

alt break

alt_break art fair: responses to community building

Fall 2016

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Featuring:

Savona Bailey-McClain

Jordana Franklin

Audra Lambert

Kimi Kitada

Sara Reisman

Abigail Smithson

Adam Zucker

For this special limited edition publication we asked the aforementioned contributors from across the arts to answer the following question:

WHICH COMMUNITIES CAN YOU ENVISION ART SERVING AS A CHANGE-MAKER FOR, AND HOW DO YOU ENVISION THIS TAKING PLACE?

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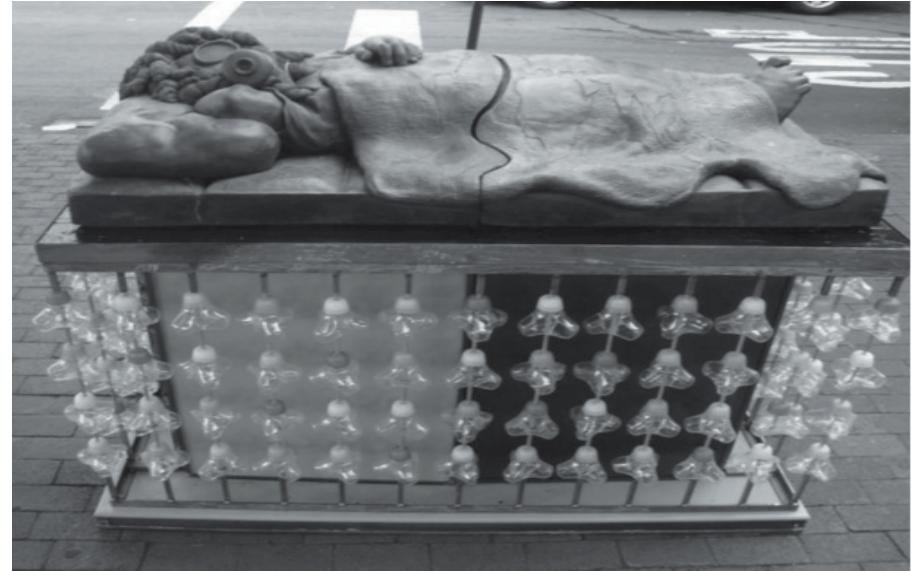
“Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future.” Elie Wiesel

I started the West Harlem Art Fund over 18 years ago, because family and friends were intimidated by art displayed in museums and galleries. It was my hope that if I could bring art in open, public spaces, then those closest to me including neighbors, would feel good about having art around them in their everyday lives.

But that was not enough. There needed to be a deeper connection – one where viewers could see themselves in the works or at least their hopes or dreams. It did not have to be literal but it needed to be apart of a broader conversation that included all humanity. How else can be bridge divides? We need to see commonalities.

So, I started to walk. NYC requires that temporary public art be site-specific. And I would walk and absorb a site and the people in the neighborhoods and get to know them and their connection to the site. Many thought I was crazy. But by engaging, it helped me to research and then work with an artist in a collaborative partnership so we could present works that were not only beautiful but also thoughtful and sometimes challenging.

Sleeping Beauty was one such work. The artist, Kenjiro Kitade, selected the neighborhood – Jackson Heights, Queens because a large Southeast Asian population lived there. The work was a ceramic sculpture with a metal base that shared this familiar tale but with a nirvana theme.



The artist saw a connection between “Sleeping Beauty” and the “Reclining Buddha”, a powerful image where Buddha is undergoing his last illness before entering nirvana or a rebirth. Kitade wanted to go beyond the Buddhist teaching and address what he called a “Change of Value”. In both stories, the main characters experienced passing from one world and entering to another

world by “awakening”. Buddha was trying to find the answer to the “Absolute Truth”, one day he became “awaken”, and at the end of his life, he finally reached in Nirvana. In Sleeping Beauty, the princess was put into sleep for 100 years and was in a dreamlike state. This separated her from the difficulties and sufferings of real life. But then she awoke and came back to the reality. She was lucky enough to fall in love with the prince, her true love and got married. But she was no longer in a dream; she had to face sufferings and difficulties in real life. But by facing, experiencing and overcoming the difficulties of life, one could only walk through the pass to the “Absolute Truth”.



