A bright orange banner declared, “Correcting Our Stories, One Cheechee at a Time.” Cheechee is a prison food, a DIY mixture of instant ramen noodles, cheez whiz, cheese doodles and Slim Jims designed to bolster an inmate’s diet, and is made out of whatever the incarcerated can buy from the commissary, or sneak out of the kitchen. This cheechee pop-up restaurant, dubbed Kitchen of Corrections, was a project conceived of and implemented by artists Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyunjin Shin, in collaboration with the men of the Overcomers program at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, a homeless services organization on Pearl Street. Kitchen of Corrections was just one of many interventions produced by this collective of artists and men overcoming homelessness in the summer and fall of 2015, with all of the projects falling under the overarching framework of CONSUMPTION, conceived by renowned socially-engaged artist Rick Lowe.

The conceptual framework for CONSUMPTION came out of Rick Lowe’s two-year artist residency with the Philadelphia-based organization Asian Arts Initiative (AAI), and was funded by the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, a major granting organization in that city. The artist
residency was part of the second iteration of AAI's Social Practice Lab, the goal of which is “to allow for experimentation with processes that combine artistic excellence and innovation with building relationships and effecting positive change within the community.” Asian Arts Initiative was especially interested in “creative projects that foster opportunities for access and equitable development,” and over the course of several conversations, artist Lowe had decided to focus his attention on the four blocks of the Pearl Street alleyway running behind their building for his residency activities.¹

This focus on the alleyway is part of a larger vision for the community that Asian Arts Initiative has developed—for the past four years they have poured multiple funding streams and programming efforts into reimagining Pearl Street as a discursive gathering place for disparate community stakeholders. Though it is hard to know exactly what form they want Pearl Street to take (a pedestrian thoroughfare? An outdoor art gallery? A public park?), it is clear that the organization sees it as a key to radically producing a more democratized city. According to Asian Arts Initiative, Pearl Street has the potential to be a resistant connective tissue in the face of overwhelmingly rapid gentrification. As post-industrial factories are refurbished into luxury lofts catering to affluent white professionals at an astonishing speed, the neighborhood’s working-class immigrants, artists, precarious workers, and those who are homeless or in recovery, face displacement and disempowerment. Pearl Street itself is a perfect example—along one single block between 12th and 13th streets, the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission homeless shelter lies at one end. At the other is the recently completed luxury Goldtex apartment building, where rent for studio apartments starts at $1500 per month.

As this neighborhood has shifted under the profit-driven local growth and development mechanism, Asian Arts Initiative has struggled with the co-option of cultural production under the conditions of neoliberalism. As critic Nato Thompson writes in his recent book Seeing Power, “The largest victims of privatization...are cities and the once-radical spaces within them. Battles over housing, rent, the privatization of space, and zoning are not merely battles over places—they are battles over how meaning is produced in the city.”² Even the name of the neighborhood is indicative of the increasing privatization of meaning within the city. Known as Eraserhood, Chinatown North, Trestletown, the Loft District, and Callowhill,³ this bit of land between the Vine Street Expressway and Spring Garden Street is a shifting landscape of managed consumption and speculation, constantly placing pressure on its diverse residents to negotiate new relationships to place and power.

In its commitment to radical place-making, Asian Arts Initiative fundamentally believes that the people of their neighborhood have the capacity to resist the total instrumentalization of space by capital. Moreover, these constituents, they insist, are capable of imagining different (non-economic) ideas of what the neighborhood can be. As an organization, they have community organizing and property development capacities, and so have pursued several strategies to make Pearl Street the literal place where that resistance and articulation occurs. These include:

1) The formation and maintenance of key partnerships with

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³ This explanation of the five neighborhood names taken from the first Social Practice Lab essay from fall of 2014: The boundaries of Callowhill and Chinatown North are currently ill-defined, and the area north of the Vine Street Expressway bounded by Broad to the west, 8th to the east, and Spring Garden to the north is commonly called both Chinatown North and Callowhill. Because of a recent spate of luxury loft conversions in that area, developers have called it the Loft District. Less popular is the name Eraserhood, which according to Jeff Gammage of the Inquirer in his September 27, 2013 article on Asian Arts Initiative, was given “because of the inspiration [the neighborhood] lent David Lynch, creator of the cult movie Eraserhead.” Finally a few refer to the neighborhood as Trestletown because of the railway trestles that still dominate the landscape (and hip dive bar the Trestle Inn), but that name is not in common use.
neighborhood stakeholders, like the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), the Callowhill Neighborhood Association, the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, the Chinese Christian Church, local business owners, and others.

2) The pursuit of development dollars and plans for a physical redevelopment of Pearl Street, including working with Oakland landscape architect Walter Hood.

3) And finally, what will be the core focus of this essay, a strategy of frequent artistic interventions as part of the ongoing Social Practice Lab program, which sites artists’ participatory projects in and around the vicinity of Pearl Street, often with the goals of both strengthening existing community partnerships and bringing unexpected artistic activities to the street itself. 4

Despite Asian Arts Initiative’s belief that people can fundamentally come together to articulate new ways to envision a positive future for the neighborhood, their community organizing history also makes them painfully aware of what Pierre Bordieu calls the “homogeneity of habitus” 5—that each of our answers to cultural questions (How can we make the neighborhood better? How can we get people to talk to one another?) are heavily conditioned by our cultural, social and class histories. In a way, our answers to these questions only really make sense to people who share the same experiences as us.

