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# A BLADE OF GRASS

Who do artists bring  
together to enact  
social change?

Nurturing Socially  
Engaged Art

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**A BLADE OF GRASS**

Cover: Equine therapy exercise from A Blade of Grass Fellow Melanie Crean's project *No Such Place as America*, in collaboration with Ebony Horsewomen, Inc. Photo by Melanie Crean.

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Mierle Laderman Ukeles  
*Touch Sanitation Performance*  
July 24, 1979–June 26, 1980

Citywide performance with 8,500 Sanitation workers  
across all fifty-nine New York City Sanitation districts.

Photo Day 15, Sweep 8, Brooklyn 14/15.

Photo by Marcia Bricker, April 18, 1980

Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

# Who Makes Socially Engaged Art?

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

## Introduction to Issue #2

The beating heart of a socially engaged art project is the web of relationships that it brings together. Artists find fresh ways to interact with people who compel them and complement their own aesthetic expertise. Artists can often point to an experience that awakened their desire to partner with someone not centered in the art world but rather in the throes of an issue or power imbalance they want to address. Such artists may become allies to and co-authors with people whose expertise comes from another source than art. Or, the artists may be able to compassionately challenge perspectives that they disagree with because they are held by people they care so much about.

Issue #2 begins with a conversation about partnerships between three artists and staff/constituents of three New York City municipal agencies—Mierle Laderman Ukeles with the Department of Sanitation (DSNY), Rad Pereira with foster LGBTQ+ youth in the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), and A Blade of

Grass Fellow Rachel Barnard with officers and clients at the Department of Probation. Ukeles’ *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition “CARE,” 1969*, made a profound connection between women and sanitation workers as the people charged with taking care of the world on a somewhat invisible, day-to-day level, setting off a forty-plus year partnership with DSNY. Her identification with san men (and the few san women at the agency) led to large-scale ballets performed with garbage trucks, inspiring a new chapter in Ukeles’ art making and bringing more public recognition to the people who clean NYC streets. Ukeles inspired NYC’s Public Artists in Residence program (PAIR), which since 2015 has embedded artists in various agencies. We hear briefly from Rad and Barnard about their very recent PAIR partnerships.

A Blade of Grass Fellow Melanie Crean muses on the politics of care in an essay about her partnership at Ebony Horsewomen, Inc., a stable in Hartford,

Connecticut founded by social organizer and self-described African American cowgirl Patricia Kelly. Crean and Kelly bring together African American teens who care for the horses, officers from the largely white Hartford Police Department, school security officers, and the horses. Through an equine therapy workshop, they are reducing stress and building trust through non-verbal communication.

The issue of care echoes through my interview with Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director of London gallery The Showroom, about the role of the curator in socially engaged art. She reminds the reader that the Latin word for “curating” or “to curate” is *curare*, *avere cura*, “to take care.” She links that idea to The Showroom’s work with artists and local residents and organizations, paying attention to the art institution’s relationship to the people who live around it.

Picking up the theme of the artist’s relationship to the people and the place that surround them, Robert Sember writes about A Blade of Grass Fellow Brian Harnetty, who returned to his Appalachian home after graduate school in London, where he’d been urged by his music professor to listen to the voices of fellow Appalachians. Harnetty went on to make sound compositions integrating the natural and human voices of that region. In *Forest Listening Rooms*, Harnetty engages Appalachians on different sides of the extractive industries debate, providing a context to experience together their relationships to the forest as a living entity.

Also responding to deep, lifelong relationships, A Blade of Grass Fellow Ashley Sparks created and developed *Good Old Boys*, a play and participatory dialogue focused on southern white male identity made with and for her family and their friends in rural Virginia. Although she is on the other side of the political spectrum, her care to understand her people motivated a work that, though challenging, is infused with humor and warmth. Excerpts from Sparks’ script are embedded in Trey Hartt’s narrative about the project.

With an emphasis on belonging, A Blade of Grass Executive Director Deborah Fisher launches a series on art institutions in our times, positing an ideal

relationship between them and their audiences as a mutually supportive “virtuous cycle.” She looks at obstacles to the smooth functioning of this cycle and introduces a fascinating range of cultural models that carry out a more satisfying and reciprocal relationship with their audiences and participants.

Our reprinted essay in this issue is by choreographer Liz Lerman, who in the mid-1970s lost her mother to cancer and felt such a need to be with older women that she created a dance company with women ages nineteen to ninety. She is among the pioneering artists who have integrated people into their professional work for reasons of their lived experience rather than technique. A Blade of Grass Fellow Dread Scott is the guest respondent in our Ask an Artist advice column, taking questions from readers about who makes socially engaged art: ought socially engaged artists try to make organizing more creative or focus on activating artists? How can socially engaged artists be part of conversations and actions related to issues facing communities that are not directly their own?

The artists featured in these essays are enriched by the sometimes surprising people with whom they collaborate in order to make the art that calls them. For them, being artists is not forsaking all others, reminding me of one of the etymological sources of art, the Latin root *artem*, “to fit together,” like bringing individuals into connected entities—*army* (if for an unfortunate purpose), or better yet, “*harmony*.” The artists in this issue make worlds, or at least projects, where they fit together people who are often kept apart. They provide illuminating responses to the elemental question of “who” is needed to make socially engaged art.

# City as Partner:

## Three Artists on Collaborating with Government Agencies

Rachel Barnard | Rad Pereira | Mierle Laderman Ukeles



Increasingly, cities across the US are embedding artists in municipal agencies ranging from Veterans Affairs to Transportation, Probation to Immigrant Affairs. Purposes have ranged from creatively addressing internal issues like workplace morale, to external goals like making public services more user-friendly. In 2015, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) initiated Public Artists in Residence (PAIR) to create artist-municipal partnerships in New York City.

In June 2018, A Blade of Grass brought together three artists—Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Rad Pereira (at the time known as Rebeca Rad), and A Blade of Grass Fellow Rachel Barnard—to talk about why they chose to be embedded in city government, what artists can contribute there, and what they get from partnering with municipal agency staff. What follows is an edited transcript of that event.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles  
*Touch Sanitation Performance*, July 24, 1979–June 26, 1980  
Citywide performance with 8,500 Sanitation workers across all fifty-nine New York City Sanitation districts. Sweep 3, Manhattan 3.  
Photo by Robin Holland, date unknown  
Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

Ukeles, whose forty-plus year residency with the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) made her the city's first artist in residence, inspired what was to become the PAIR program years later. Rad, as part of The Lost Collective, worked with the Administration for Children's Services in 2016. Barnard worked with the Department of Probation.

Ukeles began the conversation describing her pioneering partnership with DSNY. She had proclaimed herself a "maintenance artist" in 1969 in her *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition "CARE,"* challenging the low status of women's work in the household, and connecting it with societal and earth maintenance.

## Ukeles, Maintenance Art, and the Department of Sanitation

**Mierle Laderman Ukeles:** New York City had a dreadful fiscal crisis in the 1970s. The city almost went bankrupt. Many people pressured the city to "sell the Sanitation Department," to go private. It was a time of hysteria. 60,000 city jobs were cut. Art critic David Bourdon wrote a great review of a performance I did with 300 maintenance workers in the downtown branch of the Whitney Museum in 1976. He suggested that the Sanitation Department call its work performance art and replace its cut budget with a grant from the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts].

I sent a photocopy of the review to "the Commissioner," not knowing who that was. A woman from Sanitation called me and said, "How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?" I said, "I'll be right over." That was 1977. I went because it was perhaps the biggest maintenance system in the world. It was like going to maintenance heaven, to the major leagues. The Commissioner appointed an assistant and also the head of training, Leroy Adolph, who trained new sanitation workers, to drive me all over the city and show me, teach me, where Sanitation was, who they were, what they did: garbage collection, truck garages, mechanical sweeper garages, section offices, incinerators, landfills. I spent one and a half years doing research, learning.

[...]

Then, from July 1979 to June 1980, I walked the streets with sanitation workers over the eleven months of my *Touch Sanitation* performance. I faced each worker, asked to shake his hand [then an all-male workforce], and said, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive," to each individual person in the system—8,500 workers. I would go wherever they were in all fifty-nine districts of the city, and spend at least an eight-hour day with them. Because I felt that message, even though New York is the center of international information systems, got lost. Why do they feel invisible? They are out on the street every day.

[...]

The opening of *Touch Sanitation Show Part I*, four years later in 1984, was another performance called *Cleansing the Bad Names*. I sent a telex from headquarters, asking workers to send the real, bad names that they have been called on the street. Then we painted these bad names all over the seventy-five-foot glass front of the building in SoHo housing the [Ronald] Feldman Gallery and its neighbors. With Sanitation carpenters, we erected two-story scaffolds on either side of a lady's porch in Brooklyn that we re-created from the best of many, many stories that a sanitation worker had told me. He said, "Seventeen years ago we were picking up in Brooklyn and it was really hot. We loaded this lady's garbage, and then we sat down



Rachel Barnard (left), Rad Pereira (center), and Mierle Laderman Ukeles (right) in conversation during the City as Partner event at The 8th Floor, NY. Photo by Emma Colón.

on her porch steps to take a little rest. She opened up the door and said, "Get away from here, you smelly garbage men. I don't want you stinking up my porch." Then he said to me, "That stuck in my throat for seventeen years. Today you wiped that out." It was the best thing that ever happened to me as an artist. And then he said to me, "Will you remember that?" As if I could ever forget it. So to remember that, I rebuilt the lady's porch and we painted these bad names. 190 people from all sectors of society climbed the scaffolds to wipe out the bad names. Mercer Street was closed. Many Sanitation families formed the audience. Many tears were shed that day.

[...]

## Public Artists in Residence

**Ukeles:** I have two rules for PAIR, NYC's Public Artists in Residence program. One, the artist who takes on these commissions has to be prepared to learn. You are not entering an empty studio. You have to be prepared to learn the mission of the agency, its physical presence, its locations, and

the people who work there. It's a real pre-existing place that's different and often quite complicated. The second rule is that the partnering agency must agree up front that they will not tell the PAIR what to do. The artist has to be free to invent what they do. They are not your helper. Maybe they will decide to be your helper, but that is for the artist to decide. Otherwise, it's not art. So work it out. [Laughter.] And trust the artist.

**Rebeca Rad:** Thank you, Mierle, for such a beautiful presentation, for paving the way for us. I worked with The Lost Collective along with Josh Adam Ramos, Britton Smith, and Keelay Gipson. We are a collective of playwrights, musicians, composers, producers, and performance artists. We saw the call for PAIR on Facebook. They wanted an artist to work with LGBTQ foster youth. And we were like, "If there's anyone for it, that's us." We had been working on a multimedia dream performance play called *The Lost* that's centered around a Harlem foster youth dealing with his sexuality, issues of belonging, and finding his place in the city. This was perfect. So the four of us applied together. And we were chosen.

Our initial proposal was to work with the youth on the play and its different elements: hip-hop, spoken word, poetry, and rap music. We worked in three stages. First was research, to get to know the thirty youth in five foster homes spread throughout Brooklyn. The homes are really far apart and a few of them are pretty tough to get to. During the research stage, we took them to different cultural programming. Luckily it was during Pride Week so we brought them into a lot of related cultural events happening around the city. We got to know about ten of them from the beginning who stayed with us for a lot of the programming.

When we talked about theater with them they were like, “Nah. We don’t want to do that at all.” So we said, “OK. Cool,” and we shifted our proposal. That was interesting to navigate. One of the biggest learning lessons working with the government was that they want deliverables and to know upfront exactly what we are going to do at the end of the year. We didn’t know because we didn’t know what the youth wanted to do yet. The staff was really flexible with us in making a program that was structured but that left room for us to build throughout the year. We knew that we were going to end with a public performance or something public.



Working with The Lost Collective, a youth participant created the mood, cinematography, and music for a personal film. Image courtesy of Keelay Gipson.

The second stage began when we decided to make films with the youth that we generated through exercises about their past, present, and future. We worked a lot on film production and using their phones so that they could do it even without us there. We taught them about film structure, framing, scouting locations, and figuring out how to make anything with their friends. That was really exciting. We had them keep a notebook about their project next to their beds so if they woke up from a dream or a nightmare they could write what their visions were telling them. A few of them were really interested in music production as well. So Britton, who is a composer and songwriter, developed music with them for their videos. They went to a studio and got to develop brand new songs with a half dozen live instrumentalists. It was really exciting for them.

Then we thought, “Let’s have a sampler platter.” We brought in dance hall artists, hip-hop artists, chefs, martial artists. We were conscious to bring people that looked and talked like them to build trust more quickly. We gathered material for the Big Bang, which happened at the end of the year’s residency, at the Nuyorican Poets’ Café. We displayed their drawings and photography, screened their films, and played their music. In the beginning they kept to themselves in a corner of the room and people from the city agencies were taking up space. But by the end, the youth owned the space and were being loud and fully themselves. I think my favorite exchange was when one of them said, “I’m hungry.” And we were like, “There’s food right there.” And they were, “No, no. I’m hungry to keep doing more of this work.”

[...]

