

# SOFA



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# Letter from the Editors

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Who do you look to in sticky situations? As we bump into dilemmas both mundane and monumental, we are fortunate to have so many in our extended social practice circle who we can turn to for support.

In this issue we look to Social Practice alumni, faculty, and peers in similar fields to find new perspectives and understanding, a seasoned radio host on the power of the local, a first grade teacher and painter who's discovering new ways art can be present in everyday life, and a curator about the importance of centering care in arts institutions while chopping vegetables for a museum meal. Inside these conversations we find comfort, connection, and a way through that we might not have seen as possible previously. We hope you find some guidance in these pages too.

Your Editors,

Nina, Lou, Clara, Sarah, Dom, Gwen & Adela

Cover Design by Sarah Luu

# Living Between Worlds: A Mother-Daughter Dialogue

Text by Midori Yamanaka with R.Y., her daughter

**“Little me thought dark-skinned people were just more tanned. And I assumed it just stays from some point... then, they cannot go back to the original skin color. Just like toast.”**

I was born and raised in rural Japan and had never traveled abroad until I was 19. As a child, foreign countries felt like distant places—beyond the sea, beyond the TV screen, and far removed from my everyday reality.

In contrast, my daughter was born in Southern California and has lived her life moving between two countries. For a long time, she didn't fully understand the concept of nations, perhaps because she had comfortably visited and stayed in multiple countries from a very young age, recognizing only that different lifestyles existed. But by 2024, at the age of 16, she had begun to think about and understand the complexities of nations, laws, race, and social issues.

This is a small glimpse into one of our unique, yet very ordinary, conversations at home.

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**Midori Yamanaka:** Do you remember how you spent time when you were in preschool in California?

**R.Y.:** Um... kind of... Most of my memories are blurred.

**Midori:** Do you remember that one time for Mother's Day, all the students made their moms' faces with colored paper? All the moms' faces were lined up on the wall. You had made my face with brown paper. I couldn't find my face at first.

**R:** I did? Really? Haha. I don't remember, but I probably didn't care about your skin color.

**Midori:** You didn't care about skin color?



A portrait of Midori, created by her daughter at age 4.

**R:** No. When I was little, I didn't recognize skin color, but only feature differences, deeper or flatter. Haha. You know the difference between Western features and Asian features...?

But everyone has different features anyway. Some Asian people have deeper features than others, and many of my friends are of mixed races. So it also didn't really matter to me.

For the skin color, I thought those were just suntans. I actually thought that way until quite recently. You know some people can get tan nicely, but some, like you, cannot. You just get red and leave some freckles.

**Midori:** That's right. My skin cannot get tanned at all. It just burns so easily, and it's painful.

**R:** Yes, and so, you always put sunscreen on to protect your skin, and you did that for me, worrying about getting sunburned when I was little. But some people can get tanned beautifully.

So little me thought dark-skinned people were just more tanned. And I assumed it just stays from some point... then, they cannot go back to the original skin color. Just like toast. Once you toast your bread, you cannot go back to the untoasted one. And because it stays, babies are born with darker skin by its genes. That's what I thought. Haha.

**Midori:** When did you start understanding about race?

**R:** I don't know. I don't remember, but for sure I was not aware of the racial differences at least for the first few years in Portland...I came to Portland when I was 10 and turned 11 soon, so maybe until 13 or 14?

**Midori:** I also remember one incident with your Japanese friend, Karen, at preschool. You two played and talked in Japanese in school, and she was the only one who understood Japanese.

But her mother didn't like Karen speaking Japanese to you because they spoke Japanese at home and Karen's English was not so good. So they wanted Karen to practice English at pre-school so that she would be ready for Kindergarten afterward.

One day, her mother made her speak only English in preschool, even to you. And you were so disappointed. Do you remember that?

**R:** Yes, I do. And I chose playing in Japanese over her. I wanted to speak in Japanese. So I didn't talk much to her after that.

**Midori:** How did you feel? What were your thoughts on the process?

**RY:** What's the problem with talking in Japanese? I didn't understand. But she was so determined, saying 'I can't play with you unless you speak in English.' And I was like, 'Well, I don't want to speak in English.' So I decided not to play with anyone.

**Midori:** Back then, did you hesitate speaking in English, even though you sort of understood?

**R:** I didn't hesitate. I just felt more comfortable speaking Japanese since I spoke Japanese at home and everywhere.

I mean, English was not a problem. Little me just wanted to play while speaking Japanese. I thought if she really wanted to play and be friends with me, she would have, but she decided to do as her mother told her to. That upset me.

**Midori:** Yeah, her mom was very worried that she would not understand any English when she went to school after.

**R:** I know. But like, she had every right to not do that and speak Japanese with me. She could've spoken in English to others, and in Japanese with me. But she didn't do that and decided to obey her mother. That upset me very much.

**Midori:** I see... For you, it might have felt a bit like heartbreak, huh?

Anyway, I'm really surprised that at just five years old, you already had this sense of rights—like, 'Everyone has their own thoughts and feelings, but you have the right to make your own choices.'

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**R.Y. (she/her)** is the teenage daughter and only child of Midori Yamanaka, the author of this book. Born in Southern California, she grew up between Hokkaido, Japan, and Portland, Oregon. She has a keen interest in cultural and linguistic differences, diverse perspectives, and mathematics.

**Midori Yamanaka** is a Japanese Social Practice Artist and Educator whose work explores what happens in between—between people, cultures, languages, and ways of knowing. Born and raised in a coastal town along the Sea of Okhotsk in northern Japan, she brings a deep sensitivity to layered histories and micro cultures that quietly shape everyday life. She holds a BFA in Graphic Design from Art Center College of Design and is currently completing her MFA in Contemporary Art and Social Practice at Portland State University, with graduation expected in Spring 2025.



# Public Art is Dope

Nina Vichayapai with Elisheba Johnson

“Art should be for everyone... Public art is for everybody. It’s outside. There’s no hours. It’s so radical.”

In 2020 I had the pleasure of being introduced to the world of public art through Elisheba Johnson. At the time, Elisheba managed a free training program available to Seattle Area artists, called Public Art Bootcamp. As an artist, public arts manager, and the curator and co-founder of Seattle’s Wa Na Wari gallery, Elisheba brings a uniquely expansive approach to the field of public art. I continue to be inspired to engage with the public sphere in resourceful and community-minded ways of working, both of which were encouraged by Elisheba through Bootcamp. The following conversation was an exciting opportunity for me to return to my public art roots while also learning about the influences and experiences that shape Elisheba’s enthusiastic dedication to the public arts.

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**Nina Vichayapai:** Could you start by giving an overview of what your experience has been from your own background as an artist, and then into public art management?

**Elisheba Johnson:** My dad’s a writer and there was definitely art all around me growing up. But I never thought I would be an artist. I really did think art was just for white people, you know? I started making art in my senior year of high school. My teacher introduced me to the work of Romare Bearden. It was then that everything just made sense to me. I could hear the jazz and see the movement in the work. It was culturally relevant. It was transformational.

So I went to college at Cornish in 2006 and soon after I started a gallery in Capitol Hill called Faire Gallery Cafe. The gallery was inspired by the idea of salons and experimentation. Cornish was one of the only interdisciplinary art schools west of the Mississippi. A lot of my friends were in theater or music, so I wanted a space where artists of different disciplines could work together.

But the mortgage crisis happened in 2008 and it was just a bad time for everybody. So I closed the gallery in 2012. Soon after, a job came up with the city of Seattle. I had the opportunity to work with my dear friend, Randy Engstrom. He would be my boss there. He was so different from what I saw in government, so I wanted to work for him.

**Nina:** What was your time there like?

**Elisheba:** One of the first projects I got to work on with the City of Seattle was a project called *All Rise*, which was in an empty lot by City Light. Construction wasn't going to happen for a year so they decided to hire curators and to activate it. It was fucking dope. They had temporary dance performances, film screenings, all this stuff. It was also really cool because normally City Light would have had to pay security to secure that site. But instead we were able to pay artists to come in and activate it.

That really opened me up to what public art could be. I'd met public artists before who just made bronze stuff. I had never thought it could be like *ALL RISE*. Art should be for everyone. So when I worked with the city, I was like, oh, shit. Public art is for everybody. It's outside. There's no hours. It's so radical.

So, that's why I got into public art. I feel like it's a really great way to represent communities. I get to support communities to have artworks that represent what's really important to them.

**Nina:** Public art is so important as a way to mark time and place for communities. It's awesome that you get to support that. How long were you with the City of Seattle? And what is your position in public art now?

**Elisheba:** I worked at the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture for six years. I was managing the arts commission for two and then I moved into public art. Now I am an independent public art consultant.

**Nina:** Something I'm curious about is how you balance it all. You're so active in supporting public art projects, you're an artist yourself, you started Wa Na Wari and do so much programming for that gallery too... What's it like to manage all of that?

**Elisheba:** I mean I don't feel like I have any balance. I'm not gonna lie to you. I'm so bad at self-care. I am totally transparent about that. I've always been a workaholic. I used to say I have small business owner's disease. There is a

certain level of busy I like to be. But since I have a chronic illness I discovered that I had developed a couple of years ago, learning to slow down is much needed. I'm still fighting it.

At work I joke around and say that I have the binder of the artists of color. So I'm the person people call when a building is getting made and the community says we should hire a person of color. I'm working with three artists of color right now for one developer and it's all their first public artwork. So that part is cool. But being an administrator can feel like it's all just paperwork. At the end of the day I'm writing contracts and processing invoices and checking in with the artist while they get to do the creative part.

I got into making public art when I was managing projects with the City of Seattle. I'd see projects and think about how I would be doing this or that. I thought maybe I wanted to be a public artist. I started a public art practice with a collaborator who unfortunately passed away a couple of years ago. So I'm trying to figure out how to move forward as a solo public artist.

**Nina:** That's tough. And it seems like having any balance as an artist and arts worker definitely seems like a challenge across the field.

**Elisheba:** I think that as artists and administrators we have to figure out some type of balance because it really is soul killing to be that close to the art and not be making. I think I had told myself for a really long time that I'm not an artist. I'm a gallerist. But now I feel differently about it and I wish it didn't take me this long to go back. So I'm trying to find ways to bring in my own practice without it feeling like it's nepotism or something.

At Wa Na Wari almost all our staff are artists. And so, for Walk the Block, our big festival, we let everybody make artwork for it. I want to do community based public art with folks that don't have a bunch of resources. I also want to get much more intentional about having less clients so that I can really focus on other stuff.

**Nina:** Definitely. I dream of someday being able to say no to an opportunity. It's nice to have space in your life to just work on the things you find personally meaningful.

**Elisheba:** That's what happened with Barbara Earl Thomas. She's a really dope artist in Seattle and she used to be the executive director of the Northwest African American Museum. She's always made art and had shows and stuff. But then she quit and now she's a full time artist. I keep telling her, "I want to be like you." I'm going to do this administrative thing and then I'm going to be a full time artist.

Also, women artists actually peak way later than men. Most of them are like 50 or 60 years old when it happens. So I got time.

**Nina:** You do! That's really uplifting to hear as a woman too, sounds like something to look forward to.

What about the public art bootcamp program, when did you start that?

**Elisheba:** So my mentor, Marcia Iwasaki, started it 20 years ago when she saw that in the 70s and 80s there were these white guys who could self-finance making public art and they just had a lock on it. And so she created this program as a response. It was a six month program that met one day a week for several months. They went on field trips and they had meetings with fabricators and all that. The program eventually stopped running but when I learned about it I thought, wow, that's what we really need for artists of color.

So after talking about it with Marcia and my boss Randy we decided to reinvent her program with an attention to racial equity. It was really successful. We made sure the artists in the cohort had access to getting selected for a real project. At the time, we had six community centers being remodeled that needed art. I think in a lot of ways that was the most important part. We're not just talking about budgets and contracts and fees. There's a real chance to actualize the learning.

I've seen several people who went through the early boot camp who are just straight up public artists now. The program has been expanded to Redmond, too. I'm no longer involved in it but it's still really important to me.

**Nina:** It's an amazing program. If it weren't for that program, I'd have no idea about how to even get started making public art. And the fact that the program is free and not being provided by some kind of higher learning institution is really amazing too. It's so important for artists to have access to that kind of specialized knowledge.

And you also have a background as a poet, is that correct?

**Elisheba:** I'm an artist and poet. I did my MFA in poetry. I've been writing poetry since I was 12. I have a text based practice.

**Nina:** What's it like working as a poet in public art?

**Elisheba:** I have a funny story. I applied for this public art project from Vulcan. It's on Jackson and 23rd, in the Central District of Seattle. There were eight artists they picked. They wanted traditional African symbols or something. I was trying to do that and it just didn't feel right and it was not me. So I was like, fuck it, I'm just going to write a poem. That's me.

So I sent it in. The project manager even checked with me to make sure it was what I meant to submit. But later it turned out that they liked it and I was selected. So if there was ever a lesson to just be yourself, that's it!

**Nina:** I love that! I've totally felt that one of the tricky things about making public work is feeling the pressure of what others are expecting you to make. Should you do something true to yourself, or that satisfies what the board is looking for?

**Elisheba:** Yeah it's hard, right? I think sometimes artists get so overwhelmed with community feedback that they lose their own voice. But when the art comes out and you're excited about it, that is such a good feeling. I'm never going to stop loving public art. It's dope.