So Asian Arts Initiative relies on artists to imagine new ways to subvert the homogeneity of habitus, and allow for both humanization and mutual understanding among disparate groups. But they don’t really know why this sometimes happens, and sometimes does not. The organization has expressed their thoughts and ideas about this (i.e. artists should be on-the-ground, spending lots of time in the neighborhood, artists should leverage the many partnerships AAI has cultivated over the years to expand their impact), but they are also pressured to raise money and serve the requirements of funders. Inevitably, these varying forces affect the way artists enter into and process the conditions of the city, and were a central point of tension throughout Rick Lowe’s residency.

I was brought on as a writer and documentarian for the first Social Practice Lab in 2012-2013, which involved seven artists and a variety of temporary projects with varying levels of engagement from the community. I was asked to write again for the second Social Practice Lab, focusing on Rick Lowe’s residency. Unlike the first Social Practice Lab, where I was able to attend several meetings, record gatherings of the cohort of artists, and conduct three rounds of interviews over 18 months, Lowe’s residency was difficult for me to access for a long time. I periodically heard about it second-hand from Asian Arts Initiative staff and through project documents, because it largely took place in conference calls and meetings. I was finally able to talk to Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin in November of 2015, and accessed

4 From conversations with Gayle Isa and Nancy Chen in September and November of 2015, and from the Asian Arts Initiative website.

the transcripts of a public talk and internal conversation on December 19, 2015. These included more testimony from Bluck and Shin, as well as commentary from Rick Lowe, Gayle Isa and Nancy Chen from AAI, and eight of the men from Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission.

This was a complicated residency. Rick Lowe’s process involves a significant upfront investment of time in listening and evolving a project that responds to the conditions on the ground. As well, Lowe is based in Houston, and it was never agreed that he would live in Philadelphia during the duration of the residency, nor be the kind of local, daily presence that Asian Arts Initiative seemed to expect from past Social Practice Lab artists. Even Lowe himself acknowledged this paradox:

One of the things that I know about social practice work and the way that I work is that I work very slowly. And it takes a lot of time. The challenge for me in doing this residency was that I didn’t have the time to spend, right? I generally think in a years’ time you have to spend thousands of hours in a project if you’re really going to get deep into it. I didn’t have that kind of time so it was an opportunity for me to look for some collaborators that could have the time."

Artist, organization, and funder all seemed to have quite different ideas about how the residency should function in this particular circumstance. Eventually, Lowe evolved his concept of CONSUMPTION—which focused on the perceptions of homeless populations of the neighborhood, and the systems of economic power they had to contend with—and invited two emerging Baltimore-based artists, Bluck and Shin, to move to Philadelphia and be the daily presence on the ground, working directly with Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission and the men in the Overcomers program, under Lowe’s direct guidance.

Given the context of this residency and the source material I had access to, I approach this essay primarily through: the perspectives of the two young artists brought in for its last six months, the impressive array of events and artwork they were able to produce in that short time, and how they entered into a difficult and messy process and worked to make it their own—with mentorship from a seasoned socially-engaged artist.

But in the narrative of these emerging practitioners, confirmed by public testimonies and supplementary research, it is clear that they formed profound connections with the men they worked with from Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission. Together with the men they formed an art-producing collective, with its own defined process and meaningful set of relationships. This is not a small accomplishment. Although it may not have led to the dramatic results Asian Arts Initiative is looking for in its quest towards a radical production of place in the city, value may instead be found in the formulation of a more radical and revolutionary process with as-yet-unseen outcomes. The process developed by Lowe, Bluck, and Shin departs from many of the artistic and organizational strategies that have come before it in AAI’s Social Practice Lab, and is far more aligned with a Freirean critical pedagogical process—one that relies on humanization and co-intentional education as a liberatory act. But Freirean critical pedagogy is hard on systems of power—it is necessarily an uncomfortable process of critical awakening. In the following edited interview, told primarily from the perspective of Emily Chow Bluck and Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin, and punctuated by my analysis, I draw from Freire and theories of critical pedagogy to frame what I see as some of the most important work that was accomplished in this residency.

Perhaps the ultimate goal of this essay is to reflect on the process that Bluck and Shin developed...
with Lowe (told largely through their own words) and the points of resistance they encountered. I aim to investigate those frictions to discover how to build infrastructures that better support critical pedagogy as part of a collective, action-based art practice. Hopefully, this analysis will provide a window into the rare opportunity this project presents to conceptualize, organize, and advocate for artistic efforts differently.

We begin with Bluck and Shin, introducing themselves and how they became involved in Lowe’s residency.

Emily Chow Bluck (E): It was my work with the Community Rights Campaign as an undergrad that helped me understand how art could be used as a form of engagement and political mobilization. My first formal socially-engaged artwork was my undergraduate thesis. I created an autobiography mural with the Asian American Student Union, with the framework that by creating artwork and sharing collective histories with people of a similar political position, that people would find more commonalities and come together under a collective identity.

Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin (A): Having a BFA in art and working at a non-profit transitional housing service for homeless men, that got me thinking about art’s role, and art more as a social tool rather than just a form. So I started looking into programs and I chose to go to Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) because I knew the Baltimore community. My first year at MICA, in winter of 2014, Rick came as a visiting artist, and that’s when I connected with him. He invited us to come check out a project he had just started in Philadelphia with Asian Arts Initiative.

