

Fall 2019

# A Blade of Grass Magazine Issue 3: Artists Challenging Normativity

A Blade of Grass

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# A BLADE OF GRASS

**ARTISTS  
CHALLENGING  
NORMATIVITY**

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A magazine about art and social engagement

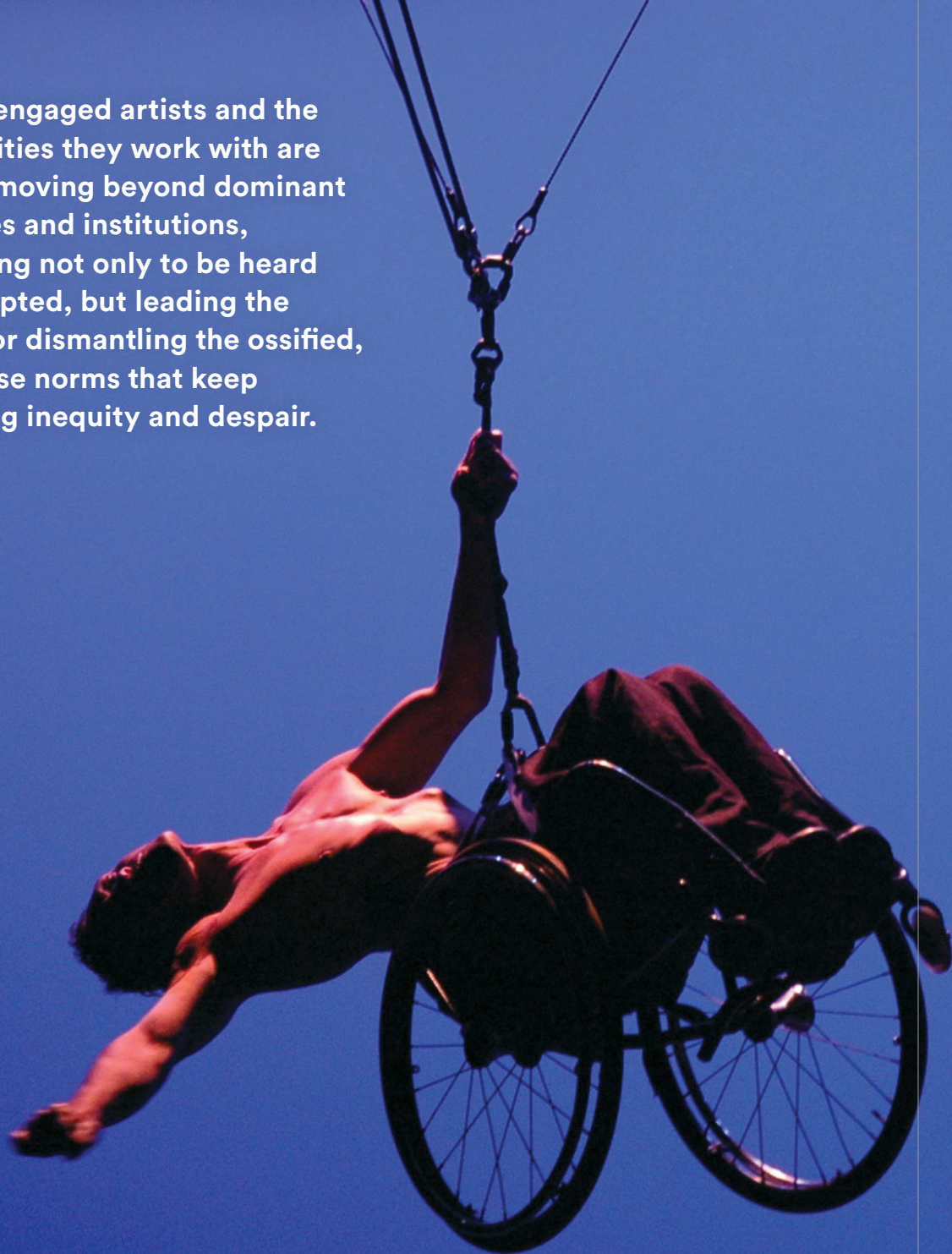
Issue 3 — Fall 2019

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## A BLADE OF GRASS

Cover: Veronica Ramirez, the founder of Mujeres en Movimiento, a community of Latina immigrant women in Corona, Queens, poses as Comandante Ramona during a collaborative photography workshop organized by *Project Luz*. Image courtesy of Sol Aramendi.

Socially engaged artists and the communities they work with are actively moving beyond dominant languages and institutions, demanding not only to be heard and accepted, but leading the charge for dismantling the ossified, risk-averse norms that keep recreating inequity and despair.



Sins Invalid performance featuring dancer Rodney Bell. Sins Invalid is a disability justice based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ/ gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized. For more information, visit [www.sinsinvalid.org](http://www.sinsinvalid.org). Photo by Richard Downing © 2008, courtesy of Sins Invalid.

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# Artists Challenging Normativity

Prerana Reddy  
Director of Programs  
A Blade of Grass

## Introduction to Issue #3

In this issue, we're looking at how socially engaged artists are challenging mainstream habits of seeing and doing that exclude the lived experience and creative potential of large swaths of people who do not fit into—or rather, who have been systematically oppressed by—the social norms and physical expectations of capitalist society. Rather than view difference in negative terms, these artists are using their work to affirm physical, sensory, emotional, and cognitive difference as “to be expected and respected on their own terms as part of ordinary human experience,” as Colin Cameron wrote in a 2001 article on disability arts that we are reprinting in this issue. Our goal is to highlight how socially engaged art can reframe the disabling gaze of normative society towards an exploration of the liberatory possibilities of those at the so-called “margins”—both as affirmations of their own creativity and wisdom, and as strategies for transforming societies to become more just and inclusive.

Issue #3 begins with Philadelphia-based artist and social worker Ras Cutlass, who writes poignantly about the ways her community's experience of violent structures such as

psychiatric institutions and foster care led her to develop the concept of a “mind space” as a visualization of the psychic self. She has since developed workshops using science fiction and Afrofuturistic creative processes to help people learn how to accept their own mental structures, regardless of the characterization or stigma they receive in the mainstream world.

Kevin Gotkin, the Co-Founder of Disability/Arts/NYC Task Force (DANT) writes about his skepticism that arts and cultural institutions' current growing interest in presenting disability artistry will result in a true transformative movement for disability justice. This criticality led DANT to engage in sustained cultural policy work to support emerging disabled artists as well as to convene two “boot camps” in collaboration with Gibney Dance to train a cohort of cultural leaders to advocate long-term for disability equity in NYC.

Brian Karl's examination of Gregory Sale's *Future IDs at Alcatraz* project highlights the ways incarcerated people are visualizing aspirational roles for themselves to confront a society that is largely unwilling to see them

as anything but criminal, and setting them up to fail when they return by discriminating against them in areas such as housing and employment. Furthermore, the project challenges Alcatraz's tourists—most of whom are there to hear stories about the prison's most infamous inmates—to empathize with the humanity of those who have endured the misery of prison and other punitive social institutions, and hopefully to change them.

Similarly ignored or underrepresented, particularly in plans for neighborhood development and “revitalization,” is the homeless population. John Malpede and Henriëtte Brouwers of the performance group Los Angeles Poverty Department have long been working to create and preserve a vital community with necessary supportive services in Skid Row. They are partnering with designer Rosten Woo and researcher Anna Kobara to organize residents to boldly challenge the city's planning department to not only prevent displacement of current residents, but to go even further. They hope to harness increased tax revenue from gentrification to also build housing for the 7,000+ low-income or homeless residents in Skid Row. We've asked Jeremy Liu, a community development professional at PolicyLink, to engage them about how their efforts upend traditional assumptions about how to finance extremely affordable housing—and, contrary to popular wisdom, why there is value in maintaining a community of and for low-income residents.

In this era of rising xenophobia and scapegoating of immigrants for economic transitions that are shrinking the American middle class, we look back on artist Sol Aramendi's sixteen years of socially engaged art practice in a conversation with transnational arts researcher Sara Angel Guerrero-Rippberger. From her position as an immigrant artist, Aramendi uses lived experience as the departure point for an exploration into counter-systems, building

collaborative artworks around resistance and solidarity. Her projects allow her collaborators to affirm their own powerful subjectivities through the intersection of socio-economic status, language, labor, gender, sexual identity, body politics, critical pedagogy, and immigration status.

We're also bringing back our advice column feature, where an A Blade of Grass Fellow responds to readers' questions regarding their socially engaged art practice or a related challenge. In this issue, Mary Mattingly, whose work imagines bold solutions to the challenges of climate change and militarism, answers questions about how artists can respond when they feel limited by the roles their collaborators or communities assign them. A Blade of Grass Executive Director Deborah Fisher also returns with the second installment of her series on how art institutions can evolve to play a more central role in social and political life. She wonders if a nuclear reactor might be an apt metaphor for how arts institutions need to be restructured and governed if they are to successfully hold critical and constructive dialogue in an increasingly over-reactive and overheated cultural moment.

We hope this magazine issue demonstrates how socially engaged artists and the communities they work with are actively moving beyond dominant languages and institutions, demanding not only to be heard and accepted, but leading the charge for dismantling the ossified, risk-averse norms that keep re-creating inequity and despair. Those on the margins are breaking free of the cages of society's limited imagination, and we need that imagination if we are all to flourish in the future.

# DEEP SPACE MIND

## Designing and Documenting Mental Wellness in Community

Ras Cutlass

TAKE A MOMENT TO HONOR THE

NON-RATIONAL,  
NON-REASONABLE,  
FRACTURED,  
PAINFUL ELEMENTS

OF YOUR MINDSPACE

As a 2019 A Blade of Grass Fellow for Socially Engaged Art, sci-fi writer, artist, and social worker Ras Cutlass is embarking upon *Deep Space Mind*, a collaborative space where Philadelphia communities work together to design innovative, alternative mental wellness systems using science fiction and Afrofuturistic creative processes. In this article, Ras shares how she came to develop the *Deep Space Mind* project as an alternative to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual currently utilized by the mainstream mental health field to diagnose, stigmatize, and confine communities that suffer from generations of disenfranchisement.

Some of my earliest memories are of visiting my brother in residential treatment centers, psych wards, and group home placements. I learned to tie my shoes from a clown doll that I now recognize as a sensory stimulation toy that he found during one of his placements.

In the numerous times when our communities and families could not bear the brunt of whatever mental spaces were taking up our home, institutions and systems were always there to consume us. It was not until fairly recently, in therapy, that I realized how temporary my relationships had felt as a child, and how my ability to stay in my home with my parent was conditional to how externalized my inner turmoil was.

I watched my family members cycle in and out of institutions during the most stressful periods in our lives—through unemployment, grief and mourning, displacement, civil unrest—and I began to internalize the ever-present message that my legitimacy as a free person was contingent on the management of emotions that set off alarms in others.

I watched my peers get dragged to far-off places meant to correct their behaviors and personalities to be more palatable to systems, particularly schools and families. Yet I knew kids had outbursts about feeling dumb, being

made to read out loud, or because other kids were goading them. They were truant because they tended to their siblings in the morning before managing their own needs, or because they were manic or depressed, or because their parents were. Kids fought other kids to have control over something in their lives, or to lose themselves in a moment of victory in a reality where they had little opportunity to feel that way otherwise.

But it seemed the only solutions society had for my peers were to remove them from class, remove them from community, and warehouse them in out-of-home placements or juvenile or criminal detention centers.

My first therapy session was as a seven-year-old alongside my dad. A white man, Dr. Ferguson, sat across from my father and me during one of my mother's more dramatic hospitalizations. He had been our family's court-appointed psychiatrist since I was a toddler, and for the first time I was able to experience his bullshit in person. My father and I sat with massive shock following my mother's latest episode and had received little support from law enforcement and the healthcare industry. I remember wondering how Dr. Ferguson would help us first—would we get emergency funds to repair our townhouse so we could get our security deposit back? Would my dad get some kind of worker to help him manage my mom's condition?

Opposite: *Deep Space Mind* workshop prompt. Courtesy of Ras Cutlass.

## When our communities and families could not bear the brunt of whatever mental spaces were taking up our home, institutions and systems were always there to consume us.

But the first thing Dr. Ferguson asked was, “Do you love your wife? Do you ever hug her or tell her you love her?” As a seven-year-old child of Caribbeans I knew better than to say anything or show any emotions, but I was absolutely aghast. It was such a mismatch with our needs at the time and such a mismatch with how we even operated culturally. And as I understood bipolar disorder at the time, her episode had not been triggered by a lack of affection. Instead, the anniversary of my oldest sibling’s death due to gang violence had incited her mental state. And somehow, that entire piece of our history as a black family in southern California was lost in favor of what I felt was a white theory on our family’s struggles. My father’s resulting irritation might have resulted in child welfare investigating him a few days later.

For me, these experiences with mental health services—and all the entangled systems and spaces of confinement that exist for Black, brown, queer, and poor people—were pivotal to my own development as a Black child. My culture, socioeconomic reality, and lived sense of what was necessary for our mental wellness when I was a child stood in stark contrast to what representatives of that industrial complex felt was going on with us.

As a Black female-bodied person, I continue to have difficulty experiencing anger, excitement, intimacy, sadness, or eagerness, especially in the presence of others. I can picture a long road to each of these emotions, and all of the milestones in between, that make up my relationship to them in the present. I can see the long distance I have to make it to anger, and the vulnerability I feel on that long, dark

road. Because in anger there is protection, self-defense, confidence, action. And being slow to anger also means being wide open for attack.

So while for a long time I felt privileged to not have “anger issues”—the same kind that caused my brother to fight and enter the school-prison-pipeline, or my mother to curse out her boss and lose her job—I have come to seek balance in all psychic relationships, including my relationship to anger and rage, which seem so far away, but offer great benefits in safe access.

Another aspect of my psychic life that I value greatly is my ability to organize my own introspection visually in a pretty consistent way. It makes for good metaphors in writing, but also helps me process information about myself with more clarity, distance, and peace. For this reason my dream world is very rich and consistent, and provides for me a sense of home or place when I am sleeping and attempting to process all of the new data and experiences I collect throughout the day.

It’s this “visioning” that I employ in my science fiction writing and practice. Being able to clearly visualize futures for myself and the pathway towards them has served as a source of conjuring for me—a way to heal myself and those that inhabit the future with me.

However, this visioning—and perhaps how I came to develop it—has a dark side. I live with post-traumatic stress disorder, with intermittent periods of recovery or relief. Dissociation is by far the major way that PTSD lies within me. I have a strong ability to manipulate my relationship to my body and

reality, because of times as a child when that was my only respite from pain and escape was not available to me. There is no road to dissociation for me. Dissociation would be my home in my own mind space, and in my twenties I explored that home thoroughly by working as a frontline mental health worker getting an hourly wage, and being unable to afford the therapy and treatment I needed.

Dissociation became a case study for me in neurodiversity, or the idea that instead of disorders and sanity, human brains are simply different from one another, with pros and cons to each state, regardless of our characterizations of those states in the modern mental health industry. It also put me on to what might be called psychiatric phenomenology: legitimizing the experiences of people whose realities may not be apparent to others.

It relieved so much shame for me to learn about dissociation as a state of the human mind that we all access at one point or another, with the capacity for mundane experiences like being “in the groove” during a game, or beautiful transcendent ones at church or during sex. That relief and respect for dissociation allowed me to develop a much more intimate, healing, and transformative relationship with it. Today I even consider it a superpower.

