There are the early pioneers or first newcomers who arrived because of cheap real estate, the wide range of disparate market developments providing housing for a new middle class, the hard line preservationists that romanticize the old days, and the powerless poor who become the population that needs to be “dealt with.”

The early pioneers in Chinatown North were mostly white artists. They were fascinated with and attracted by the urban context and the affordability of large spaces, and their curiosity connected them with the existing community fabric. On a small scale, they sometimes developed connections with the existing poor people, occasionally becoming customers of the traditional small businesses. But these artists weren't the only ones interested in the benefits of cheap real estate. Housing developers were also interested in inexpensive properties to maximize returns on their investments. Chinatown North became a viable market for upscale residential development, generally driven by a white middle class interested in living in the city center. The new developments were poised to change the community dynamics and usher in a new community identity. Chinatown North became a place where pioneering artists and local arts, cultural, and religious institutions identify with both the close-knit community of yesteryear and the disjointed neighborhood of the future.

Separated from Chinatown by a highway built in the 1970’s, Chinatown North has become a classic example of 21st Century gentrification.
These were the dynamics, as I understood them, when I began my residency with Asian Arts Initiative (“AAI”). They were not at all atypical. I have noted similar situations in nearly every city I’ve visited over the past 20 years. Although the changes associated with gentrification seem to take place overnight, it is usually quite a long process. But once the process is evident, we feel the pressure to act quickly to try to ameliorate the negative effects of gentrification on the longstanding residents and institutions. It took nearly the entire first year of my residency to accept that there was nothing I could offer to address the wave of gentrification in any significant way in the given time frame. I had to let go of the broad issues such as the relationship between the traditional preservationist institutions and the new developers. I focused my efforts on the relationship between the most vulnerable (the homeless) and the most sensitive among the affluent (both newcomers and early pioneers).

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HOST ORGANIZATION

Asian Arts Initiative had determined that Pearl Street, an alleyway that bordered the rear of their building, was a significant part of the neighborhood because it highlighted a divide between the homeless and affluent populations. At one end, the clients of Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission (“SBRM,” a non-profit organization that serves the homeless and disadvantaged in Philadelphia) use Pearl Street as the main entrance into the
The dominant presence was the homeless population, and the alleyway had become a scene for loitering, drugs, prostitution, and other lewd activities, leaving others to see the street as dirty and unsafe. For all of Asian Arts Initiative’s efforts, I began to see Pearl Street as a contested terrain. I believed we could change the activity on Pearl Street by making a conscious, assertive effort. I proposed regular Social Practice Community Clean Ups & Activity Days, to use cleaning the street as a way to attract people from different parts of the community and to show literal care for a street that had rarely been thought of positively. In community meetings with the Callowhill Neighborhood Association, an entity of early pioneers and newcomers, members talked about the indecent activities that takes place on Pearl Street. Although the clean ups showed promise, inconsistencies and lack of energy diminished the possibilities for further projects. My monthly visits and AAI’s limited staff capacity were not enough to carry the Social Practice Community Clean Ups & Activity Days to the point where neighborhood participants could guide the project.

After the failed attempt to activate Pearl Street through regular street clean ups and other activities, the focus shifted from Pearl Street as a physical place to focusing directly on the social aspects of the two populations I was interested in connecting. A series of questions came up: What role does each group play and what, if anything, do they have to trade? Is it possible to connect the purchasing power of the affluent with the idle labor of the homeless?

The importance of Pearl Street is deeper than just who uses the street. The space symbolizes a psychological and physical divide between those who have wealth and resources and those who don’t. Asian Arts Initiative sought to redefine these barriers by actively using the street. While its front entrance is on Vine Street, AAI gradually shifted to using its back door that opens onto the alley with more frequency. They started hosting artist projects and their annual Pearl Street block parties to bring attention to the alley. These efforts exposed neighbors and outsiders to a street that had rarely been thought of positively.

CONSUMPTION

The Beginning 25
These broad questions inspired a desire to explore business models that would do all the following: connect the homeless to the affluent, offer alternative activities for the homeless along Pearl Street, build networks between the homeless and the newcomers, possibly provide some financial benefit to the homeless, and establish meaningful ways for newcomers to connect with the existing community.