Rick Lowe was initially brought on to advise on Asian Arts Initiative’s launch of the first Social Practice Lab in 2011. In the very first advisory meeting, AAI described its goals for the Social Practice Lab as bringing a group of artists to “learn about the local community, and implement artistic projects that will hopefully affect some positive change.”

Although the focus on Pearl Street and more specific values have since evolved, that initial overarching vision is essentially the same. The problem with this statement is how slippery the notion of “positive change” remains. What does positive change mean to the people affected? And who decides what is, in fact, positive? At the time, Asian Arts Initiative convened a Local Resource Team formed from many stakeholders from the local community, including several that would become some of Lowe’s greatest collaborators.

Lowe described the role of the artist as a facilitator who could “elevate the creativity of people within communities to address the issues they are facing…”

E: Aletheia invited me along because she was familiar with how I had worked with Asian American communities in the past. So we essentially started shadowing Rick in his process. Whenever he was in town he would tell us, and we would follow him around to his meetings with multiple stakeholders. That was really exciting because we knew his reputation in the field, and he was very frank about his process.

CONSUMPTION

Gayle Isa, remarks in a discussion during the Social Practice Lab Launch Retreat, September 14, 2013

Notes from remarks in a discussion during the Social Practice Lab Launch Retreat, September 14, 2013
with projects which may correspond to their own view of the world, but not to that of the people.⁹

Though neither Asian Arts Initiative nor any of its artists would ever consider their approaches to be “top-down,” it takes a great deal of effort and resistance to remove expectations of what is “positive,” “worthwhile,” or to quash preconceived notions of what kind of reality they “should” be working towards in collaboration with the people, and particularly, the poor. This requires a truly radical stance, which is sometimes unrealistic for an institution that must satisfy the requirements of funders, mission, and their own raison d’être. Lowe’s awareness of the limitations artists and arts producers face in even being able to define what “positive change” could mean for diverse constituents of a community, affected the way Lowe entered into the Asian Arts Initiative residency situation. In many ways, he is a radical in the Freirean sense—interested in discovering the crises that condition the experiences of the people, and committed to shifting those conditions (rather than the people themselves). Lowe calibrates the expectations and goals of his work in accordance to these frameworks and what is possible in a given situation—and if he cannot logistically follow through on that way of working, he collaborates with other people who can. Bluck and Shin describe how Lowe and Asian Arts Initiative came to the decision that they should be brought in as on-the-ground artists, as part of the residency.


E: I guess it got to the point where he felt that the project had not gained enough momentum because Asian Arts Initiative and he had different expectations for how the project would pan out. I think his understanding was that he was more of a consultant that would advise AAI how to build a rigorous socially-engaged art program within the Asian Arts Initiative community, and I think AAI thought of him as the typical artist-in-residence who would do the project and lead it himself and be on the ground.

A: He was asking a lot of questions to staff, more trying to curate what could be gleaned from the staff, and how to empower people within the organization to create a role for Asian Arts Initiative as leaders in this practice. But as you know, the staff, there’s not a lot of them, they all have a full workload, and I think that was very hard.

So I think that was how Emily and I came on the scene as people who can just be there, on the ground, meeting people in the neighborhood, learning cultural cues that are there, and tease out some artistic and cultural areas that could be the point of the Pearl Street project.

In subsequent conversations with Gayle Isa, director of Asian Arts Initiative, who has a radical community organizing background herself, she disagreed with Emily’s reading that the expectations were unclear about Lowe’s role during the residency. She felt it had always been clear that Lowe would be leading the project in a more traditional sense; but also admitted that she understood he often brings in collaborators or delegates aspects of a project to others.¹⁰ To me, this tension becomes clear once I acknowledge Lowe’s process as one committed to the time-intensive

¹⁰ Phone conversation with Gayle Isa and Nancy Chen, November 13, 2015.
process of co-production; but also his limitations as a non-local artist entering into this situation. He entered this residency recognizing that someone else would have to be “on-the-ground” for day-to-day project implementation. The funding and organizational structures around this residency, however, were never totally in sync with this approach.

Early on, Lowe also pushed for the organization itself to evolve into more of a social/community practice entity that would directly work with people on the ground and implement projects. This was in part because he recognized Asian Arts Initiative’s commitment to social practice and working with their communities. However, time pressure came into play again, and Lowe reflected on how this may have been a misguided expectation:

“There is a gap between being a social practice organization and a social practice artist... Not that they don’t share the same passion but they have different responsibilities and so there [is] that gap.”

Asian Arts Initiative, Lowe, and many stakeholders within the community engaged in intense conversations over the course of several months from August 2014 to March 2015, working through misaligned expectations, proposing possible solutions, and building relationships, until finally a focus on the homeless population in and around Pearl Street was adopted. At the same time, it became clear that Lowe needed an on-the-ground team to work on implementing many of the projects. Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission and Chaplain Jeff Harley emerged as primary collaborators, and Lowe brought on the two social practice artists Bluck and Shin to truly delve into a co-

intentional process with the men in the Overcomers program. Bluck and Shin describe how they were first introduced to project stakeholders, and how they communicated with Lowe over the course of the project.