**Rachel Barnard:** I’m only six weeks into PAIR, working with the Department of Probation. Their stated goal is to create better relationships between clients and officers to lead to better case outcomes. If the relationship is good with your officer, you are far less likely to have your

parole violated and be incarcerated. So this is a great project. What I have learned so far is to spend the time to deeply engage. I thought I was great at engagement but the leadership has asked me to really slow down. Since then, I’ve been in every office and touched about 600 people, shaking their hands or hugging, following the brilliant precedent that Mierle set.



Collages created by probation officers in Brooklyn and Queens workshops will form the basis of designs for “Wisdom Pavilions”—whimsical spaces installed in DOP lobbies for one hundred-plus officers and clients to share insights and ideas for the future with Barnard. Image courtesy of Rachel Barnard.

We are creating “Wisdom Pavilions” in the lobbies of probation offices where I will sit one-on-one with a client or officer and listen and map out their stories. We’ll also create shrines in the client bathroom where you can deposit your wishes in exchange for hand lotion or incense or whatever. So for staff to engage, they will have to share the client bathrooms. From there we hope to create new artful interventions where clients and officers will have an opportunity to engage in new ways beyond the formal interview process that they have each week. I’m excited and feel very lucky.

## Conversation

**Rad:** I know a lot of artists distrust or mistrust the government. I was curious about how you both kept a guerrilla or gung-ho artist spirit alive within your work while doing projects within the establishment.

**Barnard:** I think when you are embedded in a community, let’s say the Department of Probation, you see that the national dialogue is very limited and often pits two very traumatized communities against each other. In this case, officers and clients. One of the questions in the “Wisdom Pavilion” will be, “How old were you when you first knew there was a criminal justice system?” It is to show that clients and probation officers often have similar life stories.

I’ve seen clients lose it. Maybe they are hungry and their children are being taken away from them. Maybe something terrible has happened, like violence within the family and they are screaming in the waiting room. I’ve seen officers remain really calm and say, “Are you ready for your meeting now?” They want to get the meeting done because it is required for clients to fulfill on their probation.

And I have seen cases not like that. I am so moved by our shared humanity and how generous everyone is in working with me

and creating a space where we can appreciate each other’s humanity through art. I think it is very healing and transformative. Of course transformative for the lives of the people, like clients and officers, but also transformative for the systems that are supporting them, or meant to be supporting them. They become the authors of that system. So I don’t feel very guerrilla, though sometimes I’m not transparent with criminal justice professionals at a high level that this is my way of thinking.

But in the courtrooms [in Barnard’s work with arts-based diversion program Young New Yorkers], I really care for everyone . . . for the young people and the prosecutors, too, because if they are being looked after, they are going to have the space to make generous choices. They are going to have the space to see the young people. One partnering judge calls court a “churn” with how dehumanizing it is for young people to be collapsed into their rap

sheet, one after the other. But that churn is also the environment in which prosecutors work. If we create celebratory spaces, prosecutors say, “Oh wow. I helped that young person.” Just introducing the words “young person” rather than “defendant” makes a huge difference. So I find it an honor and almost a spiritual practice. I guess I often am subversive. Like the installation where kids chose to give roses to the NYPD because they wanted to talk about police brutality.

**Audience member:** Thank you all for great presentations. I’m really interested in something that you just said and that Mierle was saying about the everyday. You are in these places, and you are bound with people, and you are saying that it is very emotional, but I can also imagine that it is anxiety-producing. You have to defend yourself against feeling anxiety for eight hours so maybe you glaze over or something. How do you maintain your attention and the kind of attention that you want to maintain? What is your psychic process, if that’s not too personal?

**Rad:** That is an amazing question. I have worked with care workers on how to deal with secondhand trauma and use the arts as sort of an exorcism of the leftover energy that hangs on to you so that you can go home and renew. So you are ready the next day to do it again. I have some tools and I get comfort in the mundane as well. Finding how to bring more colors into the day-to-day routines of the staff at the homes, and do the project with them, let them breathe and follow along and infuse it with the creativity and light, when in so many situations there was a lot of darkness. As an artist, I have the discipline and the stamina to maintain that deep well of hope. To me it was in how we find the pathway of light through all the routines and not let [the trauma] stick.

**Barnard:** I love talking about secondhand trauma. Because we need to be way more open about it so we can be fully human in our difficult jobs. Personally, I’ve learned to be grateful as a way to stay present. Then I have weird personal practices. On the weekend I will go on a “weeping walk,” and I will give myself permission to walk for a couple of hours and collect all of the beautiful things that

I see. Not literally in a handbag, but as a list in my head. And feel things. Then sometimes you need to grieve. There are losses. Human losses. I do weird, kooky things like write letters or make drawings and then walk them up to a park in the evening to let them go. Personal practices that you’ve got to find out for yourself. But it is helpful to be open about it. And I feel like I could change the world if I could just become a morning person. When I do things in the morning for myself I am infinitely more effective. The everyday, daily stuff.

**Ukeles:** There are two things when you talk about keeping attention up. There is putting out a proposal and then having it rejected, and then the tension is problematic. Nerve-racking. A lot of things happen but a lot of things don’t. And dealing with things that don’t happen is very difficult. I find dealing with government that sometimes takes way too long the hardest. Things that could get done quicker, don’t. There are some people who don’t have the courage to say yes and take a chance with an artist. We are used to taking risks, but we need people to do that with us. A lot of people won’t; they say no or don’t let something go past a certain point. That is tough.

You need help. You need partners. Rachel says that she honors the prosecutors. She is not breaking the system up to find people that she honors. She is honoring everybody in the system. You need people to help you and to take risks with you. I think that is kind of nice. I wish that artists would say that more out loud. I have also found a lot of people say in the Sanitation Department, when we are working on a big project, that it’s such a cool thing for them. They have had so many thoughts about doing things and the artwork has a kind of opening to it that they can enter. They have been waiting to do that, and they are ready.

[ . . . ]

**Audience member:** Making art in these nontraditional venues and working with nontraditional populations, I’m wondering how the people you work with experience what you do with them. Do they consider what they do as art? Or do they think of you as social workers or

## I’m nobody’s social worker. They don’t need my help—they need the society to change.

people doing a kind of therapy with them? These aren’t groups that are traditionally exposed to art, so what do they think they are doing? What is their understanding of the art? How do they come to understand, if they do, what they are doing as art?

**Ukeles:** First of all, I wasn’t asking sanitation workers to think of their work as art. It is their work. When I would come I would say, “I am an artist, and I invite you to participate with me in this performance. I would like to shake your hand and thank you.” Then I would hear what happened to them out on the street. Like, “People think I am part of the garbage.” It was just stupid, and I would say that this is feminist artwork. Here I am in a garage standing there with my Canal Jeans outfits. Cheap painters shirts and pants. Anybody remember [the store] Canal Jeans? Pink, green, lavender, like work uniforms. I would say why I thought this was an artwork and what it was about. I wanted to be very clear: I invite you, you are free to respond and to participate or not, as you wish. I asked them to participate, to enter the artwork and be part of it. I really always resisted and don’t accept any notion that I am there to be a social worker, to help them. Because my motivation—where I came after almost ten years of making work about maintenance, that started off with a manifesto

about invisibility as a feminist artist—I was trying to build a coalition between those who do invisible work in the home and the caretakers of the exterior city as home, which is how I saw the city, as home, living like your own home. I wanted to collapse and destroy and explode that invisibility of what is right in front of your fucking face. That it is time to destroy that, and we have to do it. I can’t do it myself, and my bunch of feminist artist friends can’t do it themselves either. We have to make big coalitions with a lot of people that are feeling pretty invisible. That is what I was trying to do.

I’m nobody’s social worker. They don’t need my help—they need the society to change.

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*Rachel Barnard is an A Blade of Grass Fellow and PAIR artist working within the Department of Probation.*

*Rad Pereira (formerly Rebeca Rad) was a PAIR artist in 2017 with the Administration for Children’s Services as part of The Lost Collective.*

*Mierle Laderman Ukeles began working with the New York City Department of Sanitation in 1977 as the city’s first artist in residence, inspiring what was to become the PAIR program years later.*



# The Art of Golden Repair: Youth, Police, and Horses Upend the Politics of Care

By Melanie Crean

*Kintsugi* is the Japanese art of golden repair. It is the centuries-old practice of fixing broken pottery by filling in cracks with seams of gold dusted lacquer. The newly recreated piece transcends brokenness by rendering the memory of its wounds in precious metal. I write here, then, not about how the world is breaking, but rather a meditation on how to create the potential for golden joinery.

The context is my art project, *No Such Place as America*. I initiated the piece with Pat Kelly, a self-described African American cowgirl, and founding president of Ebony Horsewomen, Inc. (EHI) in Hartford, Connecticut, which uses equine-assisted therapy, horsemanship training, and educational programming to foster leadership and academic advancement amongst local youth. EHI used to share their site with the Hartford Police Department's (HPD) mounted patrol, which facilitated a shared sense of purpose amongst the two groups. In the past three years, as HPD's relationship with the community has become increasingly tense, the nearly bankrupt city of Hartford dismantled this unit.

In response to a challenging relationship between a largely white police force and a mostly African American community, Pat, the EHI teens, and I invited HPD's newly constituted group of Community Affairs officers to work with the youth on a series of equine therapy workshops. Pat's hope is to make the community safer for her kids. My impetus is this impossibility: any world we create that is overseen by armed groups of law enforcement officers is one with grave and potentially life-threatening power imbalances. No art project can rectify this imbalance, but art can create a space apart that offers the possibility for change. What happens if we reposition conflict mediation as a form of care?

Questions of care were very much on my mind as I approached the project. Social bias and economic constraints often limit social imagination, and may affect our assumptions about who might bring valuable expertise to processes of care, how, and

Opposite: Ebony Horsewomen, Inc. Equestrian Center, Hartford, CT. Photo by Melanie Crean.

what possible forms that care might take. How might we upend assumptions about who has the credibility to design social constructs of care? If the outcome is meant to help in deconstructing power imbalances, can that begin by structuring the process as an equal exchange?

Sometimes care is more associated with affect than actual recuperation. What if we shifted the understanding of care as mainly being an unseen act of service to something different? Not a one-time patch or singular upgrade that would soon need to be reprised; but a continuous, ongoing, preemptive un-breaking and continual re-configuring toward the change we want to see, aligned with the poetics of imagination and play?

There are several pitfalls in conceptualizing care. Shannon Mattern notes that care can be romanticized; not every effort that is seemingly well-intentioned has positive impact.<sup>1</sup> Some approaches to care are conceived through colonialist ideologies, paternalism, and design savior-ism, such as certain types of humanitarian aid, fundraising galas, and "hack-a-thons." Miriam Ticktin writes about humanitarian causes that structure beneficiaries as being victims of biology or fate, and who in their victimhood are somehow "less than."<sup>2</sup> Social bias notwithstanding, beneficiaries of aid, i.e., people at their most vulnerable, are often used as political pawns. One need only consider people seeking asylum at the US-Mexico border, or state workers during a government shutdown.

As a society we make hierarchical assumptions about who designs and initiates maintenance infrastructure versus who actually does the work, or who is the "humanitarian benefactor" versus who is assumed to be the less powerful recipient. Distinctions between these practices are often shaped by constructions of power related to race, gender, class, and other political, economic, and cultural forces. To maintain and initiate care can be time and resource intensive, and thus may in fact be more possible and easily leveraged by those with privilege.

Ebony Horsewomen is located in North Hartford, CT, at the edge of Keeney Park. It's an incredible

place with gardens and horses, improbably yet most importantly located in an urban center. The animals and grounds are mainly cared for by local teens, who volunteer to come daily. Those in the organization's Junior Mounted Patrol and competitive dressage groups often stay for years, and over the organization's thirty-year history, have maintained 100% high school and 90% college graduation rates.

Like many police departments throughout the country, Hartford's Police Department struggles to maintain a positive relationship with the community. On the one hand, several officers are long-standing community organizers from the neighborhood, working with groups such as My Brother's Keeper. On the other hand, in October 2018, the city fired an officer who was filmed telling a group he felt trigger-happy.<sup>3</sup> Though disconcerting on several levels, the event did lead to the department restructuring its team of community service officers to now include several people working with local grass roots organizations.

*No Such Place as America* begins with local youth of color participating together in equine therapy workshops with two groups who are socially charged

with their regulation: police officers and school security officers (SSOs). The workshops are geared toward stress reduction and building trust through non-verbal communication. A central outcome is for the youth to advise on a workshop curriculum that might continue to be offered by young people at EHI for other Hartford teens and officers.

In this working group, the people with expertise did not conform to usual assumptions about who originates civic infrastructure projects. The sessions take place on the home turf of the young people, teens of color, who along with the horses, are both (quite literally) caregivers, and in the context of equine therapy and the grounds of EHI, are in a position of mastery.

The young people at EHI are very much in need of care themselves. Many come from extremely high-stress environments. At fourteen to sixteen years old, they are well spoken, with a quiet sense of confidence. They are used to people thinking they're lying when they say that they ride horses, as they don't meet some people's assumptions about what equestrians should look like. On a daily basis, all year round, they willingly, lovingly, care for the horses; not only feeding and grooming, but laboring in the cold, and mucking stalls. They discuss the bond they establish with particular horses, and quite literally, how the horses care for them.