**Nina:** So what are your hopes for the future of public art? Anything you're excited about, anything you're hoping to bring into it?

**Elisheba:** That's a good question. I think we're just in a weird moment. One of the problems with public art is everybody is super risk averse, right? Sometimes you put an artwork out there and the community hates it and they're all mad at you. So I get it. Sometimes you just want to do something safe and not cause any waves. But I think there's so much opportunity for really incredible stuff. So I think we just need to be less scared as a field. Also, most public art isn't federally funded so we don't need to play it safe.

I'm also interested in how we can make public art more accessible for different folks to get into. Marcia always talks about how public art in your city is like a library. You wouldn't want the same book from the same author. You want many books from many authors. And I feel that way too.

**Nina:** That's all so important. It's cool to hear that you support artists taking risks and finding their voice on these projects. I've definitely felt constrained in public art projects and like I need to tone things down. But to have a working relationship with someone who supports your vision would be so rewarding.

**Elisheba:** I do think most project managers are artists or went to art school. So they want to do cool projects. We want to get excited. I think that there are people out there willing to support those risks in public art. And who knows, I might be one of them. I feel like my last job might be running a public art program. I could do that for like five years and then retire or something. I think it'd be fun.

**Nina:** Didn't you say the golden years for women artists is 60 or 70? You could do that in your retirement!

**Elisheba:** Well maybe in my pre-retirement, I'll be a full time artist by then!

**Nina:** That sounds like a solid plan. Well thanks so much, I learn so much every time I talk to you and this was the perfect conversation to have right now as I think about making some public art!

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**Nina Vichayapai** makes art that explores what it means to be at intersecting margins. Her interdisciplinary work includes soft sculpture, public art, pie making, guerilla gardening, dog petting, and eavesdropping. Nina's art has been exhibited in places such as the Bellevue Arts Museum, the Henry Art Gallery, and on telephone poles and bulletin boards. Her work can be found in the collections

of the City of Seattle and in gardens across the Pacific Northwest. Nina was born in Bangkok, Thailand and graduated from the California College of Arts in 2017. She currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

**Elisheba Johnson** Elisheba Johnson is a curator, public artist, administrator, and disruptor. Feeling left out of the traditional art world, Johnson has dedicated her career to building bridges for artists of color to grow and thrive in our local arts community. Johnson, who has a BFA from Cornish College of the Arts, was the owner of Faire Gallery Café, a multi-use art space that held art exhibitions, music shows, poetry readings and creative gatherings. After closing Faire, Johnson went on to work at the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture on capacity building initiatives and racial equity in public art. Johnson currently co-manages Wa Na Wari, a Black art center in Seattle's Central Area that uses the arts to build community and resist displacement. Johnson's personal art practice examines the beauty and triumph of Black life in America through mixed media and poetry.

# When Words Hurt

Lou Blumberg in conversation with Lo Moran

“I think what people get out of these beliefs is a sense of purpose and belonging and community that are very powerful. I think the ways to counteract that would be also building spaces of belonging and community that aren’t harmful to other people.”

Lo Moran’s name has circled my social practice orbit for a while now, both as an instructor of the study abroad program in Art and Design in Berlin and Prague that I’m lucky enough to attend this summer, and as a program alumni whose work deals often in difficult conversations. Especially in this moment of political polarization, emboldened bigotry, and heightened/visibilized state violence, I was really curious how (or if!) Lo saw conversations with those who hold different or even violent viewpoints as not only an artistic interest but a way to bridging these social divides and finding ways forward. Living in Berlin, Lo’s past and current work and conversations provide crucial insight into my perennial question: can people really change their minds? And if so, how?

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**Lo Moran:** What else have you done for SOFA so far?

**Lou Blumberg:** Last fall I interviewed a security guard as part of an investigation of security in Portland. We had a conversation about how he sees his role and what safety means to him, and if people are inherently good or inherently bad.

**Lo:** Was it something that you felt like you agreed with or were coming from a different perspective or...?

**Lou:** Definitely a different perspective. Something I'm struggling with is how to avoid platforming opinions that I deeply disagree with. I would love to hear your thoughts about that, and if you've encountered that in other forms of your work, that tension in social practice.

**Lo:** Yeah, I have thoughts on this. But I also kept running into a wall with that.

**Lou:** I'd love to hear your thoughts and your walls.

**Lo:** I was just talking to my friend about this last night, who's a radio journalist, and we might work on a short radio piece together, connected to these topics about conversations across deeply different beliefs.

I have a lot of recordings with people saying things that I find pretty harmful but I was fascinated by. I was going into it not thinking very much or having any interviewing experience — just going into it very naively, I think. It's worrying that people would listen to it and be like, "Oh, they don't sound so bad, they sound pretty amicable and friendly."

When I applied to the social practice program, when I started this project that later became "Difference is a Field", I was living in Arizona. For one of my videos in my application to the program, I interviewed this street preacher guy. I was working at the University of Arizona and he was a student and had very violent rhetoric.

I was doing the part of the application that is an interview with someone about their clothing and he had these crazy shirts that he made and stuff. I made the video and it's just him talking, I cut my parts out. I had it on YouTube. And I realized it was getting hundreds of views. There were a few comments and stuff and I realized they were from people that agree with him. I was like, "Oh, he can use this as part of propaganda—people can watch it not from the perspective that I'm watching it from, of being critical of his views."

And I took it down. It was my first awareness of, "Oh, this material could really be used in a different way than I intended it to be." I've struggled with finding ways to work with the material, which is why I ended up doing a comic that was more based on my personal experience of the conversations I was having rather than directly quoting people and stuff.

I also didn't have any journalism ethics. I listened to an interview with a journalist who made the point that you should never take someone's recorded interview and then comment afterwards if you don't agree with them. Anything that you feel about what they're saying, you have to say to their face in the moment or else it's not fair to them because they don't get to respond to your opinions.

I'm not a journalist, so I don't have to follow those ethics necessarily. There's lots of artists that I don't think follow those ethics at all that I can think of examples of. But it made me think. In the moment, it's so hard to formulate a response to what people are saying. I really struggle with that.

I've done some stuff where I was playing with conversations and because I make noise music I would play with the audio pieces, distort some of the conversations and use them more in that way.

**Lou:** What got you into doing those interviews in the first place?

**Lo:** I'm from Connecticut originally, which is very different now. My hometown feels very conservative when I go back and I think a lot of people there really like Trump, but at the time it felt like a very liberal bubble in New England. I hadn't really been exposed to that many people with radical far right views.

In Arizona I was encountering that everywhere. It was 2014, 2015, the build up to Trump. And there were a lot of militia groups and this street preacher, those kinds of things. I was surprised and fascinated by it, also in a naive way.

I saw this guy protesting and I was like, "I have to talk to this guy." I felt bad for him, which was also the framing of a Vice mini-documentary about him I had seen. It was like, "Oh, this guy has no friends and everybody hates him." And I got really obsessed with the idea of, what if you just befriend people and then they learn how to be different? I think I've come to different conclusions now, but that was how it started.

And then I moved to Portland after that. It was 2016 and there were the anti-Trump protests, and then there started to be the pro-Trump groups that would come in and there was a lot of violence and it was directly affecting a lot of my friends.

I was in the counter protests to the Trump rallies and there was a lot of rhetoric about "we don't talk to fascists," which, yeah, is very understandable, and I don't think anyone should have to ever do that. But I was like, I want to, also because my dad voted for Trump. I wondered, what is the psychology behind this. It was a kind of confusion that was the initial curiosity.

**Lou:** I like to use points of my own confusion or tension as starting places for things. I wonder if that can come off a little naive, but so it goes.

**Lo:** The right really thinks leftists are trying to censor and silence them, but it's more that these right wing ideas are everywhere in mainstream culture, and it's nice to have spaces where you can have alternative ideas without them being bullied and torn apart.

**Lou:** I would love to hear how you got into social practice as a form. I know you had a printmaking background and drawing background.

**Lo:** I was doing a lot of community-based work, and I've worked in different programs and groups especially in disability communities for the last over 10 years now. I did an AmeriCorps program after I graduated undergrad and that was living on an anthroposophical farm.

**Lou:** Whoa, anthroposophical? What is that?

**Lo:** Anthroposophy, it actually started in Germany. It's very much like a cult and mixes a lot of things with Christianity. This guy, Rudolf Steiner, who also did Waldorf schools, he was working with Goethe and stuff and was more in the philosophy realm.

And then he had a vision of Jesus and got into very esoteric versions of Christianity, but he invented this version of farming, and a lot of ideas about society, and got a lot of followers, and there's still these intentional communities. And I didn't know any of this before. I just was like, yeah, I want to teach art on a farm, what is this? It was in upstate New York. There was some stuff I was like, I don't know if I agree with this.

I'm not religious, maybe spiritual or something, but Joseph Beuys was very influenced by Rudolf Steiner, in social sculpture. There were a lot of really beautiful rituals that were used in everyday life and in the farming. I found the philosophies and approach really interesting, and something I'd never really encountered before.

I had studied illustration but was always more interested in conceptual art. That experience really made me think about the art in everyday life and how those things can come together more, and how people can value each other in different ways. It was just really different than anything I'd ever done.

And then I went on, I moved to Tucson. I worked for another program that was the opposite, not very respectful of people. But then I started getting involved in forming a community print shop there. It made me think of how I really loved the social aspect of art making, making events and making a space together and working collectively. It made me realize that I was into those kinds of things just as much as making prints or something.

I went with my friend who was applying to UC Berkeley—we were on a road trip and I was like, I'm going to go look at something too. It was a different school that had a social practice program and I'd never heard of the term social practice before. They explained it and I was like, whoa, this is something you can study. And then I applied to pretty much all the social practice programs. I hated Portland at first. But then I ended up staying there for six years.

**Lou:** What did you hate about it when you got here?

**Lo:** Tucson was just really down to earth. I was doing a bit of border activism stuff, and the place just felt very real and in many ways very open. I remember I was about to move to Portland, and I watched *Portlandia*, and then I cried.

**Lou:** Oh, no! And what sort of stuff are you working on these days?

**Lo:** I'm figuring that out right now. In the fall last year I worked on a big, pretty socially engaged project that we started in May, and then the exhibition was in October. It was with this group called Sickness Affinity Group, and we created

experiential workshops that we did together, and archived it in a piece called [Soma Archives](#).

It was about archiving experiences with disability in a somatic way. It was really nice to work in a collective way with people on these topics. I love archiving and got to experiment with that kind of stuff. I mentioned my friend who's a journalist who I met with last night, who is maybe going to invite me to make a radio piece for the public radio about *Difference is a Field*, and they have a lot of interesting experience with that too. Here in Berlin it's very parallel to the US—there's a very scary threat of the far-right getting a lot of power. The elections are coming up in a few weeks, and it's unclear what is going to be happening with that. All the parties are being very anti-immigrant. Similar to how Democrats are in the US, all the parties took a right wing turn.

**Lou:** What do you feel is the role in this moment of such intense political division of talking to people who have different opinions from you? What use do you think it has now? Or maybe you've changed your mind about that and it doesn't have a use.

**Lo.** I'm not sure! I've thought about this a lot, yeah. And is it politically useful or just like a personal special interest that I have?

And I don't think you can change people's minds. I think what people get out of these beliefs is a sense of purpose and belonging and community that are very powerful. I think the ways to counteract that would be also building spaces of belonging and community that aren't harmful to other people. I don't think people see leftist spaces as something that they feel welcome in, which is reasonable because a lot of their ideas are not.

I think we're at a moment where people are really asking these questions. Maybe shaming people isn't the right strategy for building solidarity across all different demographics and actually being for working class issues.

That means maybe not policing people as heavily, and being welcoming, but then how can you do that and make sure that people feel safe if you are vulnerable? And can you actually do all of those things?

**Lou:** Totally.

**Lo:** What do you think about this? Yeah. What are your thoughts?

**Lou:** It's so hard. I don't quite know how to say this without being a total asshole, but I want people on the left also to have a larger capacity for conflict or discomfort. Because while it is absolutely a bummer and harmful when people misgender you for example, speaking from my own experience, it's not actual violence. There's actual violence happening in other ways, so how can we resource ourselves to respond to those moments of discomfort? And have a larger capacity on the left for people who fuck up, and for people who say they're wrong. More resilience, more skill building around that.

**Lo:** Yeah. That's a great way to put it. Like a larger capacity for conflict. I think a lot about that also. How do we do that? A lot of people whose perspectives I don't like and who I disagree with about other things have been saying this for a long time. We need it strategically and emotionally, so people don't take everything in and get hurt by everything for themselves.

**Lou:** We all need more awareness of when we need a stronger boundary vs when we might need to dive into something and get honest.

**Lo:** When I was working on this project everyone was like, "I don't know how you can talk to these people and listen to the horrible stuff," and I don't really know either. I don't know why I have a fascination with it instead of horror and disgust.

And I have those things too, but it's not like the primary emotional response.

I don't know. I don't know why that is.

**Lou:** What is your somatic experience when you're talking to people like that?

**Lo:** I was really nervous, like shaking, like anxiety. That's also why I don't think I could counter what they are saying very easily. But that's my experience in general when I meet new people. I always have a lot of anxiety about social things. It was like that, but just more extreme.