A: Rick connected us with stakeholders, and one of them was Chaplain Jeff Harley. That was essential to the process because we are women and we’ve never experienced homelessness, and we’re new in town, we’re also Asian or half-Asian. By introducing us as his friends, Jeff provided protection for us, and also trust from the men, as they experience a lot of different people coming in to do projects with them. It allowed us to enter into their space differently. He also introduced us to Sarah [McEneaney] from Callowhill Neighborhood Association and we met LT from the Chinese Christian Church, so knowing a few key people, that was very helpful for us to understand who to go to while we’re on the ground.

Whenever we had ideas, we’d check in with Rick and he would let us know what he thought. He would challenge us, push us, try to move the project forward, because you can do research forever. He gave us structure and a mentoring force in the whole project.

E: We had about weekly check-ins for a while. At some point that faded out a bit and it became bi-weekly or monthly, but at the beginning we had check-ins every week, talked about what we were up to, what kind of research we were developing or noticing from living in the neighborhood at that point. Although we had a sense of where he wanted to go, it was as if we had to start from scratch because we were new people, we needed to gain trust and really identify who we could work with.
A: He basically let us go with whatever ideas and inspirations we had, and encouraged certain frameworks within our ideas. When we proposed ideas he would say things like, “Okay, good, now here is how we can use that. It still is related to this broader concept that I’m interested in.” He would ask us challenging questions to get us to think about really involving other members of the community.

With Chaplain Jeffrey Harley, and the Overcomers in the program that he facilitates at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, coming on as primary partners in the residency project, Lowe synthesized his months of neighborhood and stakeholder research into a residency framework known as CONSUMPTION. In investigating the crises that condition the experiences of the poor and homeless living by Pearl Street, the school-prison-poverty-homelessness pipeline that Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission attempts to tackle at its conclusion became a core focus for Lowe. The socio-economic consequences of these situations, as well as the many different emotional perspectives on the homeless from other, non-homeless neighborhood residents framed a series of questions and responses that attempted to reframe the position of the homeless in society, and thus unveil the structural conditions that lead to this dynamic. As Bluck and Shin explain:

E: He noticed how the various populations understood the homeless as endless consumers of resources without contributing very much to the community, and he was critical of that idea. He wanted to find ways to creatively engage them and other people who are not homeless.

A: The idea of CONSUMPTION was ultimately to ask how the homeless population can also be a supplier? What do they already contribute and what kind of role are they playing in the Pearl Street neighborhood? So we were thinking about shifting that paradigm or that dynamic that exists in that neighborhood.

WHAT ARE THE CRISSES THAT CONDITION THE EXPERIENCES OF THE POOR?

With Chaplain Jeffrey Harley, and the Overcomers in the program that he facilitates at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, coming on as primary partners in the residency project, Lowe synthesized his months of neighborhood and stakeholder research into a residency framework known as CONSUMPTION. In investigating the crises that condition the experiences of the poor and homeless living by Pearl Street, the school-prison-poverty-homelessness pipeline that Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission attempts to tackle at its conclusion became a core focus for Lowe. The socio-economic consequences of these situations, as well as the many different emotional perspectives on the homeless from other, non-homeless neighborhood residents framed a series of questions and responses that attempted to reframe the position of the homeless in society, and thus unveil the structural conditions that lead to this dynamic. As Bluck and Shin explain:

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The project “seeks to study and explore ways to connect and bridge the gaps in the system of consumption, to reimagine what it means to co-exist and build together.” This emphasis on building together emerges repeatedly in the project’s goals, and it focuses on mapping and surveying “the attributes and desires of product and labor” among both the consumer needs of upwardly mobile residents and the “untapped” labor of the homeless. In thinking about Pearl Street, with luxury lofts and a homeless shelter at opposite ends of a single block, the changing dynamics of both consumption and power play out in public space. Lowe talks about his underlying conceptualization of the project:

**CONSUMPTION came about because I was thinking about how you have new people that are coming into the community and they have a certain purchasing power. They have a certain ability to consume things. And many of the people at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission are powerless to offer things that could capture the consumerism around them. And so I wanted to kind of figure out how we could do that.**

In other words, how could the wealthy people at one end of the block consume what the homeless men at the other have to offer... and how could the homeless supply what the wealthy needed? Is there a systemic way to think differently about the ecology of how different people consume things within a neighborhood, and how the dynamics of power might be subverted by shifting that system?

**WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES CURRENTLY EMPLOYED TO COMBAT THESE CONDITIONS?**

Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission (SBRM) is a non-profit Christian organization that describes itself as a “safe haven for the homeless in Philadelphia... that ministers to the mind, body, and spirit of those who walk in our doors.”

Paulo Freire might disagree with the methods of SBRM—he describes how agents of a society’s oppressors strive to change the oppressed themselves, not the conditions that led to their oppression. By treating the oppressed (in this case, the homeless) as marginal, their adaptation to the conditions of oppression is accomplished. He writes:

> The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these “incompetent and lazy” folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginal need to be “integrated,” “incorporated” into the healthy society that they have “forsaken.”

This is complex territory, as clearly the homeless have urgent basic needs, and SBRM’s core mission is to fulfill those needs on a temporary basis. They are not primarily an advocacy organization. As well, the

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16 Freire, 74.
work of the chaplains, volunteers, and homeless men themselves on a day-to-day basis may differ or expand upon the structure presented to the public, particularly for the more intensive Overcomers’ Program. However, within these multiple agendas, assumptions, and working processes, Bluck and Shin held to two very basic principles: spend quality time, and listen. Though they had ideas for projects galore (both from their own experiences and from the many proposals gathered in Lowe’s residency to that point), they started by simply attending the classes that the Overcomers went to every day, and by cleaning Pearl Street every day with the men. Perhaps, out of this, artistic tactics might collectively form that could inform the strategies used to catalyze “positive change” on a personal and neighborhood scale.