Equine therapy exercise at EHI from artist Melanie Crean's project *No Such Place As America*. Photo by Melanie Crean.

The other experts in the working group are indeed the horses. Human participants are currently developing trust and communication, as somehow mediated by their equine partners. Pat says equine therapy works because it doesn't require conversation. Being prey animals, horses have acute sensory awareness of what's going on inside the other animals around them. This is particularly helpful for people who have experienced trauma, which is often difficult to access or describe with language. Horses are basically like huge mirrors: if you're anxious, they'll

become skittish and move away, but as you start to relax, you are rewarded with them responding to you, which leads you to continue to self-regulate, probably without even realizing it.

In Hartford public schools, SSOs are socially charged with regulating teens' behavior. Beyond discipline, a big part of their job is helping young people reset after difficult experiences so they can focus on learning. Andrew Woods, the Executive Director of Hartford Communities That Care and our liaison with the SSOs, described the situation: kids who have experienced trauma are often in a continual stress response state of fight or flight. Helping them self-regulate, especially in school, is one of the few ways to stop this cycle. Many SSOs and social workers have experienced trauma themselves. In the week I met Andrew, he had spent two nights in the emergency room assisting families after gun-related homicides, which he said was unfortunately not an uncommon experience.

Hartford police involved in the working group include former veterans, who have reported going directly from police training to military boot camp to Iraq, and then back to the Hartford force. Others describe going from intense scenes of domestic violence to a traffic stop within a span of five minutes, without time to wind down. It did not go unnoticed that these patterns of being in a state of continual stress response have unfortunate similarities with the young people.

Beyond being simply therapeutic or educational in the context of the workshops, the idea of care as discussed here comes into play if and when the sessions both complicate and further relationships. This happened last fall in an exercise which required the officers to be blindfolded. Though tense, they allowed this to happen without pause.

In later discussion it came out that they never operate without one of "their own" having eyes on a situation; a clear echo of experiences in the armed forces. They described themselves as being both incredulous and grateful for the blindfolding experience, which they said would never have happened anywhere else.

What then, of golden joinery? At the end of each session, the group synthesizes the essence of what has happened that day in a series of tableaux, often related to self-protection, security, and control. In the spring, we will expand on these tableaux to create a series of short performative videos, moving beyond the functional nature of repair, to metaphor and the creation of something new.

Though still very much in process, our working group is addressing various aspects of the "who" and "how" of power relations involved in acts of civic care through the improbable combination of young people, law officers, and horses. Throughout the work, my considerations about care have continually come back to the art of acknowledging the trauma of the break, and considering the various potentials of reframing it into poetry. Many questions remain. Care requires a foundation that goes beyond communication to establish and maintain trust, but this foundation is only a beginning. Those who maintain also require care. True care can't be a series of band-aids; it must be continual and generative. For now, however, in the presence of the horses, I am reminded that a sense of unspoken harmony amongst the group is a good place to start.

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*Melanie Crean* is an *A Blade of Grass* Fellow, artist, educator, and filmmaker whose work explores how representations of power can be equitably shifted in media, culture, and technology.

Notes:

- 1 Mattern, Shannon. "Maintenance and Care." *Places Journal*. November 2018, <https://placesjournal.org/article/maintenance-and-care>. Accessed January 2019.
- 2 Ticktin, Miriam. *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- 3 Ormseth, Matthew and Jeanna Carlesso. "City Fires Hartford Police Officer Filmed Telling a Group He Felt 'Trigger Happy.'" *Hartford Courant* 17 Oct. 2018, <https://www.courant.com/community/hartford/hc-news-hartford-discipline-barone-20181017-story.html>. Accessed January 2019.

# Curating as Caring: Tending to Partnerships between Artists and Communities

Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director of The Showroom, London,  
interviewed by Jan Cohen-Cruz



**Jan Cohen-Cruz:** Elvira, would you tell us a bit about the role of the curator as traditionally understood and how it is the same or different at Creative Time, where you were Senior Curator until December 2018? It may be useful for our readers to know that Creative Time includes among its three core values “the role of the artist in shaping society,” so I am also wondering: in your role there, who beside the artist is needed to be aligned with that goal?

**Elvira Dyangani Ose:** I always go back to the origins of the term “curating,” or “to curate:” *curare, avere cura*, “to take care.” Historically, the curators were keepers, scientists, in charge of the managing, preserving, and displaying of objects and artworks in a museum or a private collection. They hold historical and aesthetic expertise about the art from a region or an era; they were, for better or for worse, their interpreter. As such, they were trained as historians, art historians, or philosophers. Occasionally, they achieved scientific knowledge and methodologies to analyze and preserve the integrity of artworks and objects—and as such, they could be archaeologists, conservators, or restorers. Besides that, fast-forwarding centuries into a much more specialized field—which includes artists as curators, philosophers as curators, curators as artists; the institution of a canon (Western canon, primarily) and the multiple attempts for its distortion; various waves of institutional critique; the renewal of certain narratives to bring about change and inclusion, etc.—the figure of the curator still involves a lot of caring.

While at Creative Time, I formulated projects that aimed to continue an incredible legacy of initiatives that considered public space as a platform for the encounter of art and citizenship, creating opportunities for social engagement, critical discussion, and aesthetic perusal. Implicit there is the consideration that artists have a role to play in shaping society through the politics

Opposite: Preview of *The Chimurenga Library*, which was co-curated by Chimurenga, The Otolith Collective, and The Showroom. *The Chimurenga Library* inserted itself into The Showroom’s existing frameworks, functions, and structures without displacing its everyday activities. Photo by Dan Weill, courtesy of Chimurenga.

of their practices, but they are only one group in a large equation which involves other cultural agents; many parties within cultural, institutional frameworks and beyond; and audience and non-audience—one shouldn’t underestimate the transformative capacity of an individual passerby! To respond to your question more directly: everyone is needed if we are to transform our society in this critical political juncture. Artists exercise their expertise to give visibility to theirs and others’ concerns, fears, and aspirations; to give voice to theirs and others’ histories and stories, current issues, and speculative futures.

**Cohen-Cruz:** This issue of *A Blade of Grass Magazine* is focused on “who” is needed to make socially engaged art? How would you respond to that as Director of The Showroom, given their collaborative and community-based approach?

**Dyangani Ose:** In a recent conversation with Nikolay Oleynikov, member of Chto Delat, about their radical art education initiative, The School of Engaged Art, we measured what was commonly understood as “socially engaged” art, which they prefer to call “engaged,” simply understanding that art is essential for human becoming. For them, that engaged position defines the role of art in society. They formulate a hybrid program of education operating in a particular context, aiming for the transformation of their immediate environment—for them in Russia today, the threat to its democratic freedom and lack of criticality of their cultural institutions.

For us, that immediate environment is the Church Street area in North London, where The Showroom has for almost a decade fostered experimental practices and reflected upon everyday life through its engagement with the local community and advocacy for international trans-disciplinary forms of arts and education—especially through a project initiated by my predecessor, Emily Pethick, called *Communal Knowledge*. Under the umbrella of *Communal Knowledge*, we have created collaborations between artists, residents, and community groups built on trust and respect. One of those examples is our relationship with the Penfold Community Hub, which hosts a collective

medicinal garden conceived by Uriel Orlow and constructed in collaboration with gardener Carole Wright, Church Street Bengali Women's Group, Penfold Hub Gardening Group, residents, and center-users. All these events and conversations developed in the lead-up and were a fundamental part of his exhibition, *Mafavuke's Trial and Other Plant Stories*, in 2016. In the context of my vision for the organization, *Communal Knowledge* will become a leading principle and a way of rethinking a new institutional methodology, in which incorporating long-term research projects into its existing community initiatives will be paramount.

Every activity at The Showroom would aim to generate the formation of a temporary diverse community, bringing together art and non-art audiences, and inviting them to take part in decision-making processes about exhibitions, local initiatives, events, and workshops. The objective is to create close collaboration through institutional partnerships—as it has occurred so far—but also to bring together local expertise and intelligentsia, collective experiences of individuals and groups. To that extent, the program would formulate an “exportable” methodology, a communal knowledge, through the vast range of display and the artistic experiences and encounters it would provide. In that respect, the role of various formal and informal centers of research and groups, as well as academia, would be fundamental to the constitution of a sustainable network for research and applied knowledge. Open to art and non-art audiences, locally and at large, projects will aim to produce multiple art forms, trans-disciplinary research, and new structural institutional challenges in which a new sense of leadership and agency could emerge.

**Cohen-Cruz:** I understand that you often tend to live—even if temporarily—in places where you're curating because, as you said in an interview, “I believe it is important for the curatorial experience to embrace context: the place, the communities in that particular area, the people, and the people in the institution I work with.” Please describe the impact of the people from the area and from the institution in your curation practice.

**Dyangani Ose:** Many contemporary biennials request their curators or artistic directors to live in the city where the event is taking place. In that requirement there is a clear investment in locality, an intention to formulate the hosting city as a platform. I believe it is essential to know the context in which your project is going to develop, even more so if your endeavor is temporary. It should be permeable to local issues and communities. It is not a condition, but I think biennials have to serve to bring under the spotlight issues that are fundamental to the local that could be relevant to an international viewer. A balanced equilibrium of that is my perfect scenario. Audience is at the core of the projects that I do; I always try as much as possible to be in dialogue with artists and colleagues to formulate the exhibition space as a place to be inhabited.

**Cohen-Cruz:** I read that you and the artists “talk with communities and individuals, questioning their specific concerns or a specific contingency of the time, and all of a sudden that is under the spotlight at the time of the exhibition . . . What you need to do to find these important voices is to go where they are, to have a conversation with the people that are there. It's important to do research. You have to be in the field.” Why do you as a curator need to be “in the field?”

**Dyangani Ose:** That goes back to the issue of caring. If you do not care, if your curatorial project does not have a sense of urgency, why bother to do it in the first place? I'm not saying that art is capable per se of bringing about social change or providing solutions to some critical concerns, but it

formulates awareness, it creates visibility, it distorts the socio-historical processes; it can formulate something larger than art itself, something that affects us all. It allows the chance to ponder questions, it offers uncertainty as a political position, here to be understood as a reflective place from which to start a debate. Ultimately, it reminds us that our sense of determined rights and other things in our lives that we believe are certainties, are not always guaranteed. It keeps us alert without forgetting that it also has the potential to envision a myriad of new imaginaries and possibilities.



*Elvira Dyangani Ose is the Director of The Showroom, a lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, member of the Thought Council at the Fondazione Prada, and an independent curator.*

*Putting the Medicinal Garden to Use, a 2016 workshop by Uriel Orlow and Jeanne-Lyse Sibaud as part of Communal Knowledge at The Showroom. Communal Knowledge invites artists and designers to work collaboratively with community groups, organizations, schools, and individuals from The Showroom's North London neighborhood. Photo by Dan Weill.*

# Stay, Listen, Organize:

## Bridging Appalachia's Past and Present through Sound

By Robert Sember

Careful listening is more important than  
making sounds happen.  
— Alvin Lucier<sup>1</sup>

A Blade of Grass Fellow Brian Harnetty is an artist who chose to stay. Born into a multi-generational Appalachian family in southern Ohio, his work as composer, musician, and sound studies scholar is both inspired by and addressed to his local communities. His commitment to place is a radical choice, in the original sense of “radical,” meaning to have roots, specifically to share the experiences and concerns of communities to which we are accountable.

Brian uses a deceptively simple practice to root himself in place and community: he listens. He has listened for close to twenty years, which has enabled him to realize a remarkably diverse collection of compositions, recordings, and writings.<sup>2</sup> His latest work, *Forest Listening Rooms*, brings together residents and workers from rural Appalachian Ohio for collective, site-specific listening sessions. In these events, listening is a tool for community organizing.

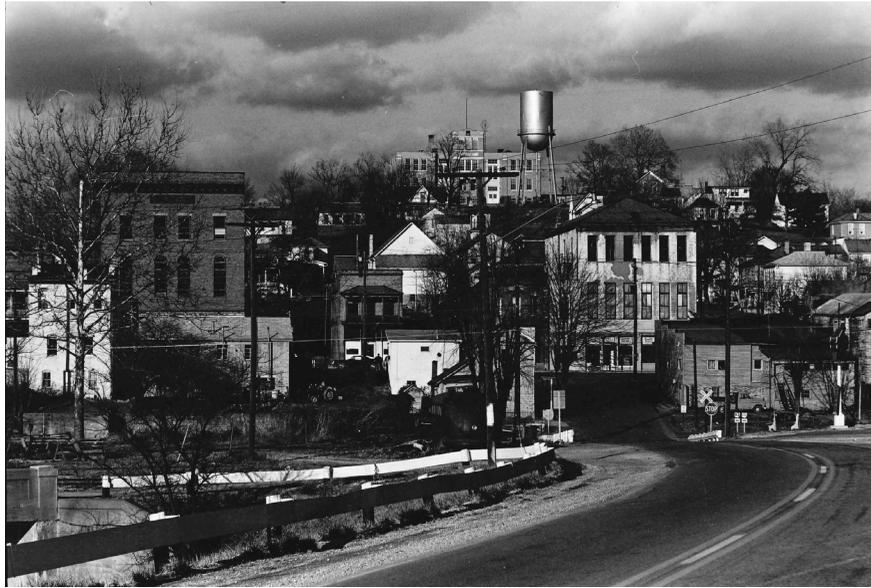
Brian did leave once. In 1998, after completing an undergraduate degree at Ohio State University in Columbus, his hometown, he moved to London to attend the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) where he earned an M.Mus. in composition. He intended to stay in Europe. However, at the urging of his mentor at RAM, the composer Michael Finnissy, he returned to southern Ohio to initiate an inquiry into the musical and sound history of Appalachia. This project has taken many forms, including archival research, sound walks and site recordings, ethnographic observations, musical performances, and sound compositions.