There was a professor at PSU that has since quit that was hosting these far right events. Peter Boghossian was his name. He was a philosophy professor—he's like my nemesis. He was introduced to me as someone who is trying to do the same kind of project that I'm like doing, but I've tried to reach out to him so many times and he's never responded. I would love to have a conversation with him. He doesn't actually want to have conversations with people. He was like, "I want someone in the women's studies department to debate me," and, saying things like Black and Indigenous Studies programs shouldn't exist. Just all this really offensive stuff.

I went to this event my friend had told me about, where Boghossian was doing these debates about stuff. But then it was like all the far right internet people there. And I had never encountered a lot of the QAnon stuff, I didn't know that there was a reactionary bubble about genders, men and women— that was the first time I encountered stuff like that. Now it's the law of the land, but it's grown from a stupid, internet troll conversation in 2020. It's crazy.

A lot of these people that were involved in this event, they've gone on to advising policy, they're like helping write these laws. It is a small circle of intellectual, horrible people that have so much influence and power and they know how to use media.

There's so much more infrastructure for their media. So much more funding, dark funding. Collecting money from all sorts of scary places. But I remember after that event there were a few interactions I had that made me feel really

uncomfortable, and I went and cried in my car afterwards. It was just too much.

I think I've become more numb, but I was very sensitive at the time. But I'm doing it anyway. And I've always had a fascination with transgressive stuff too. What are these lines that people hold, not that thinking that it's good or bad, but I'm interested in dissecting it.

Yeah. What else are you working on? Or any other projects?

**Lou:** Yeah, I'm hosting a sing along to the droning hum of the Lloyd Center Mall's basement, where they have some mechanical constant tone that's between an A sharp and a B. And with my classmate Simeen, we have a pop up song circle singing resistance songs. Some musical things to balance out some of the difficult emotional things.

**Lo:** That's what I do too. I got really obsessed with karaoke, So that was my like, counter. I work at a karaoke club here, it's really crazy, and I love when people sing revolutionary songs, and at protests people sing it too.

**Lou:** Are you a KJ? Is that the term?

**Lo:** Yeah, I somehow made my obsession into a job. It's like this giant queer club, like I'd never worked in nightlife really before, and it's wild. So fun.

**Lou:** Well, I really appreciate you taking the time.

**Lo:** Yeah, likewise.

## **BIOS**

**Lou Blumberg** is an artist, facilitator, and educator with ties to San Francisco, New Orleans, and Portland. With a belief that a better world is possible, their deeply personal practice deals with conflict and its impact on our relationships and lives; surveillance and safety; and joy in despairing times. They are part of the MFA Art and Social Practice program at Portland State University.

**Lo Moran** creates interdisciplinary projects that are often socially engaged, participatory and collaborative. They aim to experiment with and question the systems we are embedded in by organizing situations of connection, openness and nonhierarchical learning, working towards accessibility and reimagined ways of being together by investigating community support and belonging. They are currently working on a comics and audio series documenting personal experiences with current political and cultural divides and live action role play (LARP) projects. Lo has also been involved in creative projects within disability communities for the last nine years. They try their best to embrace fluidity and chaos to contribute to emergent futures and radical approaches.



# One Thing Can Be Many if We Let It

Clara Harlow with Jorge Lucero

“I’m trying increasingly, and have been trying for about three decades, to take those activities that are frequently considered underbelly activities and turn those into the primary activities. Turn those into the works.”

*Jorge Lucero*

I found Jorge Lucero’s pedagogical work at a time when I needed permission myself. I’d been preparing to teach my first undergrad course on conceptual art and looking for ways to make it accessible and meaningful for my students, while also keeping it engaging and manageable for myself as a working artist and graduate student. In my course research, I was delighted to come across Illinois-based artist and educator Jorge Lucero. I was instantly struck by his expansive approach to teaching as a form of conceptual art in and of itself that reimagines the classroom as potential art material, research site, and experiment for both student and teacher.

In a moment when folks are eager to draw boundaries around life and work, Jorge wonders what might happen if we emphatically embrace the opposite. Through Jorge’s envisage of his daily roles of professor, administrator, colleague, and parent as an opportunity to embody his art practice, he offers an invitation into what else might be possible when we don’t change what we’re doing, but rather how we’re relating to it. On the last day of school, I sat down with Jorge to parse through the potentialities of art, education, and work, and was left with something far more resonant than any singular answer could provide.

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**Clara Harlow:** I want to know a little bit more about the way you're approaching the intersection of art, life, and teaching. What has that been looking like for you lately?

**Jorge Lucero:** It's a more precise version of something that I have spent many years trying to articulate and carry out in a way that feels true to how I understand myself as an artist and increasingly, as an artist who has a lot of other activities that don't immediately read or register as studio practices. So it's about trying to figure out how these practices exist as hybrids, but also how the variations in all the different kinds of practices give permissions to each other for new ways to enact those things.

So, for example, I now hold an administrative position here at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and when that was offered to me, I was reluctant at first because I didn't want anything to take away from my artistic practice, which is what has been driving me professionally for the last 25 years. But then again, I never wanted to be a professor, because I thought that was going to get in the way of being an artist, and I never wanted to be a high school teacher before that, because I thought that was going to get in the way of being an artist.

But what has been revealed in taking on all of those different types of tasks is their materiality. There's a ton of permissions that these forms exchange with each other, and I've become increasingly attuned to how they speak into each other. And I give myself the latitude, which I try to pass along to my students and even to my colleagues, to be able to take methodologies, approaches, and discourses from each other. So I do think that there are a lot of things that being an administrator opens up for being a creative practitioner, and vice versa. It seems like a counterintuitive pairing or formula, but it has proven to be complementary practices.

**Clara:** Yeah, reading your work was making me think a lot about my own history with work both inside/outside of the art and design world in New York, and always trying to find that balance between the two. Do I need more time or more money right now? Do I want to work in proximity to the art world where my actual role isn't going to be associated with being an artist, or do I want to work outside of that, and have free time to be working on my own practice? I feel like I'm always moving around between those axis.

**Jorge:** I think the reason that we make a difference between those types of activities is because we have different levels of tolerance for their arduousness. So let's take a ceramicist, for example, who has to do the arduous work of either calibrating glazes or reclaiming clay, or fixing works that crack in the kiln or something. There's a lot of labor and finickiness, and maybe what we could call banal activity that is a part of those studio practices. While the enjoyment of those activities may fall on a spectrum, they certainly don't question their necessity as part of the sequence that allows for them to make the kinds of inquiries that they want to with those mediums.

Yet when it comes to finding that work-life balance, we tend to categorize things like filling out paperwork or working a “day job” or teaching as something else, as if those weren’t the equivalents of pugging clay or trial and error testing of glazes. It’s not like I teach or have managerial tasks in support of some other practice that I call my art practice. It’s that I’m trying increasingly, and have been trying for about three decades, to take those activities that are frequently considered underbelly activities and turn those into the primary activities. Turn those into the works.

Now, in order to do that I have to obviously reconceptualize my idea of what art is, but also how the work is put into the world. Because, you know, so much of the work that I do as a creative practitioner within the institution is never put on display, and, in fact, is incredibly difficult to document because of its expansiveness. So there are a couple of mind shifts that need to occur in order for me to get there, but that’s been the activity all these years.

**Clara:** What are some of those mind shifts for you?

**Jorge:** Well I’ll start with documentation for one. Even when it comes to social practice, there’s the expectation that even a blurry or bad photograph, or a partial recounting of the events on some level serves as the currency that emerges from the practice, event, or activity. But what I’ve been thinking about is what happens when the prioritization of documentation takes a backseat, or even proves to be impossible? What occurs then? So then you have an art practice that I would call an art practice of invisibility, meaning not that there isn’t something there, but that it’s very difficult to perceive. And it’s particularly difficult to perceive within the limitations of one lifetime. So there’s this kind of immateriality to it, or a kind of length, largeness, or impossibility to the materiality that invites us to be at peace about not being able to see it.

I get really curious about the extremes of that, about the projects that are so small that you can’t get them down on paper. You can’t photograph them, or you can’t talk about them. And then I also get really interested in the ones that are so big that they’re equally very difficult to capture. Even if you do something that has a large footprint like, for example, the Social Practice program there at Portland State, that has an incredible footprint that’s probably going to outlast, or probably has already outlasted its founders and many of its contributors. But even then, it’s gonna have a lifespan. Eventually people will come around and will either defund it, dismantle it, or there just won’t be any interest in it anymore. And then it will have lived its life. But it’s just too big to capture it all in even one very nicely designed website.

**Clara:** I’m curious how you talk about this sense of scale with your students? How do you share with them what you’re doing and the ways in which you’re playing with the expectations around what learning is and how it can happen. Do you find that it’s more of a showing and less of a telling?

**Jorge:** Actually, it's funny that you pit showing versus telling because I actually think it's more of a telling than a showing. And what I mean by that is I think people know that these things are true, we just don't have the language to describe some of those things. So I do a couple of things, actually.

One being that there's a difference between education and schooling. They all sort of intuitively know what schooling is, because they're doing it and it's being done to them. But they haven't all thought about what their education is. However, when you can present to them something like their Instagram scrolling or hanging out with their friends as an educational activity, then things start to shift in their brain a little bit. Because when you're scrolling on Instagram for 2 hours, you feel guilty about it afterwards, you feel like you wasted all that time. But didn't you also engage with the world in some way? Didn't you also learn a bunch of things?

And in order for that to make sense to them, I have to pull it back from the activity having been productive, right? So the instinct is, it's not useful, or it's not a good thing that I did because it's not productive, but not all education has to be productive. That's a schooling paradigm, but it's not necessarily an education paradigm. Sometimes we go for a walk, and our body registers the temperature, the pace, the passage of time, the nostalgia of it all, the beauty of nature, all of these things which on many levels you could say are "unproductive," yet at the same time we don't downplay that as something useful or not useful, but simply as an enriching experience.

And I'm not saying that everything that we do has to be enriching, but that I try to bring my students to a place where they can be more attuned to the things that they perhaps dismiss, or have been told to dismiss, and that actually opens up a whole other field of experience that helps them to rethink what their education could be. Once they stop thinking about school as the only place you get an education, and they start thinking that you can get an education at any moment that you're awake, or even that you're asleep, then all of a sudden there's a kind of curiosity that is enlivened in the students.

And then you can really talk about so many things that happen in art, and so many things that could happen in art that still haven't happened that are on these edges that I'm talking about, like the edge of visibility, the edge of documentation, the edge of artist currency, the edge of thinking and experience. And then you're really tapping into the idea that living life is a kind of material.

**Clara:** Yeah, that has been very top of mind lately for me in thinking about how I approach my process in making work that's relational and often anti-capitalist in nature, and then coming up against my own conditioned and self-imposed expectations in the process of making that work. I've been holding this tension between wanting to make things and spaces where productivity culture is being challenged or questioned, then finding myself also having to do a lot of internal work alongside that in unlearning the ways that I can reinforce this productivity value system in my process. Even in my learning, my real impulse to be like, "Oh, okay great, this is a thing that keeps coming up, now I'm gonna continue to

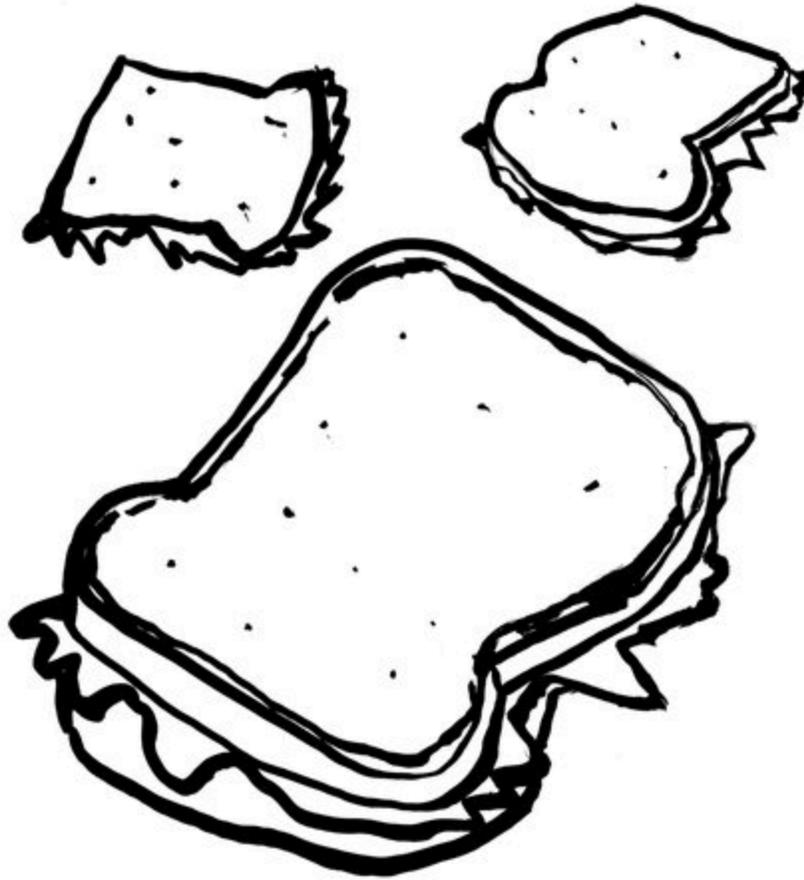
research it and see it from all these different sides.” But I’m trying to learn when it’s sometimes just about being in the experience and trusting all the different ways that we can access learning and knowledge, that it doesn’t need to be a certain way for it to work.