This shift in approach met a positive response from Asian Arts Initiative and other stakeholders. But this approach would still not be any less time consuming than the Social Practice Community Clean Ups & Activity Days, nor did it seem that AAI would be able to offer the kind of resources and support needed to tease out a meaningful opportunity beyond their existing programs. My work generally requires a strong collaborative commitment from affiliated institutions or artists and other community stakeholders, and in recent years, the team approach has provided a higher benefit for the work for me and the collaborators. It became clear that a carefully constructed team with members who could commit time along with members connected with our target populations could not be provided by AAI. In the meantime, in February, 2014, I met artists Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin at the Maryland Institute College of Art and invited them to shadow me during my monthly visits to Philadelphia. We spent a good deal of time talking about all the aspects of the project. When I decided to use some of the project resources to build a broader team outside of AAI’s staff, I had already become comfortable with Emily’s and Aletheia’s knowledge of the project’s context, the stakeholders, and the evolving project concept to invite them to work with me in an official capacity.

After a good deal of conversation, I offered Emily and Aletheia the opportunity to collaborate with me as the full time artists on the ground in and around Pearl Street. In May 2015, they moved to Chinatown North to begin work. I also invited Jeffrey Harley, a Chaplain at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, to join the team. Jeff is among the most
What role does each group play and what, if anything do they have to trade? Is it possible to connect the purchasing power of the affluent with the idle labor of the homeless?

thoughtful and honest members of the stakeholders I have met during my time on the project, and he became a core member of the team. He works with the homeless men daily, and I knew he’d keep us honest in how our work affected the men. He would also guide Aletheia and Emily through the challenges they would face as young women in a mostly male homeless environment.

By now, nearly a year and a half of a two-year residency had already passed. The idea of developing business models that facilitated exchange between the homeless and the more affluent residents didn’t seem possible, so our team decided to look for opportunities that would be a platform for the homeless to provide something that reflected their value as members of the community. Under Jeff’s guidance, Aletheia and Emily spent countless hours cleaning Pearl Street, attending meetings and listening and sharing with the Overcomers, the homeless men living in Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission’s transitional housing.

Each week we would talk about how things were going. In line with the approach of exploring different ways to connect and communicate with residents, institutions, and others, the team developed a number of strategies that we would discuss and the team would implement. Each strategy offered deeper insight into the interest and possibilities of an expression that spoke to the goals of the project.
“What we are dealing with is a relationship problem, not a design problem.” - Rick Lowe

The question of Pearl Street was not what could we do to transform the street, but rather, how could we change the relational dynamic between the neighborhood constituencies surrounding Pearl Street. How might art become a catalyst for social transformation? For an artist to design a product that is embraced by the community, the community’s involvement is an essential element of the project’s design process. The practice of presence and ritual played a vital role in building relationships, trust, and a social platform that facilitated reflection, exploration, discovery, and the creation of “art” that lives and breathes in the everyday.
In cities across the United States, one of the telltale signs of a struggling neighborhood is the amount of trash that collects in the city’s streets and how frequently it renews itself. Chinatown North was no different. In this rapidly changing neighborhood, the accumulation of trash was a daily occurrence.

Rick and Jeff were both proponents of cleaning as a way to show care for Pearl Street and shift the undesirable activities that take place along the alley. Rick often referred to Mierle Ukeles’ practice of “Maintenance Art,” which elevated the function of cleaning to a political statement that could transform a space. Cleaning, Rick thought, could be a tool to change the community’s perception of Pearl Street by transforming the visual and sanitary aspects of the street. During the initial stages of the residency, he and AAI employed this as a technique to engage passersby in caring for the neighborhood and its people. This approach was effective to a point, but the Social Practice Community Clean Ups & Activity Days remained a sporadic artist-driven initiative without a reliable repetition of the public ritual.

When we joined CONSUMPTION in June of 2015, we found value in continuing Rick’s clean ups, as a means for establishing a presence and building relationships with the community. Jeff told us that every morning the Overcomers cleaned Pearl Street and recommended that we join their daily activities, chores, and routines to establish a foundation of trust—a crucial part of our work.