Brian spent his first decade home listening to the region's sound archives, extracts from which featured in his musical compositions, recordings,

Opposite: A listening room session in the Wayne National Forest led by Brian Harnetty with local Shawnee residents Alicia Caton and her daughter. Photo by William Randall.

multi-media installations, and writings. The albums *American Winter*, *Silent City*, and *Rawhead and Bloody Bones* are products of this phase of his inquiry. For each, Brian curated a collection of songs, interviews, radio broadcasts, site recordings, and sound ephemera from the holdings of the Berea College Appalachian Sound Archives in Kentucky.<sup>3</sup> He then annotated each extract with acoustic and electroacoustic compositions. Sometimes his music lies beneath, at other times beside, and, only very occasionally, it moves over the original sounds. On one track, a simple melodic line echoes the lilt in an interviewee's voice. In another, a rhythmic pulse accompanies a recording's flaws. It is as though I am listening *with* rather than *to* Brian.

For *American Winter*, his first album (released by Atavistic Records in 2007), he gathered archival recordings of folk songs about or featuring references to winter. These are not professional, studio recordings but rough ethnographic or folkloric documents in which ordinary folk sing and converse about songs, memories, and themselves and their loved ones. Brian does not edit out the non-musical elements. For example, the first track, “The Night is Quite Advancing,” begins with a woman nervously or distractedly preparing to sing. “I’m going to get my voice clear by going to Florida,” she announces. Then, after noisily clearing her throat she sings: “The lonesome scenes of winter inclined to frost and snow.” She stops after a few seconds, struggling to remember the second verse. We hear her discuss this struggle with someone else present for the recording. Brian's music is present throughout the sequence. He composes an almost melody to accompany an almost song. As the woman speaks, clears her throat, and sings, he sounds simple, spare notes: keyboard, percussion, plucked strings. Also, the reverb is high so the notes feel spacious and gentle. On other tracks, Brian's musical accompaniment highlights different sonic qualities and emotional tones. For the choral, “I’ll



Archival photo of Main Street in Shawnee, OH. Photo courtesy of Little Cities Archive.

Have To Go Off and Be Gone Tonight,” he provides an atonal composition for toy piano that punches up the rhythm in the recorded song. When the singers pause and talk, Brian is silent, and I lean in to hear what is being discussed.

#### LISTEN

Track 1, “The Night is Quite Advancing” from Brian Harnetty’s 2007 album, *American Winter*. <https://bit.ly/2TET7J6>

Track 4, “I’ll Have to Go Off and Be Gone Tonight” from *American Winter*. <https://bit.ly/2TBxM37>

Sound artists and scholars sometimes refer to audio recordings as “sound objects.” This metaphor underscores the materiality of sound (the meeting of surfaces, movement of air, and vinyl or electromagnetic tap) and the tactility of sound editing, which once involved splicing tape and today usually requires keystrokes. By keeping the recordings intact, Brian ensures that we not forget their status as archival objects. With this condition in place it is as if, with his musical compositions, he picks up the archival sound objects and feels their different textures, their weight, their materiality. Brian notes that archival recordings do more than document moments and

their ambience. The recordings he uses also preserve the sounds of their making and their survival, such as the signature timbres of the recording apparatus and tics and crackles that are analogous to the feel, smell, and discolorations of old papers. Each audio layer is a register of time. The content of the recording, its subject, is of its time, as are the rhythms and cadence of voices that differ from those in contemporary speech. Scratches on vinyl or the decay of

magnetic tape produce grain and hiss, testifying to the medium’s fragility and endurance. Brian listens deeply to the full spectrum of archival sounds and composes works that teach us to do the same.

Brian defines his restrained and minimal musical interventions as forms of “co-presence” (a reaching across the distance of time) or “imagined presence” (the re-embodying of sound). That is, he foregrounds the tension or contradiction between the pastness of history and memory’s aliveness, its presence. It is a tension or paradox he does not resolve by abstracting the sounds from their context, by transforming them into music. As place and time-specific dialogues, these works reaffirm his decision to stay. He wants us to know that for an archive to exist, someone had to stay and listen.

Performances of these archive-based compositions led Brian to hear how his neighbors heard their pasts. On more than one occasion, relatives, friends, and acquaintances of people from the recordings introduced themselves and shared their memories. Similarly, people responded to recordings of and about specific events and places with more stories, their stories. Under these conditions, listening assumed a dialectical form: listening inspired dialogue, and dialogue guided

Brian back to the archive to learn more. Brian shared with me that these encounters encouraged him to compose with specific audiences in mind. Thus the compositions shifted from being the aim of his work to a tool for guiding listening and dialogue.

In 2014, Brian completed a PhD in Interdisciplinary Art at Ohio University. His topic was the sound history of southern Ohio, which he explored through a combination of sound art and ethnographic methods. The rigorous attentiveness and deep listening involved in ethnographic research no doubt contributed to his growing interest in who listens, where, and under what conditions. These concerns informed his next major composition *Shawnee, OH*, a commission from the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus where it premiered in October 2016.

As with his prior compositions, *Shawnee, OH* draws deeply from the region’s sound archives, including, this time, the Little Cities of Black Diamonds Archives.<sup>4</sup> Founded in 1872, Shawnee was once a mining boomtown. Brian’s maternal ancestors, Welsh miners seeking work in the newly discovered coal fields, arrived that same year. From 2010–2015, Brian repeatedly visited the town to explore his personal connection to it. The final work presents eleven aural portraits of people with close ties to Shawnee. In performance, these compositions are accompanied by historical images and video documentation. Like his sound compositions, the video pieces are collages of found and composed materials. Again, Brian chooses to listen to archival objects, following where they lead rather than providing an expository structure such as a chronological or narrative sequence.

*Shawnee, OH* touches on many facets of the city’s history but never strays far from the painful, perplexing, and contentious role mining plays in the area. In one section, we hear the activist, teacher, musician, and filmmaker Jack Wright sing: “You rulers of the forest, this song to you I’ll tell / Do the impact study, save us from fracking hell.”

Wright sings to the tune of Florence Reece’s classic 1931 solidarity song, “Which Side Are You On?”

Reece’s husband, Sam Reece, was a union organizer for the United Mine Workers in Harlan County, Kentucky.

#### LISTEN

Live performance excerpts of Brian Harnetty’s *Shawnee, OH* at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio (October 27, 2016), and the Tecumseh Theater, Shawnee, Ohio (October 28, 2016). <https://vimeo.com/198400547>

In another phase of the performance, a young boy interviews his grandmother about mining accidents. He failed to extend the microphone to her so we do not hear her responses. We must infer what she said from the boy’s follow-up questions. After announcing, “I am going to ask my grandma questions about the olden days,” he asks:

Um, grandma?

In the mines, do you know how many people died?

Do you know anyone that was in the mines?

Can you tell me three people?

Can you name them?

The accompanying music, performed on banjo, fiddle, and piano, recalls the simple, cyclical refrains of a dance or song. The accompanying video moves from a black and white photograph of an elderly woman leaning on the back of a bench in a diner and looking directly into the camera, to one of a young man standing on what may be the front porch of the same shop, a faded Coca-Cola sign on the walk behind him. Next is a few seconds of slightly out-of-focus, color film of a grey-haired and bespectacled woman standing in front of her house, followed by color footage of a young boy wearing a jean jacket with a canvas bag over his shoulder. He walks down the street, stops, looks at the camera, and moves in closer. As these fragments of old color film and black and white photographs accumulate, we start to feel the place and its people. A few of the photographs are of men dressed in mining uniforms and holding their mining gear. It is the juxtaposition of these mundane and mostly cheery images with the boy’s questions about fatal mining accidents that mark an epochal presence, those points when tragedy

thrusts life into history. This awareness is all the more forceful because, like the absent voice of the interviewed grandma, it is a silent, invisible presence.

## LISTEN

“Boy” from Brian Harnetty’s sound and video composition, *Shawnee, OH*.  
<https://vimeo.com/187986783>

Brian was determined that *Shawnee, OH* be performed in Shawnee, which it was in early 2017 at the Tecumseh Theater.<sup>5</sup> In an interview with Mya Frazier, a journalist from *Columbus Monthly*, he describes the performance as the culmination of years of “deeply hanging out,” a process of listening that meant, “I can’t detach myself from the piece . . . It’s not an abstract thing. It’s a very concrete world, and there are people connected to the archives, and I have a responsibility to do a piece that I believe in, something that offers respect and dignity to the people I have been sampling.”<sup>6</sup>

I met Brian during his years of “hanging out” when, in 2010, I was a visiting professor in Ohio University’s Theater Division. At the invitation of anthropologist and musician Marina Peterson, also Brian’s PhD supervisor, I returned to lecture and facilitate workshops on the intersection of ethnography, sound studies, and sound art. As a member of the sound art collective Ultra-red, I organized a listening session in 2013 that Brian helped facilitate. He shared an archival recording and asked us to describe what we heard.

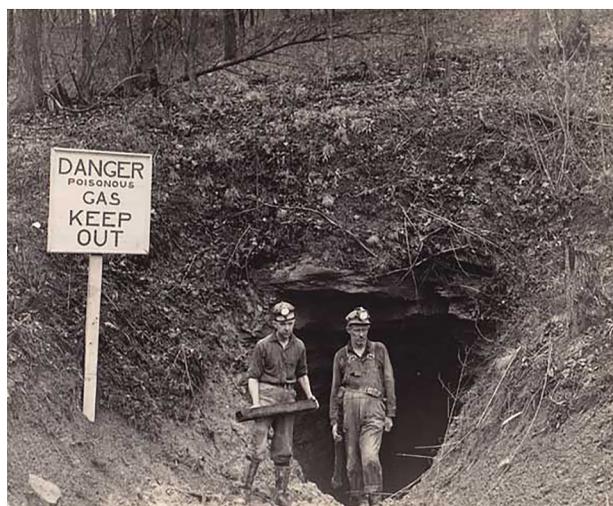
For *Forest Listening Rooms*, Brian has left the theater. He now carries the archive to key sites in the Wayne National Forest, a patchwork of public land covering over a quarter million acres of Appalachian foothills in southeastern Ohio. He invites people he knows from his years of work in the region to join him for sound walks, listening sessions, and conversation in open-air “rooms” or sites. He also reaches out to people he does not know, especially those outside his network of academics, artists, and community organizers. *Forest Listening Rooms* will culminate in a public listening session.

## LISTEN

Documentation of “Tecumseh Lake Trail (formerly the XX Coal Mine), Wayne National Forest, Shawnee OH,” a listening session from *Forest Listening Rooms*.  
<https://bit.ly/2uaHeva>

One of the listening rooms is Robinson’s Cave in New Straitsville. There, beginning in 1870, various emerging mine unions including the Knights of Labor met in secret to help form the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers, later renamed the National Progressive Union. The listening session in this room might include archival recordings of people talking about their or a family member’s participation in strikes. Brian has made this sharing of the archive part of an iterative process of recollection and discussion. He records the discussions at each gathering and integrates extracts into future listening events. This process is reminiscent of the ascending spiral frequently used to illustrate the repetition-with-difference nature of long-term community organizing. These cycles of reflection and dialogue systematically build collective literacy and community engagement.

It may seem that as Brian expands his circle of listening by reaching out to new communities and working in different locations, he is moving further and further from his work as a composer and musician. At the heart of both practices, however,



Mine Fire East Entrance, Shawnee Tunnel.  
Photo courtesy of Little Cities Archive.

is the importance of accompaniment, co-presence, and attentiveness. In our conversation, Brian spoke of two key social practice-type lessons that have emerged from the project. Both draw on qualities he has nurtured over the past two decades of sound work.

The first lesson concerns how one invites others to join a process. Invitations are slow, multi-phased engagements. Brian frequently returns to places and conversations to affirm his commitment and trustworthiness. He also joined AmeriCorps to work with others on stream restoration and the development of non-extractive businesses. This shared endeavor adds legitimacy to his more recognizably artistic work. He now also spends time with people in their homes and at work. This process, he recounts, is transforming him in much the same way he was transformed by his close work with archival materials. A further dimension of the invitation process is Brian’s willingness to stay beyond disagreements, which are mostly likely to emerge when discussions turn to mountaintop removal mining and fracking. The stakes of these disagreements have grown substantially given the

current national political climate. This practice of staying through disagreement leads to the second lesson.