**Jorge:** Sure, the only other thing that I would say in addition to that is that it doesn’t have to be either/or because we’re really elastic. We have a lot of capacity for imagination and for multimodality. So there’s also a lot of room to say, I’m a person who gets things done, and a person who enjoys and can be enriched by the process.

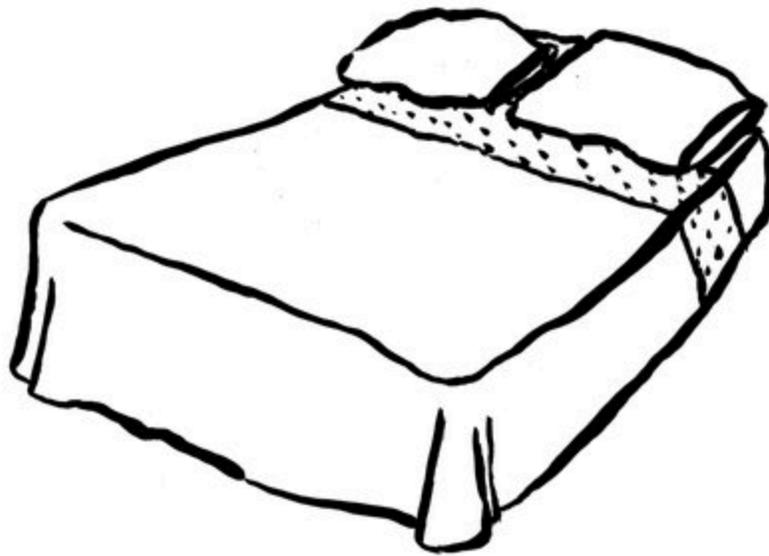
I try to get the students to not throw out the baby with the bathwater. I do want them to think about being more conscious of the fact that they might be contributing to projects and work that are way beyond them that will outlive them, that may not be recognized until way after they’re gone, or may not be recognized at all ever. But at the same time continuing to keep in consideration the ability, pleasure, and sense that we get when we close a circuit, either on a daily basis or moment to moment basis, whatever that circuit is. Whether it’s the conclusion of a 15 week class or the making of a singular meal, or the completion of a 4 year project, I believe we can have both.

**Clara:** Yeah, you mentioned you taught your last class of the school year today and I’m curious how you reconcile this idea of students’ learning and contribution to something that’s way larger in scope than they might realize at the time while also working within these real temporal constraints of the class length. How did you close the circuit for your course today?

**Jorge:** This is going to be really corny, but I try to hold true to the idea of commencement, which usually schools do at the end of the year, but the term actually means beginning. So today, I had my last class called Art, Design and Society. After 15 weeks of giving lectures to 160 first year students about things like ecology, Utopia, invisibility, and absurdity, I ended with a lecture about permissions. That lecture is an attempt to give a singular tool that I’ve been kind of modeling throughout the entire semester. And the tool is, how do you look at the work or the creative gestures around you and take what you need from them in order to compose your own toolbox in your own imagination that you can go forward with?



From Ted Purves I got  
permission to give it  
away.



**From  
Lee Mingwei I got  
permission to have a  
limited audience.**

*Conceptualist Permissions for Teacher Posture.* Photo courtesy of Lucero.

I give some examples of a project that I did where I tried to examine as many of the posture permissions that I've gotten from artists over the last 30 years in my life. So I end the class by offering this project as a tool for how the students can go forward in the construction of their own education. And my hope is that it's a kind of examining tool, a kind of microscope, that they could use to encounter all

sorts of creative practice, not just art, design, or scholarship, but that they can use that tool to engage in the next 3 years of their undergraduate experience, and hopefully in all of their creative practices thereafter.

**Clara:** I've been thinking about that project a lot recently in my own life and practice, and I made a little list myself of all the different members of my MFA Program in this moment and the things that they've taught me.

**Jorge:** That's great!

**Clara:** And my family, too. That practice was really meaningful to me because it almost felt like a kind of gratitude practice, grounding back into the idea that we all have something to teach, and we all have something to learn from each other. And even in moments of conflict or miscommunication that naturally arise in relationships, remembering that there's no right way. There's no expert here. We're all kind of figuring it out together and what if we instead choose to see the material around us and each other as a kind of gift? It's hard to phrase without sounding corny, but thinking of it as a practice that wonders how else we might see each other in this moment.

**Jorge:** I mean, it's not. I know it sounds corny, but maybe the only reason it sounds corny is because it's elementary in a certain way, you know? Like the way that I think about it is not very different from Show and Tell, a gift that I was given when I was very young, which was to have this opportunity to have the floor. And so here I am, 6 years old bringing in my treasured Star Wars action figures and I'm given the chance not only to show them, but to speak on them as if I have some expertise about them. Which of course I did, because I'm the one who plays with them, I'm the one who treasures them, I'm the one who knows where they come from, right? And I'm not saying that that wasn't a shared sensibility with other kids in the room at that given moment, but the gift of being given the opportunity to hold the floor was like being told something that you like matters.

Maybe the learning objectives of participating in Show and Tell were to encourage me to come out of my shell or learn how to tell a story or something like that. But the hidden curriculum of that was being empowered to say the thing that I am drawn to is important. I think that the permissions project is just one step more sophisticated version of that same activity.

It's connected a little bit to the word "like" and the way students who are new to an art critique setting are oftentimes told they need to give more sophisticated responses beyond expressing that they "like" something. And I understand why teachers do that because we think there's a more robust way to talk about what we're experiencing. But I also think we don't give enough credit to the expression "I like."

The etymology of the word "like," which is also where we get our word alike, has to do with an echo, an echoed body or a mirrored body. And it basically means something that is similar to you, so when we say "I like this," or even when we

give a like on Instagram or Twitter, we're kind of saying, here's an echo of me. And that for me has become a really important thing to highlight in the way that I, as an artist, move through the world, but also in the way that my students move through the world because I don't want them to discount that feeling that they have as if it's not a smart feeling. I think it is a smart feeling. It's an incredibly intellectual response to phenomenon in the world, right? I like this song. I like the green in this painting. I like the risk that you took here. I like you. This kind of thing where we express similitude to something else, I think, is an underrated, but very potent way to be in the world.

**Clara:** Well, I like that. I like that a lot, in fact.

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**Jorge Lucero** (he/him) is an artist from Chicago who currently serves as Professor of Art Education in the School of Art & Design and also as Associate Dean for Research in the College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

As part of his decades-long work to test the creative and conceptual pliability of "school as material" Lucero participates in and around the academy in every manner possible. He has exhibited, performed, published, administered, and taught through his work all over the U.S. and abroad. Lucero is an alum of Penn State University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Prior to working in higher education, he served as a high school art teacher at the Chicago Public School Northside College Prep.

**Clara Harlow** (she/her) is an interdisciplinary artist and educator interested in the question of how we can make today different than yesterday. Her work operates as an invitation into themes of celebration, exchange, and alternative ways of measuring time and value. Through parties, workshops, and interactive objects, Clara is invested in how we can turn the dilemmas of the everyday into an opportunity for experimental problem solving and collective delight. Her practice aims to create responsive public containers for unexpected joy and connection, but if she can just get you to forget about your To Do list for a little while, that's pretty good too.



# Another Way to Hold Things

Simeen Anjum and Kristan Kennedy

*“We don’t preserve; we work with living artists in the moment they’re making.”*

**Kristan Kennedy** is an artist and curator currently working as the co-artistic director at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA). In this interview, I speak with her about her artistic journey, the process of defining her core values in her profession, and how she navigates working within an institutional setting while staying true to her own principles. We explore the potential of museums and how we can reimagine these spaces to better serve their communities. Kristan, who came of age in Brooklyn in the 1980s and moved to Portland in 1995, has always been interested in examining the role of artists and creating community around art. Recently, Kristan and the PICA staff undertook a collective reorganization of the organization’s kitchen, transforming it into a more welcoming space for everyone—artists, visitors, and staff alike.

The morning of our interview, I visited Kristan at PICA just as she arrived with bags of groceries for a special event happening later that evening. Kristan and the team at PICA prepared dinner for the event, which included a Turkish tomato lentil soup. While we chopped vegetables and chatted, sitting across from each other, we dove into a conversation about our respective work, the intersection of art and community, and the importance of shared spaces.

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**Simeen:** What were your curiosities when you were a student?

**Kristan:** When I was a student, my curiosity revolved around how one claims the identity of being an artist. I had always been engaged in art since I was a child. As an only child for six formative years—my sister wasn’t born until I was almost

seven—my parents had to keep me occupied, and art was something I really connected with. From a young age, I was fortunate enough to have this identity of being “the kid who was good at art.”

As I moved into college, though, I started questioning what it meant to call yourself an artist. I wondered if it was just about skill, or if it was more about something deeper—maybe a way of being in the world, or a career. I wasn’t really sure, and I had my assumptions, but I wasn’t clear on what that meant for me.

Growing up in Brooklyn, I was lucky enough to be exposed to art through museums, and I even worked at one in high school. I had this idea that being an artist could be a career, and that there were different levels within the art world—maybe one of those levels involved becoming a “famous” artist who had their work in shows or magazines like *Artforum*. But even with these ideas, I really didn’t know what it all meant or how it would play out in reality.

**Simeen:** And how did you find an answer to that question?

**Kristan:** I am probably still doing research on the big project that is called “what does my identity as an artist have to do with my value as a person”. Ha! One way of answering this in the context of my life learning about art through, looking and making and doing especially in the context of art school is that I feel very lucky to have had the teachers I did. Leonard Bellinger my high school art teacher ( in a very small Catholic all girls school) also happened to be one of the very first artists in residence at PS1 in NY and a radical thinker who pushed me to think beyond materials into ideas of visual perception, at Alfred, I worked with Joseph Scheer and Mary Lum, Peer Bode and Ted Morgan they were all so generous and very much into art being a relational practice, one not devoid of humanity... Although they are all serious artists with long careers they also eschewed any obsession with fame or commercial success that came at the cost of their values. They shared information and knowledge, they celebrated each other’s success and were very much into process, collaboration, experimentation and questioning ( your motives, materials, methods). This helped me move towards my own philosophy that the art world should not be separate from the world world. So to be an artist is to be a human in the world who is curious and conscientious – who pushes at the sides of things and offers new perspectives. Who is creating a new language for the future, something that may not be understood in their lifetimes. It isn’t about chasing accolades or about a list of accomplishments.

**Simeen:** And how was your experience going to an art school? Was it competitive?

**Kristan:** When I first went to college, there were so many people with different experiences, which was amazing, but it also made me feel a bit lost at times. I was anxious and confused. I threw myself into my work, but I also invested a lot of energy into my relationships, especially with my friends. I think that’s partly from

how I was raised, but it also directly relates to what we're doing right now—chopping vegetables together and making food for artists. Creating a culture around art has always been interesting to me.

At art school, though, there were times when that sense of community didn't feel as present. It was more about whether or not you did well on an assignment, and I remember feeling like, "Well, I'm not sure how I did on the project, but I do know we helped each other out." Those kinds of values weren't always encouraged, and they didn't really factor into the grading system, but they were important to me.

Eventually, I found my way into the printmaking department, which allowed me to engage in a more collaborative practice. Printmaking, the way we were doing it, required you to work with others—whether you were on a press with someone or participating in group critiques. That wasn't the case with more isolating practices like painting. Even though I now identify as a painter, my time in printmaking felt more collective, and that sense of community was something I really valued during my time in school.

**Simeen:** As a curator now, What are the values you bring into the culture you're creating, both within the institution and beyond?

**Kristan:** Yeah, absolutely. The first thing I'd say is that I'm a curator without an MFA, and without a formal background in art history. I do have some background in social history ( which was my minor in college) , and now I teach in a graduate program, but when I first started, it was really about being an artist who knew how to work with other artists. My mentors, Kristy Edmunds and Victoria Frey, who founded PICA, were the ones who helped me understand that curating is about care. They reminded me that the word "curate" comes from the Latin word "curare," meaning to care for. Historically, curators were people who worked in institutions like mental hospitals or zoos, caring for people or animals. So, they said to me, "Your job is to care for the artist, first and foremost—their well-being, their ideas, and helping them figure out what comes next."

This philosophy really resonated with me, as it aligns with my values around relational practices. Even though I had to learn a lot on the job—like how to install a show—I've always been comfortable in relationships, asking questions, and bringing curiosity into institutional spaces. I came from a generation and art-making moment that was deeply influenced by identity politics, political work, and movements like those surrounding the AIDS crisis, Reagan's policies, and other forms of oppression and fascism. That kind of work was very direct, sometimes didactic, and often took place in the public realm.

As practice has evolved, my interests have shifted, but I've always carried that questioning of systems and authority with me. That's a big part of what I bring into my work at PICA—asking myself what kind of institution we are and what we're doing. There are things we just can't avoid, like being part of a capitalist system, operating within a nonprofit structure, and grappling with the effects of whiteness.