CLASSES

A: The first class we attended was a bible study class taught by Jeff called Life Skills. Though it was bible-based, it was also about sharing your story, and that was a memorable experience for us beginning the residency, because the stories that they were sharing were really intense. They were often stories of violent pasts, they made me feel inadequate to even work with the Overcomers because I didn’t have the same experience. But from Jeff’s perspective, the fact that we started just coming in and listening, it was a good way for the men to see us spend time.

E: Eventually, we started teaching our own classes. For one, we all took a quiz on something called Love Languages. Basically, there are five “love languages” – there’s quality time, gifts, physical touch, words of affirmation, and acts of service. We all took the quiz so we could better learn how to engage them and gain their trust. By and large, I would say 90% of the guys, their top love language was quality time. So that really confirmed our intuitive thought, “we just need to spend a lot of time with these folks.” Because by spending more time, you allow more opportunities for random, inspiring things to happen. I don’t think any of us could have anticipated many of the project ideas without spending so much time with the guys. They learned to feel comfortable with us, and opened up to us.

CLEAN-UP

Since the beginning of the residency, Lowe felt strongly that spending time cleaning and maintaining Pearl Street on a daily basis was key to activating the street in a meaningful way. Frequently polluted with trash and difficult to clean properly, Lowe tried to get the Asian Arts Initiative staff involved with cleaning the street, but this was never a consistently maintained task. A flurry of activity would happen when Lowe was in town, but it was hard to get staff (or anyone) excited about cleaning the alleyway. Meanwhile, the men from Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission were cleaning the street every morning, Monday through Friday, as part of their daily chores. Bluck and Shin joined them.

A: In addition to going to classes, we also cleaned every morning, from
Monday to Friday, every week. It was just a good consistent thing, like eating a meal with your family every day. We learned a lot about the street and the people on it.

E: This is something they’ve been doing for years—we just joined them. That helped them see us as honest and trustworthy people because we were just entering into something that isn’t glamorous, isn’t always that fun, it’s not something we have to do, but they have to do it, so that’s where we’re meeting them.

Reflecting on the clean-up strategy he had so long espoused, Lowe wondered what would have happened had he suggested that the Asian Arts Initiative staff joined the mandatory Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission cleaning crew from the very beginning.

On some level the guys [from SBRM] were obligated to do it because it was the morning chore. But then all of a sudden with these other people coming in to engage, things changed, right? And to me that’s one of the core aspects of community engaged art. It’s all about giving people a different framework through which to see things that we normally would consider mundane things.  

WHAT ARE THE ARTISTIC TACTICS THAT CAN BEGIN TO INFORM THOSE STRATEGIES?

Perhaps it was more successful to work in solidarity and communion with men who were required to clean the street, thus elevating the chore to something that looked and felt different, than to stage periodic art events out of cleaning.

By spending time, listening and laboring with the men, Bluck and Shin opened up a space for developing artistic tactics that could begin to act upon the conditions outlined in CONSUMPTION, and explore possible ways to connect the assets of the homeless with the needs of their community. One simple tactic was to document and display the cleaning efforts of the men on Pearl Street, a project that came to be called Before/After.

A: Emily went to a community meeting that I believe Rick experienced as well where other people in the neighborhood were talking about the homeless population and what they do to the community, and it was all about how they pollute the street with trash.

One day there was a lot of white murky stuff coming out of the Roman Catholic trashcans, and one of the Overcomers was getting really frustrated because it was smelly and hard to clean. So we decided we needed evidence. We started taking before and after pictures of cleaning. Then we went to the Callowhill Neighborhood Association clean-up, and we had the Before/After photos up for people to see.

That was a way we used art as a tool to establish the identity of Overcomers as caretakers of the community.

E: Because people were able to see those photos, folks from the Callowhill Neighborhood Association are interested in potentially getting some of their people out to help clean up the streets with the Overcomers.

As the men in the Overcomers’ Program opened up more to Shin and Bluck, the artists felt a need to create a critical dialogue with the men about their situationality. They wanted to create a space for the men to comment critically on what they were experiencing, both at SBRM and within the context of the project itself. This led them to create

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lesson plans around revising the Overcomers’ handbook as an entry point to a discursive space, an effort they came to call Redact.

**REDACT**

E: When the Overcomers join the program, they need to sign a contract that says, “In exchange for housing and food, I will do XYZ.” Like, attend bible study every day, or permit the organization to take my phone for a 30-day blackout. So we initiated this project so we could go step-by-step, have them think about ways in which program helps them and sometimes hurts them, and the ways they can us their voices to advocate for their personal needs, and just create space to cultivate critical inquiry. It was a space where they could critique us too, if they felt like our programs weren’t working for them. We’ve noticed in other projects that a lot of artists would come in with their pre-determined plan, and work with a community that doesn’t necessarily have a sense that they can change or argue with what’s going on. So we wanted to cultivate that environment, where the men could say, “No, I don’t really want to do that, let’s do something else.” Which I think was really helpful in us gaining their trust.