Acting locally is a direct contribution to national and even transnational struggles. The contradictions that shape life in Appalachia reverberate across the nation and the world. Brian references the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s observation that “[Appalachia] is a place that is at once diffused and intensely localized, incorporated into a national imaginary and left out, intensely tactile and ephemeral as the ghostly traces of forgotten things.”<sup>7</sup> He has stayed to listen from within these contradictions and is now inviting others who have stayed to do the same. We would all do well to pay attention to this work because it comes from a place where people know what is at stake.

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*Robert Sember* is a faculty member at the New School’s Eugene Lang College and a member of Ultra-red, an international collective of sound artists that address issues of housing, public health, sexuality rights, and racial justice.

## Notes

- 1 Cox, C. and D. Warner. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. New York & London: Continuum, 2004. 63.
- 2 To learn more about Brian Harnetty’s work, I recommend starting with the series of dispatches he wrote for NewMusicBox in 2016 on the sounds of labor, activism, and everyday life in contemporary Appalachia, <https://www.newmusicusa.org/profile/brian-harnetty/>. Then dive into his website where you can listen to and watch extracts from his albums and videos, <http://www.brianharnetty.com>.
- 3 Berea College’s sound archive is one of the most important collections of Appalachian recordings in the world. The archive includes recordings made in homes, churches and local and regional festivals of traditional music, local lore, religious celebrations and testimonies, radio broadcasts, and oral histories. Visit the Berea College Library website for additional information about the archive and to access finding aids, at <https://libraryguides.berea.edu/bsaresearchguides>.
- 4 Held in community rather than academic spaces, the Little Cities of Black Diamonds Archive is a repository for all forms of information about the history of the cities and towns in Ohio’s southern Perry, northern Athens, and eastern Hocking Counties. The physical archive is located on West Main Street in Shawnee and is open Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. See <https://littlecitiesofblackdiamonds.blog>.
- 5 The Tecumseh Theater was built in 1907 by the Improved Order of Red Men, one of the region’s many fraternal organizations. It was originally known as the Red Men’s Dining Hall. It has a double-height, flat floored theater without fixed seating, enabling it to be used for vaudeville shows, basketball games, as a roller skating rink, and as a movie theater. A fire in the 1960s severely damaged the building and it was vacated and slated for demolition in 1976. A group of local citizens formed to save the building. They bought the property, renamed it the Tecumseh Theater after the local first nations leader who fought to protect his people and his land, and have been slowly renovating it. The theater is now part of the National Register of Historic Places District in Shawnee, Ohio.
- 6 Frazier, Mya. “Columbus composer helps us learn to hear.” *Columbus Monthly*. 28 Feb. 2017. <http://www.columbusmonthly.com/lifestyle/20170228/columbus-composer-helps-us-learn-to-hear>
- 7 Stewart, Kathleen. *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

# Toy Soldiers and Parking Lots:

## Participatory Theater with White Rural Virginians

By Trey Hartt & ashley sparks

The *Good Old Boys* project by A Blade of Grass Fellow ashley sparks explores the archetype of the “good old boy” and the intersection of race, class, and gender. sparks describes a good old boy as both an individual: “honest, hard-working (sometimes working paycheck to paycheck), enjoys living off the land, loves his momma, God, and country;” and as a network: “those men are a little more complicated—making handshake deals behind closed doors, holdin’ onto political power, and most likely a county sheriff is gonna look the other way when one of them breaks the law, though laws may not apply to these men.” This article addresses who was involved in the creation of the work and the rural, white men it was intended for. Selections from the *Good Old Boys* script interspersed between commentary illustrate key points.

*Good Old Boys* is a deeply personal examination of ashley’s hometown in Augusta County, Virginia of the men she spent countless childhood mornings hanging out with at the nearby 7-11, and of the “death rattle of white, male privilege,” as she explains. The national conversation on whiteness and white supremacy since the election of Donald Trump elevated the urgency of the project, which began with a simple question, “What is your definition of a good old boy?” It evolved into a complex struggle between complacency, compassion, and confrontation. During the creation of the script, ashley wrote, “The country is becoming more divided. We are losing our ability to sit and have a conversation across difference. *Good Old Boys* explores that complexity and leans into conversations across age, class, and political ideology.” This project is about the power of socially engaged art to push through the armor we have created in order to have the difficult conversations that many of us, particularly white folks, avoid having. Here’s how the play is set up:

### SETTING

A parking lot in front of a 7-11 or an interstate gas station. The audience may come and go, as at any public place of business.

The set includes coolers and lawn chairs that mark the perimeter of parking. There is a pile of children’s toys including a broken robot, miniature Civil War army men, two miniature grills set up with an elaborate diorama of the Shenandoah Valley built out of saltine crackers, sugar wafers, Little Debbie snacks, and peanut butter. A musician surrounded by vintage gas station signs sits in a rocking chair.

### TIME OF DAY

pre-dawn or sunset

### FOR COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

This play can be read at gas stations, in living rooms, or on carpools. It is designed for audiences of seven to twenty people gathered in a circle. Episodes can be read to spark conversations on the topics evoked.

### CHARACTERS

**Uncle Jackson:** A community narrator, elder, patriarch; also plays *The Michael boys’ momma* and their daddy, and *Pastor Carmichael*, who sometimes frames and asks the questions (not a facilitator).

**John John:** Musician and sometimes facilitator of conversations.

**Abe Michael:** Younger brother. Drives a truck. More sentimental. Also plays *Sheriff Davis Coburn*.

**Caleb Michael:** Older brother. Veteran. Drives a vintage race car that belonged to his father. Sentimental and restrained. Also plays *County Commissioner Andrew Early*.

If a community reading, either *John John* or a fifth person reads the stage directions.

Opposite: Remnants from a Civil War reenactment scene in the play *Good Old Boys*. Photo by Pat Jarrett.

Doing the project in ashley’s childhood community was important. As a white artist engaged in social practice around the intersections of race, class, and gender, ashley working with other white people reinforced a key tenant of anti-racist organizing—white people should engage in understanding racism, its history, and its impact without relying on people of color to feed them that understanding.<sup>1</sup> For ashley, place was inextricably linked to who was involved in the creation of the *Good Old Boys* project and who the work was for.

ashley workshopped the project by presenting drafts of the script in front of audiences to test ideas and refine content. ashley reflects, “The process of workshopping the script was actually the work of engagement and uprooting racism.” Workshopping took place in many iterations, in intimate settings where participants or audiences had a chance to deeply explore the content with each other. Who was part of developing the script and who the script was presented to were vital elements in ashley’s process, just as important as the quality of the performance itself.

History is a main character in the play. The characters and narratives created over a century of well-crafted and strategic ideology are present in the script to address racism and white supremacy. This became especially important after the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville that ashley and I attended. Witnessing hundreds of white people carry the confederate flag alongside the Nazi flag and other overt symbols of hatred and racism reinforced the urgency to trace racist ideology historically.

In the following script segment, ashley highlights the historical characters and events that feed the good old boy narrative, particularly of the white men in Augusta County, who voted against secession but suffered greatly during the Civil War when much of the farm land and animals (“the Breadbasket of the Confederacy”) were burned to the ground by the Union army. Much of the text comes from verbatim interviews. How white people in this region of Virginia have internalized that narrative and how that narrative has shaped the identity of the Southern good old boy is a thread in the project’s tapestry.



The characters in *Good Old Boys* use toy figurines to reenact a Civil War battle in a performance of Episode 2: *History is Child’s Play*. Image courtesy of RAVA Films.

In a Hardee’s parking lot, Dale Burleyson, narrator and musician in *Good Old Boys*, starts the performance with a song. The play was performed in front of intimate audiences and incorporated humor and *The Dukes of Hazzard* as a pop culture metaphor. Photo by Pat Jarrett.



**EPISODE 2:  
HISTORY IS  
CHILD’S PLAY**

**SCENE:  
I AIN’T PLAYING  
WITH DOLLS . . .  
I’M REMEMBERING.**

We see two brothers, Caleb and Abe (inspired by Bo and Luke Duke of *The Dukes of Hazzard*), at eleven and fourteen years old. Caleb is dressed in a gray button-down shirt. They reenact the Battle of New Market. The Shenandoah Valley was the site for many Civil War battles, this one particularly brutal for the number of teenager soldiers from the nearby Virginia Military Institute who died in battle.

**Caleb:** The date is May 15, 1864. Line up your men over here, see you are coming down from the North and prepare for a whoopin’. You are running the men for Union General Franz Sigel. And I’m the Confederate General John C. Breckinridge.

**Abe** (doing a terrible German accent as Sigel, a German immigrant to the US): Well men! Let’s move ‘em out and down. Line up! Kill the rebels!

A battle ensues between the two brothers. Abe/Sigel’s men start to win. Abe is very proud and makes an excessive amount of cannon fire noises. Caleb’s side doesn’t retreat but slowly falls to the ground.

**Caleb** (as Breckinridge in a thick upper crust Southern accent): I hate to do this . . . but put the boys in and may God forgive me for the order!

Caleb takes out another set of miniature men, even smaller since they represent teenagers.

**Abe** (as himself): What boys?

**Caleb** (as himself): VMI Cadets. There were a bunch of young soldiers from VMI that were there. They weren’t much older than me.

Another prominent thread is the lived experiences of the men ashley is closest to: her father, his friends that she grew up around, her childhood friends, and prominent local figures like the county commissioner. Spending many hours visiting with them, hanging out at 5 a.m. at the local 7-11 where they spend most mornings, having conversations that were vulnerable and intimate with her dad, and asking questions of men that pulled back the veil of toxic masculinity and white supremacy were all part of the process. Sometimes interviews were incorporated into the script verbatim, other times large themes (like the Lost Cause narrative<sup>2</sup>) were translated through Caleb and Abe.

The work required much emotional labor and vulnerability. It was deeply personal, speaking to the internal transformations we all must undertake in order to transform our communities away from the social ills that plague us. ashley has described her own internal battle when hearing an interviewee justify slavery, captured in the excerpt that follows. She stayed present enough with him to plant a seed of transformation, rather than yelling or shaming him into a different perspective or, worse, just shutting down the conversation altogether. This dynamic played out countless times across racial, class, and gender lines in the pursuit of honest conversations that informed the script and ultimately the honest conversations ashley elicited through audience engagement.

**Abe:** *What were they fighting for?*

**Caleb:** *They wanted to protect their land. Their homes.*

**Abe:** *From what?*

**Caleb:** *Yankee invaders.*

**Abe:** *What were the Yankees fighting for?*

**Caleb:** *Ideals.*

**Abe:** *What are ideals?*

**Caleb:** *Ideas you believe in.*

**Abe:** *What were their ideals?*

**Caleb:** *Preserving the tyranny of the federal government. They were savages.*

*Music: Battle Hymn of the Republic*

**Abe:** *In school we learned they were fighting to preserve the Union, for law and order. The idea of democracy and a UNITED States. That was the dream of the founding fathers—a union of different states. If you don't like the election results you can't just throw out the process and secede.*

**Caleb:** *We—including your ancestors—were fighting for liberty and to overcome tyranny, just like when our founding fathers were fighting against England.*

**Abe:** *Whose liberty?*

**Caleb:** *Huh?*

**Abe:** *Whose liberty were we fighting for?*

**Caleb:** *Farmers! Men—who done knowd what's right and how to run things. The North was threatened by our financial success. They knew the South was growing stronger and didn't want to see that happen.*

**Abe:** *How was the South growing stronger?*

**Caleb:** *We were a thriving agricultural economy.*

**Abe:** *Because we had free labor.*

**Caleb:** *Slavery would have died out due to mechanization in a matter of years. And that's not the point.*

**Abe** *(in German immigrant accent):* *It's not? How are you gonna separate economics from slavery? How are you gonna separate liberty from abolition?*

**Caleb:** *Whoa—you're really gettin' into your character huh? Mister General Sigel.*

**Abe** *(proud):* *We took a field trip to Harper's Ferry and I did a report on Abraham Lincoln. I watched a movie about Lincoln instead of reading a book.*

**Caleb:** *Our family fought to protect our land and our way of life.*

**Abe:** *What was our way of life?*

**Caleb:** *We worked the land! Didn't they take you on a field trip to the Frontier Culture Museum? Our families was too poor to be slave owners. We were renting the land we was on then, just like we's renting this trailer now.*

**Abe:** *Why didn't they send the men who owned the land? Who owned the slaves?*

**Caleb:** *Rich men paid for the war and made plans for the war.*

**Abe:** *Then why we gotta fight their war?*

**Caleb:** *Men gotta fight for the social institutions that they believe in.*

**Abe:** *Is that the same as fighting for ideals? Our folks didn't own slaves so why were we fighting to defend slavery?*

**Caleb:** *We weren't fighting for slavery, we were fighting against Yankee invaders. Besides, there were black confederate soldiers.*

**Abe:** *As cooks and ditch diggers. Why are you defending slavery?*

**Caleb:** *I'm not defending slavery, I'm defending my family.*

**Abe** *(channeling his momma):* *Momma says . . . Love the sinner and hate the sin. We can love our way back relatives, but that don't mean we gotta be proud of 'em . . .*

The audience represents the final character in *Good Old Boys*, as important to the goals of the project as the people who contributed to the script. Ashley created the framework of a playful and interactive space to examine southern white male identity, class, and privilege and to intimately discuss the impact of changing demographics and class divides on the archetype of the good old boy. Her approach included keeping audience sizes low and intimate, and using humor and *The Dukes of Hazzard* as a relatable popular culture metaphor. The explicit intention was to create anti-racist, intersectional work (connecting issues across race, class, and gender) that addressed the lived experiences of southern white men head on, for southern, predominantly white, audiences.