When I started, we didn't really have the language to articulate these things, but the questions were always present. I'm really fortunate to have had the mentors I did and to work with the artists I do.

**Simeen:** How has your experience been working with other artists and curating their work with this understanding?

**Kristan:** One of the key lessons I learnt was that, despite the common belief that curators are somehow "above" the artists, the value at PICA was that curators were on the same level as the artists—or sometimes even below. The core idea that was instilled in me was: follow the artist's lead. This fundamentally shifts the role of the curator away from a top-down approach. It was really helpful to learn while in that environment. So, curating is like a mentor role for me here. It's also about truly understanding what the artist is trying to express and where they might not be seen or understood. A good example of this is the show I did with the artist Storm Tharp, who currently has an exhibition at PDX Contemporary Art. A monograph of their work was just published—it's an incredible catalog that took five years to complete.

When Storm and I worked together, they were facing a challenge in their practice. Storm has an incredibly diverse approach to art—they're a talented draftsman, capable of rendering incredibly detailed garments and facial features. But they also have an interest in a variety of mediums, from making clothes to creating more abstract paintings, sculptures, and videos. This diversity in practice presented a challenge for their gallerist, who was very supportive but found it difficult to define who Storm was as an artist to collectors. To some, it seemed like seven different artists were involved in the work.

But to me, it was clear: this was all made by the same person. It was about ideas, color, and form. So when Storm and I discussed the possibility of having a show, I wanted to approach it from that perspective. I didn't want to narrow the focus to just one aspect of their work, like the drawings, because that's what was most commercially viable. Instead, we created a show called High House that was a more expansive representation of Storm's practice. We moved a lot of their studio into the gallery—pedestals, plants, paint jars, and other materials—blurring the line between studio and gallery space. It also included all the forms of Storm's work.

The exhibition was an installation that gave visitors an immersive experience of Storm's creative world—essentially, an inside look at their mind.

**Simeen:** This sounds so exciting! I also just started working as a curator at Littman and White, a student-run exhibition space at Portland State. Lately, I've been really interested in learning and engagement in a gallery setting. A lot of times, when you go to a museum or an art show, it's unclear what's going on. Do you have any concerns about that when curating a show, or hosting something in this space? How do you make sure that the average person can be a part of the experience?

**Kristan:** Yeah, that position is always shifting depending on the project. But I'd say I try not to underestimate the audience. I'm not a fan of shows that are overly didactic. What I really hope for is to create an experience with the artist, the crew, and the entire team here that engages curiosity. This word—curiosity—is really important, it's a core value for me. I hear it a lot here, like when we talk about who PICA is for, the answer is: curious people. That doesn't just mean artists or people who "get" art—it's for anyone who's interested in things that are compelling or challenging.

Now, making a show that's not heavily didactic can sometimes feel exclusionary, right? Because you're not handing people a bunch of information as soon as they walk in the door. You're not guiding them through the experience step by step. But my desire is to create an environment where people can walk in, observe, and be curious. What makes someone comfortable enough to walk through the door is a whole different question, though, and that's what a lot of audience engagement programs are working to address.

I absolutely think about accessibility. Over the years, I've created more or fewer access points depending on the show, but it's still something I'm always considering. For example, earlier this year, we had an exhibit called Policing Justice, which focused on police brutality and activism. The exhibit featured multiple artists. You might assume that a show like this would need context or explanation for visitors to understand the works, especially since much of the content was really challenging and could be triggering. There were discussions about whether we should write a statement explaining what people were going to see. But the artists were very clear—they didn't want a statement on the wall. They said, "Nothing happening here isn't already happening in the world."

And that brings me back to the conversation around engagement. Nothing in an art exhibit happens in isolation from the world. Art just takes a different form and uses different materials.

I do think we want to get people in to see the work, especially those who might not have encountered these issues before, and that may require more development and understanding of the work. But for the most part, I believe that people already have the capacity for this kind of imagination and understanding. It's about providing the space for them to connect with it in their own way.

**Simeen:** That's really interesting. I have one last question. Since you mentioned that you grew up going to a lot of museums, do you have a favourite? And if you were to work in that museum, what event would you want to host?

**Kristan:** I may never work in a museum and to be honest Museum's and the work of upholding the colonial project that most museums are is not interesting to me. PICA is not a museum. We're intentionally a non-collecting institution. We don't preserve; we work with living artists in the moment they're making. If I had to pick

someplace... I have always been inspired by Marsha Tucker, who founded the New Museum and I wish I could go back in time and work for her in that time and place...

As for an event, it's very similar to what you experienced today. I think it's essential that everyone in art spaces, regardless of their position, feels acknowledged as an important contributor to the work. That's a tough system to break down, but I'd absolutely initiate a family meal or something centered around food. I cook for my crew, staff, and artists at PICA because it's something I love, it calms me, and it allows for connection in a different way. Bringing food into a space that is often cold and about preservation can break down barriers between people. This isn't a new idea, but I think it's essential. My dream job in a museum would be to have an open kitchen, and as a curator, I'd just work in that kitchen where people could come in, talk to me, and share a meal. What we're doing here with food is really about hospitality, and I think that kind of warmth inside an institution is so important. Not just through the education department, but from the top down. I want to see every director in every art space making someone a sandwich.

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**Kristan Kennedy** is an artist, curator, educator and arts administrator. Kennedy is co-artistic director and curator of visual art at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA). She is based in Portland, Oregon, and has exhibited internationally, working with various media including sculpture and painting.

**Simeen Anjum** is an artist and curator based in Portland, Oregon. She is currently interested in exploring the possibilities of education and learning within art spaces. As a curator, she works with artists to create shows that are engaging, inclusive, and provide space for people to connect with artists about their larger practices, thoughts, and processes, rather than just viewing art as objects. As an artist, she imagines alternative modes of existence and belonging in public spaces, which often take the form of singing groups, building a nap room in a mall, hosting a sky-watching party, among many other things.



# Place-making

A conversation between Chariti Montez and Adela Cardona Puerta

*“Here’s the ideal of what we want and over here’s the bureaucratic process to get there and I had the skills to walk between the two. Going back to being the interpreter or the translator of the two worlds: I can build this house by hand, but if it’s not legal in the place where I live, it’s vulnerable. I think that’s when I realized that I could live in both and help people navigate this bureaucracy”*

I met Chariti Montez for the first time with my cohort to figure out if we (the Art + Social Practice Program) could work together to make Assembly, our event of experiential projects, workshops, and performances, with the Portland Office of Arts and Culture.

Chariti was sweet and passionate in sharing her hopes for placemaking through art in Portland in her current role as the Director of the Arts and Culture Office. That excitement and the fact that she is a Latina in a position of power in government cultural spaces made me curious to know more.

When we met for this interview, we walked to the park together and as we did, I asked her what language she would feel most comfortable speaking in: English or Spanish. The fact that she felt more comfortable speaking English prompted a personal and vulnerable conversation around the wound and baggage that language carries when you have mixed backgrounds or come from a family that has been forced to immigrate from one culture to another.

Language, therefore, became the thread to unravel just a speck of the brilliance of this woman that inhabits the borders between the US and México, and between Art and Government. I hope you too enjoy this chat with a fellow translator of worlds.

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**Adela:** As a Colombian, who is also a descendant of Syrian-Lebanese people, that does not speak Arabic, I too understand that the feeling of inhabiting a language is a wound, a scar that sits in the place of war, displacement, and resilience. Could you tell me more about what your experience with language has been like as the daughter of Mexican and American parents?

**Chariti:** Absolutely. In my case, it has to do with the fact that my dad was deported when I was a kid. My mom is white: she's an English and Scandinavian descendant, from Danish Mormon pioneers. My dad is a Mexican immigrant from Tierra Huichol, in Jalisco, in the mountains. And like everybody from his village, he came to the United States to work because that was what my grandma had done. He did so as an undocumented person, like a lot of other migrant farm workers.

When he was working on Mount St. Helens, planting pine trees, Mount St Helen started blowing ash, and they realized the trees weren't gonna live because the ash was coming down on them. So the company stopped planting them. As his whole crew left Washington on a Bus, crossing back over into Portland, they were detained. My dad said he was detained for a week before he was deported, and they didn't tell us anything.

**Adela:** So your dad fucking disappeared for a week?

**Chariti:** Yeah. And then he was gone. And this is before there were cell phones; he's from a village, a *ranchería* that doesn't have running water, electricity, or roads. He'd never been to a big city, he's never even been to Mexico City to this day.

My mom looked for him. She couldn't find him. We just didn't know what happened and we moved back to Portland. He came back, years later, to look for us at the house that we lived in in Salem, and nobody was there.

He had no other way of reaching us because he is from an indigenous village, he doesn't read or write. And so he wasn't able to find us. And we weren't able to find him.

**Adela:** That is really fucked up.

**Chariti:** Yeah, it is. My mom speaks Spanish well. But after my dad was deported, I didn't grow up around Spanish for a while. Until my mom remarried my stepdad who is Afro-Mexican, and who I feel I was raised by. I have two little

brothers who were two and three when our parents got married, they mostly grew up in Acapulco. And they tell me that I sound like I learned Spanish in a textbook.

**Adela:** Oh my God. That must be like a dagger to your heart.

**Chariti:** Yes! So, they think that I'm *fresa* and I'm not.

So because of my history, I just feel that language is so confusing.

For example, I have friends who are white and don't have any identity tied up in it, and they learn Spanish so easily. I think it's because they don't feel the same pressure of practicing it, hence they feel comfortable making mistakes. For them, it's just a cool thing to get to learn. It doesn't reflect on them and their core identity, or this part of it they are missing. And that's just Spanish. My dad's from an indigenous town, and we don't speak that language. So it just keeps going. It's a sort of wounding around language.

The one other thing that I think is fascinating is that, because I was born on this side of the border, I have a very different privilege than my siblings. Because, even though I was raised very poor, I was raised very poor in the United States. Which means I have access to things that my siblings who were born in Mexico don't.

I eventually reunited with my dad because he got amnesty and had a new family, and I have five half-siblings from that side who all live in Nevada. To my ear, my siblings speak perfect Spanish.. But most people think 'they sound like country bumpkins, have poor grammar and bad Spanish'.

The other difference lies in the fact that since they left as children, they haven't been back to Mexico. I, on the other hand, because my stepfamily is also Mexican, have been traveling to Mexico for the last 20 years or more. So we have a different relationship with Mexico.

We had this moment of meeting each other as adults and trying to understand what my life was like on this side of the border and their side of the border. And since my dad was still working in the United States, they didn't feel like they had their dad either. The border just divided everything.

Then to think that because my parents have switched countries, my mom has lived in Mexico for 20 years and my dad's been in Nevada, our relationship with Mexico and with the United States is like two sides of the same coin. It's messy.

**Adela:** It's really convoluted. And that experience is what I got from when we first met when you were talking about placemaking. It's clear what you have been doing all your life, because you have been put in a space where you didn't grow up having an actual place, both spiritually and physically. Which means that you're inhabiting the in-between,

And even though that is a very hardcore experience, it's also something that makes you a translator of worlds in a way that is an essential part of your career in between art and government. Isn't it?

**Chariti:** Exactly, I feel like that's the part that I have leaned into from my identity: I am bisexual, I am Biracial, I am bicultural, I am only kind of bilingual, not really (laughs). In fact, until recently, I was the only biracial person in my family. Because I have half-siblings who are white, I have half-siblings who are Afro-Mexican, but both of their parents are Mexican, so they don't feel mixed in their identity in the same way.

So whether I choose it or not, I lean into that bi-experience with my identity: I am an artist and a musician, but I'm also a bureaucrat. I represent the government, I work for the "Man". It is an interesting place, the place of an interpreter.

**Adela:** Yeah, that is something that I wanted to ask you about since you are this person that inhabits different places and that creates their own third space constantly: What are the places, not just physical, but also metaphorical in terms of music, people, and food that you find belonging in?

**Chariti:** One thing I've noticed in the United States, in college, is that I felt really comfortable with other mixed-race, bicultural people, even though they didn't have the same mix as me. And that is more intense because I grew up in Oregon and Washington, which means I did not meet a lot of folks who had one American parent and one Mexican parent who were my age.

I had a lot of friends who were Mexican nationals or Mexican immigrants. And now I see younger people, who are mixed race or have a parent from each country. But back then, I felt very isolated. When I was in elementary school, there were only two Mexican families besides my half-family in an entire elementary school. Can you imagine that?

**Adela:** That's intense. I mean, you grew up in one of the most white places.

**Chariti:** Yeah. So I learned early on that I was really comfortable with the other kids whose families were different from the American dominant culture norm. And I felt that even more so in college, a place to finally experience our identities and meet people who were not from the same towns and cities.

Something that also makes me feel a sense of belonging is music. For me, music is not about performing or being the center of the stage. It's about building community. I love being in a group, and playing music with other people because you are creating something outside of yourself, even though it's ephemeral.

When you play, you learn a non-verbal language with your bandmates; you're communicating without talking, while you are playing together. But then there's also that mix of creating community through that music.

I first did that with the Brazilian music community in Portland. I just fell in love with Brazilian music when I was like 12 years old because I played the tenor saxophone and one of my parents' friends gave me that album of Stan Getz.

