CONSUMPTION
a project on Pearl Street

conceived by Rick Lowe
led by Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin
and Chaplain Jeffrey Harley

Hosted by Asian Arts Initiative
CONSUMPTION: A project on Pearl Street

Conceived by Rick Lowe. Led by artists Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin, and Chaplain Jeffrey Harley, in partnership with the Overcomers at the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission.

Hosted by Asian Arts Initiative, Philadelphia, PA
CONSUMPTION: A project on Pearl Street

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CONSUMPTION: A project on Pearl Street was initiated by artist Rick Lowe as part of a residency and exhibition project with Asian Arts Initiative, a community-based arts center in Philadelphia's Chinatown North neighborhood.

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CONSUMPTION is a project that grew out of Rick Lowe’s residency with Asian Arts Initiative.

The goal of the project was to explore ways to bridge relationships between the diverse stakeholders along Pearl Street in Philadelphia’s Chinatown North.

CONSUMPTION used multiple strategies to shed light on the relationships between the homeless, the upwardly mobile middle class, and other community stakeholders. Strategies included neighborhood clean-ups, intensive time spent with homeless men, workshops, and community meetings that led to the production of Finding Comfort, an installation that activated the first storefront on Pearl Street, and Kitchen of Corrections, a pilot, pop-up restaurant initiative that used prison food recipes and stories of incarceration to cultivate dynamic social and economic exchange between returning citizens and local residents from the neighborhood.

CONSUMPTION was conceived by Rick Lowe and led by artists Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin, and Chaplain Jeffrey Harley in primary collaboration with a group of men (the “Overcomers”) overcoming homelessness, addiction, and incarceration residing at a local rescue mission.
It’s been an honor and a privilege for us, as a relatively small organization, to have the opportunity to work with such a giant in the field of social practice and community-engaged art. And it’s been a long journey—full of hopes, exploration, winding turns, learning, and building community.

As a founder and executive director, I’ve had the fortune to be immersed in the possibilities of linking art and communities for over two decades. Started in 1993 in response to racial tensions in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, Asian Arts Initiative has a two-fold mission of telling the stories of Asian Americans and bridging dialogue with and in the even more diverse communities of which we are a part. In 2008, Asian Arts Initiative moved to a new home in Chinatown North, and began developing our building as a 24,000 square foot multi-tenant arts facility to house our own programs, peer organizations, and individual artist studios. Since then, we have generated a hub of activity within the building, as well as projects aimed at animating and creating positive change within the surrounding neighborhood.

I’m delighted to introduce this document of CONSUMPTION, the culmination of Rick Lowe’s two and a half year residency with Asian Arts Initiative.
Of course, like most people familiar with Rick Lowe’s work, I had long been an admirer of his, since first visiting Project Row Houses much earlier in my career. I was thrilled when Rick first began working with Asian Arts Initiative in 2011 in an advisory capacity for our then nascent Social Practice Lab, which invites artists-in-residence to engage a wide cross-section of community members in our neighborhood of Chinatown North.

Looking back a little more than four years later, it seems fitting to mark some circumstances that have changed since—events that have changed us as people, as well as the shape of the project. In my own life, I am grateful that, after a long wait, I became a first-time parent to a daughter born just six days before our first Advisory Committee retreat in 2011. Later, just as Rick’s residency was scheduled to begin, a key staff member experienced a tragic accident and was out for several months, thankfully recovering and eventually returning.

On a more positive note, in 2014 Rick and his remarkable track record were recognized with a MacArthur “genius” award, which opened even more opportunities for him, within his already busy schedule of speaking, teaching, organizing, and remaining connected to Project Row Houses.

Significant changes have taken place at the neighborhood level, too. Cut off from the commercial core of Chinatown and the rest of Center City when the Vine Street Expressway was built in the 1970s, our neighborhood has a reputation as an underdeveloped industrial area but has been home to a diverse community of people throughout its existence. Chinatown North—simultaneously known as Callowhill, Eraserhood, Trestletown, and the Loft District—has been described as a “contested terrain” and a neighborhood of extremes: illustrated by the statistic that 20 percent of households earn over $75k, while 40 percent live in poverty. Often, when we talk about Pearl Street—the alley that runs behind Asian Arts Initiative’s building—we give the example of the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Community Feast at the 3rd Annual Pearl Street Block Party, 2015 October 10

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Mission, a homeless shelter, on one end of our block, and the luxury loft apartments and condos on the other end.