Ashley wove a story that connected history to honest lived experiences and filtered them through her artistic lens, incorporating comedy, satire, and playfulness in order to draw audiences into difficult conversations. Audience engagement and hospitality was written directly into the performance of the play, not as a separate post-play dialogue. From the moment audiences arrived they were greeted by ensemble members who acted more like party hosts than actors. Audiences were offered something to drink, perhaps an old-fashioned ice cream cup, or served a potluck lunch. Characters interrupted scenes to ask the audience questions about the topics raised and facilitated conversations.

*Interrupting the scene, the narrator and musician engage the audience in a conversation about the impact of the war and of slavery before continuing.*

**Uncle Jackson:** *October 1864, The Burning of the Shenandoah Valley. We were the Breadbasket of the Confederacy and we were devastated. Families who didn't have anything to begin with were left with less.*

**John John:** *Holding the ashes of rage and tears. Cries of babies and women who had done nothing wrong other than being born on the south side of the Mason-Dixon line. They say smoke filled this valley, like when God burned Sodom. Our boys that made it out and marched homeward were looking back, an Army of Lot's Wives covered in soot, and instead of turning to salt they became fire. Rage and regret began festering inside.*

**Uncle Jackson:** *There are mornings I look over the hills and mountains of this valley and wonder what's right below the surface. The bones and ashes that create fertile farmland to feed families.*

**John John:** *The ghosts of those who were innocent and those who weren't. Do we reap them into the wheat? The corn? The soybeans?*

**Uncle Jackson:** *Sometimes the men we love fight for dark causes.*

**John John:** *What does liberty and justice for all mean when our economic success is based on slavery?*

**Director Lady (shifts audience into conversation):** *Here we are, over 150 years later. How is the history of the Civil War still impacting us?*



After a Civil War reenactment scene in *Good Old Boys*, actor Derek Roguski pauses the performance, held outside a local brewery, to facilitate a conversation with the audience about the impact the Civil War had on people in the region. Photo by Pat Jarrett.

The project is about meeting folks where they are, metaphorically and literally. The play was read by community members in Ashley's family's carport, performed by theater professionals in parking lots, and workshopped for churchgoers after Sunday service as part of their Bible study. And over four days in September 2018, nine fully realized performances took place at eight different locations including a local brewery, the BP gas station/Subway, the Hardee's parking lot, and the nearby 7-11.

I participated in a 5 a.m. reading at a BP station where Ashley's dad and his friends have met for years. She asked a friend of her father, a Civil War re-enactor she had already interviewed for the script, to participate in a reading that morning because he wouldn't be able to make it to the full sharing of the script in a couple days. It was the scene about the Civil War. He easily agreed. Both men read the script with earnestness and grace, allowing the words to thoughtfully chew in their mouths. From there, we had a jumping off point to talk about slavery, plantation life, its ties to wealth-building today, and our different perspectives on why the Civil War was fought and how it impacted life in Augusta County.

When asked if he and his friends discussed topics like this, the friend quickly said no. This is the crux of Ashley's project. How can the power of storytelling, theater, and performance inspire conversations about difficult topics from sexism, the impact of the Civil War, and how slavery has shaped our society today, to immigration, labor, and the values of the good old boy?

Notes:

- 1 For more information on organizing white people to work toward racial justice, see [www.showingupforracialjustice.org](http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org).
- 2 The Lost Cause narrative depicts the South's defeat during the Civil War as noble and promotes the ideas that the Civil War was a battle of states' rights fought valiantly by the noble and deity-like generals and that slavery played a small, benign reason for secession.

**Trey Hartt** has been undoing and dismantling white supremacy personally and professionally for over a decade and currently works in the youth justice movement through a national initiative called *Performing Statistics*.

**Ashley Sparks** is a southern theater maker and engagement strategist who believes that humor and radical hospitality are necessary tools to create social justice. For more information visit [www.goodoldboysproject.com](http://www.goodoldboysproject.com) or contact Ashley directly at [www.ashleysparks.com](http://www.ashleysparks.com)

# Evolving the Institution:



## Who Belongs?

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

In the first of a series of essays about the art institution today, A Blade of Grass Executive Director Deborah Fisher posits an ideal relationship with the institution's audience as a mutually supportive "virtuous cycle." The people who make the institution possible, she writes, need to feel like they belong and are valued as participants. She looks at obstacles to that ideal relationship and evokes a fascinating set of examples to suggest a way to get closer to it.

I've been thinking about how to make sure all the people who make A Blade of Grass possible feel like they belong, and are valued as participants . . . which feels like a total no-brainer—the most basic, common sense priority an arts institution, or any nonprofit, could possibly set for itself. A healthy art institution is, at root, a productive meeting of art and audience that keeps happening over and over again. By repeatedly bringing art and audience together, ideally the institution hosts and nurtures a virtuous cycle that generates all the things art needs to thrive—meaningful discourse, community, context, and financial resources. I want my work to be easy and successful, and I can't really think of a more efficient way to feed this virtuous cycle than to make sure the people who make it happen feel good about their participation. But you know . . . every time I start designing it in my head, a funny thing happens. I realize over and over again that this isn't exactly how art institutions work. Art institutions frustrate the virtuous cycle because they add value through excluding and gatekeeping—deciding what is and isn't art, what should and should not have an audience, who is and is not a creative person, and so on. A Blade of Grass actively participates in this work, and we have good reasons to do so—discernment and curation are definitely not bad things! But it's also true that art is unique because everybody is creative and has an imagination, and the art world is applying all this discernment and curatorial control to creativity and the imagination. This means that there's a potential to at least partially or obliquely exclude and reject 98% of all the people who make the institution possible, and that's an incredibly inefficient business model. No

wonder arts funding is shrinking, everybody's got gala fatigue, and museum attendance is declining.

This is the first in a series of essays that focus on belonging—why art institutions struggle with it, how we might increase it, and why doing so might make us feel better, do cultural work that is more appropriate and impactful in this moment, and be more financially resilient. I'm writing this series with a perspective that's broader than A Blade of Grass because most of the opportunities I see are systemic and collaborative—there's much to address right here at home, but there's also only so much one little institution like us can do. And it's going to rely heavily on comparing how we do things in art institutions with the norms and behaviors of lots of other types of formal and informal "cultural institutions"—such as parks, neighborhoods, sports clubs, farmers' markets, workplaces, bars, and online communities. This is important because this notion of belonging comes up a lot in creative placemaking and socially engaged art discourse, and when it does, it tends to feel like yearning or diagnosing. I'm doing that too! But I want to move beyond yearning for what we don't have, and into building something that we want, and I think the way to do that is to notice, over and over again, that there are a lot of models out there for imagining how we might approach our work differently. Out in what I guess we could call the "world world," as opposed to the "art world," people are actually quite good at engendering precisely that feeling of belonging that I think matters so much to the relevance and sustainability of art institutions! It's important to see these examples clearly.

Opposite: Quidditch players in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Deborah Fisher.

Lastly, the reason that this is going to be a series of essays, rather than a list of things that we might lift from other places, is because I don't think it's advisable to simply try to do the business of art the way other businesses are done, or copy and paste whole ways of doing things from other sectors. That feels like it's having a moment right now, and the results can be a little dumb and grim. What I'm advocating is something a little more synthetic and playful. Here's what I mean. When I

it holds difficulty and paradox. It's often alien and alienating. It is the one thing that can be both by and about the outsider. Great art is often hard to see because it can articulate or even momentarily conjure what is legitimately beyond us. This is so important—it's the mechanism by which art propels us into the future! If we don't keep the fundamental difficulty of art in mind, or otherwise approach this problem of belonging in a simplistic or reckless way, we could craft a well-intentioned

## Great art is often hard to see because it can articulate or even momentarily conjure what is legitimately beyond us.

am walking in Prospect Park and I notice how the quidditch players' self-organize right alongside the football and soccer players, I do not conclude that museums should do more sports—that would be a sad, cynical dilution of the core work of the institution. But I do get two great insights that enable a different way of thinking about belonging. First, I notice that there's an equivalence between the soccer, football, and quidditch teams—the park is not making any judgements about the validity of a fictional sport. Also, the park is a place where you have the agency to both play sports and watch them. The questions that come out of these insights hit the root of my work in a way that brings out a lot of curiosity, possibility, and play—and not a lot of easy answers! There are a lot of quidditch equivalents in contemporary art—forms and ways of making and thinking about art that are not sitting neatly within the particularly mannerist art historical period we're living in. How might curatorial practice evolve to better see and incorporate artists who are "playing quidditch?" Art can also be a lot more fun and understandable to look at when you're also engaged in making it. Why aren't making art and looking at art more fluid and integrated activities in an art institution?

I'm approaching this in a way that preserves complexity and allows for expansive questioning because there is one really good, totally inviolable reason that art institutions don't engender belonging that needs to be protected. We can never forget that great art is often great because

plan to turn art into mere entertainment. That's no good! The art itself can never have an obligation to make anybody feel like they belong. But the art is not the institution—there's a lot of interesting work an institution could do to hold and bridge that difficulty if institutions weren't acting as obscure as the art, and if there weren't so many other, less noble reasons that art institutions aren't good at generating a sensation of belonging.

By drawing from other examples, my goal in this writing will be to keep returning back to this point, and more clearly articulate what an art institution could do to support, share, and build community for these wonderfully difficult qualities that we cherish and need in art. A really good martial arts dojo, for example, creates a common culture of bravery and inquisitiveness among its practitioners that an art institution might want to emulate. This dojo culture generates helpful peer pressure; sometimes enacts the ideology behind the martial art; sustains a common awareness around things like mindset, body position, or nuances of technique; and holds surprisingly intimate relationships. This dojo culture helps everybody who trains there decide, day after day, to keep coming back to face the inevitable fear, boredom, challenges to the ego, and injury that are inherent in committed combat training. I think art institutions could learn something from this, and invest in creating brave and inquisitive audiences instead of merely explaining art to audiences, to take one example.

Before building such a brave and inquisitive audience, we would need to address the obstacles in our path. Most of the reasons art doesn't engender belonging are about resources, scarcity, and how art and creativity are being valued. These broadly economic aspects of the problem are easy to critique and difficult to change, but I don't think it's impossible. I also feel a responsibility to try. After all, assigning value and managing resources are legitimately the work of institutions. An art institution can't unilaterally change what resources are available or how art and creativity are valued, but institutions can meaningfully inform this conversation about value, resources, and scarcity by doing their work differently. Institutions have played a role in conflating art with an art market that most of us can't afford to belong to, and that makes a lot of people feel economically excluded by art. We don't have to keep doing this—there are

other ways to create and maintain an art economy that institutions could model and participate in. Art institutions manage resources, and there are a lot fewer resources than artists in need of them, so a lot of artists feel quite literally and constantly rejected by arts institutions. A Blade of Grass has an open call, so I think about this one constantly!

More broadly, art institutions tend to add value by making decisions about who is and is not an artist, and who does and does not have an audience. I think that this value proposition needs rethinking—art institutions need to figure out how they are adding value by including, rather than either excluding or educating, people. This is important for two reasons. First, decisions about aesthetic excellence have been used to affirm and normalize systems of structural oppression for such a long time that there is no good reason for a



Souvenir handkerchief available in the gift shop of the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Photo by Deborah Fisher.



Demonstration by Hayato Osawa Sensei at United States Aikido Federation Summer Camp. Photo by Javier Dominguez.

lot of people who are making great art, and should have an audience, to trust them. More obliquely, I also think that using exclusion to the degree art institutions do telegraphs an unintended message to audiences, and that a lot of people who could love art because they're deeply creative people simply don't like being told, even indirectly, that they somehow lack creativity and imagination because they aren't called artists.

Increasing belonging in an art context is about recognizing how belonging is generated elsewhere—noticing that quidditch players belong in Prospect Park—and using these examples to play with these intractable-seeming barriers to belonging that stem from how art is valued and resourced, such as the way we currently value a quite narrow range of artistic expression. This play, I hope, will be fun, like play should be! I am writing from a place of genuine joy. In his book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari writes that this innate human ability to create culture, or ways to belong together, is an evolutionary accelerator—it takes us out of the impulses and limitations presented in our DNA and helps us collectively imagine ways of being

that are far more complex, flexible, responsive, and generative. I believe this, and notice that I am in a state of joy when I participate in this process. In the essays that follow, I'll be writing a lot about my own life and how I get a lot out of a bunch of communities that I belong to. A big motivator in this writing, and in my own institutional practice, is the sense of wonder I get out of these collaborative experiences that grow and transform me. They transform me because I feel connected to others through them, and feel safe enough to be vulnerable in them, even when the experience is quite challenging.