Although presence and ritual can build trust, sociologist Sherry R. Arnstein, who has studied the exchange of power dynamics in civic engagement, states that “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless... It maintains the status quo.” By documenting the cleaning efforts of the Overcomers, Before/After posed an opportunity to redistribute social power by positioning the men as leaders with authority over their environment within the community. “This trash isn't even coming from us!” Greg often complained. Greg was an Overcomer who had been a part of the program for about four months by that time. “People think it's us who's doing this to the streets, when it's really coming from over there [loiterers on the street, residents in the neighborhood, and even Roman Catholic High School, SBRM's neighbor].” This was true. Although the Overcomers didn’t do the littering and dumping, they always kept Pearl Street clean. We began to document before and after photos of our daily clean ups to show the efforts of the people who we saw to be the everyday caretakers of Pearl Street. The collection of photos was installed as an exhibit in the CONSUMPTION storefront space on Pearl Street.


Before/After posed an opportunity to redistribute social power by positioning the men as leaders with authority over their environment within the community.
Exhibiting *Before/After* shifted community leaders’ perceptions and resulted in the Overcomers gaining social capital in their community. The photos served as evidence of the Overcomers’ otherwise invisible labor and challenged common perceptions of the homeless population living along Pearl Street. The community was able to see the fruit of the Overcomers’ daily work. As a direct result of the photo series, Sarah McEneaney, President of the Callowhill Neighborhood Association, expressed a desire to join more of the Overcomers’ daily cleanings. Chinese Christian Church and Center asked to host the photo series to honor the Overcomers’ work in the community, and organized fundraising efforts in their congregation to continue their longstanding relationship with Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission. The exhibition humanized the Overcomers as consistent caretakers of Pearl Street, contributing to a deeper respect for them as human beings and members of the community.
Photos from Before/After series
In socially engaged art, the contributions of intrinsic material and experiences of each collaborator, whether artist or member of the community, become the assets and artistic media for the creative product. Working with what we’ve got taps into the resources of all involved and highlights unique and compelling facets that exist within the community.

We employed living forms such as stories, experiences, ritual, and memories as our primary media. We used this method with the belief that involving these elements of community life would lead to stronger outcomes and greater local participation in sustaining on-going project efforts. By focusing the starting point on skills and interests from the community rather than relying on artists from the outside, we created greater opportunities for the community to fully embrace the collaborative work as products of their own creativity. All of these dynamics coalesced when we began to design the Finding Comfort installation with the Overcomers in the CONSUMPTION storefront.
Located on the 1200 block of Pearl Street, at the rear of Asian Arts Initiative’s facility, the storefront was allotted to us for our residency. It was a blank canvas for us to shape however we wished.

We introduced the storefront space to the men and asked how they wanted the space be used. The Overcomers expressed that they wanted to use the storefront to elevate conversations about homelessness and to illustrate the experience from their perspective. This idea sparked a conversation about how challenging it can be to escape their situations. Fred, John, Anthony, Will, and LaMark stepped forward as self-taught writers and poets to contribute literature written about their experiences. Artistic thinkers like Johneil, Perez, and Raphael added their aesthetic visions to the visual elements of the storefront. Employing all of our talents, we designed an installation that we titled *Finding Comfort*, incorporating two concepts derived from our collaboration with the Overcomers.

The first concept was Johneil’s idea to create a work of art using a found couch and other remnants of homeless life to construct images of comfort: the comfort that homeless people seek out in their hard times and the kind they strive to attain in their more prosperous moments. “The key though,” he said, “is to make the art from a couch that had been slept on by a homeless person—a real true homeless couch.” “A couch to a homeless person,” he explained, “is like the most comfort you can find. It’s way better than cardboard or lying on the concrete.” His assertions created some commotion among the men, but Johneil intuitively understood the significance that the couch’s history as a found object would lend to the artwork.

Together, we began to gather
materials from our clean ups for the couch: bottle caps, cans, old needle caps, dime bags, crack vials, cardboard, and cigarette butts, along with store-bought acrylic gems, gold beads, and crystals to contribute to Johneil’s vision. In addition, each of the men added his own personal symbol of comfort to the couch: objects that brought them solace or reminded them of better days. Although Johneil did not end up staying in the Overcomer Program for long, we continued to carry out the couch piece based on the vision he had articulated.

The second concept stemmed from the desire to create an installation that would envelop the couch and transport the viewer to a new, immersive environment. Given the couch’s domestic connotations, we played with the idea of a home-like space and displayed the couch in front of a wallpaper we designed collaboratively. The process began with drawings by the Overcomers in response to the questions: “What does homelessness mean to you?” and “What does overcoming homelessness look like to you?”