These trains of thought led me to develop the first *Deep Space Mind* workshop, initially created as a one-time engagement during the *Afrofuturism Now!* Festival in Rotterdam, Netherlands in 2015. I had been creating and carrying out writing workshops in the US with other members of Metropolarity, a sci-fi collective, and had followed Rasheedah Phillips [of Black Quantum Futurism Collective and Metropolarity] to the Netherlands to test out *Deep Space Mind* before bringing it back to Philadelphia.

With *Deep Space Mind*, I wanted people to have a space free from the scrutiny of

society and systems to simply get to know the architectures, landscapes, soundscapes, and any other organization of their own minds, with the goal of decolonizing and destigmatizing the structures that make us unique and alive. Now, I hope to scale that up and address the collective psychic space we share, illuminating the power we have to impact our collective consciousnesses through vulnerability and building together.

By creating our own designs for mental wellness and peace, we get away from looking only to large systems and poorly resourced credentialed professionals for treatment; but also to our neighbors and community members who may have gifts they can offer to our wellness and vice versa. I don’t know yet what Philly communities will come up with for *Deep Space Mind*, but I know it will bring together the massive power of mind spaces that are flexible, resourceful, cunning, passionate, and effective, as I know my neighbors to be.

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*Ras Cutlass is an A Blade of Grass Fellow, sci-fi writer, artist, and social worker based in Philadelphia, PA.*

**Meet Deep Space Mind Program Associate Dominique Matti, Philly-based writer, editor, healer, and mother of two**

“I will be supporting *Deep Space Mind* by focusing primarily on communications and group co-facilitation with Ras Cutlass. What most excites me about participating in this project is the opportunity to archive the ways we tend to one another under systems that root for our isolation. There’s no shortage of documentation of how we’re held down. I believe it’s imperative that we train our eyes towards reverence for the many ways we hold each other up, and how we forge spaces where the core focus is our collective well-being.”

cannot reject th  
have you ever felt expendable? disposable? unfit  
for society? unable to work? or to learn? or to  
procreate? or interact like 'normal' people? have  
you ever felt left behind? too sick? wrong body  
for walking down the street, or for paper and  
online forms?

if you have, how do you cope with being a part of  
the surplus population?

do you hide it from coworkers, from partners,  
from friends? do you pretend to have resources  
that you don't have? how often do you do this?

do you truly believe you have value in the eyes of  
your employer? university? high school? therapist's  
office? emergency room? what makes you feel  
valuable?

if you do not believe you have value, what do you  
do with that feeling? if you are angry, where does  
it go? if you are envious where does it go? if you  
are mournful, where does it go? if you are  
complacent, where does it go?

who do you trust with your feelings of  
disposability?

have you ever given thanks for your invisibility?  
is there anything to be thankful for in your  
disposability?

do you have a community of disposable or formally  
disposable people who you can turn to for  
emotional, political, and economic support?

are there times when you feel disposable to your  
loved ones? is it because your loved ones struggle  
with their own disposability? or because your loved  
ones have never struggled with disposability?

WERE GETTING BETTER  
AND I SAID THEYRE BETTER  
AND ABETTER AND BETTER  
IM GETTING BETTER

HOME WHERE ITS SAFE  
MEDICATED AND SE

if you have never felt disposable, what's the  
closest you have come to expendability? are you  
friends with any surplus people? do you work  
with any surplus people? are any of your lovers  
a part of the surplus population?

are you descended from persons who may have  
been seen as disposable at different points in  
history? are any pf them living? have you  
spoken to them about their experiences? how  
does your family of origin tell your story of  
familial disposability?

how often do you push disposable persons from  
your mind? if they are rarely in your mind,  
what does it feel like to think of them now?

have you ever lived next to a prison? waste  
processing plant? superfund site? petroleum  
processing plant? abandoned lead factory? was  
it by choice?

when you hear of the disposability of others,  
how do you feel? do you believe your world  
disposes of certain groups of people? what  
makes you believe or not believe that this is a  
\*true\* state of affairs?

are you able to make connections between your  
freedom/wealth/privilege and the countless  
bodies of disposable persons, living and dead  
who [have] contribute[d] to your  
freedom/wealth/privilege? do you feel an  
obligation to acknowledge this connection?

do you believe there will ever come a time in  
the future where you will be considered  
valueless and slated for disposal? or a time  
where current disposable people are seen as  
valuable?

what makes you so sure?



**Excerpt of “Melinda and the Grub”  
by Ras Mashramani [also known as Ras Cutlass]**

In the morning, there is a man in a starched white coat sitting at the foot of her bed. He looks angular and large in the room, where the walls are dusky pink and her artwork and family pictures are taped over the bed. He begins to ask her about her stay, and about her family, how she’s feeling.

“I miss Philly,” she says. “I’m ready to go home.”

The man scribbles in some journal. “It’s only been three weeks,” he says. “What makes you so sure you’re ready to go home?”

Melinda keeps being reminded that her opinion about leaving the institute means nothing. A tech had said something the other day when she threatened to smash her head through the medication window if she couldn’t get another Wistarel. “When I write my daily tonight,” the tech had said, “Should I write ‘Melinda patiently waited for her nightly meds despite being upset,’ or ‘Melinda smashed her head through a window and had to be placed in restraints?’”

Melinda softly thudded her forehead against the glass. “Oh my god, Miss. It is not that serious.”

So Melinda thinks she knows what the man is getting at—does she make everyone’s job easy, or is she going to give them a hard way to go.

“I been acting calm, and I started going to sleep on time without cursing everybody out. And I don’t even care no more that I was taken,” she mumbles.

“Taken?” He looks blank, yet somehow cheery, waiting for the punchline to a joke he won’t quite get.

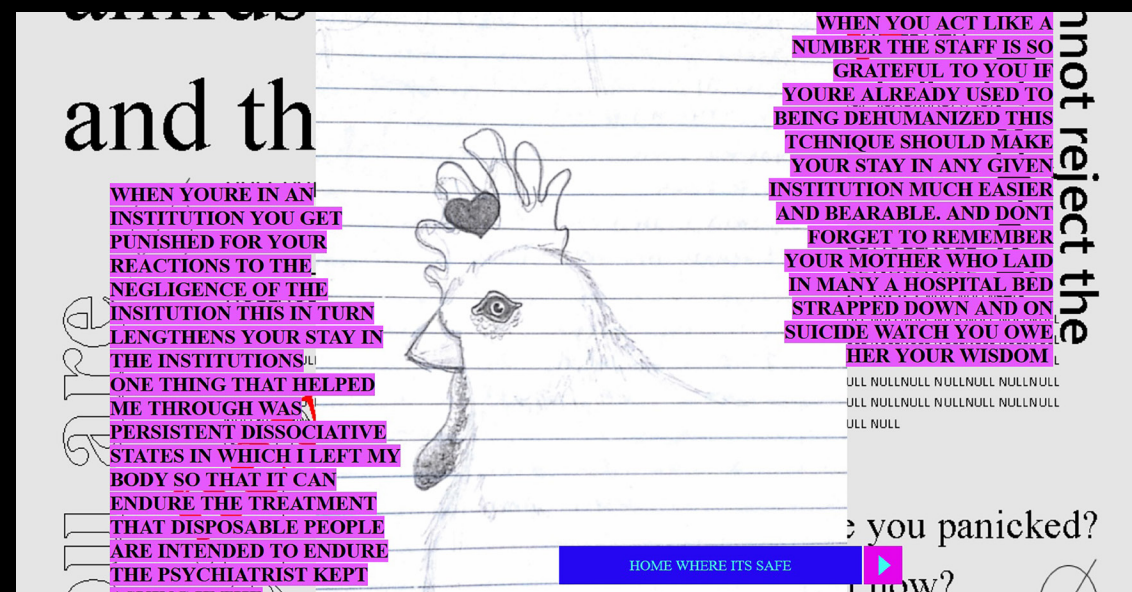
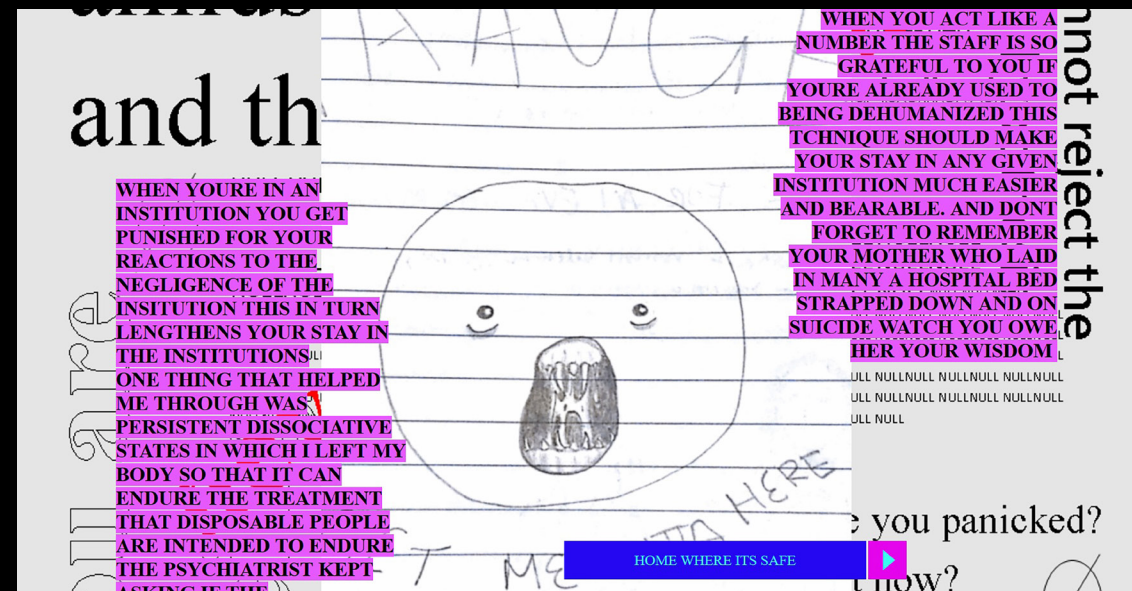
Melinda frowns, feels her breath hitch in her throat. “You know,” she says.

The man leans in. “I’d like to hear the story that got you here. The story all you girls have been telling. Because the way out of the institute is through me. I’m who you have to convince.”

Melinda searches the man’s face now and finds some kind of bureaucratic hardness, like her mother’s worker at the social security office, like the school counselor, like Tashira’s advocate who monitors her blinking ankle bracelet since three months ago when they caught her running away.

In any case, the man in white is waiting.

Above: Excerpt from *Procyon Science Fiction Anthology*, (2016) from Tayen Lane Publishing.  
Previous: “Surplus Person Questionnaire” Excerpt from *Style of Attack Report* by Metropolitarity. 2016, Philadelphia. Image courtesy of Ras Cutlass.



Screenshots from “Surplus Person” project exhibited at *Time Camp 001* curated by Black Quantum Futurism Collective, 2017 in Philadelphia, PA. Digital and Print media. Images courtesy of Ras Cutlass.



# Disability Arts:

## From the Social Model to the Affirmative Model

Colin Cameron

Above: Ian Stanton, a leading singer and songwriter in the Disability Arts Movement in the United Kingdom, performs onstage next to a BSL interpreter and “Chip the Crip,” a vintage Spastics Society collection box. Image courtesy of the National Disability Arts Collection and Archive (NDACA).

We chose to reprint this 2011 article for the way Colin Cameron clearly connects the emergence of disability artistry in the 1980s with greater capacity for disabled people to not only communicate the oppression they experienced by society, but to connect with each other to create a more supportive—and more politicized—community. By making space for disabled people to share their unique embodied experiences, disability artistry allowed for more nuanced explorations of how those with impairments have distinct aesthetic perspectives, as well as robust strategies for generating resilience and pleasure. The following is an excerpt of Cameron’s article that originally appeared in the online journal *Parallel Lines*. You can find the full text at <http://www.parallellinesjournal.com>.

### PART I

#### Disability Arts and Oppression

**I don’t think disability arts would have been possible without disability politics coming first. Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior. Our politics have given us self-esteem. They have taught us not simply to value ourselves, but to value ourselves as disabled people.**

Allan Sutherland, “Disability Arts, Disability Politics,” 1989<sup>1</sup>

I want to argue here that disability arts is fundamentally tied up with the wider disabled people’s movement and, indeed, has no meaning apart from the wider disabled people’s movement. In Jane Campbell’s characterisation of the movement as a jigsaw, “each piece vital for the true picture to emerge,”<sup>2</sup> there are two images drawn. Just as each piece—the independent living movement, campaigning organisations, the direct action network, disability studies, disability arts—is required in order to understand the movement as a whole, so each part is given context only in relation to the whole. Disability arts involves creative

and cultural production which interprets and illuminates the meaning of disability and the meaning of lived experience as people with impairments in a disabling society. Central to this enterprise is an understanding of disability as oppression—as an oppressive social relationship—that ties us to the social model.

The social model, in order to establish clearly what I mean when I use this term, identifies disability as: “The loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the words of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, disability is “something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.”<sup>4</sup> We are not people with disabilities, we are people with impairments who are disabled by the barriers we encounter on a daily basis, not only by the physical barriers that exclude, but also by the judgements and demeaning encounters we have to deal with in the business of going about our everyday lives.

Disability arts, as a set of practices, emerged in the 1980s in the activity of disabled people forging a new sense of personal and cultural identity illuminated by the social model: an identity rooted in perceptions of self-worth

Disability arts has at its heart the principles of transgression, resistance and affirmation. It is transgressive in that it involves a refusal by disabled people to identify themselves in terms of personal tragedy, as the dominant culture represents and seeks to recognise them; it embodies resistance to hegemonic discourses of normality and abnormality; and it affirms by establishing physical difference as something to be expected and respected, valued on its own terms as part of ordinary human experience.<sup>5</sup>

[ . . . ]

Through the organisation and development of cabarets, festivals, exhibitions, performances and workshops,<sup>6</sup> the disability arts movement

## **We are not people with disabilities, we are people with impairments who are disabled by the barriers we encounter on a daily basis.**

and value rather than one which could measure itself only in terms of physical deficit or departure from the norm. Disability arts was issue-based arts, characterised and motivated by anger at the social injustice experienced by people with impairments in terms of exclusion from mainstream education, employment, housing, information, public transport, and leisure opportunities. This anger, however, was not simply oppositional but productive, for it strengthened the sense of common purpose of disabled people who were coming increasingly to talk to each other. People with different impairments who had traditionally been taught by the charities, the doctors, and the “caring” professionals that their interests were separate and unrelated began to recognise in each other similar experiences of being marginalised and medicalised.

created spaces in which disabled people could come together to share and explore with each other insights and perspectives on situations that had previously only been experienced individually. With access at its heart, in practical terms this meant that gigs usually took place in small venues—arts centres, community centres, civic centres, sports centres, day centres, pubs, college bars, residential homes—any place, crucially, that disabled people were able to get to. Through performances of songs about patronising professionals and nosey do-gooders (“The Fugertivs’ Bar Room Bollocks,” 1999); or which cocked a snook at the cultural icons disabled people have been taught to hold in high regard (Ian Stanton’s “Douglas Bader,” 1992); through performance poetry questioning social limitations imposed on disabled people (Johnny Crescendo’s “Disabled People Aren’t

Allowed To Say ‘Fuck,’” 1988); through sign dance exploring the richness, depth and texture of signed communication (Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre); through exuberant reggae performances celebrating disabled identity and announcing that, after all, we are strong and confident about being who we are (Heart ’n’ Soul), disability arts speaks to disabled people about their lives and the things happening in their lives. In terms of an analysis developed by John Fiske,<sup>7</sup> disability arts is popular culture, for it involves the oppressed making use of the forms offered by mainstream culture and turning these to their own purposes, to communicate in accessible terms a different way of relating to disability, self, and society. As Elspeth Morrison and Vic Finkelstein have argued: “Arts events can provide another accessible route for looking at the world in relation to disabled people [ . . . ] Having someone on stage communicating ideas and feelings that an isolated disabled person never suspected were shared by others can be a turning point for many.”<sup>8</sup>

Disability arts involves a rejection of dominant cultural narratives and assumptions which represent impairment as something to be cured, endured or overcome; as a sign of misfortune whichever way it is considered. It also involves a revelation of, and a reflection upon, the experience of disability as the experience of oppression. Oppression not in terms of having somebody with a big stick hovering above, but identified in the routine everyday practices of a society that places a high value on normality and anticipates that this is something people with impairments will aspire to; which imposes judgements about the right and proper ways of going about things and characterises other ways of achieving these same ends as abnormal and inferior. Iris Young has noted that: “The conscious actions of many individuals daily contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression, but these people are simply doing their jobs or living their lives, and do

not understand themselves as agents of oppression.”<sup>9</sup>

In materialising medical and personal tragedy models that can only comprehend impairment as deficit, countless workers in the disability industry or the media, for example, play their own parts in sustaining disability as a form of oppression. Disability arts offers an alternative perspective. What is involved in disability arts is a reclamation of the impaired body; a statement of the right of the impaired body to respect and to inclusion on its own terms; an affirmation of the rights of people with impairments to do things differently and to be who we are as we are. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have made the point that: “The power of transgression always originates at the moment when the derided object embraces its deviance as value. Perversely championing the terms of its own stigmatisation, marginal peoples alarm the dominant culture with a canniness about their own subjugation.”<sup>10</sup>

Disability arts throws out a challenge to the ontological security of those who find comfort in their own normality. Building on an insight generated by the social model, disability arts unsettles dominant cultural ideas about the self and the autonomy of the self. It develops a discourse that regards impairment as presenting an opportunity to gaze critically and differently at what passes for reality: a reality which mediates the interests of the dominant non-disabled. It draws the unpredictability and frailty of the human body from the dark recesses of consciousness to which it has been confined and brings it to the forefront of attention.