But I also want to keep in mind that the reason to engage in this play is actually quite serious and consequential. As the fundraiser-in-chief at A Blade of Grass HQ, I'm concerned that art just doesn't seem to quite have what it needs to thrive. It's not just that funding is shrinking and participation is declining—the reasons to participate don't add up as nicely as I want them to. And that's really a problem because I believe in art, and what it can do for us on a more societal level. I'm sure you've noticed that along with the insect

**I really do believe that art's difficulty and paradox could also be harnessed more collectively, and put to really good cultural use right now.**

populations vanishing and Antarctica melting and all the wealth rapidly consolidating and OMG what is going on with Brexit and on and on . . . a B-list reality TV show celebrity with absolutely no political experience has been the President of the United States for a couple of years even though he got elected with what's looking like significant help from Russia, and as of this writing has kept the government shut down for a month because the most important pressing agenda item of his administration seems to be stoking white identity politics and fear about immigration rather than serving the American people as a whole by keeping things up and running. This is a moment in which power is being expressed and maintained through manipulating and shaping a culture—by raging on Twitter, fighting a decades-long culture war between “real Americans” and an “elite ruling class,” and inciting a tremendous amount of tribal fear. And this cultural power is hurting a lot of people, including people who voted for this president. Art's difficulty and penchant for paradox has historically been used to create this culture war—we helped make this Two Americas by creating institutional practices that kept art

separate from people. But I really do believe that art's difficulty and paradox could also be harnessed more collectively, and put to really good cultural use right now. We are stuck in a truly dismal cultural moment that is probably not going to be resolved without holding difficulty and sitting with paradox. If art institutions approached their work differently, in a way that enabled high-trust, productive conflict and engaged a lot of different kinds of people in making and enjoying art and culture, I think we could figure out how to hold this moment bravely and curiously, in all of its difficulty, divisiveness, and fear. Just doing that—simply creating a place where we could bravely move through the fear instead of endure it or hide from it—would actually do a lot to help to create the next cultural moment.

Ultimately, I am writing to try to create that possibility.

Note:

1 Quidditch is a fictional sport created by author JK Rowling for her Harry Potter series.



Liz Lerman performing *Swan Lake* with senior dancers. Photo for Dennis Deloria with permission from Dance Exchange.

Our reprinted essay in this issue of *A Blade of Grass Magazine* is by choreographer Liz Lerman, who in the mid-1970s lost her mother to cancer and felt such a need to be with older women that she created a dance company with women ages nineteen to ninety. She is among the pioneering artists who have integrated people into their professional work for reasons of their lived experience rather than for technique per se.

Liz Lerman, "The Roosevelt, Dancing," from *Hiking the Horizontal: Field Notes from a Choreographer* © 2011 and 2014 by Liz Lerman. Reprinted with permission from Wesleyan University Press.

My life changed when my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Only in my mid-twenties, I was able to go home to Wisconsin and be with her. The end was swift. I was propelled into an emotional period of loss and reflection. Although still fairly new to choreography (I had at that time made one formal piece for the concert stage and many informal works for my high school students in a Maryland boarding school), I realized that I needed to make a dance about what my family and I had gone through. I was interested in finding older people to be in that dance.

This was in 1975. It was the same year that Robert Butler had written his book *Why Survive: Being Old in America*, which was the beginning of the aging consciousness movement. It was before people were jogging in the streets. It was before any broad awareness of the possibility of aging well or being physical late in life. In fact, the idea of old people dancing was quite outlandish to most people. But for me it was the only choice I had.

The problem was that I didn't know where the old people were. Returning to Washington, DC, I began calling around and discovered a retirement residence that was within a mile and a half of my apartment. Officially titled the Roosevelt for Senior Citizens, it was known as the Roosevelt Hotel because the building had started life as a grand hotel back when the neighborhood, now a little shabby, was an elegant embassy district. I went to the Roosevelt and told the manager I wanted to teach a dance class. She actually hooted with laughter as I explained that I meant it to be for the residents of the building. But she'd lost her entertainment on Thursday nights, and she needed somebody to fill the slot. She said I could come in for five dollars a week. I accepted.

When I arrived on the first night, the residents who gathered were all seated in chairs, facing me. I danced a little solo for them. Then I said, "It's time. We're all going to dance together. I want you to start by turning your head. . . . We're going to warm up . . . just turn your head." Nobody moved. I thought they couldn't hear me. My own experience with older people had been so fragmentary that I immediately jumped to the stereotype and

assumed I was addressing a room full of people who were partially deaf. I started yelling, "We're going to turn our heads!" Still nobody moved. Then I began to run back and forth in front of them, and finally they began to turn their heads left and right to follow me.

In that moment, I realized that I had stumbled into a weird and wondrous laboratory. Suddenly, everything I believed in was called in question—especially everything that I believed about how to train a person to become a dancer. What exercises did these folks need? How and what could I ask them to achieve? What would good technique mean on an eighty-year-old body? What made them look beautiful? In fact, I began to question accepted notions of who and what was beautiful. As the weekly classes went on, usually attended by twenty to fifty people, I found each one a struggle and an inspiration.

The residence was primarily for frail older adults, people trying to stay out of nursing homes. It was mixed-race, mixed-class, mixed-everything. Several younger retarded adults also lived at the Roosevelt because the city had no other place to assign them. Everyone was lumped together. I was astonished by the things I noticed and then began to think about as I spent time among these people. For example, some of the residents were labeled senile by the staff. This surprised me because I saw these people in dance class and they didn't seem senile to me. I began to muse about the nature of dance and its present-time usefulness. Maybe it was a way out of the symptoms of senility, depending on what definitions people were using for that illness. Of course, I thought to myself, I would be senile too if I had to live in the conditions and isolation of so many of the residents. We were at that time doing a good job of warehousing our elderly. The simplicity and cost-effectiveness of art as a natural intervention seemed all too obvious to me then. It still does, all these years later.

It was also interesting to see how people responded to touch. You can't teach dance without touching. Sometimes I would ask residents if I could touch their backs and then worked on their spines a bit as they unrolled from a forward bend. At the start of

one class a woman approached me and said, “What did you do to my back?” I wondered if I had hurt her and asked what happened. She said, “I cleaned my apartment, I vacuumed, I did stuff I haven’t done in years.” She was so happy. I was the first person to touch her in five years.

I discovered new ideas and new processes at every moment. Slowly I realized that my own teaching was changing, and I brought these changes with me back to the academy, for I was at the same time pursuing my master’s degree in dance at George Washington University.

As I began to spread the word about my work at the Roosevelt and invite friends, colleagues, and guests to visit and observe the classes, I was struck by the number of well-meaning people who would pat me on the head and say, “Isn’t that good for them?” Now it certainly was good for many of these older people. The physical range of their bodies increased as they found the joy in moving, their imaginations became animated as they learned new mind/body connections, their trust in each other grew as they partnered in dance, and their self-esteem blossomed as they made works of art. They were strengthened as a community as well: when the residents of the building staged a rent strike against the management, it was the dance class regulars who organized it.

But it puzzled me that while observers immediately recognized the social good of this practice, they never conceived of the possibility that my work at the Roosevelt was also good for me as a person, as a teacher, and as an artist—and ultimately not only good for me, but good for the art form of dance as well. These benefits were most observable when I brought my undergraduate dance students to the senior center. I encouraged each of them to move around the room before the class actually began, meeting the older people and learning their names. They were greeted with great smiles and often with direct, outspoken comments about their looks, such as, “You are so pretty,” or, “What

a great body you have!” I had become used to this type of conversation, but I was unprepared for the positive impact it had on the women students. I also warned them that, because of the hearing and vision impairments that affected some of the older people, they might have to exaggerate their presence to make connections. I noticed that some of the shyer students were laughing, talking loudly in order to be heard, and in general participating at a very high level. The older people made it so easy to extend oneself, converse with strangers, and be big about it all. I wondered if I hadn’t stumbled into a way of teaching dancers how to project character onstage. If dancing is primarily a mute form, perhaps we had found a way to evolve performance personality that was both authentic and larger than life.

At the Roosevelt, I taught a modified technique class. We began seated in chairs and worked our way to standing while holding onto the chairs as a kind of barre. Eventually we would gather in a circle in the middle of the room and do some kind of extended improvisation with the goal of keeping the older dancers on their feet for as long as possible.

I made sure that everyone could and did participate at the beginning of the class. But I also made sure, as the class became progressively more physically demanding, that those who had reached their



limits could become encouraging observers, able to reenter the movement whenever they saw fit. I also encouraged all to keep adapting the movement so that even as many of us stood up, others could continue seated.

I realized that the participants were learning theme and variation in this way; when I posed all of this as artistic practice, the participation level soared. What became evident to me is that conventional technique classes assume that every student’s body will work at the same pace as the teacher’s. (For example, I’ve known many dancers who come to a class early to warm up so that they will be ready for the teacher’s warm-up, making clear the inaccuracy of this assumption.) At the Roosevelt, I was learning a way to allow for many levels of achievement as well as capacity. And at times, this diversity contributed to something quite beautiful and unusual.

Toward the end of class we would sometimes use an improvisational structure composed of a free-form dance done in the center of the circle with each person taking a turn to solo. I found a way to “shadow” the soloist by allowing plenty of room for him or her to move while remaining available to each in case of imbalance. Sometimes, in the excitement of the music or the audience’s appreciation, the older dancers would find themselves close to falling. I wanted them to stay aware and be responsible, but I also found that shadowing them was an interesting form of partnering.

So often a structure like this has multiple outcomes. In this case, the undergraduates who came to class to help also had to take their turn in the middle, and this is when I noticed how the circle of older adults affected their dancing. Taking their turns, they danced more freely and more beautifully than I had ever seen in their university classes. On the way back to campus they were full of excitement: “I was never able to do triple turns before. What happened?” or, “My leg has never gone that high and with so much ease.” This happened so often I began to wonder why.

Opposite: Rehearsal of *Woman of the Clear Vision*. Photo by Dennis Deloria with permission from Dance Exchange.

I decided that they were dancing so well because they were so loved. The dance environment in which most of these students had grown up was harshly judgmental. It was a liberating experience for them to perform for an audience that offered such unreserved appreciation of their dancing and admiration for their bodies. Instead of reinforcing their own feelings of self-loathing about their physical imperfections, they danced with people who were free with their appreciation. That affected the dancers’ technique, so they danced better. I found myself telling my friends, “Older people are an underused natural resource, literally dying to give their love.” I wondered how many people were just sitting out there waiting for some kind of interaction. That’s when I began to see that not only is dancing in and of itself fantastic, but it is also a way to bring isolated people together.

I began to experiment. What happened when my students started from a place of positive feedback? What if they had a way to appreciate what they had accomplished? I observed that if they could name something particularly meaningful for themselves in what they had done, they could more easily take the next step, isolating a particular technical problem they wished to work on. It wasn’t just a global “I need to be better,” but rather an “I want to work on the way I swing my leg in my hip socket.”

But my larger concern as a teacher of dance was how to get my students to be human as they worked on their technical deficiencies. I have heard the same thing from other teachers, not just in modern dance, but in ballet and in classical music too. Just recently I had a conversation with a ballet master who said, “We train them to be phenomenal technicians, and then we damn them because they have no passion or personality when they perform.” I had tried numerous approaches in college classes, mostly various partnering schemes in which students had to accomplish difficult physical tasks while facing each other. It seemed they could handle either seeing their partners or working on their technical assignments, but not both at the same time.

So back to the Roosevelt we went. (An interesting aside is that when I brought my students from

George Washington University with me to the Roosevelt, the number of older participants sometimes doubled. It was as if the residents could smell young people in the building. Perhaps many came just to socialize, but eventually they were all dancing, which led to wild events with as many as a hundred people cutting loose.) I began to push the older people more in their physical prowess by expanding the idea of shadowing. I paired everyone up early in the class, reminding my college students that they had to keep dancing while keeping an eye out for their partners' health, balance, and technique. As the exercises became more demanding, problems for the young dancers increased. If they stopped dancing in order to be sure their partners were okay, they found their partners quit too. So they had to find ways to be externally involved with someone else while maintaining their own physical work.

We had spent time both at the university and at the senior center talking about what we meant by a safe environment. I had become convinced that a safe environment meant not just a nurturing place but also a place where people were challenged to do better. The older people didn't want to be commended just because they could raise their arms at the age of eighty. They wanted to learn how to do it better, bigger, in unison, with dynamism. They wanted to improve. The older people took pride in the fact that some of them were able to do push-ups, dance for a full hour, turn, or jump. I didn't realize how important this was until I brought the younger dancers to class.

I also noticed that the older people danced harder, with more investment, if they understood the source of the movement. For this discovery, these older dancers and I began to develop what would become a methodology of text and movement encompassing talking and dancing, storytelling

and research, information and feeling, and the means by which these elements could be integrated into a choreographic whole. When I also engaged my more sophisticated college students in these processes, they too discovered a new investment and curiosity in their dancing.