We also talk about the dynamics of the growing arts district in the neighborhood; Chinatown expanding northward, housing being developed, and the development of an abandoned railroad viaduct as the site for an elevated park sometimes compared to New York’s Highline. For some, new amenities represent the threat of displacement of others.

Since the start of our work with Rick, particular changes are worth noting on many of these fronts. The Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation broke ground on a 23-story mixed income housing and multi-use complex planned on the 1000 block of Pearl Street. The Goldtex Apartments completed construction of 163 units of luxury housing, and the tunnel beneath the viaduct on the 1100 block, no longer needed for storage of building materials, has been re-opened. Construction for a hotel, which will be a first in the neighborhood, is taking place next door to Asian Arts Initiative on the 1200 block. A city shelter several blocks north on Ridge Avenue was closed, compounding the need for the services sought at Sunday Breakfast on the 1300 block of Pearl. Artist-run collectives and venues have continued to flourish throughout the neighborhood. New restaurants and bars have opened. In 2013, the City Planning Commission adopted a plan for Chinatown and Callowhill as part of the Philadelphia 2035 citywide planning process.

Building from our existing history of community-engaged projects, Asian Arts Initiative launched our first cohort of Social Practice Lab artists-in-residence in 2012. As part of the national advisory committee, Rick first began to understand our neighborhood and its diverse entities and met many local community members, including Chaplain Jeff Harley from Sunday Breakfast, who has played a pivotal role throughout Rick’s residency and the CONSUMPTION project.
Midway through the first cohort of Social Practice Lab artists, Asian Arts Initiative had a unique opportunity to begin re-envisioning the Pearl Street alleyway that runs behind our facility. Instead of being defined by litter and illicit activities, we imagined this street as a vibrant cultural asset for the neighborhood; physically and symbolically connecting the diverse range of people in our community. We were fortunate to be able to partner with the esteemed landscape architect and artist, Walter Hood, to develop a schematic design for the physical transformation of Pearl Street. Through a process that involved deep listening and conversation with a spectrum of neighbors, Walter proposed infrastructure and safety improvements including: repaving the cartway and fixing sidewalks, and aesthetic interventions such as creative lighting, greening, and venues for artwork and events. A through line in his concept was to encourage re-opening windows and doors along the alley, and to add more eyes and feet on the street. To demonstrate the potential of what the re-activated alley could be, Walter motivated us to host the first Pearl Street Block Party and community feast in 2013.

**We imagined [Pearl Street] as a vibrant cultural asset for the neighborhood; physically and symbolically connecting the diverse range of people in our community.**

With guidance from Chaplain Jeff, several artists in our initial Social Practice Lab cohort began to work with the homeless community at Sunday Breakfast, whose doors open onto Pearl Street and draw a range of people who congregate along the alley. Local photographer and pop-up book maker Colette Fu partnered with the Overcomers in the long-term recovery program to create a series of oversized greeting cards incorporating personal stories shared by the men, photographs they took of the neighborhood, and folktales related to animals of the Chinese zodiac. Filmmakers Anula Shetty and Mike Kuetemeyer began the *Time Lens* project, engaging men from the Overcomers program to help document the history of Pearl Street—not just as subjects but as makers themselves. And radio producer Yowei Shaw, created *Really Good Elevator Music* as a playlist inspired by sounds and stories of the neighborhood, with one of the tracks called *Sunday Breakfast*.