With those prompts in mind, together we created an illustration that expressed two aspects of the homeless experience. On one side we drew images of things that keep the men homeless: drugs, alcohol, incarceration. On the other side we depicted things that could bring them out of homelessness: education, a supportive family, jobs. In spite of the wallpaper’s difficult content, we wanted to make the images beautiful. Wallpaper can surround us in daily life like an unobtrusive backdrop that often goes unnoticed. We created the wallpaper as a metaphor for the everyday presence of homelessness in the neighborhood. By designing it in a way that was visually appealing but that, upon deeper inspection, confronted the viewer with the emotional hardships of being homeless, we encouraged viewers to look beyond the comforts of their everyday surroundings and see the grittier structural forces at play in their daily lives.

The process began with drawings by the Overcomers in response to the questions: “What does overcoming homelessness look like to you?”

By getting to know the Overcomers, we became privy to their interests and experiences that lay beneath the surface. The Overcomers began to take ownership of the artistic direction of the comfort couch concept, but we wanted to transition from simply depicting their experiences with art, to harnessing the Overcomers’ past struggles and hardships for positive contributions to the project, their lives, and society. These ideas coalesced with the next component of the residency: Kitchen of Corrections.
Photos from the Finding Comfort installation
Food is a tool we’ve consistently harnessed to build relationships over the course of the residency. We brought snacks to every class we facilitated at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, not only as a way to break bread with the Overcomers, but also as a vehicle for sharing our stories and ourselves. We first brought snacks from Chinatown to relay parts of our Asian cultural heritage to the men, most of whom were Black and unfamiliar with the treats we would bring. When we realized these snacks also provided a welcome reprieve from the typical food the Overcomers were served at SBRM, we asked the men for ideas for the next week’s snacks.

On one of these occasions, one of the Overcomers, Anthony, started to talk about cheechee. Neither of us had heard of cheechee, so we asked him to elaborate. “It’s like a prison gourmet. You make it out of ramen noodles, cheese curls, squeeze cheese, some meat, like beef sticks, and whatever else you could get your hands on in jail.” Other Overcomers began to chime in with their favorite cheechee ingredients. Some liked it with tuna; some with summer sausage. Others preferred it with rice and beans in the mix. “It’s real good—best thing you could get behind bars!”

Cheechee was a spark of inspiration. The Overcomers recounted how, in prison, people would cook the dish together, each contributing a different ingredient. Cooking cheechee cultivated friendships and unity among the inmates. LaMark told us of prison guards abusing inmates and depriving them of food and how prisoners resorted to making cheechee together each night to survive. Despite the social fragmentation that occurs in prison, cheechee was an element of everyday life that inmates used as a means to resist the powerlessness of incarceration. As American historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes, “oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing a ‘hidden transcript,’ a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices.” Making cheechee was the incarcerateds’ hidden transcript. These stories were not just reiterations of prison narratives; they were powerful glimpses into the Overcomers’ experiences told through an unconventional form: food.

Together, we developed the concept of a pop-up cheechee restaurant where consumers could buy the dish from the Overcomers while learning about their experiences in prison. Despite enthusiasm for the idea, some men remained skeptical. They worried that their stories would be tokenized and commodified in a way that would belittle their experiences and perpetuate their social marginalization. But Jeff framed the idea for us as an opportunity to educate. Cheechee could function as a metaphor for survival, community, and self-determination, the way sharing narratives of slavery supports the empowerment and voice of many.

Black Americans. As the project evolved into an empowerment tool to raise awareness of those affected by the U.S. prison system, we read with the Overcomers excerpts from *The New Jim Crow* (written by civil rights litigator and legal scholar, Michelle Alexander), a seminal text in the study of mass incarceration as the new racial caste system in the U.S., to explore the political and social realities we were grappling with. *The New Jim Crow* helped us connect the Overcomers’ stories to a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the prison industrial complex. Juxtaposing this research with the men’s experiences, which are often glossed over as mere anecdotal evidence, brought new life to the research and helped frame their stories. Documentation of this process was printed into a zine that we passed out with the cheechee at the Pearl Street Block Party.

Now with a compelling concept, we needed to develop the formal qualities of the work, including choosing a name for the initiative. Johneil proposed the name *Kitchen of Corrections*, a play on the Department of Corrections, but with the understanding that this version would serve to correct outsiders’ perceptions of the incarcerated rather than the incarcerated themselves. With the framework in place, we designed a logo that repurposed cheechee’s staple ingredient, ramen, to recall its prison origins. We chose orange and yellow as the dominant colors to reference the color of cheese, a key ingredient, as well as the inmates’ orange jumpsuits.