The **Redact** project, though small and internal, felt like one of the more radical propositions of the **CONSUMPTION** residency...

The **Redact** project, though small and internal, felt like one of the more radical propositions of the **CONSUMPTION** residency, especially from a pedagogical standpoint. This process encouraged both a reflective understanding of situationality — what Freire describes as “critical thinking by means of which people discover each other to be ‘in a situation’”— and a platform for discursive, critical thinking. To Freire, both the emergence of critical thinking and the subsequent reflection on one’s own “situationality” are precursors to the rise of self-determinative action. Freire describes this process of emergence:

**Reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of existence...Humankind emerge...and acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled. Intervention in reality—historical awareness itself—thus represents a step forward from emergence, and results from the conscientização of the situation. Conscientização is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence.**

**KITCHEN OF CORRECTIONS**

In **Redact**, the men had the opportunity to directly confront, critique, and intervene upon the situation in which they found themselves, embodied by the Overcomers’ Handbook document and extended to encompass the residency projects.

One of the more ambitious and connective projects that addressed many of the concerns of the **CONSUMPTION** framework was the **Kitchen of Corrections**, which made its debut at the 3rd annual Pearl Street Block Party organized in October 2015 by Asian Arts Initiative. In many ways, this project continued the critical work begun in **Redact**, and synthesized it into creative energy and labor that highlighted the talents and assets of the participating men.

The conceptual underpinnings of this project were sophisticated, and reflected the rise of a situational awareness among the men, which then translated into an intervention upon their reality. The reality that the men were dealing with was a history of incarceration, and many of them trace their struggles with homelessness to that experience. But by repositioning that history as not only personal but situational, they were able to determine a creative action that would simultaneously allow for discussion, relationship-building, and the re-emergence of their own hidden assets and skills into the economy of the neighborhood as a whole. As Bluck and Shin explain:

18 Freire, 109.
A: We started talking about power dynamics and mass incarceration, trying to connect and educate ourselves about the bigger story that goes beyond just being the prison experience. From studying the data and written accounts of mass incarceration, those were some entry points for men to start sharing their personal experiences. They were really empowered to connect that they were part of this system called mass incarceration. Placing and feeling, being able to share that it is not solely their experience.

E: We came up with the name *Kitchen of Corrections*. And we framed it to ourselves that we were not really “correcting” the people who were serving the food, but we’re correcting the perceptions of the incarcerated.

The cheechee that would be served at *Kitchen of Corrections* first came up as a topic of conversation among the men because they loved the snacks Bluck and Shin would bring to all their class meetings. At one point the men (particularly a man named Anthony) started reminiscing about cheechee. When the group suggested the idea of cheechee as a focus for one of their residency projects, however, the discussion became more complicated. Some of the men felt uncomfortable elevating this staple of prison culture, preferring not to talk about it. The struggle to make this project meaningful for the whole collective was key to shaping the project.

E: They started telling us stories about why they made cheechee, it was largely because the food served at the prison dining hall was either so foul-tasting or undercooked that it was inedible. So they needed to find something else to eat. This became a new focal point for the project and we started shaping our classes around this idea—how we could build a shop that serves cheechee and use it as an educational experience—one that empowers and validates the skills and experiences of the Overcomers who have been in prison, but also serves as an education tool for the general public, who maybe don’t have as much interaction with prison culture in their daily lives.

A: A lot of the guys didn’t want to perpetuate that culture of jail experience, so there were a few men who didn’t want to engage. We started asking, “How do we make this meaningful for us?” We framed it as trying to “correct” our identities and stories to humanize who we are...that we’re Overcomers and we’re trying to overcome and come back into society.

E: So we set up a cheechee shop at the block party where we gave away food in exchange for donations, and we ended up serving close to 200 plates. It was very popular, people came back for seconds or more, and people were really engaged by the stories that the guys would share as they were dishing the food out on to their plates. The guys themselves expressed that they really liked getting to meet and interact with so many people that they otherwise wouldn’t.

A: The men were the teachers and givers of the cheechee, and people were asking questions of them, and they were the people who were supplying information, being educators and leaders in a way, bringing a different light to this whole issue.

E: So we felt that really accomplished what Rick set out to accomplish in his analysis of the economic power structures at play in the neighborhood around Pearl Street. I think it was a really great start...for something.

Bluck and Shin worked on other
projects throughout the residency, all with slightly different tactics and desired outcomes. Their Water Bar project, which occurred soon after they came on board full time, served water out of a cart during the hottest months of the year, and was a way to survey the neighborhood and talk to people in and around Pearl Street. Hear/Say, a “get-to-know-you” event that gathered disparate neighborhood groups to engage in structured one-on-one conversations, was another early attempt to both survey and research, but also to begin forming those connective relationships. Likewise, the exhibition Who’s Who attempted this with a display methodology, uncovering and broadcasting the faces and “stories” of the people in the neighborhood in an outdoor installation, investigating that simple Sesame Street question, “Who are the people in your neighborhood?”