### **In the Ghetto?**

Disability Arts are art forms, art works and arts productions created by disabled people to be shared with and to inform other disabled people, by focusing on the truth of disability experience.<sup>11</sup>



Theater director, actor, and poet Julie McNamara performs at a festival organized by Tyneside Disability Arts, one of many art events in the 1980s and 90s that celebrated disabled identity. Photograph by George Wallace, courtesy of Colin Cameron.

If we accept this characterisation by Paddy Masefield, which identifies disability arts as a conversation being held by disabled people between themselves, is it not legitimate to ask where the challenge described above is made? How can it be argued that disability arts unsettles dominant cultural ideas if it is only seen and talked about by disabled people themselves and regarded as being of marginal interest by the rest of society? If disability arts are to be taken seriously is it not important that the end results are regarded as good art rather than tainted by association with amateur or community arts?

These are legitimate questions, but they are also questions that pose a dilemma. Given its rootedness in the wider disabled people's movement, disability arts has, in many ways, been characterised by a levelling that is perhaps inherent in any process that aims to

be democratic. While cabaret acts developed as community arts projects may have evolved many profound and darkly humorous observations about disabling social relations, it has also been observed that, in terms of performance quality, sometimes they are just not sufficiently polished to aspire to anything more than performing to other disabled people at the local arts centre. For disabled artists who aim to be considered critically for the quality and professionalism of their work, this association is sometimes regarded as limiting. How, then, is disability arts to be taken seriously?

[...]

It is possible to make sense of the aspirations of "serious" disability artists to gain critical recognition for the quality of their work (as opposed to having it recognised and

celebrated only as part of disability culture) by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural production as a class issue. "Culture is," writes Bourdieu, "not what one is but what one has, or rather, what one has become."<sup>12</sup> Understanding what constitutes quality, and having the capability to produce with a knowledge of what constitutes quality, is acquired only at the expense of long training at art college or university. Artists as individuals look for recognition for what they have produced. The fact that what they have produced is an expression of their identity as a disabled person is, in their own eyes, secondary to its merit as art. In the eyes of others, however, this is exactly what makes it of marginal interest, or to be regarded with patronising condescension. There is a contradiction here, also, in so much as the aspiration to achieve distinction as an individual reflects bourgeois concerns while the desire to challenge discrimination and oppression as a member of a relatively powerless group addresses the class-based structures and unequal distribution of life opportunities in modern society. To enable

thing: rough and ready accessibility is what counts.

I would argue against the idea that there is a need for critical acceptance of disability arts in order that disabled artists and performers achieve greater representation in the cultural mainstream. While disabled people have long argued, for example, for increased representation on television as part of a cultural shift towards inclusion and equality, the outcome of this has been to other purposes. The structural function of television is to provide amusement that distracts from the violence performed by capitalism, to normalise rather than offer a critique of capitalism. Jean Baudrillard observes that transgression never gets on the air without being transformed into something else. There is no better way to reduce the impact of transgression, he suggests, "than to administer a mortal dose of publicity."<sup>14</sup>

In Richard Hoggart's words, the media occupies a role as a gatekeeper on behalf of its audiences: "Keeping out not so much

## The power of transgression always originates at the moment when the derided object embraces its deviance as value.

culture to fulfil its primary function of class co-optation, Bourdieu suggests, it is necessary "that the link between culture and education, which is simultaneously obvious and hidden, be forgotten, disguised, and denied."<sup>13</sup> While the overtly political practice of disability arts explicitly and unashamedly makes clear the link between culture and education, quality is not always reckoned as the most important

obviously undesirable elements such as rank obscenity or malicious slander but worrying elements, elements which the anonymous audience simply 'might not like'—intellectual criticisms of some popular attitudes, anything remotely judgemental of those attitudes."<sup>15</sup>

My point is that the pursuit of "quality" as a measure of disability arts leads us nowhere

useful. If we accept Masefield's description, good disability arts will be regarded as such because of the insights they reveal about the disability experience rather than in terms of how far they meet irrelevant aesthetic criteria. The validation of disability arts by the mainstream is unnecessary, as it is not the purpose of disability arts (as part of the wider disabled people's movement), to look to the integration of people with impairments in society as it currently exists, but to inclusion in a transformed society. In the meantime, there is a requirement for disabled artists to continue to expose and critique the oppression required by normalcy.

## PART II

### Towards an Affirmative Model

Within the emerging academic discipline of disability studies there has been ongoing critical debate about the adequacy of the social model as a theoretical tool sufficient to address and explain disability in all its aspects. Disabled feminists have stated that the social model over-emphasises socio-structural barriers and ignores personal and experiential aspects of disability. Jenny Morris, for example, has suggested that "there is a tendency within the social model to deny the experiences of our own bodies."<sup>16</sup> It has been argued that the collective identification

of the disabled people's movement, and the recognition of disability as primarily a political issue, has left little room for the acknowledgement of often painful and emotionally draining impairment effects.<sup>17</sup>

The response to these criticisms made by social modellers has been that: "The social model of disability is about nothing more complicated than a clear focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers experienced by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment."<sup>18</sup> The social model is not an all-encapsulating theory of disability<sup>19</sup> but a framework through which disability can be recognised as a social process. Without impairment there is no social model of disability. While disability is not the only collective social response that could be made to impairment (the major thrust of the disabled people's movement has been to demonstrate this), without impairment as a departure from and challenge to valued norms of physical embodiment in bourgeois society, disability as a specific form of social oppression would not exist. The fact that much of the movement's campaigning activity has focused on structural and environmental barriers reflects (perhaps controversial) positioning decisions rather than a weakness of the social model.

One intervention in the structural/individual, barriers/experience debate was made by John Swain and Sally French in a *Disability and*

*Society* article from 2000 entitled "Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability." Here they proposed an affirmative model: "essentially a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle of being impaired and disabled."<sup>20</sup> Rooted in perspectives emerging from the disability arts movement, and aiming to build upon "the liberatory imperative of the social model,"<sup>21</sup> the affirmative model is identified as a critique of the dominant personal tragedy model corresponding to the social model as a critique of the medical model. In proposing an affirmative model, Swain and French set out a position from which it can be asserted that, far from being necessarily tragic, living with impairment can be experienced as valuable, exciting, interesting and satisfying. This is not to deny that there can be negative experiences resulting from impairment, but to note that this is not all that impairment is about.

The original article has been developed and elaborated upon in Swain and French's book *Disability on Equal Terms* (2008). Outlined here is a statement of what the affirmative model *is* and *is not* about. **The affirmative model is about:**

- Being different and thinking differently about being different, both individually and collectively
- The affirmation of unique ways of being situated in society
- Disabled people challenging presumptions about themselves and their lives, not only in terms of how they differ from what is average or normal, but also about the assertion, on their own terms, of human embodiment, lifestyles, quality of life and identity
- Ways of being that embrace difference

### The affirmative model *is not* about:

- All people with impairments celebrating difference
- Disabled people "coming to terms" with disability and impairment
- Disabled people being "can do" or "lovely" people
- The benefits of living and being marginalised and oppressed in a disabling society<sup>22</sup>

In my PhD research I wanted to ask, among other questions, whether the affirmative model is really necessary when we already have the social model, and whether, as a new theoretical tool, the affirmative model is able to fulfil a task the social model has not been designed for. Among the insights I gained was one drawn from the following comment made by a research participant called Charles:

When I was talking in the pub with Erin and yourself tonight [...] with every sentence I wasn't thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to say this sentence with a speech impairment... blah blah blah... now I'm going to say this with a speech impairment... blah blah blah... I'm going to move back, but I'm moving back in my wheelchair... ' You don't think about it, but when you catch somebody looking at you—and looking at the effects of your impairment, concentrating on your impairment—then you're suddenly aware that you're speaking differently...<sup>23</sup>

Impairment is not necessarily a problem for people with impairments, but is often made a problem by those around them. Disability is more than about just what people with impairments are prevented from doing and being, it is about what they are required to do and be instead. The disabling gaze requires

**Far from being necessarily tragic, living with impairment can be experienced as valuable, exciting, interesting, and satisfying.**

people with impairments to experience their own embodiment negatively, to take upon themselves a role which acquiesces with the expectation that impairment can only be endured or struggled against, but never lived with in acceptance and enjoyment of self. There is a purpose involved in the imposition of this role, which has to do with the social requirement for conformity. I have, therefore, tentatively suggested the following affirmative model definitions:

**Impairment:** physical, sensory, emotional and cognitive difference to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society

**Disability:** a personal and social role which simultaneously invalidates the subject position of people with impairments and validates the subject position of those identified as normal<sup>24</sup>

As a development emerging from the social model, the affirmative model has its roots in the insights and perspectives developed in and by the disability arts movement. Whereas the social model allows us to understand the bigger picture, and to recognise the structural barriers which oppress and exclude, the affirmative model is intended to allow us to make sense of what happens at the level of the countless everyday interactions in which people with impairments are required to experience themselves as deficient. If this model can be used as a tool for resilience in the face of oppressive social relations, its usefulness is established.

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The National Disability Arts Collection and Archive ([www.the-ndaca.org](http://www.the-ndaca.org)) is a learning wing, catalogue and website full of the heritage story of the UK Disability Arts Movement; [www.the-ndaca.org](http://www.the-ndaca.org) is collecting the heritage story of the UK disability arts movement, which was a group of people who fought barriers, helped change the law and made great art and culture about those struggles.

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# Artistry and Activism:

## Building Movement for Disability Justice

Kevin Gotkin



Sins Invalid performance featuring Nomy Lamm and Cara Page. Sins Invalid is a disability justice based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ/gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized. For more information, visit [www.sinsinvalid.org](http://www.sinsinvalid.org). Photograph by Richard Downing © 2009, courtesy of Sins Invalid.

Jaklin Romine’s video work *ACCESS DENIED* (2018) begins with the artist at Bergamot Station in Santa Monica, California. She faces away from the camera, at the bottom of a yellow staircase that leads from the parking lot up to one of the galleries. In her black power wheelchair, she is still. There is music from an event outside the frame. Cups left on a nearby ledge suggest a celebration is happening inside. Someone moves past Romine to climb the stairs. Someone else descends.

The sequences in Romine’s piece do more than document the ways that Los Angeles-area galleries are inaccessible to physically disabled people. She calls the piece a “compilation of experiences.” Slow-shutter still images capture a blur of nondisabled visitors ambling up and

down entry stairs. The video uses ambient lighting and audio recorded from the street, where Romine remains for most of the scenes in the work. The piece divines an aesthetic of built exclusion.

*ACCESS DENIED* can also be understood as part of a key moment in contemporary disability artistry. It was made in LA but installed in New York, as part of a disability arts exhibition at Flux Factory called *TALK BACK*. It refuses the neat separation of aesthetics and access, two spheres that legal and regulatory notions of compliance imagine to be separate. When Romine explains to a gallery-goer that entering an inaccessible space is a choice to leave her behind, she gets the middle finger and the video captures the aggression that rises against disability direct action protest. When Romine directs her friends lifting her manual wheelchair up a flight of stairs, we get an impassioned joy that lives alongside the rage. If we could think of *ACCESS DENIED* as a work of “socially engaged art,” the piece teaches us that the term also includes a wide set of institutional practices whose depoliticization constitutes pervasive and ongoing engagements to social exclusion.

Disability artistry is having a moment. The Flux Factory show, with an array of works and programs, happened when disability artistry was unusually conspicuous around New York for several months. A festival called *I wanna be with you everywhere* at Performance Space New York featured four days of performances, readings, and study sessions. The Whitney Biennial curated the work of two disabled artists about disability. Movement Research’s Artist of Color Council



Artist Jaklin Romine’s video *ACCESS DENIED* installed in the exhibition *TALK BACK* at Flux Factory, which featured works by contemporary artists with disabilities that dismantle systems of ableism. Image courtesy of moira williams.



Disability rights activists gather to bludgeon a curb on July 1, 1980 during a demonstration against obstacles to their mobility. Photograph by John Sunderland/Denver Post via Getty Images.

featured an evening of disability dance artistry at Judson Memorial Church. Ali Stroker became the first wheelchair-using Tony Award winner for her performance in *Oklahoma!* Joe’s Pub hosted a sold-out show by disabled playwright, actor, and crooner Ryan Haddad exploring gay and disabled romance fantasy. And beyond New York, too: A disabled drag queen won the eleventh season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

Cultural organizations are recognizing that disability equity requires learning and humility—ongoing and transformative. Often this means disabled artists and cultural workers are asked to do the uncompensated work of offering advice and summarizing decades of disability scholarship and organizing over a cup of coffee. But there are models of excellence in some parts. Gibney, a dance and performing arts hub in downtown Manhattan, has conceptualized disability

equity across all its offerings: programming disability arts in its season and special events, offering disability-centric dance classes, hosting conversations about disability and the arts, and partnering with disability arts activists to grow the field of activists who will make change across the city. Gibney is making disability part of what it is as an institution, resisting the idea that disability arts equity is only for organizations that focus solely on disability arts.

What do we call this? The lessons from decades of disability activism temper our rush to confer a “movement,” a word some offer with excitement. When protestors slammed sledgehammers onto the entrances to crosswalks where curb cuts should have been on Denver’s sidewalks in the late 1970s, they were in fact protesting the city’s decision to halt curb cutting that had started the year before. Too many city systems and cultural institutions



# Too many city systems and cultural institutions hold tight to one-time initiatives, looking for landmark moves without troubling a whole system of inequity we call ableism.

hold tight to one-time initiatives, looking for landmark moves without troubling a whole system of inequity we call ableism. The work is not contained in a checklist, and celebrations of success must also be calls to continue.