Inspired in part by Rick’s practice of playing dominoes with people as a way to build relationships and get to know a place, Asian Arts Initiative made a commitment to hosting micro-events on a more frequent basis. We commissioned local artists to lead micro-projects, such as: Jacque Liu and Sarah Kate Burgess’s *Peach Blossom Spring*, for which community members constructed and installed hundreds of pinwheels along Pearl Street as symbols of change and possibility, the roving *Hot Tea Cart* serving free cups of tea and creating space for conversation in the time it takes to drink them, which started as a Social Practice Lab project by Laura Deutch, Katya Gorker, Kathryn Scavi and Lee Tusman, and the regular appearances of Erin Bernard and the Philadelphia Public History Truck, a mobile museum which partners with neighborhood grassroots organizations to explore local history.
More recently, Asian Arts Initiative has been working with Sunday Breakfast and local artist Meei Ling Ng to establish the Sunday Breakfast Farm, a vertical farm on the side of the shelter’s dining hall, which produced over 1000 pounds of food in the first growing season. Asian Arts Initiative is also currently partnering with Sunday Breakfast on an innovative exhibition that will take the shape of a dining hall makeover—shifting the culture of how meals are served and enjoyed.

Rick’s residency thus took place in what has been an active and evolving relationship between Asian Arts Initiative and our neighbors, and what can sometimes feel like a cluttered and “messy” ecosystem of roles, ideas, and community. We explored many directions over the course of the residency, and learned from each of the twists and turns. When Rick began working on Pearl Street, he encouraged a form of “maintenance art”—engaging in a regular practice of cleaning the alley as an activity that could bring the community together. Through the tremendous commitment and the depth of creativity that he and his artistic team generated, we learned—or, to borrow a term that Rick has used, “re-remembered”—the critical importance of being able to invest time in any project that is about building relationships and community.

The experience of CONSUMPTION also leaves Asian Arts Initiative with questions to contemplate for ourselves as an organization and the broader field of social practice. What is the role of a host organization in creating the opportunity for visiting artists to have creative freedom, while also preserving and deepening past community work and relationships? What does it mean for us as an organization to define our own aesthetic or artistic practice? How do we navigate the relationship and tensions between intention, expectation, and messy realities?

Big experiences—and big questions—change us; they help us see differently, think differently, and walk differently. All of us at Asian Arts Initiative appreciate this journey and will continue to carry the learnings from this experience into the future.

CONSUMPTION has been an incredible opportunity to witness and learn from a particular artistic approach to working with communities (or actually, multiple approaches during the course of the residency). Among the meaningful outcomes are the earnest relationships that Emily and Aletheia and many of the Overcomers were able to build through their work in the final phase of the residency, and the personal impact that participating in the creative process had on the individuals in this community.
COMMUNITY TO THANK

So many forces came together to make this project and this process happen. In particular, I would like to thank:

- Rick Lowe, for his leadership and mentorship, and his generosity, patience, and commitment to working with us throughout the disappointments and discoveries of this project.

- Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin, whose personal commitment, creativity, and willingness to literally get their hands dirty, enabled them to build meaningful relationships and bring the project to its successful culmination.

- Chaplain Jeff and the men in the Overcomers program at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission who shared their stories, dreams, and skills that ultimately shaped the CONSUMPTION project.

- The many community members who have contributed their time and passion to this project and for the longer term good of our neighborhood, especially Sarah McEneaney and members of the Callowhill Neighborhood Association, Pastor Laurence Tom and members of the Chinese Christian Church and Center, and Pastor and Mrs. Wilkes of Congregation of Churches.

- Asian Arts Initiative’s staff and volunteers, especially Senior Program Manager Nancy Chen and former Pearl Street Project Manager Melissa Kim, for the tenacity and thoughtfulness that they have brought throughout this project and Asian Arts Initiative’s broader work with artists and community members.

- Video documentarians Anula Shetty and Mike Kuetemeyer and catalog coordinator Dave Kyu for their keen insights and support on this project; and that they and fellow Social Practice Lab artists have taught us about our neighborhood and community.

- Essayists Sue Bell Yank and Maria Rosario Jackson for their responsiveness and advice throughout the process; and Aimee Chang and all our Social Practice Lab advisors for leading us to this path.

- The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage for the major grant that made it possible for Asian Arts Initiative to host a project of this duration, and their staff for being responsive to the project’s extended timeframe and evolving needs, while also holding us accountable for what we set out to achieve.