Next we developed a menu for the *Kitchen of Corrections*. In translating cheechee from “prison gourmet” to accessible street food, we had to carefully consider the quality of our ingredients and flavor profiles that would appeal to the preferences of a middle class clientele. We experimented with several variations of cheechee and ultimately settled on three recipes plus one side dish.

*Cheechee could function as a metaphor for survival, community, and self-determination...*
Kitchen of Corrections was presented at the Asian Arts Initiative's 3rd Annual Pearl Street Block Party. Our cooking prep with the Overcomers started at 10:30 a.m. when we brought the ingredients to Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission’s kitchen. Thomas took the lead in putting together all of the cheechee recipes as Fred, LaMark, and others assisted him with chopping and prepping enough ingredients to feed 200 people. Danie and Eric worked together to wrap jalapenos with bacon and stuff them with cream cheese. Although Thomas had come straight from his night guard shift, and other Overcomers had been awake since 5:00 a.m. for their daily chores, everyone moved in the kitchen with energy and purpose. It was incredible to witness the excitement and energy as we prepared the cheechee.
Photos from the Kitchen of Corrections launch
at the 3rd Annual Pearl Street Block Party, 2015 October 10
Feedback cards from the Kitchen of Corrections launch

Thank you for teaching me something new today about food, community, & culture! I enjoyed hearing stories from the overcomers & how this program is supported by them and your work.

This project really helped me reimagine the boundaries & possibilities of this neighborhood - which used to be "off the map" for most Philadelphians but is now so highly contested. Thank you to all and keep up the questioning!

Just stumbled upon the Pearl St. Block Party and am so glad I found out about this project. The food is delicious and I think this should become a regular occurrence!

I love what you guys do. There's so much stigma around incarceration - very easy to write people off as hopeless. Introducing people to prison culture through a relatable medium is a powerful & creative way to restore relationships & community. Keep up the great work!
The core concept of CONSUMPTION came to fruition as the Overcomers served the cheechee to the public, becoming the teachers and producers for the Kitchen of Corrections. The cheechee itself, made with wholesome ingredients and cooked with the Overcomers’ culinary expertise, echoed the men’s transition back into society. The Overcomers told their stories with a sense of pride and ownership evident in how they served the food and the enthusiasm with which they shared their knowledge with the public. Kitchen of Corrections created an avenue to connect the homeless to the affluent, and transitioned the Overcomers from consumers into producers in control of their own stories. It achieved Rick’s vision of connecting the Overcomers with Chinatown North’s new middle class in a producer-consumer exchange.

Having received such positive feedback on their work, the Overcomers expressed their desire to continue the Kitchen of Corrections to see how it could help people like them through employment, social and economic empowerment, and political mobilization. In an ideal envisioning of the Kitchen of Corrections, it could be used as an organizing platform creating partnerships with local prison reform movements and groups that organize against police brutality and inmate abuse such as the Black Lives Matter movement.
Unfortunately, I’ve had to endure numerous groups and organizations who come into the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission with a presumption that their work, ideas, and knowledge would come into the lives of the men here and bring social, economic, and spiritual change. I refer to these people as imperialistic in their attitudes and approach. Thus, I had personally declared that I was finished with working with such people. Emily and Aletheia are not those types of people.

I will never forget my first meeting with Emily and Aletheia. I didn’t tell Rick at the time, but before even meeting them, I had decided that if they were typical idealistic and passionate, but condescending and naïve, young people who thought that they were going to come into the community of the poor and marginalized and “fix” the people, then my intention was to not waste my time working with them.

Emily and Aletheia are passionate and humble. They are artists who are sensitive to the needs of others. Moreover, they are well-read, and this informs their work. I mentioned to them the works of Paulo Freire, and they immediately recognized his name and were familiar with his writings. I am a Chaplain, Pastor, and Theologian. However, I read other books and works by people who are not Pastors and Theologians. Many artists that I meet, while very skilled and gifted in their particular art, have not invested in themselves by...
being familiar with related works from other academic disciplines. Emily and Aletheia, however, are well-read and knowledgeable about labor relations, social justice, the prison industrial complex, and the marginalization and oppression of people of color. In addition, due to their unique ethnic and life experiences they are well aware of the feelings of people who are “outsiders” in any given community. Emily’s father is White, and her mother is Chinese. Aletheia is Korean but has lived in Canada, South Korea, and the United States. The combination of their experiential knowledge, academic training, and artistic abilities have given them a unique and powerful testimony, especially when it comes to working with marginalized groups like the homeless men at the Mission.