I have been calling this moment a “swell” to describe the marked increase in attention for disability arts as an increasingly legible and transformative field without having to cede my wariness about its maintenance once it’s revealed just how thorough-going the work of making arts accessible really is. A swell is a rush. It lifts. It is also liable to recede. The way we narrate this moment will determine what we think is possible and what we want next.

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In the fall of 2016, I co-founded an organization called Disability/Arts/NYC (DANT) with fellow activist and scholar Simi Linton.<sup>1</sup> The City of New York had recently announced that it would craft a cultural plan, a unique policy genre that sets comprehensive and long-term objectives for public arts and culture. Through the end of 2016 and into early 2017, the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs rolled out a vast public engagement plan to source priorities and concerns from New Yorkers.

Having read the cultural plans of other major cities like Boston and Denver, I knew about the vagueness. Principles like “inclusion”

and “affordability” pepper the plans without very much detail about what this means or how they get enacted. Some artists I spoke with rolled their eyes at this kind of city stuff, suggesting cultural policy is always too slow for the real work that needs to be done.

But I was fascinated by cultural planning because it calls everything in. It purports to serve an entire city’s cultural ecosystem. That means it doesn’t tarry with administrivia the way other policy documents do. It also leads to a set of unique tactical opportunities. When the Department of Cultural Affairs says it wants to learn from all New Yorkers, there is an audience for ideas that might seem impossible. You get to leave evidence that you were there and you imagined something serious. The radical potential of cultural planning is harnessing the horizon of impossibility to train our activist sensibilities and desires.

The Department of Cultural Affairs was attentive from the start.<sup>2</sup> We insisted that disability equity includes inclusive hiring within the agency itself—and within months they had hired a disabled cultural worker whose role included designing and monitoring the agency’s disability equity efforts. We pressed them on the lack of data about disability in a recent workforce diversity study. They studied models for disability data collection in other cities. We insisted that disability be explicitly defined when the words diversity, equity, and

inclusion are used in official communications. We documented their commitments.

When the plan, called CreateNYC, was released in July 2017, there was a lot to celebrate. Disability equity received a full page of recommendations, eight implementation strategies to “support people with disabilities at all levels of NYC’s cultural life.” The recommendations included regular meetings with disability arts communities, increased representation of disabled artists on funding review panels, and support for access-related capital projects.

The plan also left out many things we had discussed with the agency, like a strategy for gathering missing disability data. Disability equity is consolidated on one page of the section on equity and diversity, when we had been advocating for it to be reflected in a structural form across the whole document. Like other cultural plans, CreateNYC is vague.

But unlike other plans, CreateNYC led directly to a funding initiative we proposed during a disability arts-focused town hall in early 2017. We asked that the city designate a fund specifically for the cost of access features like American Sign Language interpretation and real-time captioning, called CART. Small and emerging arts organizations who are committed to disability inclusion often don’t have the budgets to pay access workers fair wages for this labor and we argued that the most equitable location for these costs is in the public.

The Department of Cultural Affairs devised a fund for disability arts, broadly conceived, called the Disability Forward Fund. In the end, the fund awarded \$640,000 to twenty-two organizations’ projects, in grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$35,000. But the story of this fund tells us a great deal about the complexity of city-supported disability equity initiatives.

In their effort to launch the fund within a year of the release of CreateNYC, a helpful benchmark for what the agency called “immediate” implementation of the plan’s recommendations, the Department released the request for proposals less than a month before they were due. The eligible city-funded organizations rushed to form proposals, often without necessary time to develop the meaningful partnerships needed to implement the projects.

The proposal review process remains opaque. The Department has not released the names of the panelists who decided the allocation of the funds, nor the agency’s instructions to these experts. We don’t know, for example, if proposals designated as new projects would be reviewed differently than proposals for existing projects. What we learned during the agency’s two information sessions about the grant left room for significant interpretation, which ultimately rested on the makeup of the review panel.

We advocated for the Department to craft a system to study and report on the fund applications, including analysis about what kinds of projects were proposed from the full applicant pool and which kinds of projects received funding. At the time of writing, we have not received responses to these requests. And although the Department called the fund a “pilot initiative,” suggesting it may be renewed, there has been no update about whether the fund will continue.

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In their 2016 primer on disability justice, the organizers of the Bay Area-based disability arts collective Sins Invalid make an important distinction between the Disability Rights Movement and Disability Justice. Whereas the former relies on “litigation and the establishment of a disability bureaucratic sector,” it comes at the expense of “developing

a broad-based popular movement.” Disability Justice finds a single-issue civil rights framework inadequate to address the wider weave of domination that able-bodied supremacy has been formed with. “The histories of white supremacy and ableism,” they write, “are inextricably entwined, both forged in the crucible of colonial conquest

attempts to deploy it tongue-in-cheek, called up disabling forms of correctional violence and able-bodied fitness supremacy that activated enforced vulnerabilities among the group.

Disability arts activism draws our attention to these complexities—which are routinely ignored by majority culture and in bureaucratic

## These kinds of things are not access as an additive to art—they show us the ways that disability is a categorical intervention into what we understand art to be.

and capitalist domination.” As such, activism focused on civic bodies like the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs can miss the more fundamental ways in which those bodies already position multiply marginalized disabled people in uneven ways.

We learned this when we ran artist, activist, and cultural worker trainings we called “Boot Camps” in 2017 and most recently in partnership with Gibney in March 2019. The idea for the program came as we realized NYC needed a structure for bringing together experts in the field and distributing forms of knowledge about disability arts across the cultural landscape. Cohort-based trainings seemed the way to go.

When we gathered, we realized we were already assuming that everyone in the room was ready to engage in the city’s workshops and initiatives. When we asked participants to dream up new projects, we learned that the disability-related trauma in the room included a foreshortened sense of the future. Dreaming required an idea of a horizon that many kinds of state violence and dispossession can close off. Even the term “boot camp,” despite our

realms of all kinds, making it difficult to sort out priorities about “the arts” as if that category can ever exist independently from housing, employment, health care, transportation, labor, and other essentially interconnected aspects of disabled living.

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Shannon Finnegan’s *Museum Furniture* project started with drawings of benches, chairs, and a chaise lounge. Text on the back-support surface of one bench says: “Museum visits are hard on my body.” On the seating surface it continues, “. . . rest here if you agree.”

The project switched media when Finnegan fabricated a few of the designs. Two large plywood benches are blue with white text. One says, “This exhibition has asked for me to stand for too long. / Sit if you agree.” The other says, “I’d rather be sitting. / Sit if you agree.”

The benches have been shown in several New York exhibitions of disability artistry. When I watch people interact with them, they’re cautious at first. Not just touching but sitting on works in a show draws out some hesitation.

And then it melts away as people talk, or engage with nearby works for longer than they might otherwise. People spend time on the bench. Sitting on the benches is where access meets artistry, when the aesthetics of disability land on fundamental questions of how bodies and minds come into the presence of art.

Disability aesthetics de-centers any one form of sensory and model engagement. “Visual” art becomes broader when artists design verbal or audio description of their work that opens access to blind, low-vision, and non-visual audiences. Museum programs featuring tours and events in American Sign Language spotlight Deaf culture as a form of knowledge in art spaces. These kinds of things are not access as an additive to art—they show us the ways that disability is a categorical intervention into what we understand art to be.

When people sit on Finnegan’s benches, the text about access gets covered up. For some visitors this becomes a game, trying to figure out what the bench says. The point, I think, is something else. The point is that the work has changed the space itself.

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### Notes

- 1 Editor’s Note: At the time of printing, DANT has recently announced that it will close. Gotkin and Linton remain committed to furthering their work to shape a disability arts platform for New York City and promoting disability justice. Read DANT’s recent report, *Disability Equity in NYC’s Arts & Culture Landscape* at <http://disabilityarts.nyc/report>.
- 2 My partner, Simi Linton, was appointed by the Mayor to the Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission, the body that is tasked with overseeing the agency’s work. We began organizing after realizing the serious limits to the Commission’s capacity to request and oversee meaningful change. Announcing our watchdog status outside city channels surely contributed to the agency’s attentiveness.



Shannon Finnegan  
*Do You Want Us Here or Not? #5, 2017, Pen.*  
Image courtesy of the artist.



# Envisioning Future Selves:

## Reclaiming Identity After Incarceration

Brian Karl

Who is a criminal? Who gets to decide what standards of conduct are deemed binding by the rest of the community, or what the punishment for breaking the standard should be? The where and when and how by which ideas of normal behavior and identity are established and enforced are complicated by myriad subtle, unnoticed, and unspoken human contexts. These are not just abstract questions: they have dramatic and sometimes heartbreaking real-life consequences.

The *Future IDs at Alcatraz* project makes publicly accessible the poignancy of such questions in particularly forceful ways. It does so by representing the aspirations and disappointments of scores of very real humans affected by the stigmatizing and restrictive norms of incarceration. *Future IDs at Alcatraz* was initiated by artist Gregory Sale, whose creative social practice has primarily engaged people with direct experiences of prison, jail, probation, and parole in interactive exchanges about the impacts of incarceration. The exhibition and a series of programs runs from February through October 2019 on the site of the notorious island-based Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary itself.

Visiting prison for even a short period makes apparent how bleak the physical and psychological realities are for anyone locked up against their will. As a teacher in a “correctional facility” previously myself, I witnessed the tense and antagonistic social dynamics that can form between prison staff and prisoners. I observed the extreme and hostile factionalizing that can develop among different groups of prisoners as well, and I heard firsthand the traumatic personal stories of so many people forcibly channeled into the complex penal system of courts and detention.

The Actors’ Gang Prison Project, one of the community partners of *Future IDs at Alcatraz*, showcases an improvised theatrical performance at one of the monthly public programming events to coincide with the *Future IDs* exhibition. Photograph by Peter Merts.

Lives are damaged by those interactions, even long after being “released.”

*Future IDs at Alcatraz* summons feelings of compassion through personal testimonials in word, image, and bodily presence about the past and present circumstances of individuals with conviction histories. As importantly, participants in the project generate multiple distinct outlooks striving toward better futures. Individually designed and artfully produced alternative identification cards are blown up to outsized dimensions to offer spectacular viewing for visitors. The idea of generating newly imagined self-identifications alternative to those issued by prisons grew out of meetings instigated by Sale with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, a support network for current and formerly incarcerated men and women. The first handful of those who helped conceive the goal of creating new identities promulgated the idea among a growing constellation of prison-impacted individuals and more than twenty other organizations.

### **Future IDs Artworks and Their Creators**

Many of the personal goals depicted in *Future IDs* re-inscribe different kinds of “normal” while also trying to parry or deflect them. The standardizing implications of digital barcodes for identifying products and people, for instance, are played upon by multiple *Future IDs* artist-participants in their banner-sized ID cards.

In the complicating manner of a trickster figure, Felix Lex Miranda’s winking self-portrait highlights an idiosyncratically-rendered version of a barcode made up not simply of generic strips of black and white but hieroglyphic icons that imply a more complex world of cultural understanding than the simple numerical data-coding marks. In a further jousting with the conventions of ID cards, Miranda inscribes an infinity sign as an



Felix Miranda poses in front of the personalized ID he created as a participant in the *Future IDs at Alcatraz* project while holding up his former prison-issued ID. Photo by Jear Keokham.

expiration date for his self-stated position as “Revolutionary,” and also incorporates “ARC,” the acronym for the Anti-Recidivism Coalition.

The core team that coalesced around Sale included Dr. Luis Garcia, Kirn Kim, Sabrina Reid, Jessica Tully, and many others who shared the goal of “shift[ing] thinking about rehabilitation, reentry, and reintegration.” In addition to exhibition co-curators Sara Cochran and Chris Sicat, the project also relied on collaborative design and labor both in prisons and other communities by Ryan Lo, LaVell Baylor, Dominique Bell, Aaron Mercado, Jamee Crusan, Sara Daleiden, and Emiliano Lopez.

Among the other self-portraits to emerge was the particularly abstract figurative image by John Winkelman, who is still incarcerated. The cyborgian face that Winkelman generated in the form of a QR code leads online to the *Project Paint* website, profiling additional artwork produced in prison—an expansive use of the communicative possibilities of otherwise standardizing or utilitarian digital codings.

Another strategy of *Future IDs*’ portrait-makers is finessing the conventions of the usually limiting identity card to include an array of multiple identifiers. For example, Réne Hernández’s detailed illustrations in word and image: “Journeyman Electrician/Community & Family Member/Father of Two.” Juan Sanchez also lists multiple tags of identity: “Art Mentor,” “Substance Counselor,” and “Productive Member of Society.”

In perhaps the most prolific instance, Michael De Griego cites the several

Indigenous nations (Hopi, Tewa Pueblo, Manito, and Jicarilla Apache) with which he traces affiliation. He employs multiple images of other humans (including an Indigenous person crying out in full regalia, along with one of himself) as well as an array of animal spirit images such as a fish, bear, armadillo, and wolf, drawn with various degrees of realism and stylization. He uses a handful of different designations naming himself “Christian. Humanitarian. Activist,” and, in all caps, “HUMAN BEING.”

Among the singular, not-politics-as-usual identifiers chosen for self-portrayal, Candice Price redrew a page from the newspaper *The Guardian* that features her militant defense of an elected official. The reproduced headline reads, “Rightwing rally cancelled as Maxine Waters supporters stand guard,” a complex layering of identification with an official representative on the frontlines of social conflict.



A roundtable discussion led by *Future IDs* collaborator and artist Kirn Kim as part of the series of public programs coinciding with the exhibition of ID-inspired artworks on Alcatraz Island. Photo by John Contreras.

### **Future IDs at Alcatraz in Context**

The regime of prison acts as one intensely defining context for reckoning what and how norms come to be—not only for those incarcerated, but throughout societies where values and resources are measured out in relation to perceived transgressions. Social divisions stem from judgments of what is good or bad, right or wrong, and they cordon off possible roles from those who transgress them. This determines not only who has greater degrees of liberty (and who turns the keys in locks by judging, confining, and penalizing others’ lives), but who has access to education, jobs, and social networks—and who doesn’t.

The sense of social shame projected on individuals who become caught up in the criminal justice system is perpetuated by media accounts containing latent judgments against those labeled as criminal. That shame

has real-world effects for those who bear such judgments, as participation in work, school, and interpersonal relationships can all be radically curtailed or distorted, or simply impossible to imagine.

If prisons are significant sites where society sets its own limits—and isolates and punishes those who trespass those limits—the most celebrated prisons are likely then candidates for considering what effects these intensive enforcers of normalcy might have on society and individuals. Alcatraz, infamous as a location for human confinement and disciplining, was closed in 1963 and reopened in 1972 as a major tourist attraction that serves as a reminder of incarceration.

Alcatraz Island today presents the stripped-down remnants of the penitentiary that detained thousands between 1934 and 1963. It is mostly now just non-functional

infrastructure: bare, crumbling walls and rusted metalwork. The US National Park Service has added signage, a gift shop, and an ongoing series of introductory verbal messages from National Park Service Rangers who meet each arriving tour boat. For the last thirty years, the site has also offered versions of an audio tour recounting what life was like on the island when the prison was still in operation, as well as anecdotes about some of its most notable prisoners.

While the majority of official programming on contemporary Alcatraz has focused on historical particulars, a handful of more recent projects—particularly art projects—have surveyed present realities and speculated on future possibilities related to the island’s identity and its place in larger society. The long-developing contemporary art project *Future IDs at Alcatraz* involved the efforts of a multitude of individuals impacted by the criminal justice system, while using Alcatraz as a platform to provoke questions about how standard definitions of individuals and their behaviors can default to singular, highly skewed, and even damaging identifications.