The work was instantly received with neighbors serving as our eyes to safeguard the installation. The West Harlem Art Fund has presented many public installations around NYC that speak to history, people and place. Story Piles by Iliana Emilia Garcia was presented in 2012 at the Tunnel for the Affordable Art Fair and commemorated the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic.

Flying High, 2013 by Dianne Smith was a paper installation at the Bartow Pell Mansion. For Smith, the butcher paper is a metaphor for the treatment of people in developing countries, particularly those of African descent, as well as consumption in the global market.



Images:

Sleeping Beauty: 2010 Artist: Kenjiro Kitade; Guest Curator: Sai Morikawa; Location: Jackson Heights, Queens; Ceramics with metal base and Corian siding with Y bottles
Story Piles Commissioned by the Affordable Art Fair at The Tunnel; Artist: Iliana Emilia Garcia; Location: The Tunnel, West Chelsea, NY, October, 2012; Mixed Media Installation
Flying High; Artist: Dianne Smith; Location: Bartow Pell Mansion, Bronx, NY, March, 2013; Paper Installation

Savona Bailey-McClain is a community organizer and art producer, and the director of the West Harlem Art Fund. Bailey-McClain has curated or organized exhibitions by Vicki DaSilva, JJ Bentley Meeker, Tomo Mori. She has also spoken at the Silicon Harlem Technology Conference, and organized part of the NY-CxDESIGN festival. Outside of art, she is the head of West Harlem Food and Beverage, a merchants association in Harlem, and served as a member of New York's Community Board 9.

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Historically, members of marginalized communities have had minimal involvement in their own mainstream representation. This has resulted in depictions that range from inaccurate oversimplifications to explicitly racist. Art can be a powerful platform for alternative narratives that dispel these stereotypical misrepresentations. For example, Chad Evans Wyatt's RomaRising photographs (2004 – 2016) challenge the traditional stereotype of the Roma culture as nomadic and impoverished. The series was particularly inspired by the media's disregard for the Romani professional and middle class. It features intimate portraits of Romani community members in Eastern Europe and Canada working in the public and private sector. In a different vein, multidisciplinary artist, Gloria Swain, uses art to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and foster a greater understanding of mental illness and homelessness. Swain's Mad Room exhibition (2016) features images and installations that symbolize institutionalization, forced medication, and depression. In creating the work, Swain drew upon her personal experience with anxiety, chronic pain, and depression. The title speaks to both her experience and the anger she feels about the treatment of those with mental illness.

It is incumbent on those in positions of authority to lend their privilege and help foster these types of artistic production. The Ontario Arts Council (OAC) has identified priority groups that have felt excluded or marginalized by systemic barriers, including Aboriginal artists, deaf artists, artists with disabilities, and artists of colour. In 2010, activists Geoff McMurchy and Rose Jacobson presented a field report to the Canada Council for the Arts regarding disability and deaf arts in Canada. They concluded that predominant images of disability range from pitiable to overly heroic, mainly created by non-disabled individuals. This observation speaks to the importance of empowering people from marginalized communities to create their own representations. The OAC's current strategic plan has placed a particular emphasis on these priority groups to support the creation of art and programming that will be presented locally, nationally, and internationally. It will also encourage arts organizations to include board members, staff, and volunteers from OAC's identified priority groups.

In a time when xenophobic rhetoric has dominated political discourse, these strategies that demystify the notion of the "other" have become increasingly important. By exposing people to more accurate and comprehensive depictions of a diverse range of communities, the barriers between them can begin to come down.

Jordana Franklin is a curator and writer whose love of art, feminism, and collaboration brought her to FAC (Feminist Art Conference, Toronto). She has an MA in Art History, where her research focus was on individual, institutional, and collective memory. Jordana has worked for art galleries on land and sea and sat on the board of a public art gallery and non-profit arts organization. She was recently a jury member for the Ontario Society of Artists and is a member of an international curatorial collective known as 7x8. She also co-founded a blog that examines critical curatorial practices. Jordana has curated exhibitions in Canada, Hungary, and Italy.

I am not sure if the specific community is important, or if one community is more likely to be affected than another. The act of making art is the venue for change and if made outside the studio, can impact whichever community is surrounding. Making art in public is what is important.