I shared with Emily and Aletheia the importance of serving with the Overcomers in tasks that the men have to perform before trying to implement one’s own agenda. For example, the men have to clean the perimeter of the building every day at 9:00 a.m. I’ve shared with other artists and organizations that if you are willing to help the men with their work, then you will earn the right to share your work with them. Emily and Aletheia were the first artists, individuals, and/or organization to heed this advice. They were faithful every day to be at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission at 9:00 a.m. to help with cleaning. I even had to call them on rainy days and tell them not to come because I knew that they would be there rain or shine. The men would tell me with astonishment in their voices and body language how these two women did more thorough work than they did and had no issues with getting their hands dirty.

In addition, Emily and Aletheia sat in our classes, like Bible Study and Life Skills. They participated, and through their participation they were welcomed into our community. They did this from day one, and I believe that this is the reason for their success. You see, by taking an “incarnational” approach and assimilating in a genuine and transparent manner with the men in the Overcomer Program, Emily and Aletheia were able to glean and collect information from the men that most people never obtain. They entered into genuine, transparent, and honest relationships with the Overcomers, while at the same time maintaining their integrity and womanhood. It is very difficult for a woman to not be objectified in this environment. However, unknown to Emily and Aletheia, when some men would try to make lewd comments and/or observations about their femininity behind their backs, there were numerous men in the community who rose to their defense. I was so proud of how these two young women were able to make a connection and impact in the lives of the Overcomers in such a short period of time. They made a lasting impact in my life as well.

The *Kitchen of Corrections* was a monumental success. It gave the Overcomers who have been incarcerated an opportunity to express their experiences and voice. Giving a voice to those who are voiceless is very important. I have never seen any group of men in this program so excited and driven to complete a project, and this was all due to the work of Emily and Aletheia. This was a part of the impact that they made on my life.

I have been hurt and disappointed in the past when trying to work with outside groups. As I stated earlier, the majority of the people and
groups that come here are very imperialistic and colonial in their attitude and methods. Moreover, they really just use the Overcomers to extract money from grants and benefactors under the guise of serving the homeless. Therefore, I have become disillusioned with helping these groups. Emily and Aletheia restored my confidence in the fact that there are people and groups who are sincere and genuine about serving the marginalized and oppressed. In addition, instead of taking and extracting resources (even though they were paid for their work) they invested monetarily, emotionally, and relationally in the lives of the Overcomers. They invested in my life. I am finishing my Doctoral Dissertation, and Emily and Aletheia are the perfect models of what a volunteer looks like at the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission and the Overcomer Program. I have come to respect and admire their work, but I love their character and personalities better. They have been a pleasure to serve with, and I miss them. I know that the Lord has a glorious future for them, and I am praying that they will continue to grow and develop in their life’s work.

The Kitchen of Corrections was a monumental success. It gave the Overcomers who have been incarcerated an opportunity to express their experiences and voice.
When you approach a project in community from a place of love, your capacity to grow, learn, and impact the world around you increases manyfold. You devote yourself to the people you are working with and become a better listener more attuned to their needs, wants, and dreams. You share essential parts of yourself with the community in a way that ties your humanity to theirs.

For many centuries, art has been a tool for reflection, imagination, innovation, and communication. Because community-based art grapples directly with the social realm, artists cannot ignore the issues that exist in the world. Instead of using art to point to the thing we want to talk about, the art becomes the thing itself. In CONSUMPTION, by approaching our collaboration with the

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Overcomers from the heart, our art practice became more about recognizing that the aesthetic, the beauty and symbolic meaning we wanted to create, already existed in the complex makeup of the community and its social context. Our role as artists working with historically, racially, socially, and economically marginalized communities is to first recognize what we do not know and acknowledge what, as artists, we can bring to the table to create an equitable exchange.

When we asked the Overcomers how they would describe the project and what we do in our work together, one of the men, Fred, said, “You make the Overcomers feel [like] normal [people]. You make us feel appreciated, like we really matter.”