The *Future IDs* project produced nearly a hundred self-portraits, of which forty were hung for public viewing at Alcatraz. While the ten-month-long exhibit features a number of different events, the primary artifacts that remain throughout are the larger-than-life ID cards, which subvert the enforced norms of the cultural conventions from which they’re derived.

The diverse styles and aspects of the *Future IDs* banners add lively color and texture to the otherwise desolate shell of Alcatraz’ cavernous New Industries Building. More significantly, the IDs’ content acts as a catalyst for visitors to think about the lives of individuals impacted by incarceration while overwriting the stigma projected onto them by would-be normalizing judgments of the US justice system. Among

Sale’s intended outcomes for the project is validation for participants who are trying to move beyond the constrictive stigma of having been imprisoned, and to demonstrate how their efforts to be seen on their own terms can be successful both in terms of their own reentry experience as well as how others see them. The ripples of public notice for the project also impact those still inside prison (40% of the participants in the show), making connections for them to those already succeeding outside. With a 60–70% recidivism rate, that kind of possible affiliation is no small difference.

Prisons have been so commonplace for so long that most never question their existence or growth. This normativized status demonstrates the power of ideologies—even amidst highly conflicting impulses and beliefs. Whatever one’s opinion of prisons (a word whose linguistic roots signify “taking hold” of something or somebody), the claims and after-effects on individual lives are extraordinary. *Future IDs at Alcatraz* works against the normalization of associated and narrowly constrictive social judgments. As one participant in the *Future IDs* program put it during a public event on Alcatraz: “In the case of the incarcerated, most are defined by the worst thing they ever did.”

In further illustration of the challenging status quo that *Future IDs* is attempting to move beyond, one formerly incarcerated participant rhetorically asked: “Who thinks about a guy in San Quentin who wants to be a ship captain? Who thinks about a guy in San Quentin in the first place?” These questions were perhaps a reference to the still-imprisoned Bruce Fowler, whose “Captain’s License” self-portrait was on display in the next room at Alcatraz as part of the *Future IDs* public exhibition.

### Community Programs as Art

The humanizing effects of static visual artwork are limited, however, and even the most stimulating effects of visual art can remain

isolated in a rarefied world of abstraction, no matter how persuasively depicted alternative realities might be. *Future IDs at Alcatraz* has addressed this by encouraging social interaction during its various phases of production, gently choreographing a multitude of encounters through public events held on the third Saturday of each month of the exhibition’s run.

During those events, people impacted by incarceration have shared personal accounts directly with friends, families, and strangers. My encounters with *Future IDs*’ participants were far from the only experiences among visitors that triggered deep upwellings of emotion and prompted reconsiderations of presumptions about what people who have been subject to the justice system might be like.

The *Future IDs* artists regularly attend these programs and events. Perhaps no more effective means could be conjured for providing alternatives to the stigma of “convicted felon” than the actual embodiments of difference that complex, nuanced, and feelingful individuals are able to assert through their own physical presence. The self-portraits in the form of identity cards—more like boldly declarative flags when blown up in large scale—serve as backdrop for those embodiments, proof of the work that has been done to think through what might be uncomfortable and/or problematic in identifying definitions by legal code, and to provide alternatives, some of which are attainable while others are pipe dreams due to the myriad of legal restrictions placed on those with a conviction history.

Participants in the *Future IDs* project also embody some of these positive feedback loops back in the “real world” of other, still-functioning prisons and society at large. Returning as a visitor to Calipatria State Prison, where he’d done time seventeen years before, the formerly incarcerated Kirn Kim was called upon to speak to the many still-imprisoned individuals gathered for a special concert

event in the yard. Kim understood from their response the kind of impact his story of release and forming a new identity outside of prison could have in providing hope for those still inside. Kim became both a participant in the Anti-Recidivism Coalition and a key organizer for *Future IDs at Alcatraz*. His Future ID depicts that pivotal moment when he unexpectedly connected with those still being held in the Calipatria yard.

### An Entry Point to Discussing Human Rights and Social Justice Issues

Meanwhile, Alcatraz’ status as a destination for tourism continues to present not only opportunity for historical interpretation but also, among a more progressive cohort from the National Park Service through its non-profit affiliate the Parks Conservancy, consideration of what the past might have to say about society’s present and future values. The Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service have undertaken a slow-building series of initiatives to provide more substantial and wide-ranging critical considerations of the historical roles and purposes of Alcatraz, including its role in the US prison system, as a site of enforcement for cultural norms, as well as other events with conflictual foundations, such as the 1969–1971 Native American Occupation of Alcatraz.

As part of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, through which more than 250 member organizations promote dialogue on contemporary issues of human rights in sixty-five countries, Alcatraz has expanded on the types of cultural preservation and interpretation it provides through its overseeing National Park Service body, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. For example, it has preserved murals and graffiti from the Occupation, and produced an online series of images and essays documenting earlier US imprisonment

of 19th century Hopi resisting forced relocation of Indigenous children for English language education. Additionally, it holds documents regarding the confinement of Hutterite pacifists on the island for their refusal to serve in the US military campaigns of World War I.

There have been a handful of expanded and highly relevant newer public cultural offerings at Alcatraz as well, including 2014's *Ai Weiwei @ Large*, which pointed to specific issues of global concern such as political imprisonment through lenses of contemporary art presentations. These newly activated uses of the former prison to consider issues of continuing social importance signal the more intensive possible engagement that such context-specific cultural projects can catalyze for public visitors at Alcatraz.

The majority of the 1.5 million-plus annual visitors to the island will likely continue to be caught up in the tours of physical cell blocks and biographies of Machine Gun Kelly, the Birdman of Alcatraz, and the like, at least for the foreseeable future. However, those lesser but still substantial numbers of visitors who either make the trek to the island specifically for contemporary art events like *Future IDs*, or encounter by chance exhibitions and experiences curated explicitly to represent contemporary viewpoints once they are actually on the island, can have their perspectives transformed.

At the same time, the social stigma of incarceration will broadly remain for those who become imprisoned. Calls for prison reform or outright abolition develop mostly in communities inordinately affected by the criminal justice system, as well as along the radical margins of political activism and within academic settings more than in any sustained mainstream political realms. The activism of the *Future IDs* project gently prompts thinking about how a person can move into a better future once released from prison. As such, it is more determined to shift the thinking of

and about those incarcerated than to directly critique the idea of incarceration itself.

The vocational tendencies of would-be reformers to make better citizens are usually understood as positive, but they can also be seen as submitting to another mode of normal. Many of the new identities that the *Future IDs* artworks display—"Teacher," "Life Coach," and "Youth Advocate"—remain entangled in a social system that values only certain human endeavors—and productivity foremost, perhaps. The channeling of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals toward becoming "productive" members of society might be one likely direction to follow in order to imagine a future after the constraints of prison. However, there is danger in pressing vulnerable individuals to conform to certain ideals that might be difficult to attain in a society whose underlying structural basis is understood by many to be fundamentally unequal.

Meanwhile, the majority of people who come to visit the former penitentiary on Alcatraz will encounter only the hard surfaces of bare buildings, revealing little about the impact of prisons on lives continuing to languish and chafe today, nor those confined and constrained in generations before. Any more direct or immediate address to a system of laws and ideologies that prescribes incarceration will seemingly have to occur much more offshore than on the island itself. But on Alcatraz, at least some reminders are being proffered by projects like *Future IDs* and the developing programs of cultural interpretation by the National Park Service to reflect on the harshness of the prison regime's effects on those impacted by incarceration—which is, arguably, everyone in society today.

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# Getting Creative About Affordable Housing in Skid Row

Jeremy Liu interviews  
Henriëtte Brouwers  
Anna Kobara,  
John Malpede,  
and Rosten Woo

Map of Downtown Los Angeles  
depicting the fifty square blocks  
that make up Skid Row.

Theater artists & activists [John Malpede](#) and [Henriëtte Brouwers](#) of the performance group Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) and designer [Rosten Woo](#) are creating *How to House 7,000 People in Skid Row and How to Fund It*. The project aims to realize “Skid Row Now & 2040,” a community-generated alternative development plan designed for and by the Skid Row neighborhood of Los Angeles to challenge proposed upscale development and resist displacement by the Los Angeles Department of City Planning (DCP)’s DTLA 2040 community plan. Skid Row Now & 2040 sets the following as guiding principles of their proposal:

“Skid Row Now & 2040 wants generations of families and Skid Row residents to lead full, vibrant lives in Downtown LA. [ . . . ] No displacements of extremely low-income residents should occur; policies that promote the Human Right to Housing should be enacted. The DTLA 2040 update shouldn’t include any policies or zoning changes that harm low-income communities of color. This includes policies that lead to criminalization.”

A Blade of Grass Fellows Malpede, Brouwers, and Woo will integrate an exhibition, public conversation, and research into financing mechanisms with the support of researcher [Anna Kobara](#) from the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. They will engage the DCP and neighborhood residents about “Skid Row Now & 2040” to collectively enact a city plan that houses and protects all of Skid Row’s low-income and homeless residents. We’ve asked [Jeremy Liu](#), Senior Fellow for Arts, Culture, and Equitable Development at PolicyLink, to talk with them about how their project challenges assumptions and ways of working within the community planning and affordable housing sectors.

## The Shaping of Skid Row

1973

Activists lead City of Los Angeles to save and renovate single room occupancy housing in 50 square blocks of downtown, defining official boundaries of Skid Row and disallowing construction of market rate housing in the area

1999

City passes the Adaptive Re-Use Ordinance, allowing conversion of empty downtown commercial buildings into residential lofts, and threatening protection of low-income housing. Illegal evictions and displacement ensue

2019

City drafts DTLA 2040 plan to open up most of Skid Row for market rate development. The Skid Row Now & 2040 Coalition, of which LAPD is a part, obtains concessions to preserve ~30% of Skid Row exclusively for extremely low-income housing

**Jeremy:** I’ve spent fifteen years running community development corporations. All along, the way I have tried to incorporate arts and culture into that work was inspired in many ways by the work of you all. You have been involved in Skid Row for a long while now. What’s that journey been like for you, and did you think you would ever be delving into local land use and finance policy?

**Henriëtte:** Well, I certainly never thought I would get so deep into the policy. And to be honest, I’m still trying to wrap my head around it! When I arrived here in 2000 and started working with the Los Angeles Poverty Department, I saw so many people in the streets and thought things would get better. Instead, they have gotten worse. The only way to improve this is by delving into the housing. The City is updating its Downtown community plan, so things are really going to change if we don’t do anything. For me, just making performances or exhibitions is not enough at this point—we have to study!

**John:** The reality is that Skid Row wouldn’t even exist if it hadn’t been for activists intervening in the land use process. The Bunker Hill redevelopment project would have obliterated Skid Row, but activists intervened and the result was that in fifty square blocks of downtown, the hotel stock was preserved and additional housing for extremely low-

income people could be built. Those fifty blocks became the official borders of Skid Row. Subsequently, it’s only been through the sustained actions of people living and working here that affordable housing and supportive services for low-income communities haven’t already disappeared. There’s been increasing amounts of money to be made by displacing us to build market rate housing in Downtown LA.

**Rosten:** Through a previous planning project I assisted with—called *Our Skid Row*, organized by Theresa Hwang of the Skid Row Housing Trust—I came to an awareness that [Skid Row] actually serves a lot of critical functions for people and is actually something that people want to preserve. I think we need to understand Skid Row as a success story. It’s a really radical reframing of the conventional wisdom that mixed-income developments always create better social outcomes. If you don’t know much about Skid Row, like most people in the city, it’s easy to think of it as a problem area. Someone who hasn’t been there and just has a fantasy of it might have an image that everyone in Skid Row actually wishes they were not there, and that Skid Row didn’t exist. That’s actually not at all the story within the neighborhood. In Skid Row, all the activists and folks like LAPD have built a story about how there’s something special happening here, and it’s something worth saving. I don’t think that’s necessarily something that just self-generates. It’s part of the work of culture to tell that story and help create a collective sense of what this place is—that this is a recovery community, and that’s a really vital thing to protect. It’s very unique within LA, so far as it has a lot of community organizing history and a kind of connective tissue that many neighborhoods don’t have.

Also, doing affordable housing in Skid Row challenges what truly affordable housing means for the people who live there, who basically have zero income—[working here] keeps you more honest in a way.

**Jeremy:** Is the goal to actually get the City to approve a new Tax Increment Finance (TIF) district that will fund at least 7,000 very, extremely low-income, affordable housing units in Skid Row? Is that the actual end policy goal?

**John:** We got the planners to come talk to the community, and then some of our community partners had an idea to get together and draft our own community plan, which we did as the Skid Row Now & 2040 Coalition. The goal of that plan is to build those 7,000 extremely low-income units, and we identify several different mechanisms for doing it, including TIFs. [TIFs allow municipalities to promote economic development by earmarking property tax revenue from anticipated increases in assessed values within a designated TIF district]. Obviously it will be an uphill slog to actually make this happen, since these are relatively new versions of these financial instruments in California that have yet to be tested in LA, but hey, let's push it!

**Jeremy:** Can you clarify the intent of the creative aspect of the project that you're bringing to the Skid Row Now & 2040 Coalition?

**John:** When the City's plan comes out and there's a public comment window, we plan to create exhibitions and performances as a mechanism for drawing attention to what's going on. Beyond that, it's also a way to get a deeper understanding in the community of all the different possibilities.

**Rosten:** I think there's kind of an element of fantasy to it, but no more fantasy than using a TIF to build a stadium or parking lot. The idea is to focus the conversation towards a collective vision of what we actually want our city to be spending its money on. Then we can explore the mechanisms to actually create a city that we feel is ethical. I wouldn't feel like this project failed if we didn't end up producing a TIF district. The goal is definitely to actually build the housing, and there are all these different theoretical pots of money to do that right now. We can raise billions of dollars

to build extremely low-income and supportive housing in a place that wants it, so why don't we just do it! What are these policy mechanisms for anyway if we don't use them to build things we actually like? And secondarily, it also makes one ask—why are we building all this other stuff? Who does that serve?

**Jeremy:** The way that I read what you're proposing is that the TIF itself is an expressive thing. Creating one is an expressive act. The TIF structure and design certainly have visual dimensions, right? You're drawing something, actually making markings on a piece of paper, and that expresses a set of values and a vision for a particular future. It's not just a technical thing.

But presumably, if there's a district where 28,000 new units are going to be built and only 25% of them are set aside for extremely low-income residents, that means that 21,000 will be market rate units for higher income folks. This is a question that faces a lot of enclave neighborhoods. How come the whole

**Skid Row actually serves a lot of critical functions for people and is actually something that people want to preserve.**

thing isn't 100% affordable and created for the people that already live there? How are you all confronting that?

**John:** Yeah, that definitely sounds like a really scary thing to sign onto, because it would create a master class of higher income folks within Skid Row that would be hard to assimilate. I was a holdout for maintaining 100% extremely low-income housing in the neighborhood, but the consensus in our coalition was that that wasn't going to be possible. The good news is that the situation is dynamic, and that in response to our advocacy the City has changed its plan to preserve one third of the current area—and we have compelling arguments for increasing that area. We're continuing to work on it.

**Henriëtte:** When Alice Callaghan started Skid Row Housing Trust, that was one of her principles—to only build for homeless people and not anybody else. She left their board when they decided to start doing mixed-income housing. A lot of Skid Row residents felt like this was the beginning of the end, because if we let more rich people in, they are going to determine what happens in our neighborhood. In mixed-income areas, often the poor people are pushed out of the building, or the rich folks complain to the police and all of a sudden there's more surveillance, and that leads to all kinds of problems.