**Adela:** The black and orange one? I love that one.

**Chariti:** Yes. And that's how I found out what you could do with the saxophone, and it turned into a gateway for Brazilian music and these rhythms. I ended up in a Forro band, with Brazilian bandmates. Forro is from Northeastern Brazil. We started playing out and people came.

There was such a community around it, that I would see people in our audience singing, swaying, and singing along to the songs. We had folks who would tell us that they hadn't danced like that since they left home. This is why having that third place, even though it's in a nightclub, transcends that through culture and sharing musical knowledge.

Because I am mixed-race and ethnically ambiguous-looking, though, and I was on stage singing in Portuguese, people would be like, oh, are you Brazilian? And I kept saying, no, I'm Mexican.

Which finally led me to learning Mexican music. I started studying the Mexican Son Jarocho and working with a whole group of people in Portland to bring teachers up from Mexico to do a cultural exchange. Those became *talleres* and Fandango.

And even though I'm not from Veracruz (where the Son Jarocho is from), I am not Jarocho. That music has become a really important way for me and for many communities in the United States to have a connection with their culture.

**Adela:** Was there any specific workshop or *Fandango* that you remember as being especially impactful to you?

**Chariti:** Yeah, a few. There's an event that's been going on for years. It's called the Fandango Fronterizo, there have been stories in the *New York Times* about it. It's at Friendship Park at the border wall, south of San Diego and Tijuana.

And the organizers do an incredible job, they would get a permit to be in Friendship Park, which is a militarized zone on the US side, it's so wild. With the permits, you can just be in this one area where we would put the *tarimas* up against the border wall, that it's like mesh, layers of *malla* that you can kind of see through.

Then on the Mexico side, in Tijuana, they would do the same thing and people would be barely able to see each other through the wire but the sound traveled. So we'd be singing and playing music across the border to each other. And that in itself was so impactful. Full stop.

It would be a daytime event, but afterward, folks who could cross the border would go over to Tijuana and have a Fandango all night.

One of the things that was moving was that on the US side, a lot of the roads washed out and we had to get rides to drive back with the *tarimas* on the back of a border patrol vehicle. And I was talking to the border patrol agent, and he was Latino, asking 'What is it like for you to be Latino and a border patrol agent?' And he was like, 'No, it's great. I get to use my skills and my community connections, and I'm able to help these people. And in my head, I was like wow, 'how is it that that's what you think you're doing?' That was fascinating to me.

And then I think that another moment that really broke my heart was on the Tijuana side. That side was just incredible, there was so much life, a stark difference: on the US side, you're surrounded by barbed wire and there's border patrol going up and down as well as all these lights. You have to get a permit to exist in that US space between these two countries for just a few hours.

And on exactly on the other side of the wall, in Mexico, people were painting a mural on the border wall with all the names of Mexican Americans who had fought in US wars. And then there were people doing their Quinceañera photos and having a book festival on the boardwalk. There was so much life, beachgoers, and lowriders, people were just right against the border as if the border didn't matter. As if saying 'We're still living our life right up to the edge'. It was just so interesting.

I cherish that and I think about that space a lot. I mean we're sitting in a park right now, I work for the government, for Portland. I used to work in parks. And now that I work in arts and culture, I keep that image in my head about what it looks like on the US side versus what it looks like on the Mexico side.

Later that night on the Mexico side, I wandered off down towards the water and there was a young Mexican man who had a very rural accent and had been swimming out in the middle of the night trying to get out past the wall to the US. It was heartbreaking.

And there's border patrol right on the other side of that wall, and they were patrolling with lights and he was just getting tossed by the waves in all of his clothes. And I was like, are you okay? And he was not wanting to be seen, just trying to hide in the shadows, trying to get the strength to swim out into the ocean. Far enough to get past the wall.

**Adela:** Oh God.

**Chariti:** And I just... there are no words for it, you know?

Moments like that make me think a lot about what I look like: I'm a light-skinned person and you would never think that that border has any impact on my life. But my stepbrother and his wife tried to cross last year and got detained and I had to find them and figure out where they were and send money. They had all their documentation taken away when they were released on the Mexico side and I had to help get back home in Mexico City.

It just feels like the pain of that border doesn't end. It hasn't ended.

**Adela:** First of all, thank you for everything that you just shared. It is very vulnerable and I hold it in my heart. And secondly, I feel like you are one of those people for whom where it hurts is where you end up working your butt off to make it better.

Do you feel like this way in which you inhabit the world in the in-between made it so that you could code-switch and jester your way into change and placemaking for underrepresented people in the government from the inside?

**Chariti:** Yeah, actually, I decided right after college, that I was gonna have more access to power if I was on the inside, to affect change that way.

**Adela:** How did you come to that conclusion? It is interesting to me where people who want to make change decide to stand from and why.

**Chariti:** I did Sustainability Studies for my major. My focus was Earthen Architecture and natural building. I studied with a Welsh architect and with a Mexican architect in Mexico. I was ready to change the world and thought we were all gonna live in Earthen buildings, and a lot of us do in the world, and they're beautiful.

But at some point, I realized that we have a different seismic situation in Portland and that's not necessarily the right thing for here. I thought that just by knowledge I was gonna change how architecture and our relationship to built-in environments work; but whilst working with some of my mentors, I realized that we had codes to follow: seismic codes, engineering codes, and building codes. And I also understood that you can work through the permitting system for those codes to make what you imagine legal.

And because of that, we were able to build a straw bale house. I drew the plans for a couple with compromised immune systems in Thurston County (WA), outside of Olympia and it was permitted. I was able to work with the government people at the permit counter to have it exist legally in that space.

So that made me come to terms with the reality that here's the ideal of what we want and over here's the bureaucratic process to get there and I had the skills to walk between the two. Going back to being the interpreter or the translator of the two worlds: I can build this house by hand, but if it's not legal in the place where I live, it's vulnerable. I think that's when I realized that I could live in both of these worlds and I could help people navigate this bureaucracy.

No wonder my first full-time job with the city of Portland was in the permitting department, where I was able to use my background in architecture to help people navigate this complex regulatory permitting system. And I never stop playing on the side.

I would be at the permit counter, during the day, and then my coworkers would see me working the door at a Club on the weekend or see my band playing at the summer concert at Sellwood Park. I kept inhabiting both places.

One of my mentors, when I first got a job in the city said: 'Be careful Chariti, it's like being in golden handcuffs, make sure this is really what you want and like, check in with yourself every couple of years'.

And I took that really seriously. But also that mentor came from a place of privilege that I didn't come from. So I was, like 'golden handcuffs to you. You have the choice not to work in a job like this, but I don't necessarily have that choice. This is an amazing job for a poor kid who used to be unhoused...look at what I'm doing here. That feels pretty amazing'.

**Adela:** It does sound dreamy! How did you transition to working in parks programming and arts engagement then?

**Chariti:** The thread was music. My band played at the outdoor Summer Free for All Parks concerts, and I realized it was somebody's job in the city to produce those events. And I was like, let me have thissss.

It took a few years, but I did move over to the parks department. A lot of what we do we're producing events, but a lot of it was also helping people who wanted to produce their own events outside understand how to do it, how to navigate that process. So there's always been this layer in my work of making awesome ephemeral places and also helping people navigate through the system.

In the events we were doing, I saw them reflected on what I experienced as a young person in Portland because the summer is beautiful here. And I was always at every outdoor free concert I could be at when I was a kid. So when I stepped into that role, I could see that community happening around the movies, the concerts, and the cultural festivals that we were creating as part of Summer Free for All.

I remember we did a concert in the park near my house and I walked out of my door towards the park and other people were walking out of their doors and they were walking towards it too. I was like, 'These are my neighbors, and even though we don't even talk to each other, we are all headed to the same place right now to go do this thing that it doesn't matter if we know each other or not, or if we have the same politics or not, we are in the community right now experiencing this'. I was doing ephemeral placemaking, simply by providing the infrastructure.

We had to bring in the stage, the sound, the band and the *tarima*. And by making that container something really special happens and then it's gone. And that's part of the beauty of it. It's a ritual that happens every year. It comes with the seasons, but it's part of this larger cycle and I just find that so beautiful.

**Adela:** It's amazing, the power of holding space for togetherness, identification, and catharsis through music is something I also hold dearly. And When you were talking about that ephemeral placemaking, I was thinking that you're both making containers for these transient places of belonging, but you're also being a Wayfinder because you're helping people navigate the grants and governmental system in order to get with them where they need to be

Reading about the Summer Free World and how back in 2015 you saw that the people that attended these events were of the dominant culture. I am curious about how you have worked to make it so that people from different communities of Portland can both have a place, but also learn to navigate to become the place makers themselves. Both before and now as the Director of Arts and Culture.

**Chariti:** With Summer Free for All, at the movies and concerts, we slowly shifted who we partnered with. We made sure that we were partnering with culturally specific community groups so that they had a say in when, where, and what movie in the band was shown.

We also started doing movies in languages other than English. And the first movie that we did in Spanish with English subtitles, I got hate mail because people were so offended that we did that movie in their park in Spanish, even though we made sure that we played that same movie in another park in English. But the team at the city stood behind us a hundred percent. And I went to the event that night, and there were 300 smiling brown faces watching the movie.

So, we kept doing more movies in more languages, translating our schedules into 16 languages when I was working there. And we made sure that there were community members who spoke those languages to write them.

On the other hand, I'm interested in the fact that you called what I do wayfinding. I've never thought of it that way. But I do remember sitting with a leader in the Tongan community, helping them navigate the event production process, sitting in my office together, because we were in our second or third year of doing the Tonga Festival. That's an immigrant community that's been here for decades and still feels marginalized. It was so valuable to be able to provide access and help people navigate those systems.

**Adela:** And how have you been doing that wayfinding and place-making in the Office of Arts and Culture?

**Chariti:** At the Office of Arts and Culture, it's all very new, and there's so much change at the city government level. But, the work we're trying to do is making sure that we're supporting arts organizations, and cultural organizations, and not letting things fall through the cracks while we are all undergoing all of this transition that is happening.

Specifically, we have a cultural plan called Our Creative Future, and we're working on the Portland implementation plan for that, called the Portland Action Plan. And I think that there are ways that we're going to be engaging with the

community more around that plan.

**Adela:** And how does that actually look at the government level? When you say that you are gonna engage with the community to make that program happen, what does that look like? Do you go to neighborhoods and town meetings? Do you make surveys?

**Chariti:** There are a lot of ways that we do community engagement and government. Sometimes we hold meetings in community spaces. For some of that specifically our community is also arts organizations and arts leaders. And I do my best to go to them and to see their programming and to build a relationship that way first, to understand their work. We also do lots of one-on-one conversations.

When the transition to being districts was happening, we did arts talks in each district in the community space, oftentimes the community center (parks have lots of community centers, so that's awesome). We have been doing that combo where we are going to people's events just to build a relationship with the community and also inviting people downtown to be with us in the Portland Building. Now that we have hybrid meetings, on Zoom, that also makes it possible for people to participate from other spaces, which wasn't accessible before the pandemic.

My team is now building out a community engagement plan specifically for the Portland Action Plan with the cultural plan that exists with seven different jurisdictions, and multiple governments participating. The plan was led by a 21-person community steering committee that did around 50 focus groups, as well as surveys, and town halls.

And even though I don't think we have caught our breath enough yet, there are a couple of examples that we have done with the whole team. One is that the city arts program manager who was in the program before we expanded it to the Office of Arts and Culture, worked with these federal funds and made a contract with the NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center) because they looked at the lack of Indigenous representation in public art and wanted to do something about it.

So it contracted with the NAYA to work directly with indigenous artists to commission the pieces, which are now going off on the 42nd. There's a piece: [Raven's Welcome](#) that's already unveiled and then there's another piece on the PCC campus; those pieces will be part of the city's permanent public art collection.

**Adela:** Did the NAYA choose them or did you choose them collaboratively with the Office of Arts and Culture?

**Chariti:** The NAYA made that selection. On the other hand, there are the pieces you all saw that are in the Portland Building. Generally, all of our public pieces are selected by a community panel of artists. And our partners at RACC (the

Regional Culture Council) are the ones that invited the Indigenous artists that are on the first and second floors.

As the Arts and Culture Office, we are being intentional about public art specifically by encouraging representation of all Portland communities, with a focus on commissioning and purchasing artworks from BIPOC artists for our permanent collection.

However, we don't just think about it as a public, physical art, we also work with school districts across the city. They receive funds from the Arts Access fund, from the arts tax, so that every elementary school in Portland has an arts teacher or music teacher.

And there is a wonderful event that Portland Public Schools has been doing for like 10 years, called the *Heart of Portland* that just wrapped up which showcases part of that work. They had it at the Portland Art Museum (PAM) with a visual art component, an exhibition in the gallery space, and performances.

In the past, those performances have always been in the Portland Public Schools. This year, the Office of Arts and Culture and the Arts Education Coordinator worked to bring in this idea of doing student art in our gallery on the second floor of the Portland Building. We also did student art in the Literary Arts in their bookstore, as well as an exhibition in the Goat Blocks, in a vacant building. The kids that get to exhibit are of all ages, from different school districts. So, Reynolds and David Douglas are represented.

Finally, at the *Heart of Portland* closing event, there are performances from youth from Park Rose and from other school districts that are a little farther away from the central city, who we've been working to bring into the larger Portland City arts scene, experience, and education.

