime professor at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Cohen-Cruz taught applied theater and produced community-based arts projects. She received the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's Award for Leadership in Community-Based Theatre and Civic Engagement (2012). Jan was evaluator for the US State Department/Bronx Museum cultural diplomacy initiative smARTpower. She wrote *Remapping Performance, Local Acts*, and *Engaging Performance*, edited *Radical Street Performance* and, with Mady Schutzman, co-edited *Playing Boal* and *A Boal Companion*.

**Brett Cook** is an interdisciplinary artist and educator who uses storytelling as a vehicle to distill complex ideas, and creative practices to transform outer and inner worlds of being. His public projects typically involve community workshops featuring arts-integrated pedagogy, along with music, performance, and food to create a fluid boundary between art making, daily life, and healing. In 2017 he was Director of Social Practice and Pedagogy at San Francisco State University Health Equity Institute and a Visiting Professor in Community Arts and Social Practice at California College for the Arts. Brett was a 2014 A Blade of Grass Fellow for Socially Engaged Art.

**Deborah Fisher** is a creative leader working to expand the roles artists, creativity, and culture play in civic life. She is the founding Executive Director of A Blade of Grass. Fisher has served as an art, strategy, and philanthropy advisor to Shelley and Donald Rubin, and has worked in many capacities at the intersection of art and civic life in New York City, including as studio manager at Socrates Sculpture Park, and as a curriculum developer for the Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment. Her approach to leadership is deeply informed by her artistic training and experience making public art.

**Lucy R. Lippard** is a writer, activist, sometime-curator, and author of 24 books on contemporary art and cultural criticism, including *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997), *Down Country: The Tano of the Galisteo Basin, 1250–1782* (2010), and most recently *Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (2014). She has received more awards than she deserves and has co-founded various artists' organizations and publications. She lives off the grid in rural Galisteo, New Mexico, where for 21 years she has edited the monthly community newsletter *El Puente de Galisteo*.

**Rick Lowe** lives in Houston, Texas. He has exhibited and worked with communities nationally and internationally. His exhibitions include: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Museum of

Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles; Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York; Gwangji Biennale, Gwangji, Korea; Venice Architecture Biennale; Documenta 14. Community projects include *Project Row Houses*, Houston, Texas; *Watts House Project*, Los Angeles, CA; Anyang Public Art Program, Anyang, Korea. His honors include Rudy Bruner Award in Urban Excellence; AIA Keystone Award; Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities; MacArthur Fellowship; Loeb Fellow, Harvard University; Mel King Fellow, MIT. Rick is a Professor of Art at University of Houston.

**Michael Rohd** is founding artistic director of the 19-year-old ensemble-based Sojourn Theatre. In 2015, he received an Otto Rene Castillo award for Political Theater and The Robert Gard Foundation Award for Excellence. He is an Institute Professor at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design & Art and is author of the widely translated book *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue*. He was the 2013–2016 Doris Duke Artist-in-Residence at Lookingglass Theater Company in Chicago. He leads the Center for Performance and Civic Practice where current initiatives include The Catalyst Initiative, Civic Body, and Learning Labs.

**Claire Tancons** is a curator and scholar invested in the discourse and practice of the postcolonial politics of production and exhibition. For the last decade, Tancons has charted a distinct curatorial and scholarly path in performance, inflecting

global art historical genealogies with African diasporic aesthetics, as well as decentering and othering curatorial methodologies as part of a wider reflection on global conditions of cultural production. Tancons is currently a curator for Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving the Echo Chamber* (with Zoe Butt and Omar Kholeif), slated to open in 2019.

**Dominic Willsdon** is the Leanne and George Roberts Curator of Education and Public Practice at SFMOMA. He directs a curatorial department of pedagogical and cultural programming that comprises school initiatives, public dialogue, performance, and film. Willsdon was Pedagogical Cloud Curator of the 9th Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2013) and a Co-Curator of the 9th Liverpool Biennial, UK (2016). He is a co-editor of *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cornell, 2008), *Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa* (YBCA, 2016), *Visual Activism* (Sage, 2016), and *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* (MIT, 2016).

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