Gayle Isa is the Executive Director of Asian Arts Initiative, a multi-disciplinary community arts center in Philadelphia that engages people of all ages and backgrounds to create and present art that addresses Asian American experience and effects positive change in a broad range of communities and in its immediate neighborhood of Chinatown North. In her work at Asian Arts Initiative she has led the creation of programs such as the Chinatown In/flux exhibition of site-specific installations responding to and shaping the constantly changing neighborhood; the Artists Exchange which involves artist peer-led workshops and commissioning of new work in response to current social themes; and the development of a multi-tenant arts facility that serves as a hub for community arts and social practice.

Gayle has been a Douglas Redd Fellow focused on arts and community development and has served on the boards of the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, the National Performance Network, and the national Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists. She is currently a member of the Philadelphia Mayor’s Commission on Asian American Affairs and the Mayor’s Cultural Advisory Council, and was the first Asian American appointed to serve on the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. She has been an aspiring dramaturg and taiko drummer, and is currently focusing her creative energy on learning to be a parent with a pre-school-aged daughter.
RESIDENCY TIMELINE

2011
Fall: Rick Lowe joins Asian Arts Initiative as an Advisor.

2012
Fall: Asian Arts Initiative and Rick submit Pew Center for Arts & Heritage grant proposal.

2013
April: We receive grant notification! Rick begins making monthly visits to Philadelphia for planning and research.

Spring-Fall: Rick participates in community meetings with Walter Hood.

September: First Annual Pearl Street Block Party.
Rick in attendance.

2014

March: Emily Chow Bluck & Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin begin to shadow Rick’s residency.

Spring-Fall: Asian Arts Initiative organizes monthly Community Clean Up & Activity Days on Pearl Street in conjunction with Rick’s visits.

September: Second Annual Pearl Street Block Party.
Rick hosts dominoes activity.

September-December: Critical assessment period.

2015
March: Emily & Aletheia join project team.

May: Emily & Aletheia graduate from the Maryland Institute College of Art, move to Philadelphia.

June-October: Emily & Aletheia work with Overcomers.

October: Third Annual Pearl Street Block Party.
Debut of Kitchen of Corrections.

November: Finding Comfort exhibition opens on First Friday.
Conclusion of residency.

December: Artist talk with the core project team.
THE BEGINNING

BY RICK LOWE

THE BEGINNING

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.

CONTEXT

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).

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.

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

HOST ORGANIZATION

Rick Lowe at the 3rd Annual Pearl Street Block Party, 2015 October 10
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.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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 only gets cleaned on occasion. These actions would set the stage for the emergence of a project evolving out of the connections made during the clean ups. 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?
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...
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 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?
“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.”¹ 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.

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

“When people are truly powerful, they are not in the role of consumers...[they] are each other’s best teachers.”

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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
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 reframe 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.
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.

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.

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.

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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.

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CONCLUSION

BY EMILY CHOW BLUCK & ALETHEIA HYUN-JIN SHIN

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

“Great organizing campaigns are like great love affairs... [T]hey help us to see the potential that our relationships have to create real change in our lives and in the world around us.”
-Ai-jen Poo, Domestic Workers United. 4

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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.”
**CORE PROJECT TEAM**

**Rick Lowe** is an artist who resides in Houston, Texas. His formal training is in the visual arts. Over the past twenty years he has worked both inside and outside of art world institutions by participating in exhibitions and developing community based art projects. Rick has participated in exhibitions and programs nationally and internationally.

He has exhibited at: the Phoenix Art Museum; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles; Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York; Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Glassell School; Indianapolis Museum of Art; the Kumamoto State Museum, Kumamoto, Japan; Zora Neale Hurston Museum, Eatonville, Florida; Venice Architecture Biennale; the Anyang Public Art Program; Cittadellarte, Biella, Italy; and the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, TX.