I think that's something my team –and especially the Arts Education Coordinator– has been really great at: centering youth and kids, seeing them as creative people, as artists, and as an important part of our civic community in Portland. And I'm so proud of my team for that and so happy to see those kids react to it too.

**Adela:** That must be amazing, to go back to the experience of you not feeling like you were being seen in art within Oregon itself. What a wonderful effect it must have on a kid to have their own fucking art on the wall.

And, speaking of youth and education, nobody teaches you how to be a living artist. I am still super intimidated by applying for grants, for example. Is that something that the Office has thought about? Making more educational opportunities to make those processes more accessible the way you have made it for people one-on-one in the past?

**Chariti:** We do that a lot with our partners because we can't do everything, we are 8 people (laughs). So we work with the Regional Arts and Culture Council and the friends of IFCC and Music Oregon to do grants to individual artists. Everyone who runs a grant program for us helps people get through the process of applying for the grant.

And because we are hearing that professional development is something people want, what we are asking ourselves is: how can we find existing organizations that already work on that to invest in?

**Adela:** Absolutely. It's the question of: how can you assemble with other people who have the educational capability of doing that with you since you are 8 people? I feel like that's something that I'm hearing you're very good at: assembling, which is also translating. Because in order to bring people together you have to use the language of one and then the language of the other, to create a common one.

This is why it is so exciting to work with you and the Office of Arts and Culture to bring forth Assembly 2025, our event of experiential projects, workshops, and performances. I can't wait to keep finding new ways to place-make together.

**Chariti:** Yeah! Excited to see what we can do!

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# Human Recognition: Honoring What We Know to Be True

Gwen Hoeffgen in conversation with Roberta Hunte

“Resistance doesn’t have to look big. It can look like the normalization of that which is hated. It can look like simply loving people. Or putting forward a model of what care looks like in birth. And doing it in artistic ways so that people, on a feeling level, can relax and have a moment with that. Because that’s our knowing. But whether we honor it or not, that’s the question. I think that’s the thing in this life, can we honor what we know to be true?” – Roberta Hunte.

I first met Roberta Hunte during a visiting artist course, where she generously shared both her personal narratives and her powerful work centered on Black women’s reproductive care. I was immediately drawn to how Roberta told stories about maternal health experiences and the way her work engages with the body, theatre, and resilience. As someone whose own artistic practice explores how stories are carried in women’s bodies—through scars, breaks, and bends—I wanted to explore her work more. I invited Roberta into conversation to talk about the intersection of public health and embodied storytelling, particularly how data points translate into lived realities. At the time, we were only a month into a seismic political shift, and I found myself questioning how, or if, social change is made within an institutional context. What unfolded was a dialogue not only about political crises, but about the role of storytelling in creating a “human recognition”, and in building connection. Looking back, I think this conversation was exactly what I needed to think more deeply about the work I want to do— around care, loving, and storytelling as a form of resistance and social change.

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Gwen Hoeffgen: I wanted to thank you for taking time out of your day to talk with me. I was incredibly emotionally moved by the work that you showed us during your visiting artist talk in our class, and I really wanted to talk to you about it.

Roberta Hunte: Thank you!

Gwen Hoeffgen: First, I wanted to know how you feel at this moment, as an artist and someone interested in social change work, with this national, but really, global crisis that we are in.

Roberta Hunte: I don't feel good.

Gwen Hoeffgen: Yeah, me neither.

Roberta Hunte: It's bad, and they are going full tilt. They're eroding people's civil rights. I don't think the US Constitution was that strong a document to begin with, and they are doing everything they can to weaken it to just flimsy paper. So, I feel really sad, and frustrated.

Because Trump telegraphed so hard what he wanted to do, and now that we are feeling the repercussions of these hateful policies. Different people are thinking that this doesn't feel so good. Othering is very seductive. It's very seductive to view ourselves as separate from the suffering of others and then to allow others to suffer. It's the idea that somehow others' suffering isn't as important as our own or that it's "better them than me". We have to realize it doesn't work that way.

I said to some of my freshmen, what wedge issue have you tolerated? I think that is the agenda for this regime. It's to create wedges and for people to see how much of a wedge they can get in, and divide us collectively. It's interesting, I spoke to an immigrant student. She's very against the anti-immigration systems that are developing. But even in that stance, she said "Well, if they get rid of the criminals, then that's okay."

And, and I said, "Well, they're saying that any undocumented person is a criminal." We cannot tolerate the demonization of groups. It is a justification for violence against people and violating rights. So I think, you know, that's just deeply painful.

Gwen Hoeffgen: Yeah. These are manipulative tactics that have been used throughout really all of colonial history. It's an oppression tool, in this way of "othering". And now people pained by our systems are ready to inflict pain on other people. It's an "I've had my pain, now I need you to have yours." kind of thing.

It's a scary time. And, I think it's scary to be in education. It's scary for health care. Thinking about the work you do in reproductive care. I have a friend who's a gynecologist. And there was this moment, a couple of weeks ago, when all of

their resources on the World Health Organization website just totally shut down. And she told me that those are resources that her team uses daily for women's reproductive care. And they just completely disappeared in the blink of an eye. So not only do we now have an issue with access to healthcare, which we always have had economically, and in a gendered experience in access to reproductive healthcare, but I feel now health resources are becoming even more jeopardized.

Roberta Hunte: It is a crisis for healthcare. It's an absolute crisis for healthcare, but what I also think is important is state and local government. We will see how my institution responds to these attacks on DEI. Trump's words around DEI are interesting. It's DEI and environmental justice. What is emphasized is DEI, but if advocating for environmental justice is a crime, then fighting against pipelines, fighting to maintain the national parks and prevent them from being mined is a crime. So these different people who are like, "Yeah forget DEI, who needs that?" will fall on this sword.

Gwen Hoeffgen: Wow. DEI has been more publicized for sure. But yeah. It sounds like the effects of the climate crisis will be visible soon.

Roberta Hunte: Right. Our national forests will fall. The failure to recognize the interconnectedness of our survival is dangerous. Thinking about trans and non-binary folks. You don't erase people simply by saying they don't exist. Because they will continue to exist as they have always existed. However, this administration can pathologize people and make it harder for people to live. More people will die simply for being themselves.

Gwen Hoeffgen: Yeah, I think it's become normalized to create an exclusionary, unsafe environment for people to just exist as themselves. And thinking about access to hormones, and how much that will be affected, again it becomes a health issue. The danger is not just social and psychological, but also there is physical reality too. Anyway, I'm sorry to bring all of this up, but I just wanted to talk to you a little bit about the context we're living in, because I think it's hard to keep up motivation when voices are constantly silenced and the scale just keeps sliding in one direction. I don't know, I feel like the momentum for social change out here is very low.

Roberta Hunte: Tell me more about this low momentum.

Gwen Hoeffgen: Well, I don't know. I think as an art student, it just feels like there is not a lot we can do that will change things. Or maybe, I think that the norm has been to just accept it and go on like "business as usual". It doesn't feel good. It's like wait, I'm going to work and going to class while there is an act of violence being committed? And, I want to create some sort of social change, but how? And who is going to listen? Also, this is the second time that Trump has won. I feel like the first time there was a lot of energy and movement towards resistance and fighting it. And yeah, the second time I don't feel that's in the air as much. I really

don't. It feels like people have been hit while they're down. That's what it feels like in some sense. It feels low and different to me. But maybe that energy shift is fear-based.

Roberta Hunte: It's hella fear-based. Hella, hella fear-based, shocking, and confusing. Particularly in the way Trump stacked the courts. He was doing it in public. And people didn't organize as strongly against that as they needed to. He created a wall of protection around himself. And also only a certain number of folks really pay attention to what's happening politically. Artists are incredibly important right now. Whether they are speaking actively against what is happening or whether we are simply telling different stories, it is incredibly important work. For yourself and your compañeros, what are the stories that you need to tell? And how do you get those out? Because what I see in this upcoming generation is that they're overworked, right? They're working really hard, harder than their parents had to work, to survive. Even though I worked hard— I was working two part-time jobs and doing my master's— I made myself sick. But I was still able to buy a house for \$127,000.00 and I still was able to finish my master's at PSU with about \$4,000 in debt. And that reality can be very hard to come by right now. So I think students need to understand that they're being cheated. But, they have to find the right targets.

Gwen Hoeffgen: There is a fight going on, and yeah, that happens when people are angry about reality. There are people at the top and people at the bottom, and maybe when we can't reach the top, we just start fighting the people down here with us. I think within what I see, it's that people want to fight institutions, but sometimes I think you have to use it. But I do think a lot of it is economics. It's transactional— Like I think people sometimes are using school as a transaction. Because we're paying for the school, and it's putting us in debt, maybe there's this idea that the degree should be given to us for that. Because that's the type of capitalized system that we live in. I'm sacrificing something financially for something in return. But also, what will that get you? Specifically in art.

Roberta Hunte: It's part of achieving what you want. And no one who's created anything gets away without working hard. But working hard can't be what we fight. But I also say that as somebody who works hard and doesn't really know how to not work hard. I often look at people with this kind of confusion. But one realization I had while I was sleeping the other night was this: As long as my university can fight for me, I can stay at my university. But if my university is not going to fight for my right and ability to do what I do, then I need to find a different place that will allow me to do what I need to do. Because voices like mine are critically important to resistance. And resistance doesn't have to look big. It can look like the normalization of that which is hated. It can look like simply loving people. Or putting forward a model of what care looks like in birth. And doing it in artistic ways so that people, on a feeling level, can relax and have a moment with that. Because that's our knowing. But whether we honor it or not, that's the question. I think that's the thing in this life, can we honor what we know to be true?

Gwen Hoeffgen: Hm. What you said about “relaxing” is interesting to me. Because it’s tense right now. And when we’re talking, I think an audience can’t hear it when they’re defensive, or already rigid in some way. But putting an example out and allowing it to sink on an emotional level is the goal. I’ve been thinking about how health data relates to your work on reproductive care. I’ve been thinking about how data points don’t stick with people on an emotional level, but people’s stories do. Can you talk about how maybe you utilize that kind of practice in your work? Why is it important to have people tell their stories rather than seeing statistics about them?

Roberta Hunte: Yesterday I was at a hearing for the early childhood behavioral health subcommittee of the Senate. And we were advocating for a bill, 691, 692, 693. These are related to the Omnibus. And so I’m at this event and I think about maybe 30 people testified or so, and they were testifying about substance use disorder and the need for doula. And what was so real for me in that experience was folks had so much to say. There was so much wisdom in the room. The things that people said were more compelling than the mess I see on TV. It was searing. I felt in the room the human recognition of each other. That hearing was art.

Gwen: Thank you for telling me that story. It’s so simply put, but says everything. I know you have to go soon, but I wanted to quickly also ask about how you transitioned from studying conflict into the work that you do now.

Roberta Hunte: I still work in conflict. This is just a structural conflict. But I work very much in conflict. That’s all I work in, honestly.

Gwen: Thank you so much for your time, Roberta! I’m so happy we got to talk. Hopefully, I will see you again sometime soon.

Roberta Hunte: Yes, of course, bye friend!

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Roberta Suzette Hunte is a health equity researcher, facilitator, professor and cultural worker. She is an associate professor in the School of Social where she teaches courses on reproductive justice and social justice. She is a maternal health researcher and uses theatre and film to share her research with a wider audience. In 2013 she co-wrote and produced the play “My Walk Has Never Been Average” with playwright Bonnie Ratner. The play is based on her research on black tradeswomen’s experiences. Other playwriting and production credits are We Are Brave (2016), Push: Black mamas changing the culture of birth (2025). She co-produced the short film Sista in the Brotherhood (2016).

Gwen Hoeffgen is a visual and social practice artist who currently investigates the physicality of emotional experiences, and how those experiences live within the body waiting to be released. After receiving her bachelor’s degree in psychology, she worked as a social worker in the mental health, addiction, and cognitive

health fields, and then received her MA in Drawing at Paris College of Art. Currently, as an Art and Social Practice MFA student at Portland State University, she use mediums of painting, drawing, photography, sound, and conversation to explore how we find stories within pieces, creases, breaks, and bends.

# Tuning Back In with Mr. Ghost

April 23, 2025

Text by Sarah Luu with Lewis Alexander Geist of 90.5 KSJS

“The most amazing thing I’ve seen continuing despite all these digital changes is that radio continues to be a beacon in the community...When one discovers something that they really enjoy on the radio, it’s as if they’ve entered into a club that they didn’t know existed.” - *Lewis Alexander Geist*

It was around 6AM and I had just finished delivering the last case of pastries for the morning. I never figured out how to play my own music in the delivery van, though I tried. After a week or so, I just gave up and turned on the radio. I flipped through various channels of static, throwback hits, and classical music until I suddenly heard the voice of Lucy Dacus on 90.5 FM. I was totally caught off guard– she was the last artist I expected to hear on air. I looked up the channel online, and there it was: “San Jose State University’s Student Run Ground Zero Radio Station.” So, being the music nerd that I am, I joined the radio station, [90.5 KSJS](#), in Spring 2022 and would find myself spending the last half of my undergraduate program almost entirely at the station. I became engrossed in the world of radio, immersed myself in my local scene and left as radio’s biggest advocate.