My young students began to develop real skills as they partnered the older dancers. They learned how to dance fully while remaining aware of someone else. They learned how to be in support roles and how to step forward into leadership roles, whether partnering or taking a solo turn. They learned how to focus outwardly even as they listened to their own inner stories. They figured out how to read a room for space, for personality, to spark new movement ideas. But above all, they learned how to be themselves, to be human as they danced. I began to talk about the work in senior centers as a training group for professional dancers. I talked about how it was like money in the bank: the experiences we had at the senior center could serve us later in so many capacities in the dance world.

Beyond the benefits for the seniors and the students, we also discovered the power for everyone in bringing together unlikely groups. Pursuing my intention to make a piece about my mother's death, I held a gathering to explain my plan to the Roosevelt residents, and eight of them agreed to be in the dance. They were joined by local professional dancers and a couple of my students from George Washington.

We were to have a cast dinner at one of the student's homes the week before we opened. Given the social standard of 1975, the student who was hosting got nervous because she was living with her boyfriend. She was afraid that the older women would disapprove. Hardly! What happened instead

was that the older women, so happy to be out of their institutional environment, spent the whole evening talking about sex, who had done what and when. It was an eye-opener for everyone.

It was then that I began to see that from an artistic point of view, we could change people's lives, and from a community point of view, we could change how people interacted. And the evidence kept coming that from a personal point of view we were changing people's physical beings. Every week I got reports from women who could once again zip the backs of their dresses or from men who could get in and out of the bathtub again.

After the premiere of the dance about my mother, *Woman of the Clear Vision*, a regular performance group emerged from among the Roosevelt residents. We made short tours with this group, and I engaged them in a project supported by a Baltimore presenter in which I explored my Eastern European roots. In my research about dances done in the Jewish ghettos, I learned about the "angry" dance. At Jewish weddings the soon-to-be mothers-in-law did an "angry" dance at each other, which would end with them making peace and embracing. What an idea for a community to think about! (It might have helped my first marriage.) Two of the older women danced this. I could not have imagined it any other way.

In this Baltimore project we also worked with young people from the inner city. This was the first of many Dance Exchange projects that I would describe as either cross-cultural, cross-racial, or cross-class. We did the wedding dances with young people and invited them to make their own celebratory pieces. So in the midst of all this Yiddish dancing, the kids came storming through in a fabulous street dance. The kids and the old people came to love each other in the few weeks we were together. Their thinking about what ghettos are and what ghettos mean created an amazing image and raised questions about culture and identity that I would keep revisiting for many years.

## Postscript

Since these first ventures into dancing with older people, the Dance Exchange and I have conducted many other intergenerational projects. The presence of senior adult dancers in our core ensemble has continued to provide a particular grounding to our work as well as a distinctive look to the dances. Who is old and what old means in our society have also changed. Embedded in the perspective that "sixty is the new thirty" is an enormous amount of upheaval, a multitude of new understandings about the biology of aging, and a generation that refuses to retire, myself included. Thus, it is still surprising to me that when the company holds post-performance discussions, almost always the first comment is about seeing the generations together onstage. I wonder why it is still so new, even though it has been thirty-five years since I made *Woman of the Clear Vision* and first considered the fact that older bodies make for great storytelling, beautiful movement, and a curious form of courage.

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*Liz Lerman is a choreographer, performer, writer, educator, and speaker, and the recipient of honors including a 2002 MacArthur Genius Grant and the 2017 Jacob's Pillow Dance Award.*

**The older people made it so easy to extend oneself, converse with strangers, and be big about it all.**



# Ask an Artist:

## Dread Scott Answers Your Questions

Dread Scott, *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*, performance still (1), pigment print, 22" x 30," 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Dear Dread,

**I'm half of Intelligent Mischief, a creative action lab that uses art, narrative, design, and pop culture to bring about social change. We do a lot of training and capacity-building with individual organizers and activist groups around creative direct action, activism, and integrating imagination into cultural organizing. We've found that these activist groups are open to making their work more creative, but are often not able to make long-term commitments to incorporating art into their activism. Do you think it is possible to help organizing to be more creative, or should we focus on activating artists? Or both?**

**Aisha Shillingford  
Brooklyn, NY**

Dear Aisha,

Thanks so much for your question. The short answer is "both." Artists need to get out of the studios and join the struggle. And activist organizations need to be more creative in how they think about and initiate change.

If you and the artists/organizations you work with want to take on some of the big questions confronting humanity, then the artists need to learn from radical and progressive activists who have spent decades fighting to change the world. And the activists shouldn't just continue what they've been doing without utilizing the strengths of artists.

For me, working with revolutionaries, being part of demonstrations, meeting people whose life experience is different than mine (including those who have lost loved ones to murdering cops), organizing activist meetings, being arrested, fighting legal battles, raising money to keep offices open and print flyers, studying communist theory—in short, being an activist—has made important contributions to changing the world, and has also greatly enriched my life and art. Artists who care about humanity would do well to connect with people who are "professional activists" and be part of movements. Many artists already do, but I encourage more to do so and to really go all in.

At the same time, many activist organizations don't really understand art. Frequently, artists attempting to reach out and work with activist organizations are asked to paint a banner or do a fundraiser. Artists should paint some banners and raise funds, but what's needed is beyond better-designed "End the XYZ" banners or a few thousand dollars. Some artists know about intervening in public space and how to shift the ways people think or ask questions. We are willing to attempt the impossible. Artists' boldness of thought combined with activists' determination and knowledge of key questions can produce magic.

It's great that you've experienced organizations open to making their work more creative. If the art/artists genuinely enhance the effects of the activists, why can't these organizations incorporate creativity into their work in an ongoing way? Emory Douglas reimagined design to serve the people when illustrating the Black Panther Newspaper. Laurie Jo Reynolds worked for a decade for the successful closure of Tamms C-Maxx prison. In these cases, artists and activists found ongoing ways for their work to strengthen shared goals.

For activists to see what creative vision can bring to the battles they are fighting will require repeated struggle, challenging some of their assumptions and methods. Working with artists can be messy and at times frustrating: some artists' ideas will be bad or even harmful to the movements they support. Artists in turn must be open to assessing their work and methods in terms of how they serve the strategic goals of a movement. I encourage both artists and activists to consider the complexity of social change, and that art that engages the big questions confronting humanity can still serve the aims of broader movements even when the work is not necessarily directly part of the movement.

The problem you pose is not easy to solve. But when we get these partnerships right, art can deeply connect with people. If you continue to remind people what brought them together in the first place, together they change the world.

Dread

# Artists need to get out of the studios and join the struggle. And activist organizations need to be more creative in how they think about and initiate change.

Dear Dread,

**As a white cis woman curator and artist, I am continually seeking out best practices for being in conversations and actions related to issues facing communities that are not my own. Though I prioritize perspectives and programming ideas from my community partners, and acknowledge them and emphasize their views when I am asked to speak or write about projects on which we collaborate, my current focus is in my home state of Montana, where less than 10% of residents are not white. These partners are often too busy doing the tough work, being leaders in their often disenfranchised, under-represented communities to respond to media or other inquiries or to seek funding, and I've ended up being the public face of these projects.**

**Guilt about privilege and a desire to avoid “do-gooder” frameworks certainly feed my uneasiness in this role, but mostly I question who I, as this public face, need to be to most effectively support these projects and communities and bring attention to issues that may not directly affect my life. How do I most respectfully define my identity and use my resources in public, when a partner of the affected community is unable or unavailable to stand with me?**

**Sherrri Cornett  
Billings, MT**



Hi Sherri,

Thanks for your question. I'm glad to hear that you are mindful of the systemic oppression that defines our society and world.

You have described yourself as a “white cis woman curator.” Your “guilt about privilege” is about whiteness, not about being a woman. Also, you have not explicitly addressed questions of class, but we'll have to leave that for another time.

Get over your guilt. If you are genuinely helping people in the communities that you wish to work with, people will recognize this. And if you are well-intentioned but not well-practicing, people will see through the intent and judge you for your actions. I'm glad for the John Browns of the world and I have no use for the Ben Carsons. No person should mistake Sarah Huckabee Sanders as a fighter for women, though she is female. The real question is the ideas and actions, not identity. In a white supremacist society, people who are white have privilege through whiteness alone, and you will do a lot of harm if you don't recognize this and fight against it. But when you understand this and seriously study, then you can transform your thinking and actions.

You say your partners are too busy to respond to media or to seek funding. But artists and community leaders make choices about how to spend their time. I've yet to meet a leader or artist who doesn't have time for good funding or media opportunities. Ask yourself why the people you are working with don't assess these opportunities the same way you do. If you feel the opportunities you see are a good fit and your partners should make time for them, struggle with them to make the time. To not do this may seem like it is helping them do the “tough work being leaders,” but actually it risks condescension. When you have this conversation, listen to their perspective. You may learn why these leaders think that a particular opportunity is not so good, or that it makes most sense for you to speak on behalf of

Opposite:  
Dread Scott, *Burning the US Constitution*, 3 pigment prints, each print 26" x 20," 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

your collaboration—in which case there's no need to be guilty about doing it. Then when speaking, don't define your identity in relation to a project as the “white woman curator,” but rather as the curator or collaborator or partner. It shouldn't be about you and white privilege, but rather whatever the project is.

Finally, in all of America, including mostly white Montana, all people need art and ideas that challenge white supremacy (and patriarchy, capitalism, and American chauvinism/patriotism . . . ). Showing a lot of radical work of the 10% from your state is essential for overcoming centuries of oppression, even if it's not representative of the demographic, and even if some people feel challenged by this. I hope that you continue to program this work.

Dread

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**Issue #3 will explore how socially engaged art can challenge normativity by affirming physical, emotional, circumstantial, and cognitive differences.**

**Send your questions to:  
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**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.**

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Participants in A Blade of Grass Fellow Suzanné Lacy's project *De tu Puño y Letra* in Quito, Ecuador. Photo by Christoph Hirtz.

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# Contributor Bios

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

**Melanie Crean** is an artist, educator, and filmmaker whose work explores how representations of power can be equitably shifted in media, culture, and technology. She is an associate professor at Parsons School of Design, teaching courses on emerging media, social engagement, and visual culture. Previous work includes directing the production studio at arts nonprofit Eyebeam; managing animation and motion capture teams at MTV's Digital Television Lab; and producing documentaries in Nepal on the effects of women trafficking. Crean has received fellowships and commissions from Art in General, Creative Capital, Creative Time, Franklin Furnace, No Longer Empty, Performa 11, and Rhizome.

**Elvira Dyangani Ose** is the director of The Showroom, London. She is a lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, a member of the Thought

Council at the Fondazione Prada, and an independent curator. She recently curated *Basilea*, a Creative Time project commissioned by Art Basel and Laura Lima's *Horse Takes King*. She curated the eighth edition of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA 2015) and International Art at Tate Modern (2011–2014). She recently joined Tate Modern's Advisory Council.

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

**Trey Hartt** is the Project Director for Performing Statistics, leading its strategic growth as a national initiative. He has been engaged in the process of undoing racism in his personal and professional lives for more than a decade, particularly focused on dismantling white supremacy. In 2006, he began working with The Conciliation Project, a social justice theater company that facilitates dialogues on racism. He is the former Deputy Director of ART 180, a past president of Alternate ROOTS, and the cofounder of the Community Justice Film Series and Community Justice Network. Trey has a BFA in Theater Performance from Virginia Commonwealth University.

**Liz Lerman** is a choreographer, performer, writer, educator, and speaker, and the recipient of honors including a 2002 MacArthur Genius Grant and the 2017 Jacob's Pillow Dance Award. Key to her artistry is opening her process to various publics, resulting in research and outcomes that are participatory, urgent, and usable. She founded Dance Exchange in 1976 and led it until 2011. Her recent work *Healing Wars* toured the US. Liz teaches Critical Response Process, creative research, the intersection of art and science, and the building of narrative within dance at institutions such as Harvard, Yale School of Drama, and Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Her third book is *Hiking the Horizontal: Field Notes from a Choreographer*. As of 2016 she is an Institute Professor at Arizona State University.

**Dread Scott** makes revolutionary art to propel history forward, working in a range of media including performance, photography, screen-printing, video, installation, and painting. He has exhibited and performed at numerous institutions, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Contemporary Art Museum Houston, the Walker Art Center, and Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), and has been written about in numerous publications including *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, *ArtNews*, *Artforum*, *Art21 Magazine*, *The Guardian*, and *Time*.

**Robert Sember** works at the conjunction of public health and cultural production. He teaches interdisciplinary art at the New School's Eugene Lang College where he also directs the social justice scholarship program and is on the faculty of the

Lang College prison education initiative. Robert is a member of Ultra-red, an international collective of sound artists that address issues of housing, public health, sexuality rights, and racial justice.

**ashley sparks** is a southern theater maker, engagement strategist, and facilitator. She has worked nationally with companies such as Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles, ArtSpot Productions in New Orleans, and PearlDamour. As a director, she focuses on creating site-specific devised work and participatory events that may involve line dancing, community singing, or ice cream sandwiches for all. She makes space for folks to rehearse difficult conversations about the intersections of race, gender, and faith. She is a white lady deeply committed to having intimate and challenging conversations about race in support of movements toward collective liberation.

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