We don't want any displacement of the people in our community. So the next big challenge is to really imagine that if we can build all this affordable housing, how do we get our people to actually live there?

**Jeremy:** Have you seen any newer TIFs, or other public finance strategies, create differentiation in the districts? For instance, in Boston, where I spent fifteen years doing this kind of work, the City had a real estate value-capture mechanism called Linkage, where there were contribution areas as well as benefit areas. So there was differentiation in the geography—projects in certain areas were contributors, benefiting other geographies. In some ways it's akin to developers buying out their inclusionary obligation by paying into a fund, but the fund is targeted to an area that

needs a subsidy to develop rather than going citywide. Is that technically something that could be part of the consideration for Skid Row? Could you draw some line within a TIF district and say, we want the 7,000 affordable units inside of this line, and

we want the 21,000 somewhere else outside of that? This would actually reinforce the existing containment strategy that preserves Skid Row's autonomy.

**Anna:** I don't think this non-contiguous designated beneficiary area exists right now in California through these new tools. But it's a really interesting strategy! Geographically, as a response to the upzoning they want to do in downtown LA, we might want to draw a TIF zone that includes it so that we can capture some of that value for Skid Row. That's a great variation because it really increases your funding capacity.

**Jeremy:** Do you have some ideas now of how you're going to translate the complexity of something like TIFs for everyday folks? Your previous collaboration, *The Back 9* project, ingeniously used a mini-golf course as a teaching tool and a set for related performance

**I think we need to understand Skid Row as a success story.**



work and workshops that challenged the city's efforts to rezone Downtown LA.

**Rosten:** Not yet, as we're just starting. But we stand by the strategies and methods we successfully used in *The Back 9*. I try to create a hierarchy of information in my exhibits because there's always going to be the people who only spend fifteen seconds [viewing the work]. Can we give them something to walk away with so that they're at least able to say what a TIF is? Then you can layer the information so that the people who want to spend an hour or three hours actually playing the golf course or coming to a meeting can get deeper into this stuff. I think a lot of this is not actually super hard to understand. I don't necessarily think that everyone needs to know the intricacies of a TIF, but we do want to provide different layers of depth for different audiences, and I think that this learning can happen in public.

**Jeremy:** I feel like owning the idea that there have to be 7,000 units designated for extremely low-income individuals is [meant to] not shortchange what's possible before we even start to talk about it by claiming a desired result. Most community development

## The development community at large has done a pretty good job of training the public sector to feel like there's a scarcity complex.

corporations are on the treadmill of "how many units of housing can we produce a year," but are not as clearly focused on the implications of building that housing, and where, and for whom. Who do you feel like you have to convince to actually get behind your goal? Who are the audiences for this project?

**Rosten:** It helped to create a consensus, or close to a consensus, of what needed to happen. We gave lots of copies of the *Our Skid Row* plan [from 2015] to the Department of City Planning (DCP), but there was no sense that the City had any particular interest in it at any point. So it was interesting to me to watch the golf course idea get traction and interest from the press. Before we had done anything [on the project], the grant had only just been announced and *The Guardian* called us the next day! When we actually did build it [in 2017], there were then many more articles, and suddenly that really did change the way that DCP looked at us. They became much more interested in incorporating all this stuff that had been given to them in our document years earlier.

That's the alchemy of cultural work. I don't know if it even mattered that City Planning staff came and played the golf course or came to some of the performances. But they affected DCP's interest level when there were all these articles about Skid Row being in danger. To me the city at large needs to be involved to create that kind of moral pressure on city departments and developers to move these things forward that basically everybody knows should happen, to move beyond the sense that this is completely impossible.

**Henriëtte:** Now there's the HHH measure [a \$1.2 billion bond to build approximately 10,000 units of supportive housing across the City of Los Angeles] and everybody is like, "That's the solution because we have this big pot of money." Actually, a lot of that money has already been spent or committed



Participants engaging with *The Back 9* installation by artist Rosten Woo at the Skid Row History Museum and Archive in 2017. Image courtesy of Los Angeles Poverty Department.

to existing projects. So we're already at the end of that, but HHH is not the only solution. I think the other audience would be affordable housing developers—giving them new ideas about how to build and finance it.

**Jeremy:** What you're describing sounds a lot to me like a fairly endemic challenge amongst public sector folks about what's possible. The development community at large has done a pretty good job of training the public sector to feel like there's a scarcity complex. Do you think that's the way folks in Skid Row feel about these same things?

**John:** I'd say people who are engaged are standing up against the wrong kind of projects and happy to work with developers that want to do the right kind of projects. It's very motivating, and we're gonna keep fighting. I was at a meeting last night about a project that is going to be turned into 100% affordable

housing by these really cool developers. The building was the Salvation Army for seventy years, it was a recovery program. We had worked there many years ago, and in 2009 they closed it down very precipitously and sold it to somebody who was going to do market rate micro-lofts because it's right down by the arts district and they thought it would appeal to [University of Southern California] students who could only afford smaller units. Meanwhile, people were living in tents right in front of the building! We did a press conference with Inner City Law Center after they closed down the project and sold the building. So we have gotten big wins, and it was just people mobilizing and getting on the streets.

**Jeremy:** It sounds like you're also saying that Skid Row has a history of fighting these things and actually achieving the goals it sets out for itself. Do you feel like you're building upon something from *The Back 9* in this new project

## So much of what ails us is the failure of imagination in really crucial moments when we have a choice or an opportunity to make a different kind of decision.

that's effective in moving public perception internally and externally, while also landing on some technical details?

**Rosten:** We have very aligned goals and values, but very different working methods and creative strategies. I'm a visual designer, and LAPD is primarily theater and live performance. There's this fun overlap where we're building something together, but making stuff in parallel. My stuff is typically very understated and friendly and welcoming. Like, "We can we all understand this and come along." But the performance of *The Back 9* is just totally scathing satire, and kind of over-the-top in a way I would never do in my own work. But I could make the set! And these strategies were complementary.

**Henriëtte:** I don't know how wild we can get about TIFs.

**Rosten:** I bet it could get pretty wild.

**John:** *TIF the Musical* [laughing]! But I'm really anticipating that Anna can be on top of making the technical stuff clearer to us. Her work with the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project also had this storytelling and visual presentation aspect, so she brings these new skills to the project. It's another dimension we're adding to this thing that, who knows, might turn into a musical.

**Jeremy:** You know, there is a long line of poignant musicals that address neighborhoods.

**John:** I have an idea, let's just call it *Rent!*

**Jeremy:** Oh my God, *Rent: The Parody!*

One of the [findings] from working with seven organizations over the last couple years was that we really need to equip arts and culture organizations with a policy strategy person in residence. And you all figured out this prototype for what that could look like in this collaboration! That's definitely something I plan to lift up in my sector. How has Anna being part of your work changed the way you all think and do your own work?

**Rosten:** I usually spend a huge chunk of the project just trying to get my head around the policy, so it feels like we have a great head start! And I don't feel burdened with always knowing everything about this stuff. Just having someone with real expertise to bounce things off of is super great.

**Jeremy:** Your project description talks about exchange. Do you feel like the role of this project is to set up an exchange amongst the City, developers, Skid Row residents, advocates, and others? Or is it really internally focused towards different segments of the neighborhood?

**Rosten:** One of the things I really like about LAPD and this space, The Skid Row History Museum & Archive, is that it has an inbuilt constituency thanks to all of the programming that happens here already, like the movie nights or creative writing workshops. It attracts an interesting mix of people both from and outside of Skid Row. And then when you add something like a policy expert coming

in after the movie night, that gets publicized to the audience of other arts nonprofits and architecture nonprofits doing work about housing, so then their people come. And that generates a really different conversation with the city planner than you'd get any other way.

**Henriëtte:** I think a big part of what we do, because of where we are located at the edge of gentrification, is to bring together Skid Row residents, but also the new downtown residents, and now even tourists come in more and more. They have the same questions: what is the community plan going to do? And they see many more people living in the streets, and they're worried about that. So to get all these people involved and have them talk to their friends, it just widens the circle. I think that's a good thing.

**Jeremy:** For many years I've said that so much of what ails us is the failure of imagination in really crucial moments when we have a choice or an opportunity to make a different kind of decision. I think it's exciting that you're holding space for that.

**Rosten:** One of the meta-goals of the project for me is thinking of public policy as a space of imagination and creativity. It sounds like an oxymoron, but why couldn't this all be really different? We want to make a space where people can share their ideas for good policy. We don't necessarily want to present the project as: "We did all the math and here's the best or only proposal." Rather, we want to ask, "Wouldn't this be amazing, and what else do you think could be amazing?"

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**Henriëtte Brouwers** is a performer, director, teacher, and producer, and has been the Associate Director of LAPD since 2000. Prior to joining LAPD, Brouwers directed and performed original theater works in The Netherlands, France, Belgium, Poland, and the US.

**Anna Kobara** is a California native whose background and education is in land use and affordable housing policy. She has worked with the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project on various mapping projects that support state-wide and local tenant campaigns.

**Jeremy Liu** is an artist, community development consultant, and real estate developer advising, investing in, and creating projects that support creative, healthy, and equitable communities.

**John Malpede** is the founding Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), where he directs, performs, writes and makes multi-event projects. In addition to local productions, LAPD has produced projects around the US, Europe, and South America.

**Rosten Woo** is an artist, designer, and writer living in Los Angeles, and served as co-founder and former Executive Director of the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP). His projects aim to help people understand complex systems, re-orient themselves to places, and participate in group decision-making.

For more information on efforts to create affordable rental housing using policy, public and political will, and cross-sector collaboration, please visit: <https://www.housingisopportunity.org/our-work>.

# Collaborative Art Through Immigrant Resistance and Solidarity

Sara Angel Guerrero-Rippberger  
in conversation with Sol Aramendi



A *Project Luz* lighting workshop at the Queens Museum as part of Sol Aramendi's partnership with the museum. Image courtesy of Sol Aramendi.

Tracing a line through collective image-making and systems intervention, artist [Sol Aramendi](#) describes sixteen years of socially engaged art practice in conversation with transnational arts researcher [Sara Angel Guerrero-Rippberger](#). Using lived experience as a departure point, the artist explores counter-systems, building collaborative artworks around resistance and solidarity. Traversing dimensions of socio-economic status, language, labor, gender, sexual identity, body politics, critical pedagogy, and immigrant rights, she employs photography, performance, and the moving image as tools for social activism. From her home base in Queens, NYC, Aramendi's collaborative practice challenges the norms underlying museum engagement, while re-defining the lens through which institutions view immigrants. Embedded in her practice is the use of digital image-making as a social stage for immigrant issues.

## Arriving in Queens

Between 2002 and 2005, Sol Aramendi developed a creative process from the womb-like darkroom of analog photography. Already a successful architect in Buenos Aires, she began exploring the architecture of representation, drafting images of the city through black and white film and group excursions. The daughter of a boat-maker and a teacher, the creative vessels she designed allowed her to move from an inside space into the outside collective experience. Transmitting models, measurements, and strategies became a way of navigating counter-narratives within systems of the everyday.

In 2004, Sol immigrated to New York, quickly entering networks of Latin American artists and activists engaged in representation and learning to survive in the immigrant economy of enclaves and innovation. She exhibited early works in Praxis Gallery and Exit Art—photo essays of Topacio Fresh, an Argentinian trans icon, and María, a Mexican garbage collector in Queens. Under the name *Project Luz*, she taught Spanish-language photography classes in underground immigrant artist spaces,

improvising cultural hubs clustered around artist studios in warehouses of industrial neighborhoods. The idea was to teach self-empowerment through art. *Project Luz* was an exercise in education as an art form and an act of collective arrival.

### **Sara:** How did you first conceptualize *Project Luz*?

**Sol:** When I started in Buenos Aires, we visited architectural sites and neighborhoods, taking photos and then returning to the lab to develop and discuss texts about image-making and the city. That moment was about black and white photography.

After migrating, I brought the texts I had used to discuss photography, place, and film. The workshops in Long Island City were slower, more poetic. They centered around each participant finding their artistic self and communicating through art. It was about the time and space of being inside a photo lab, like the one we created in Local Project (a Queens art space where many Latin American artists

meet). Spending hours with your work in that uterus of a darkroom. Time was different in that space—far from the madness of the city. I decided to write letters in my broken English to request free Spanish-language tours from all the local museums. Museum community engagement did not exist then. But since we were in New York, with all the masterpieces and big museums, the idea was to be able to appreciate those works up close and in person as part of the creative process.

Everything was about the act of arriving. As migrants we occupy a space that is nowhere. We need to get past the shock of arriving in a place where you have to find a job and start working right away, where you don't know anyone and all of the systems around you are new. One can get lost in all that. The workshops presented a way to see yourself in the context of your own story, examine who you were before migrating, who you are now, and imagine who you will be in the future. The act of seeing and understanding yourself through art was a process. We spoke a lot about working from the surface to heal something inside.

A community was created. People arrived alone and shared the artistic process of self-portrayal. *Project Luz* was founded during a period when communication was slower, and it impacted everything around it—artist studios, museums, libraries, and the artist collective Local Project.

There, within that community, other issues were brought to the table. One was the issue of labor.

## Photography as an Excuse

Between 2004 and 2008, several thousand people answered Sol's local newspaper and radio advertisements offering low cost and free photography classes in Spanish. *Project Luz* grew from ten students to 800. The content broadened; the format stayed the same. Inside windowless corners of warehouses turned into makeshift classrooms with scavenged furniture, students passed around yerba mate brewed by the artist, and shared the moments caught by their cameras. They turned the lens inside and outside, contemplating arrival in a city already a muse in film history.

Sol was invited to bring *Project Luz* to the New New Yorkers Program at the Queens Museum and Queens Library, and later to other museums. This brought thousands

of new museum participants to empty galleries previously disconnected from the immigrant communities that surround each museum in New York City. *Project Luz* inserted a new system into the institution by working from within an immigrant world defined by labor, limbo, and isolation. Documentary in nature, its collective visual language represented a first-person format and an expression very different from the image-making about immigrant communities of this time, far from media narratives and documentaries.

**Sara: The idea of visually representing someone who needs help can be complicated. Organizations can fall into the trap of “poverty porn” when trying to create a visual campaign about rights. Even when aiming to promote greater social**



The *Project Luz* logo. Image courtesy of Sol Aramendi.

**justice, they use an aesthetic language that portrays the person who has migrated as victim or object of poverty rather than hero or human being. How have you navigated this territory of images with *Project Luz*?**

**Sol:** Mostly by creating stories from the point of view of the immigrant, with dignity. Sometimes the empowered community upsets an organization. What's important for me are the methods we can use to amplify immigrant voices, especially now.

*Project Luz* was founded around the time when digital photography appeared as an accessible tool. With adapting from analog to digital came the need to teach computer tech. It was more expensive at first, but then less without prints and developing. Everything became faster. And we lost that moment of being alone in the dark. All of the early students went on to teach and become photographers. Students began to earn money as photographers, which created the need to provide different kinds of instruction: studio photography workshops or social photography relating to documenting quinceañeras, weddings, baptisms, and local celebrations. We began thinking about how to use photography and video for work.

It went from being a hobby, or a meditation on life, to becoming a source of income. Having a day job at a deli or a construction site, but also being a photographer. Many work in social photography, fulfilling a need generated by the Latin American and immigrant communities by documenting rituals and life.

*Project Luz* grew exponentially when the Queens Museum received a large grant to do

arts and literacy-based work with immigrant communities through New New Yorkers.