Art can engage not only as a finished piece but during the production stages as well. The most important part is often not the end result but the process of creating is where artists have the greatest ability to affect people through their actions. Art can be an act of reaching out, engaging a group, or for making small changes within a community. This is most impactful when the community is included in the production stage and not only in the finished product.

My thesis works consists of a gesture rooted in strengthening ties to the community I live in. Throughout East Baton Rouge Parish, I am trading out used basketball nets for new basketball nets at local schools, parks and private residences. The act of asking permission to make this trade, setting up the ladder and physically unhooking the old net and hooking the new one on are all gestures towards the community that surrounds me. I am making a small physical change to the landscape of each location, but the act of reaching out and engaging people I would most likely not connect with otherwise is a change maker for my relationship to a community. It is not that I believe my work can change a community, but it can change my relationship to a community. The end result of this work will be a map of the Parish, made up of basketball nets stitched together in geographic order. But it is not the end result that matters but the interaction that the work sparks. I have spoken and worked with people from all over the city who I would not normally cross paths with.

My hope as an artist is that the act of making art can change my relationship with any community and vice versa. It is not the end result that matters but who you are producing around and with whom you are sharing ideas.

Abigail Smithson is a multi-media artist living in Baton Rouge. Her work focuses on the subjects of femininity, symbolism and fragility. She is also the author of The Photographer Discloses, a blog where she speaks with contemporary photographers about their current projects. She is currently pursuing her MFA in photography at Louisiana State University.

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“plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”

Typically, change is a slow process, one that is often hard to perceive even as it is taking place. As individuals, if we think about changing our habits, some in the health industry suggest that adopting a new habit for three weeks leads to long term change. Yet we know that deeper systemic change, beyond an individual’s decision to change a set of habits, is more complex because it depends on many people engaging in and participating in transformation.

What role does art play in the context of change? In many instances, artists have had the power and more importantly, the agency, to speak truths that many are unable to express. While being an artist or cultural producer (curator, writer, critic, educator) is often a precarious existence, that very same precarity is what can enable an artist to speak truth, sometimes to power, sometimes quietly enough that the critique is not perceived as a threat, but audible enough that the message gets absorbed into the so-called system.

<http://the8thfloor.org/portfolio/when-artists-speak-truth-2/>

Two of the biggest change agents in recent political memory in the United States are Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. Each movement’s methods of activism - what’s been coined “radical protest” on the street, the use of hashtags and slogans to engage broader participation - feels closely related. An important distinction between the two is that early on the Occupy movement resisted making clear demands in favor of disruptive innovation, whereas Black Lives Matter released specific demands in August. What does any of this have to do with art? For many associated with the Occupy movement, its beginnings can be traced to Adbusters (a Canadian anti-capitalist magazine), meanwhile in the financial district, 16 Beaver Group, the artist collective that has operated for more than 15 years out of a rented space at 16 Beaver Street called for a people’s general assembly, replicating methods of protest that had been staged earlier in 2011 in Spain in response to unemployment, economic despair, and a lack of accountability on the part of the government.

<http://www.villagevoice.com/news/the-story-behind-last-nights-verizon-building-99-projections-6689046>

Beyond igniting Occupy Wall Street, the work of artists has been visibly prominent in the movement’s key moments. On November 18, 2011, the day after Zuccotti Park was cleared out by city officials and law enforcement, the Occupy protesters reconvened with a large scale response, taking to the Brooklyn Bridge and projecting onto what’s known as the Verizon building with the outsized slogans like “99%,” “Love,” and “Occupy Earth.” Whether or not the message was read by critics as a direct enough call to action, the impact of these agitprop interventions can’t be dismissed, given the rise of political activism and engagement across the country since Occupy began. When artists speak truth, we should trust their messages as signs of what’s to come. The thing about art is that an open-ended reading leads to many possibilities. Hopefully the future of activism has just begun.

