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# INTRODUCTION

BY GAYLE ISA

Executive Director of Asian Arts Initiative

**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.**

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.

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## THEN AND NOW: SOME CHANGES

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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



*Photos from the Pearl Street Block Party  
Furniture build led by Walter Hood*



*Attendees participate in a painting activity*



*Hip-Hop Fundamentals performs*

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.

## **ENGAGEMENT IN OUR OWN NEIGHBORHOOD**

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.

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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



*Youth Arts Workshop activity led by teaching artist, Eva Wo*

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 Sclavi 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.



*Peach Blossom Spring* installation, Jacque Liu and Sarah Kate Burgess

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## FINDING MEANING IN THE MESSINESS

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**There’s a basic truth to working in a community arts context: It can be directed but not controlled. It’s messy. And in the end, that messiness is where learning happens.**

*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.

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.

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## COMMUNITY TO THANK

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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 McEaney 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.