Finally, Bluck, Shin, and several men in the Overcomers’ program, worked on a collection of art pieces with the men, called Finding Comfort. This culminated in an exhibition in a “storefront” space within Asian Arts Initiative that opens up on to the Pearl Street alleyway. In her description of Finding Comfort, Shin speaks a lot about “humanization.” This recalls again a Freirean process of critical thinking and emergence. To Freire, critical thinking precedes “true dialogue,” and that thinking “perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than a static entity”—in short, the vision that reality can change, and that we are capable of catalyzing that shift. This contrasts with “naïve thinking,” in which the experiences of the past contribute to (what should be) a normalized present. Humanization is at the core of critical thinking, because it allows for the situational awareness of each human’s condition, context, and obligation. As Freire writes:

For the naïve thinker, the important thing is accommodation to this normalized “today.” For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality, in behalf of the continuing humanization of men. 19

Finding Comfort rather elegantly created dialogue and advanced humanization through object-making. Shin describes in eloquent detail the artistic symbolism that arose from the men, and how she and Bluck worked together with a group of Overcomers to create a couch and wallpaper covered with poetic and critical meditations on their personal, human conditions—and that specificity had the effect of universalizing their stories. As one Overcomer named Brett testified on behalf of the project, “The homeless have a tendency of being treated like we’re less than human. And what this does it changes that.” 20

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19 Freire, 92.

A: Finding Comfort is a collection of bigger art projects that we worked on with the men, and the focus was that humanizing and storytelling aspect of their identity. We started the artistic process with a drawing project and the prompt was “Draw what homelessness looks like.” Danie drew this picture of his first encounter of homelessness, before he even knew he himself would become homeless. Greg, he drew snippets of things from jail that he experienced, and he talked about how that experience perpetuated a state of homelessness in his life. Nick, he did a really great picture of a castle and stars, really kind of sci-fi, which represented homelessness as an escape from reality. Fred drew a heart with a sword going through it and he wrote “Pain and Misery.” He wanted to talk about the pain he carries with him all the time from the experience of homelessness.
So after doing a couple of art projects, Johneil got the idea of working on a whole couch. He wanted to talk about how everyone is seeking comfort. And the point is not to be comfortable, but the idea that we’re striving for more.

So on one side, we had this prompt: “Bring an object that symbolizes comfort to you.” Thomas brought a hat that he used to wear when he had a job as a painter and contractor. It brought back a lot of memories for him as a man who had a job. And Danie chose the little frame with a little pineapple on it—that object represented comfort to him because it represents his ability to take care of himself and do laundry.

The other side was comforts that are found on the street. And from cleaning every day, you see a lot of evidence and residue of the comforts that are sought on the street. Emily and I learned about these crackpots—small plastic containers that look like trash cans and they sell drugs in them. We found a lot of dime baggies, caps for syringes. So we started collecting these things as well and incorporating them on the other side of the couch.

Even this idea of consumption, it ends up being a lot about relationships. A lot of our work was trying to educate, and also reflect, and also humanize this picture of the men that we’ve gotten to know, and create a place where those stories can be told in the way they want to be, to see themselves as people, or as part of the community. I think that was one reflection we had together.

VALUE AND POTENTIAL VALUE

The value for the Overcomers who participated in this project was clear—several of them spoke about a feeling of accomplishment and enjoyment they felt that they had not experienced in a very long time. Thomas spoke about being so used to feeling judged for being homeless, and praised Bluck and Shin for truly wanting to get to know the men in the program. Like a few of the other men, Thomas had lots of cooking experience, and felt a sense of deep enjoyment working with his good friends on the Kitchen of Corrections. This kind of togetherness, he said, may even lead to “taking it another step forward and taking on responsibility for life’s circumstances and situations.” This truly sounded like a critical awakening on Thomas’s part:

“It made us open up our eyes completely and it opened others guys eyes completely and now we’re beginning to see now an understanding more better than what we did before.”

LaMark also cited the enjoyment he felt when participating in the project—he would wait eagerly for when Emily and Aletheia would arrive for clean-up. Similarly to Thomas, he felt that the Kitchen of Corrections experience opened his eyes, that he was exposed to a lot of
different kinds of people than ever before, and perhaps interacted with them in ways he never had before.

When I first came to the mission I went to class and I met Emily and Aletheia and I really liked the class. I like, started liking the cleanup process and when I would look out the window and see if they was coming down the street because we would talk and have conversation and everything. But the cheechee thing I kinda liked that because of, like I said, I told my story when I was a prisoner about how we used to all get together and make cheechee. When we were hungry and when we was getting punished and it was the Caucasians, African Americans, Puerto Ricans everybody got together and chipped in their own piece of whatever they had to put in it and we all ate well. I liked the concept. I liked everything about it and it really made me see a lot of different things. It made me feel the neighborhood out as far as dealing with the Asian people. I talked to the Asian people, talked to the other people that was around during the block party and everybody liked the cheechee.²²

Organizationally, the efforts begun in this residency have great potential value for a strengthened relationship between AAI and SBRM, especially as those efforts coalesce around other initiatives between the two organizations. For example, Asian Arts Initiative’s continuing work on Pearl Street and its upcoming scheduled makeover of SBRM’s mess hall, in combination with these ongoing residency activities, have bound the organizations together inextricably. Some of the men, like John, have participated in several different projects associated with Asian Arts Initiative. John now considers himself an artist, and attributes the accomplishments he feels to his activities with Asian Arts Initiative. When the increased connection with Callowhill Neighborhood Association is factored in, largely due to the Before/After project and sparked interest in the daily clean-up efforts of SBRM, the potential for a powerful neighborhood coalition is a stronger possibility than ever before.