**Emily Chow Bluck** is a socially engaged artist, educator, and community organizer currently based in New York City. She works with communities to build campaigns for social justice that draw upon the experiences, stories, and creativity of her collaborators. She first began working in community in Southern California where she studied the politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, and national origin with a focus on social movements. This has had a profound impact on her artistic praxis. She has been actively engaged in organizing in Los Angeles, Baltimore, and New York City, working with organizations such as the Labor/Community Strategy Center, No Boundaries Coalition, and the Audre Lorde Project. She holds a B.A. in Politics & International Relations from Scripps College and a M.F.A. in Community Arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art.
Jeffrey Harley has been the Education Chaplain at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission for four years. As the key community partner in *CONSUMPTION*, Jeff served as the community liaison in the artist team’s collaboration with the Overcomers. In addition to his ministry work, Jeff expects to finish his Doctorate degree in 2016. His research is exclusively on homeless and marginalized communities.

Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin is an artist based in Baltimore, Maryland. Her life experience growing up as a third culture kid, born in Canada and raised in United States and Korea, informs her interest in transnational, intercultural, community based art practice grounded in the methodology of community organizing and storytelling. Aletheia exhibited and led project initiatives in Site:Lab, Michigan, Stone and Water, Gallery 175, South Korea, Station North, Baltimore City Hall, Baltimore Clayworks, Maryland. Since completing her Master of Fine Arts degree in Community Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art, Aletheia received the Launching Artist in Baltimore Award in 2015, and was recently selected as a Creative Community Fellow at National Arts Strategies.
KEY COLLABORATORS

Overcomers

The Overcomers are men who are a part of Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission's Overcomer Program. Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission is a non-profit organization that ministers to the physical and spiritual needs of homeless and disadvantaged people in the Philadelphia area. Men who visit Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission for emergency services are given the opportunity to join the Overcomer Program. The 8- to 12-month recovery and discipleship program enables men who are committed to a positive life change to address their problems. Ultimately, the goal of this program is for these men to return to the community as self-sufficient individuals, contributing to Philadelphia's economy and quality of life.

CONSUMPTION has been fortunate enough to collaborate and build relationships with:

- Anthony
- Bobby
- Brian
- Danie
- Derrick
- Eric
- Felix
- Fred
- Greg
- John
- Johniel
- Kevin
- LaMark
- Nick
- Perez
- Stanley
- Thomas

and the many others who have been indispensable co-creators and contributors throughout the residency. Without them this project would not have been possible.

Tyrone Jones

Tyrone Jones is a graduate of the Overcomer Program who is now serving as Intern Chaplain at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission. He joined the CONSUMPTION team to provide additional insight into the culture and structure of the Overcomers and the Overcomer Program from his perspective as an alumni of the program and as a newly appointed intern chaplain.
We would like to give our deepest thank you to Asian Arts Initiative for providing this opportunity for our team to be in residency within the Chinatown North community. Special thanks goes out to Gayle Isa for leading Asian Arts Initiative down the road of social practice and giving opportunities for artists to do work in their neighborhood.

Thank you to Nancy Chen and Melissa Kim for their support and friendship throughout the residency, Maria Rosario Jackson and Sue Bell Yank as writers-in-residence covering the progression of CONSUMPTION, Mike Kuetemeyer and Anula Shetty for documenting the residency as it took shape, and Dave and Ilyssa Kyu for putting together this beautiful design for this publication.

Our team is indebted to our community partners including the dedicated men of the Overcomer program from Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, who have been key co-contributors and co-creators throughout the residency. Additional thanks to our friends at the Chinese Christian Church & Center and the Callowhill Neighborhood Association, who have supported our work in the community.

The project would not have been possible without the generous support of The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

– Rick Lowe, Emily Chow Bluck, Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin, Jeffrey Harley

Cover Photo by:
Emily Chow Bluck & Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin

Other photographs by (in order of appearance):
Tim Kyuman Lee - p. 6, 10, 26
Annie Seng - pp. 9, 10, 13, 20
Ilyssa Kyu - p. 10
Jaime Alvarez - p. 14
Emily Chow Bluck & Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin:
PP. 17, 24, 30, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 41, 42, 44/45, 49,
60, 69, 73
James H. Bluck - pp. 23, 54, 55, 58, 59, 65, 68, 70, 71, 72
Rick Lowe - p. 26
Nancy Chen - p. 26, 29
Dave Kyu - pp. 44, 45, 46/47, 62, 66
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