The Museum of Modern Art took six months to answer my letter requesting a visit, but now we still have a partnership, thirteen years later. The Guggenheim, El Museo del Barrio, the New York Public Library, and the Brooklyn Museum are other partners. Before that there were no museum projects in Spanish—the idea of working with the community looked more like charity. Top down.

We worked with community organizations as well, beginning with the Ecuadorian League and a Dominican association, and later with service-based organizations focusing on the immigrant worker, like New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE), in Jackson Heights. First, they'd call us to request a photographer to document galas or public events. Then I proposed workshops for workers to use the technologies of image-making not only for self-expression but also to fight for one's rights. That was how *The Workers' Studio* developed.



Participants in a *Project Luz* photography class review their images. Image courtesy of Sol Aramendi.

## Evidence of Being Here

Between 2008 and 2015, *Project Luz* grew to 2,000 members and they added new themes. Image-making as a social tool was changing with the digital, as was the definition of artistic interventions into the social realm. Art that used education as an artistic medium was re-named socially engaged art, later reimagined through the lens of participation. Social media, applications, and photographic metadata became formats for the artist to explore while continuing to build community through processes of art, research, and visibility.

**Sara:** Tell me more about *The Workers' Studio* and adapting the *Project Luz* model.

**Sol:** In 2012, a new branch of my work came together when I was in the Social Practice MFA program at Queens College. I met artist Barrie Klein, who was working with unions. We held a meeting to connect two groups that did not get along: undocumented day laborers and union workers. I created a “Learn Your Rights Through Your Cell Phone” workshop and began collaborating closely with NICE and The National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON). I was hired as a community consultant by Cornell University for a project on wage theft. This is when I began to work on the *Apps for Power* project, after learning more about issues surrounding day laborers. *The Worker's Studio* developed through using art processes to understand labor, community, and rights.

Lawyers involved in the project described the importance of the photograph as a legal document. The geographic location, date, and other metadata embedded in the photograph can be evidence in cases of wage theft. For example, day laborers are picked up on 69<sup>th</sup> Street in Queens and transported in large vans by the contractors to a work site, who promise to pay them on Friday. After a week's work, when the worker tries to claim their pay, the contractor says “I don't know you, you were never here.”

A photograph taken at the work site is proof that the person was there. We made lists of the kinds of photographs you can take for evidence: a selfie including the construction site, the beginning of the wall and after it's finished, the permit and the patent. The organization can help collect payment and empower workers so that they have physical evidence of their work and can be more aware of the systems of exploitation. The idea is to educate to prevent. Even so, it's difficult when contractors are subcontractors of subcontractors, a chain of misery created by the mega-company. It's important to understand the situation of precarity. One needs the money now to pay rent tomorrow—the workers do not have the luxury of waiting two years for the Department of Labor to bring a case to judgement. But even with workers who grow wise to the system, tomorrow a hundred more arrive at the same

**Strategies for using art as a tool deepened: image-making as therapy, as economic tool, as trace, as social recourse, as public stage, as critique of systems.**



Roberta, a member of Mujeres en Movimiento, poses for a portrait during a photography workshop organized by Sol Aramendi after having realized her dream of becoming a pastry chef. Image courtesy of Sol Aramendi.

job pick-up site who don't know anything about it and will agree to work for less. They fall into the same trap.

We decided to make a smartphone app to report the theft of wages using image as proof. The digital social network was a public stage where we could call out employers and share information amongst laborers. My role was to facilitate the design of the app between workers, software developers, organizations, and lawyers. The first step was to reach a collective understanding of how an app can help with accountability. I defended the manner through which decisions were made collaboratively every step of the way. You cannot skip the democratic process even when things need to be done quickly.

The app launched a week after Trump won the presidency and the organizations went into emergency mode. The project bore fruit

when a network of relationships was created, expanding ways of thinking. Today, the organizations position themselves differently in relation to others, with a sense of collective identity.

## Traces of a Process

From 2015 to 2019, Sol expanded the dimensions of labor and participation through new collaborations with the immigrant coop of Apple Eco Cleaners, Brightly Cleaning Coop, Mujeres en Movimiento, La Colmena Community Job Immigrant Center in Staten Island, and the L'Unicorns, a group of transgender migrants from Latin America.

The collective force of *Project Luz* continued as a photography school for adults, mitigating the marginalization implicit in the act of migrating. An archive of digital and print material developed with the self-publishing of books and

newspapers, an online image repository, and publications in local Spanish language press.

Strategies for using art as a tool deepened: image-making as therapy, as economic tool, as trace, as social recourse, as public stage, as critique of systems. Across all, photography opened a door to participate in one's own social, personal, collective and economic development. The artist consulted with experts from all sides to investigate the colliding worlds of labor activism, day laborers, domestic workers, human trafficking, immigrant communities, urban displacement, gentrification, and transnational identity. With academics, lawyers, mothers, migrants, software developers, students, transgender asylum-seekers, and workers, her strategy was the same: coach the group in identifying and building an art project around a social justice issue. Some brought greater visibility to an issue, while others discovered inequities they hadn't seen before.

**Sara: Describe your process.**

**Sol:** I think about how the project can continue to function without me being there. A NICE staff member once commented about how after I left, the workers continued applying the process we learned together to other areas of their life and work: ideating, designing, concretizing, and presenting projects.

I talk about trusting the process. This kind of art practice that involves long-term community engagement is not like the act of creating a painting. It doesn't have a predictable end. Often when I enter a community space, lingering conflicts come to the surface. I generate tension just by being there. I notice conflicts that are present but not named: inside that doubt and distrust is where I feel most comfortable. This is my territory. I work in that tension. The process of explaining and externalizing hidden issues is an important piece of collaborative work.

Sometimes I work with the poet Claudia Prado. She introduces writing exercises at that moment when tensions begin to rise. The group reflects and writes. With time to think about their own questions, they listen to each other, and give depth to the issues they are confronting. With writing comes a different kind of patience, another way of working.

I learned that creative exercises offer a better way to generate questions from within the group, because sometimes you produce what you want to hear, instead of really allowing participants to reflect and share their opinions.

The process usually begins with the traditional roles of teacher and student transforming into a collaboration. The method of engagement is to get to know one another, listen, understand the kind of campaign or strategies enacted in that group. Conflicts, issues, and questions are named. We start with what I know: photography and organizing. Gradually we explore art actions and begin to question pedagogies pertaining to culture, identity, and mobility. We change roles, explore new disciplines, and find new collaborators.

This process can also help rebuild a group. When there is chaos or when collaboration breaks down, bringing this process to bear upon a group can be like weaving, reconnecting individuals collaboratively. A kind of repair through art.

**Sara: Tell me about the research behind your art.**

**Sol:** Now I'm working in collaboration with immigrant women who work cooperatively. For two years, I've been investigating the benefits and problems related to cooperative incubation, searching for factors involved when difficulties arise. Reading about the subject, I realized that the voices of the workers within the cooperatives are not represented. The experts quoted are always

academics and project administrators with master's degrees in economics. They make projections and try to foretell statistics, but the voices of the workers are absent.

**Sara: What happens after you finish a project?**

**Sol:** There are always traces left behind by the process. For example, the asylum case lawyer who works with several members of the transgender group of migrants called the L'Unicorns described a solidarity created through our seven-month collaboration for an installation at the Leslie Lohman Museum, consisting of an altar for Day of the Dead, a video work, and a collective poem written with other trans groups. She said, "By working together artistically, the group has become engaged as activists, more willing to support each other in their cases and to step forward to try innovative strategies. Presenting cases together makes each one stronger."

After we finished our collaboration this past February, the L'Unicorns had their first case approval for asylum based upon gender identity persecution, and a second in May. They are now creating their own projects for museum spaces and personal spaces.

**Sara: In institutional spaces, you inserted your practice of educational interventions. From education, you pushed through to exhibitions with a participatory approach.**

**Sol:** My strength is to facilitate making space for immigrant communities, and craft those opportunities in cultural spaces. Museums are moved by funding trends and current directors. Their model is to not become too deeply committed. They may take money that causes harm to the same communities that they want to include as audiences. I've observed institutions having discussions about creating a sanctuary while firing DACA employees. Artist educators are put in increasingly precarious

conditions. Community programs are cut, and curators spend that money going to Venice. Remember when they wanted to do programs for immigrant women but didn't allow kids? It was a form of segregation and a contradiction. There is a gap between discourse and the facts. If we want to be inclusive, we need to consider the economics of the community, their strengths, and their realities.

**Sara: Let's return to the beginning with the idea of the imaginary state that inspired you to create *Project Luz*.**

**Sol:** Immigrants inhabit an imaginary space when we think of our presence as temporary. It's convenient for others that the immigrant is always thinking about returning. In this state of limbo, one lives without rights and is susceptible to abuse and exploitation. This imaginary space was the engine behind *Project Luz*. The act of inhabiting and appropriating the city's spaces compels you to arrive. The idea behind *Project Luz* is to dissolve the illusion of being here temporarily, and re-affirm the space of the worker. We're here and we're not leaving.

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*Sol Aramendi is a socially engaged artist working with immigrant communities throughout New York City. Her participatory practice promotes change around fairer labor and immigration conditions. She is the founder of Project Luz, a nomadic program that uses photography and art as a tool of empowerment.*

*Sara Angel Guerrero-Rippberger is a transnational arts researcher who studies and leads initiatives in the overlapping fields of participatory practice, education, art, and sociology.*



# Ask an Artist:

## Mary Mattingly Answers Your Questions

Above: A Blade of Grass Fellow Mary Mattingly aboard her project *Swale*, a floating food forest welcoming visitors to harvest food for free, and offering educational programming throughout New York City's harbor. Photo courtesy of RAVA Films.

New York-based artist Mary Mattingly challenges environmental and economic norms by enacting alternative systems. Whether she's transforming a barge into a public food forest on the East River, or repurposing a military vehicle into an interactive performance stage, Mary's work models creative approaches to enacting social change and sparks the imagination of those who experience it.

Dear Mary,

**I can't sleep at night! I want my project to be accessible and welcoming to a wide set of publics. With that in mind, I am happy to break free of avant gardist demands that the form of my work be disruptive and/or create estrangement. But how can I suggest transforming our society and lives if the form and aesthetics remain close to what is already accepted and known? Is there a happy medium? Can I have my cake and eat it too?**

Signed,

**Sleepless and wanting to eat cake in Brooklyn**

Dear Sleepless,

Working together in public involves the art of compromise, or embracing the idea that learning is always alive. If we are given a space to begin a process of compromise, then that is where the public art begins. As artists, we can ask our community collaborators to keep visualizing past the realm of potential and into realms that can feel uncomfortably utopian, with us.

Here's why: I believe that proclaiming our eco/social goals and values through our art and work allows us to imagine its effect, and makes space for others to do the same through

co-creation of that artwork. Holding space for compromise (or entropy, depending on how we see it) is essential as an idea manifests in the world. I think you're correct, and believe pushing boundaries further than may seem comfortable is important in incremental change. I want to encourage us to manifest our ideas one step further than even we can envision them—as ideals that we aren't even sure whether we ourselves understand. We can do this assuming that when those who are uncomfortable with difference have taken their turns tearing us down, we may still be ahead of where we began, and in this way we can help incrementally build change. I believe that when a certain type of change is our mission, we cannot be on the defense in our goals, we must be on the offense. Of course, building together is key: creativity alone asserts our collective and individual voices, but without a creative community, it is near impossible to exercise the power of multiplication. While it's difficult to give concrete suggestions without knowing more about your project, what I can say is that while change is incremental on a societal scale, can't radical thought on a personal scale be just as accessible and welcoming, and even desired? It is the vocation of the artist and thinker to keep imagination alive and to continue weaving stronger fabric, making and reframing the present and future of our shared society.

Mary

**As artists, we can ask our community collaborators to keep visualizing past the realm of potential and into realms that can feel uncomfortably utopian, with us.**



*Swale* docked at Concrete Plant Park in the Bronx, New York. Photo courtesy of RAVA Films.

Dear Mary,

**For the past year and a half, as part of a group of artists and community members, I've been working on addressing cultural erasure and displacement in our city's Chinatown. I also work a job that is arms-length to the City, which puts me in a space where I and my supervisor have to make clear my position as an employee when working in this community. Luckily my supervisor listens and is supportive.**

**Recently, I've come across a label that people have placed on me, which has negative connotations for them, so it becomes a barrier. Some have called me an activist: I'm not so sure I am and this label is neutral to me. However, I call myself an engaged citizen and an active, socially-aware, and conscious person and artist.**

**Have people ever placed a label on you that has negative connotations for them, so that it becomes a barrier for the work? Do you have to manage these labels? Where is the line between spinning the language so that it is more palatable versus being dishonest? For example, using the word "gentrification" vs. revitalization, cultural erasure, or displacement. Or using the word "intersectionality" rather than bell hooks' "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy."**

Thank you,

**GLAW  
Edmonton, Canada**

Dear GLAW,

First, I'll say that I think it's necessary to formally share how you'd like to be perceived in your multiple roles. I think it's fair to use labels for yourself as you see fit, especially as an "artist"—that's the power we have as artists with multiple social roles in the different communities we are part of. We know that this creativity evokes contradiction, tension, and complexity, but also that it's our job to hold our own inconsistencies in balance, or else they will leave us unable to thoughtfully act. As thoughtful actors, an ethics of shape shifting may also be in order, but at the end of the day, switching roles can help everyone break down silos and stereotypes.

That said, I also think that there are times when embracing how we're labeled by others, even if we don't understand or agree with that label, is fine. If we have shared our preferences and people choose to ignore them or call us by another name, it doesn't take away who we are, or what else we have to offer. Labels are used as shorthand, as a way to categorize in a world that often feels out of control or too big to comprehend. We can choose to give people the benefit of the doubt, lest we waste our energy and time concerning ourselves with others' perceptions of us, when it's our work that really matters in this context. Operating with dignity in our multiple roles has such potential to break from the label-logic formed through generations of training, and to open up a more nuanced comprehension not based in a binary of honesty versus dishonesty, but that speaks to the fact that we all are more than the sum of our labels.

Mary

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# The Art Institution as Nuclear Reactor

Deborah Fisher  
Executive Director  
A Blade of Grass

A nuclear reactor pool in the now-closed Barsebäck Kraft nuclear power plant in Sweden. Photo by Knut-Erik Helle.

Art is an effective vehicle for expanding empathy and challenging our sense of what's possible because art is a space of imagination. And this maxim that I keep coming back to in my own work as an institutional leader is that *the art is not the institution*. Art and images are sparks that ignite the mind and soul. Art takes us on the journey, and must be able to challenge us—even to the point of disturbing us or making us feel unsafe. How else are we going to be able to do brave things like examine our closely held beliefs, love more people, or imagine a future that's better than the present? The institution's role, though, is not to be the spark, or to do the disturbing. The institution needs to honor, hold, and enable the capacity art has to make us feel unstable or unsafe, or it would lose its purpose and its moral center. But it can't be unsafe itself. In fact, the opposite—the institution needs to prioritize safety because its role is to help the artist realize the journey; sign people up for it and hold them through it; make sure enough people value it; and put it in a larger context so that its meaning might be enhanced and shared.