HOW COULD THE INSTITUTIONAL AND FUNDING STRUCTURES BETTER SUPPORT THIS METHODOLOGY AND WORKING PROCESS?

Though powerful work ultimately emerged from these residency projects, the process was often rocky. Because the residency was set up as a single artist residency to be directed by Rick Lowe, the sponsoring organizations at times seemed to have difficulty absorbing an apprenticeship model, which is essentially how it functioned in its last six months. Part of this was structural—even a two-year residency is an extremely short timeline for an ambitious socially-engaged project with a value proposition of catalyzing positive change on a neighborhood scale, especially given the logistical limitations of Lowe’s time on the ground as a non-local artist. Likewise, the funder expectations of frequent reports and updates on that value proposition required Asian Arts Initiative to function as advocates for the artist process, and the connection between the funder and the work on the ground was heavily mediated. As Emily Chow Bluck describes:

> It would have been nice if we could have had more interaction with the funder ourselves because I think that information felt a little hazy, because we had to keep going through AAI to them, and they, through AAI to us.

Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin described similar confusion, especially citing the lack of discussion and clarity around socially-engaged art and its unique artistic process. This could stem from the inexperience of these two artists, and both mentioned how

²² LaMark, Public Conversation on CONSUMPTION at Asian Arts Initiative, December 19, 2015.
grateful they were for the learning experience, but this also could have been a missed opportunity to engage in a much more open, transparent discussion around community-engaged artistic process.

So the grant system and reporting system wasn't really there, so there was a big need for AAI to become the middlemen and advocate for our practice. Just that whole relationship of trying not to burn bridges and also try to understand what's going on at the same time, and that whole definition of socially-engaged art... we were all in the mud. There wasn't a clear stance, like this is what we're going to stick with.  

From Asian Arts Initiative's perspective, they experienced a difficult transition as well once Bluck and Shin moved to Philadelphia to be on the ground. They felt that the artists were walking into a two-year residency in the last six months (even though Bluck and Shin had been engaged in the process in a different capacity for over a year prior) and were unaware of many of the historical relationships Asian Arts Initiative had cultivated with partnering neighborhood organizations. This came to a head in the early Hear/Say event, which included multiple neighborhood partners and was scheduled for a day when AAI staff could not attend. Asian Arts Initiative felt its position in the neighborhood could have been leveraged more effectively if the lines of communication had been more open from the beginning and accommodations had been made for their participation. Yet they acknowledged the artists' need for autonomy and protection in order to help their process—in part so that Bluck and Shin could create their own robust relationships in the neighborhood without an overt association to existing organizations.

Because these artists did not become fully engaged until so late in the residency, their roles were unclear—to Lowe, to Bluck and Shin, and to the organization. Lowe sums up many of the questions they struggled with:

These were artists that were on my team, but I was also bringing them in a way that I wanted them to be fully engaged. And so then the question is, you know, so are they actually in residence with AAI? Or are they actually just part of my team? And so we always had this kind of dynamic where I was pushing them to value their autonomy.

Asian Arts Initiative felt similar confusion about their roles, and felt they were getting mixed messages about whether Bluck and Shin were to be treated as artists in residence, or whether they were to be part of Lowe's team. This was exacerbated as the artists were empowered more and more by Lowe to pursue their own interests and projects, and gained true ownership over many of the relationships and partnerships formed.

Despite these complications, this residency has the potential to provide a unique learning experience for the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage as a granting organization, Asian Arts Initiative, and the artists involved. Since one of the achievements of the project was the coalescing of an artistic collective-like structure involving Shin, Bluck, Lowe, Chaplain Jeff Harley, and the men of the Overcomers' Program, I suggest that such residencies should be

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approached with greater allowance for a nimble and responsive collective structure. This might include phases that are not tied to resulting projects or exhibitions, but information gathering phases, relationship building phases, and a collectively designed implementation process created in collaboration with the participating members. Roles could be envisioned more along the lines of a practicing theater company or dance troupe—with key participants, liaisons, directors, and producers all as part of a coordinated structure. Embarking on such an ambitious residency project is more akin to building a functioning artistic company—a nimble, responsive, collaborative structure that can mold itself to conditions on the ground with the support and resources needed to take action.

It is neither possible nor practical to expect a single artist to instigate massive change or to have that kind of impact, yet our residency structures are still largely set up to support that kind of proposition. Lowe himself acknowledged several times that he knew full well that engaging in this residency would require at least 3-4 hours per day of direct and indirect engagement with the community to have any kind of impact; and Asian Arts Initiative realized with hindsight that they could have built up a very different infrastructure around a team approach that would be flexible enough to encompass multiple artists and the formation of a working collective over time. When working with socially-engaged art, we must not only rid ourselves of our fascination with the auteur, but realize that a very different approach is required—an approach that involves teams and co-participants, learning together, creating together, and taking action co-intentionally.

That said, Bluck feels there is strong interest among the Overcomers in continuing the work of Kitchen of Corrections. It is possible that this temporary, provisional artistic collective might solidify into a more operational, ongoing project. All the ingredients are there, but it takes a strong network of relationships to actually make cheechee. Everyone has to contribute something different, something that adds to the whole. You just can’t make it by yourself.
IMAGE CREDITS

Photographs by (in order of appearance):
Annie Seng - p. 1, 5
Tim Kyuman Lee - p. 11
Emily Chow Bluck & Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin:
      pp. 15, 20, 22, 29
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