(1) Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, *Les Guêpes*, January 1849. Literally translates to “The more it changes, the more it’s the same thing.”
(2) Andy Kroll, “How Occupy Wall Street Really Got Started, Mother Jones, October 17, 2011

Sara Reisman is Artistic Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation where she has initiated the foundation’s art and social justice grantmaking program while curating an ongoing series of exhibitions and related programs including Mobility and Its Discontents (2015), Between History and the Body (2015), When Artists Speak Truth (2015), In the Power of Your Care (2016), and Enacting Stillness (2016). From 2008 until 2014, Reisman was the director of New York City’s Percent for Art program, where she managed more than 100 permanent public art commissions, including projects by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mary Mattingly, Tattfoo Tan, Karyn Olivier, and Ohad Meromi, among others for civic sites like libraries, public schools, courthouses, streetscapes and parks. She was the 2011 critic-in-residence at Art Omi, an international visual artist residency in upstate New York, where she serves as a board member, and a 2013 Marica Vilcek Curatorial Fellow, awarded by the Foundation for a Civil Society.

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In 1936, a group of artists in New York City formed the American Artists' Congress in response to what they saw as a frightening international rise in fascist governments. In a prolonged global depression, these artists saw a need to transcend the limits of their immediate artistic community in order to preserve that freedom of expression which was being threatened by chaos. At the same time, the members of this burgeoning Congress were divided in how they envisioned this new activist approach. Should artists be campaigning for freedom of expression? How should those in the art world partner with those outside of this sphere to build awareness of, and agency for, fellow freedom advocates outside of the arts and cultural community?

These questions ring as true today as they did during the bleak years of America's Great Depression. The world has changed, but the belief that arts and culture can serve as a potent vehicle for social change endures. There is an understanding that we preserve our cultural heritage through time as a way to reveal the heart of a society: we see art as reflecting our greatest hopes and fears, our triumphs and our failures. Paul Manship states in his riveting text for the American Artists' Congress, "Why Established Artists Should Oppose War and Fascism", that "in various epochs and different countries the artist has interpreted for his audience those beliefs and ideals in the terms of his cultural background." Art in its purest form elevates the human spirit and allows us to see the greatness that lies within us. This has never been more necessary than during our current political moment.

Justice and defense of human rights is at the core of what it means to live in a democratic and humanist society. It is integral to the social contract in a free society as an artist and cultural producer to work with integrity. Political parties don't take sides on the fact that human rights extend to every single one of us. It is this defense of human rights, the right to self-expression, and the dignity of the human spirit that spurs our mission at alt_break art fair, and we urge and support working artists and social justice communities to come together over these crucial shared values to work together for a brighter and more equal future for us all.

(1) Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress. Matthew Baigell & Julia Williams, Ed.s. Manship, Paul: "Why Established Artists Should Oppose War and Fascism" p. 87. Rutgers University Press; New Brunswick, NJ 1986.

Audra Lambert is an independent curator, art critic and Founder of Antecedent Projects (2014), a sustainable urban curatorial consultancy focused on spotlighting site-specific heritage and working towards cultural regeneration. She is responsible for curatorial projects at galleries, alternative spaces & public spaces through New York City. In addition to curating individual and group exhibits in and around NYC, she also writes on contemporary and public art for a variety of news outlets including Art Nerd NY, Artefuse and Whitehot Magazine. She holds a BA, Art History & Asian Studies from Saint Peter's University and is currently completing a Master's in Modern/ M.A., Art History at City College of NY (CUNY).

"This vote acts against women, Muslims, climate change, immigrants, people of color, and queer communities. These are communities that I am a part of, communities that I am supportive of, and communities that were already disenfranchised before this election reinforced our oppression." (1) In the wake of the 2016 Presidential Election, the words of artist Brendan Fernandes precisely capture the groups of people for whom art is a means of representation, visibility, and solidarity. The disenfranchised and historically marginalized communities, who have continually struggled for rights, recognition, and equal treatment — not only within the art world but in society at large — are fundamental in activating social change.

A number of significant artists, whose practices are heavily embedded in politics, create works that instigate political action and unify communities of color. Hank Willis Thomas, along with artist Eric Gottesman, co-founded the first artist-run super PAC called For Freedoms. Most recently, For Freedoms installed a prominent billboard in Pearl, Mississippi with an iconic Civil Rights image from the march on Selma, overlaid with the text "Make America Great Again." The state's governor called the billboard "divisive" and the city's mayor vowed to have it removed. As of November 21, 2016, someone had covered the entire sign with a black tarp. Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman expressed that the work's intention was to provoke conversation; in this way, the impassioned dialogue on the billboard's message successfully garnered attention and made national news.