This role, and its fundamentally receptive and nurturing nature, informs the social and political work that an art institution can do. This is important to clarify for two practical reasons. First, we are living in a moment in which popular culture, media, and images are incredibly powerful, and are being wielded in a high-conflict, unstable way, to significant social and political effect. Look at the outrage and proliferation of fake news on your Facebook feed, or the abundance of journalism about what the POTUS is tweeting for examples. The intensity of this broader cultural exchange, and what's at stake in it, are relevant to art institutions in a tautological way—it feels almost dumb to clarify that art is part of the culture, and art institutions are cultural institutions. But there's more to it than that. I want art organizations to get in on this moment in a productive, proactive

# I want art organizations to get in on this moment as helpful transformers of outrage and anxiety into meaning and connection.

way—not as a target of protest, or as a mere amplifier of the malignancy and intensity, but as a helpful transformer of outrage and anxiety into meaning and connection. I think that this work would have tremendous value, and art institutions are facing a crisis of value right now. 65% of my job is fundraising, so I mean this literally, in terms of who pays for art and why. *Art for art's sake* wound up being a relevant value proposition to a very small handful of people. We know that art, and the art institution, is not just relevant “for its own sake,” that there’s civic and social value in the images we make and our collective imagination. But we struggle with articulating that value clearly and taking it seriously.

So, if the broader cultural moment is powerful, unstable, and full of cultural conflict, and if art is a challenging, potentially unsafe encounter that can transform us, let’s say that art institutions can do their best work when they manage and hold all this power and instability; transform it into meaning and connection; and then productively channel that meaning and connection into increased collective agency for as many folks as we can. This is the kind of relevant, growth-oriented, inclusive work I want to be doing as an institutional leader—it takes art seriously, keeps the art dangerous, and prioritizes relevance! To get organized around doing this work well, I want to spend some time with a metaphor. Let’s pretend that the art institution is like a nuclear reactor,<sup>1</sup> and that its work is

to generate and harness the effects of what we could call “cultural fission.”

A nuclear reactor harnesses the energy created by a chain reaction. Pellets of uranium are hit with neutrons. This causes the nucleus of the uranium atom to split apart, and as it splits, it throws off a lot of extra particles—this is what makes it radioactive. Those particles then hit other uranium particles, and they split, throwing off more extra particles, and so on. Chaos ensues! Particles keep hitting particles, and this produces more and more heat. Nuclear reactors are designed to control this chain reaction, and use the heat that gets produced to power a steam turbine that produces electricity.

As “cultural engineers,” we are not starting with a relatively stable situation—unprocessed uranium is mostly harmless—and then making it unstable by putting it into a sealed container and smashing neutrons into it to start a chain reaction. Instead, we are noticing that there’s already a somewhat dangerous uncontrolled chain reaction going on all around us every day, and suggesting that it’s a good idea to bring it into the institution in some way. Each image of children in cages, story of yet another black person being treated unjustly by the police, twenty-person Unite the Right march, bizarre presidential tweet, and meme of Ivanka Trump photoshopped into an important historical moment is, in and of itself, small. But they are also each unharnessed, unprocessed, unstable, throwing off extra heat and unstable

particles. They are also highly reactive—pelting us with energy, and generating more and more of themselves. Memes beget memes. Bizarre presidential tweets turn into a flood of media coverage about the tweets. Actual news stories that feel offensive and hard to believe on both sides of the partisan divide spawn even more divisive fake news. Right now, all this unstable, radioactive cultural energy is mostly gathering on one another’s social media feeds and popular media, where the kind of power it generates is outrage and anxiety—which feel poisonous. I have to admit that this is a risky start! If I were a board member, I would be really worried if my Executive Director was like, “What we need to do is bring all this stuff that feels bad into our work.”

Here’s why I do actually think it’s a good idea. First, I think that cultural institutions are going to be better at transforming the culture than engaging in partisan political speech or enacting a policy agenda. How we engage ideas, whose ideas are represented, and what kind of society those ideas and images walk us toward are all fair game for a cultural institution. And people are getting hurt by ideas and images now! The outrage and anxiety that comes out of engaging right now are painful, and they propel too many of us into hurtful, antisocial behaviors

like shaming, deplatforming, yelling at people in person or online, firing your babysitter because you don’t agree with her political views, deciding you can’t do Thanksgiving, driving a car into a crowd of people you don’t agree with, or stockpiling weapons with the intention of creating a militia. Institutions enable collective action—they are what we decide to do and believe together. If what we need to do together is relieve one another of all this shame, hold a lot of conflict, or remember how to disagree, then institutions should rise to that occasion. Even if it’s scary.

If we can all buy that we want to start working with this uncontrolled cultural chain reaction that is spitting out all these outrage and anxiety isotopes because it is doing harm, then the next step is to figure out how to work with it in a way that has a shot at actually reducing harm. Here I think we can find some good news. There is very little that a very large institution like the Whitney or the Met can do to proactively or productively engage this moment because their board members and donors are already targets of protest, and their business model is built on high-level participation from the Sacklers or Warren Kanders. Smaller art institutions are similarly dependent upon wealth and philanthropy,

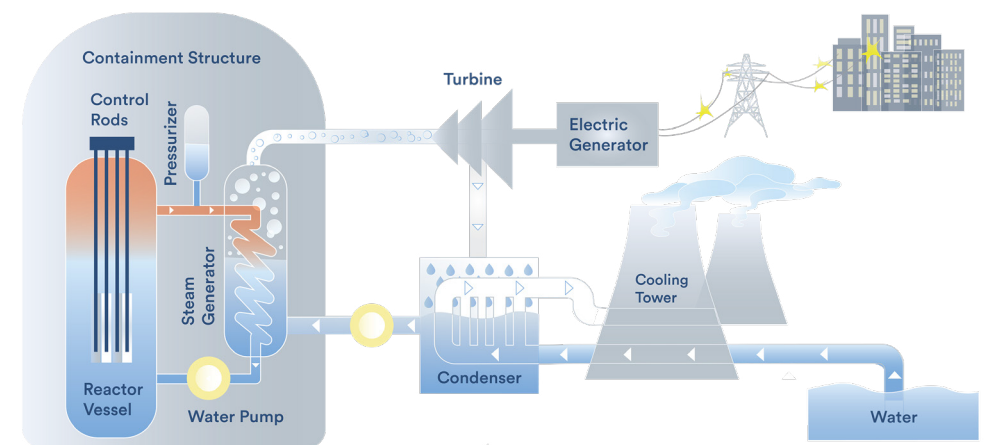


Illustration of a nuclear reactor based on GAO and Nuclear Regulatory Commission documentation. Image courtesy of Karina Muranaga.

<sup>1</sup> This is a metaphor, not an endorsement of nuclear power.

but with a completely different set of stakes, and using a different value proposition. Simply because smaller organizations are less dependent upon exchanging very large contributions for social capital,<sup>2</sup> other opportunities to articulate value can arise. Many smaller organizations are already taking advantage of this flexibility by integrating community and cultural organizing, social practice artists in residence, and talkbacks and other more dialogical programming formats into their work. There are also more and more examples of institutions asking community members to curate exhibitions or otherwise drive programming. This is an important shift because it moves beyond talking and

the depth of the histories or civic issues that are coming up all by itself. The only way to meaningfully engage difficult discussions about race, colonial history, economic oppression, environmental justice, and so on, is to partner with organizations outside the arts.

To deepen these sorts of programmatic commitments safely and transformatively, we would need to consider the structure of the institution itself, and how it holds and nurtures the programming it creates. In our metaphorical reactor, nuclear fission happens inside a containment vessel filled with water because the water slows the particles down. The heat in the reactor is controlled using

## We can slow this process, examine it, make the reactions into reflections, and take the time to make decisions that are more loving or just.

relationship building, and into actually sharing institutional authorship and authority. I think that all of these existing programmatic strategies can be broadened beyond the scope of the art world and its discourse, and start holding and serving a broader cultural agenda that does things like use art to put people who disagree with one another into a productive dialogue. Using art and art institutions for this work creates an opportunity to work obliquely. While a historical or civil rights museum might bring a constituency deeply invested in an issue or history, an art audience might be seeing a new idea or new material. It also creates the ability to broaden institutional networks and partnerships. An art institution can responsibly hold a cultural moment full of conflict, but it cannot responsibly hold

these things that are, unmythically, called “control rods.” Various chemical reactions are monitored and fine tuned to maintain equilibrium. It’s true that programmers of art institutions are developing some facility with holding consequential conversations in considered spaces, and a matrix of consciously developed community that, like the water in a nuclear reactor, cools and slows reactivity. I would also argue that the board of directors of any nonprofit should consider itself a set of “control rods” that keeps the nonprofit safe and productive—not by shutting conflict down but by understanding, participating, and supporting it, and also by letting conflict inform the institution’s work. I would also suggest that the purpose of good governance is to enable the leadership of nonprofits to

ensure that everybody is working in balance—toward shared values and goals, instead of trying to extract value from the nonprofit as an individual. Taking in this cultural moment, with its hyperproduction of images and memes and outrage and anxiety, would not require art institutions to do different work. But it would require art institutions to take aspects of their work that currently don’t get much attention, like board culture, governance, and education, much, much more seriously.<sup>3</sup>

Once we’ve got a compelling why, and have invested in a “control rod” type board and donor base<sup>4</sup> that truly understands what we’re doing and has our back and is consistently walking their talk, and have perhaps committed to a little inventory of all the assets we have in the form of programmatic strategies or experiences with letting our stakeholders inform our work, then it’s time to push this metaphor as far as it can go. How much can an art institution prioritize productive, humane conflict? Is there a point at which this starts being generative? How many human resources can be devoted to relationship management and trust building across the entire stakeholder map that makes an art institution possible? How can we go beyond simply enabling conflict, which feels a little too easy right now, all the way to diving into the proliferation of images, memes, and commentary that the institution itself cannot control? How do the art and the culture get plugged together? There are types of diversity that feel easy to achieve—like getting poor artists and wealthy collectors together—and others that feel really hard, like getting people of color onto boards, or conservatives and liberals into

the same exhibit. How diverse can outreach get—how diverse can we get in our thinking about diversity? And . . . I think this is the most important and delicate question of them all:

*What is the institutional perspective that meaningfully responds, consolidates, shapes, and directs all this debate and imagery in a way that does effective political work but does not simply collapse into taking a side?*

This is the question that really makes the metaphor work. It is a question that is accountable to harnessing the heat of this cultural moment to create the next cultural moment. And to do that, the institution needs to have some values that it is willing to not just articulate, but deploy. The institution needs to be thinking clearly about who it is inviting to participate, who has a voice, and whose images matter; what types of conversations and encounters are being shaped; what art and an art context do to shape these encounters—why art matters in them; who is holding the encounters and the larger networks they might feed into; and what happens when we disagree. That’s not partisan work—cultural institutions are not for liberals or conservatives. But it is deeply political work. Culture in this framework is participatory, the business of every single person who touches the institution. This is already how culture works—we imagine the future when we watch TV or listen to music. In an art institution, we can slow this process, examine it, make the reactions into reflections, and take the time to make decisions that are more loving or just.

2 Or less able to! A Blade of Grass, like many art institutions its size, certainly goes through the motions of hosting galas with honorees and otherwise tries to use this business model. It’s just not effective, in large part because we are competing in the same social landscape as the New Museum, the Met, the Whitney, MoMA, and so on.

3 This is actually not a hypothetical for A Blade of Grass. While we are not yet harnessing cultural fission, we do work with challenging artists who are enacting change in the world. Sometimes we bump up against legal issues, the fear of physical violence or reputational damage, our own accountability to structural oppression, and so on. We could not do our work without a small, empowered, fully educated, deeply engaged board that does act as a healthy and functional set of “control rods.”

4 Future essays will further draw out both the work and potential business models for this type of institution. For now, I think it’s important to simply clarify that you can’t do this work if it threatens funding.

Jury members are sworn in during *I Speak for the Trees: A Mock Trial*, a public program that tested whether art copyright law could be used to legally halt construction of a natural gas pipeline, as proposed by A Blade of Grass Fellow Aviva Rahmani. Photo courtesy of RAVA Films.



**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 want to know your thoughts on *A Blade of Grass Magazine!*

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

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**Ras Cutlass Mashramani** is a Philly-based sci-fi writer, narrative artist, and co-founder of Metropolarity, a local grassroots sci-fi collective. Her artistic work concerns the experiences of people who are subject to institutionalization and dehumanization because of mental wellness challenges, being of color, or possessing another marginalized identity that proves dangerous to the status quo. In another life she is a social worker with over ten years of frontline mental health experience, currently organizing young people to take the lead in local housing justice and community healing work.

**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 a 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.

**Kevin Gotkin** is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Media, Culture, & Communication at NYU. In 2016, he co-founded Disability/Arts/NYC with Simi Linton. He received his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in 2018. Since 2017, he has been the Artist-in-Residence at the Critical Design Lab at Vanderbilt University, directed by Aimi Hamraie. His writing has appeared in *Dance Magazine*, *BOMB*, and many scholarly publications. His artistic practice involves accessible media-making and disability-centric DJing.

Transnational arts researcher **Sara Angel Guerrero-Rippberger** studies and leads initiatives in the overlapping fields of participatory practice, education, art, and sociology. She holds a PhD in art theory from Chelsea College of Art & Design, and was the founding manager of the New New Yorkers Program at the Queens Museum, a program that continues to serve immigrant communities through the arts (now in its thirteenth year). Sara serves on the board of the Queens-based art space Local Project, Inc. and is a research consultant at Baruch College. Since 2005, she has led art initiatives in collaboration with local communities, institutions, and artists in Queens, Brooklyn, Mexico, London, and San Salvador.

Writer, curator, media artist, and teacher **Brian Karl** has served as Artistic, Executive, and Program Director at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Harvestworks Media Arts, and Headlands Center for the Arts, and has provided curatorial, programmatic and technical consultation at Art-in-General, Creative Time, and the Kitchen. His writing has been published in *art-agenda*, *Artforum*, *Flash Art*, *Frieze*, *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Migration Studies*, SFMOMA's *Open Space*, and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. His media work has screened at the Jewish Museum (NY), the Kadist Foundation, and as a part of the Whitney Biennial and the New York and San Francisco Film Festivals. His screenplay, *Cybersyn: The Computer and the Socialist*, on the role of cybernetics in Salvador Allende's socialist-led government in Chile in the 1970s, is an official selection of the 2019 Oaxaca Film Festival.

**Jeremy Liu** invents, samples, and remixes creative practices for equitable community development. As an artist, he has exhibited in museums, art centers, and communities around the country. He co-founded Creative Ecology Partners, an art and design studio that developed the Creative Determinants of Health framework and created the award-winning National Bitter Melon Council to promote the literal and poetic potential of bitter melon to address social bitterness. As a Senior Fellow at PolicyLink, he guides the integration of arts and culture into equitable development, including the Creative Change: Arts, Culture, and Equitable Development report and the website: [www.communitydevelopment.art](http://www.communitydevelopment.art).

**Mary Mattingly** is an artist working in varied forms of sculpture and photography, focusing on environmental, economic, and political change. A participant of smARTpower, a program initiated by the Bronx Museum of the Arts with the US Department of State, she implemented collaborative sculpture as

architecture with residents in the Philippines in 2012. As an A Blade of Grass Fellow in 2016, she launched *Swale*, a mobile floating food forest built atop a barge that travels New York City waterways to offer educational programming and free produce for the public to harvest. She has been awarded grants from the James L. Knight Foundation, Eyebeam Center for Art and Technology, the Harpo Foundation, NYFA, the Jerome Foundation, and Art Matters.

**Prerana Reddy** is Director of Programs at A Blade of Grass. Previously she was the Director of Public Programs & Community Engagement for the Queens Museum in New York City from 2005–2018 where she organized both exhibition-related and community-based programs as well as public art commissions. In addition, she oversaw a cultural organizing initiative for Corona, Queens residents that resulted in the creation and ongoing programming of a public plaza and a popular education center for new immigrants. She is currently on the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission and sits on the boards of NOCD-NY, ArtBuilt, Rockaway Initiative for Sustainability & Equity, and New Immigrant Community Empowerment.

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