Likewise, the work of artist Joshua Rashaad McFadden highlights the similarities between the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's in relation to the present-day Black Lives Matter movement. His photographic series, After Selma, depicts images from recent Black Lives Matter protests, as individuals take to the streets, mourning the deaths of young black men and women. In this way, McFadden's work develops a sense of unity and solidarity: a cause for action. Seeing these images of protest in cities throughout the United States affirm the parallels of these senseless killings: in Ferguson, in New York, in Cleveland, in Milwaukee...it does not end. And we must not stop the protests. Though we may feel discouraged at the moment, we must forge ahead. We must continue to stand up and speak out.

(1) Brooks, Katherine and Priscilla Frank, eds. "What It Means to be an Artist in the Time of Trump," The Huffington Post. 17 November 2016.

Kimi Kitada is an independent curator based in New York. She is currently the Public Programs & Research Coordinator at Independent Curators International (ICI), and works with an international curatorial collective called 7x8. At ICI, she organizes public programming for the Curatorial Hub, such as artist and curator talks, book launches, and film screenings, as well as the Curatorial Intensives internationally. Prior to joining ICI, Kitada was an Exhibition Facilitator for Tomás Saraceno's Cloud City at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In 2013, she co-founded the curatorial collective 7x8, along with collaborating curators based in London, New York, Toronto, Singapore, and Rome. Recent curatorial projects include: (in)complete at TEMP Art Space in New York, NY (2013), 7x8 Curatorial Conversations at Budapest Art Market in Budapest, Hungary (2013), 7x8 Decay at ARTplace in Tihany, Hungary (2014), and Postscript: Correspondent Works at artQ13 in Rome, Italy (2015). She received a BA in Art History and Classics from Bucknell University in 2010, and an MA in Museum Studies from New York University in 2012.

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Life can be boiled down to two key components: fear and love. After the results of arguably the most polarizing election in our nation's history, many individuals are expressing either one or the other. Shock turned to mourning, then to anger, and now we must turn our emotions into a unified response. It is as important now as ever that love reigns supreme over fear. We should be emboldened by acts of kindness and compassion and rise above hateful actions and discourse so that the hard fought freedoms so many gave their heart, soul, and bodies for is never in vain.

As artists we have a job to do. Throughout history, the arts have been a means to confront and take on difficult issues. Artists have resoundingly responded to devastating wars, fascist regimes, and social injustices. Participating in the arts allows us to express our experiences completely and expressively. We are active participants in shaping the cultural landscape and therefore we need to come out from our studios into the community. We should learn from others, hear their experiences, and help them to tell their story. Now is not a time for self-righteousness or ego, as artists we can facilitate the kind of change that civilization needs.

The day after the election I was moved again by the words of Toni Morrison who wrote a poignant essay about why the arts are necessary, especially when despair seems to outweigh hope:

"This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."

I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge — even wisdom. Like art."

We will survive this and many other moments when the situation seems bleak. The best we can do is to embrace uncertainty and not give in to the fear. Don't fear failure, because we are all flawed, however, we can challenge the conditions of humanity and push the limits of our creativity to un-chartered territories. We started the alt break art fair because we saw artists as great advocates for change. Through partnering with non-profit organizations that work tirelessly to help those in need, we hope to raise both an awareness and participation in humanitarian efforts amongst the art community and the community at large.

As an artist, curator, and arts educator, I will do my part to impart hope, strength, and knowledge wherever I can. I hope to see you on the frontlines in our community.

Adam Zucker is an art historian, curator, artist, and lifelong New Yorker. He holds an M.A from the City College of New York in Art History/Museum Studies. From 2011-2014 Adam was the co-founder and artistic director of et al Projects, a Brooklyn based gallery committed to showing emerging contemporary artists and under recognized historical artists. As an independent curator, Adam has organized multiple gallery exhibitions and museum exhibitions. His writing has been published in Berkshire Fine Arts (online), Sculpture Magazine, Black Cat (art journal), and several exhibition catalogs. Adam is the founder and author of the Rhino Horn Group blog, a contemporary discourse on socially engaged art and figurative painting.

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