After a year in this program, I began to question how I could use my other interests in my practice. I sat down for a chat over the phone with one of the first friends I met upon joining KSJS to uncover some of his thoughts on how radio is currently evolving, how it may change for the future and what ideas he might have to push radio into becoming a more flexible tool of expression and communication.

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**Sarah Luu:** I have a loaded list of questions for you about your experience in radio and what you think about radio as a whole. Let's start off with an introduction.

What's your name and story?

**Lewis Alexander Geist:** My story is...whatever comes out of my mouth. Frankly, I'll say anything. I'll say anything I can all the time if in jest or for humor, and it may not necessarily be the truth, but my name is Lewis Geist. Lewis Alexander Geist, if you want to be specific.

I'm from the Haight in San Francisco, California and I really enjoy helping people. I would say that's my main story.

**Sarah:** How long have you been working for KSJS?

**Lewis:** Man...I got involved with KSJS back in 2012...That's crazy.

It was the spring semester of 2012. I was learning how to become a DJ and that summer I would have my first show, which was an overnight show going from 2AM to 6AM.

**Sarah:** What drew you first to working in radio and what made you want to stay so long?

**Lewis:** What drew me is that they offered elective units toward my degree and I needed those units so I could get loans, so I could attend school. What kept me around was that the radio station at San Jose State, KSJS, had jazz as one of their music genres that they played on their station.

I grew up listening pretty exclusively to jazz and so I was really excited to have an opportunity to play jazz music in general, not only for myself on air, but also for anybody else who decided to listen in. On top of that, the station also did sports broadcasting for San Jose State Athletics, which I'm a big fan of, so I started doing sports broadcasting and got even more work in that as life moved along.

**Sarah:** Yeah, you've been running your jazz show for years since then, too. Have you ever thought about exploring other genres for a show?

**Lewis:** Not entirely. It's not that I don't appreciate the other genres that are played at KSJS, which include electronic, rock (which we call subversive rock), hip-hop R&B, and what is currently Latin, but in the past has been Alternativo en Español. Currently all those genres, with the exception of Latin, generally have plenty of DJs or folks familiar with those genres as they're more popular with modern audiences, or today's audiences, I should say. So, I continue to play jazz as my choice just to make sure that it's around.

**Sarah:** That's beautiful. You've been in radio for quite some time, then. I'm very curious to know what potential shifts you might have seen in the culture of radio in the past 10 years or so, especially with the different types of media we play and interact with as well as the technology we use?

**Lewis:** That's a really good question. It's a really important question.

As you've noted, our tastes have entirely shifted. Our areas where we get this service, if you will, from radio (broadcasting) has now moved to an online platform. Radio is limited by the amount of licenses that the federal government has given out, whereas we have an unfettered distribution of music, viewpoints, opinions— whatever it may be, that the people can broadcast on the internet— so that's one way things have changed. The listener now has a multitude of options to choose from. But, something that keeps radio incredibly unique is that it's not only the music stations that you'll hear in English, but multiple languages, at least fortunately here in the San Francisco Bay Area. Here, I know I can turn on the radio and hear things in Spanish or Chinese. I'm sure if I go to different parts of the Bay, I'll hear Vietnamese. A bit further out, Korean. Japanese, as well. Definitely Tagalog. I'm sure they're all out there.

Radio can serve specialized local needs, whether that is in the political opinion sense or in the music sense. You'll see so many folks still post online in their social media like, "Hey, my song is on the radio!", and it's usually starting with local radio. This is a barometer that people still want to get to or clear.

And also, there's the news. The news on the radio hasn't very much changed. It's still pretty locally focused. It's still telling you the weather and the traffic 'cause I imagine the majority of radio listeners are still kind of car-based? Radio isn't as ubiquitous. If we imagine in the 1940s and 50s, before television really expanded across America, people would sit around and listen to the radio! They'd look at the radio! And that was the major form of entertainment.

So obviously, in terms of its overall popularity across the populace, it has just declined with the competition that's been out there. But now, it allows for even more hyper local abilities. Even with nationally syndicated radio, there's still that ability to connect within your community that exists only in these places because their bandwidth only exists within their community. Their power from their stations only exists within their community. The most amazing thing I've seen continuing despite all these digital changes is that radio continues to be a beacon in the community.

**Sarah:** That's really insightful. I'd really love to know more about these changes you brought up. When it comes to the age of digitalization, how do you think that would affect the future of radio and how that would affect live broadcasted shows?

**Lewis:** Digitalization of radio would not only allow us to listen wherever, but folks who are no longer present in said community can have a chance to connect back. So if you're living in New York City, but you've moved away and done work for a couple months or a year in some other place, you'd be able to go online and get the feed from your favorite station, still able to feel a connection back home. This also goes for some specialty shows that are now able to attract audiences from all around.

**Sarah:** So I know what specialty shows are, but some people might not. Do you have any examples? Maybe within KSJS?

**Lewis:** At KSJS, we have an oldies show run by Bay Area Radio Hall of Famer, Dennis Terry. Shout out to Dennis, who's legally blind, who may not have previously (as he is a bit older than us) been able to deliver his choice of content without the radio. I don't know how he would get oldies music to the masses without it. It's his voice and his choice, and there are people who listen all over the nation who previously would not have had the opportunity to.

Not only does it help local communities, but it also helps those in niche communities. You can talk through the DJ to the other people, via the music, and thoughts being shared. While digitalization does decrease attention span (as we've seen with our relationship to our phones), it can really enrich folks who want to pay attention, as they now can access their desired content live from anywhere. I think that's really cool.

**Sarah:** What do you think about this circulating idea about radio "dying"? Because that's something that we both are trying to combat, largely in support of Kimb Massey, KSJS's faculty advisor, who is incredibly outwardly passionate about keeping radio communities visible.

**Lewis:** Yeah, shout out to Kimb!

There's this music group called "Jazz is Dead". As someone who loves jazz, the wording freaks me out in a sense 'cause the reason why they're saying that, is because jazz and radio really came around at the same time in terms of their popularity.

But there's still live jazz shows all over the place. There are still jazz festivals. Do these festivals now include some acts that may not be called 'jazz'? Yeah, absolutely, I would say that. But everything evolves. Even though we're in this digital world, radio will evolve with it. And hey, one day the power's gonna go out, the phone lines will be down and the only thing you'll have is your handheld radio. Stations usually have backup generators, too, so we'll eventually have to fall back to listening to radio in general.

Secondly, radio is also not quite a secret society, but it can feel like a secret society you've walked in on. Nobody is really listening to the radio and in the amounts we used to. When one discovers something that they really enjoy on the

radio, it's as if they're entered into a club that they didn't know existed. And it's possible that this club grows, but I imagine as we get more digital, there will be even newer things out there to take one's focus away from the radio.

And you know, there's podcasts. Podcasts, I'm sure, have taken away radio listeners. But in the end, the content from the radio will have to change in order to attract people. Maybe what I see in the future is that radio will change its content in order to stay relevant within the people.

**Sarah:** Do you think this digital shift has affected our relationship to physical media? Do you think we'll lose our ability to connect in the physical?

**Lewis:** With more digital things, we lose more physical things. There's no doubt about it.

Music these days is generally all distributed online, so we don't get albums with covers that we can flip over and look at the backside, and see the tracks, and see the continuation of the artist's work on the album. There's no longer a little insert we can take out and read things about the album that were intentionally put in place for that specific album. We can certainly go online and read a bunch of different opinions people have on the album, but maybe someone got a music critic to write about that particular album and it gives you insights that are not necessarily accessible to you anymore. So, there are things that are lost. When we switch from physical media, which we might call radio, we may lose what makes radio, radio. Things may turn away from being live, and everything will start to be pre-recorded. But I suspect that going forward people will recognize that it's one of the outlets that can connect to anyone anywhere.

You will still have a stronger community by still having radio because of it being used by the community as opposed to a large national syndication type thing. Not that there isn't a place for a national conversation, there always is, frankly, but we don't want it replacing all the local ones. I hope that as we move forward into the digital age, people will remember that it's still pretty good to use these physical mediums. And that there's still impact to be made from radio that just can't be matched through other mediums.

**Sarah:** We've noted in the past that many college radio stations, even in proximity to KSJS within the Bay, have decided to operate fully online and how that may take away from the physical experience of radio in itself. There is a difference between clicking a mouse to play automated playlists and interacting with a soundboard and a music library as you broadcast. What do you think about these physical experiences that are lost when stations make the shift to go on the web? Do you think stations lose some credibility or validity when they make the decision to go online?

**Lewis:** A lot of stations that are now online-only originally had licenses to live broadcast. It's very likely that during the great recession from '07 to '10, maybe even a little beyond that, they had sold their licenses off, especially if they were

owned by non-profits.

At the time, we were facing massive financial issues and these licenses were (and are) very valuable. The fact that they're now online-only is just a little bit different. You need to have that internet connection and you need to make sure that you go to it. It's not as simple as starting your car and spinning a dial 'cause the radio is already built into it. I don't know if anybody still has clock radios anymore, but those things still exist and it's also not as simple as just putting the power on. You have to connect to the right station you want. Even though it's not on the same distribution level or wavelength system, its goals are generally the same, which is to connect the community with information. The goal overall is to provide content that interests, resonates or engages.

At some point, an online-only thing has to compete with other things that are also online, which could be watching some streamer play music and discuss it live in real-time with the chat. I've seen it happen now in our station; they'll go live and say "Hey, I'm doing my show. Hit me up on my stream and I'll answer your questions." Maybe that is the next step, and I didn't know that until we started having this conversation and that's right where it needs to be. Current radio will adopt what the online radio people might have experienced and tailored to their own shows.

**Sarah:** Thanks for sharing that, it seems like radio will continue to exist as a critical tool to connect with our communities in any shape or form, from musical interests to personal opinions. In that sense, would you see radio as a potential platform for activism or other forms of cultural work?

**Lewis:** I think it's always been a form of activism. There's certainly different causes being taken up on airwaves, depending on what portion of the country you're in. Sometimes you're driving along a road and you're listening to a station and all of sudden, it becomes another station, and you don't even have to go far sometimes. I mean, where else is one able to get content that resonates with themselves? It takes a lot of community to make that happen. Almost all the time, radio very much responds to those who's listening now.

Fortunately in our radio community, there are non-profit stations that are able to give us things that are not necessarily demanded by the public, things we might not know we need. Those things can be worship-related, language and culture-related, politics-related, and of course, music related. So, I think it is activism as we see the community push and pull their own individual thoughts and feelings reflected in our broadcasts.

**Sarah:** If you could reimagine the role of the DJ as a kind of public thinker or artist, what would that look like to you?

**Lewis:** I wonder if I can reimagine that or if I'm already too entrenched in being a "DJ", that I couldn't freely think of something else. Part of what may be inhibiting my imagination of rethinking is the fact that radio generally doesn't have any

silence.\* When people tune in, whether it be online or the FM/AM bandwidth (though I guess actually the internet is bandwidth, too) there is this preconceived notion that the silence isn't good. I guess I could imagine somebody adding silence, for a little while if it was part of an artistic demonstration. I'm also imagining somebody with a trombone just playing into the microphone for no particularly good reason.

**\*Note: When you are on air doing a show, there must be something playing at all times— music, dialogue, etc. Silence on live air waves is known as “dead air”, and you should never have dead air. Ever.**

Jokes aside, because radio licenses are provided by the government, there are constraints even with some safe harbor hours. There are even further constraints depending on the radio station you work for. But it would be fun to be able to have an unconstrained stream of consciousness broadcasted on air. A stream of Art-ism. Um, that's not a word. Art. A stream of artistic expression. And a part of that could be curated from other sounds or individuals, inviting others to come in and communicate.

**Sarah:** Wasn't there a DJ that would read his dream journal on air?

**Lewis:** Yes, and that was incredibly popular. People would always ask about that.

**Sarah:** Has KSJS as a station ever pushed the boundaries of “typical” radio content?

**Lewis:** We do have the opportunity to use radio as a creative outlet within some of the confines of our station. Every April Fools Day we do something that's satirical and mocking. Most recently, we changed song lyrics to cat meows, and that went unbelievably viral, relative to anything we've ever experienced recently, online and within our community. Even now, a couple weeks removed from April 1st, people are still talking to me about it, wondering if they could get copies of some of those songs, and relaying stories of how they called into the station that day and the DJs on the other side of the line would just meow. So, there are still opportunities within radio today that I don't have to reimagine, because these DJs are already doing the things that I should have imagined already...

Overall, though, DJs have the responsibility to the community to give them something. And like everything in life, it's not always the right thing or a good thing. We all miss every once in a while or some of us miss a little more frequently, but we're not here to judge. Sometimes, it's just how things go. I know I certainly miss every now and then but with such a platform, we have the opportunity to be able to give and share so much, and I love giving.

**Sarah:** Well, that is all the questions I have for you, Lewis. Do you have any for me?

**Lewis:** Yeah, absolutely, How do you feel about the SOFA journal being published digitally and not distributed with physical copies?

**Sarah:** Hm, well where do I start? As you know, I started this program last Fall. The SOFA journals were already fully digital at that point so this system is only what I know. It does make me a bit sad. I know it's more cost-effective but it feels so much more special to read from something you can feel. The tangible, physicality of it. I feel more connected to things when I'm not receiving it from a screen. It's why I do zines and stuff.

**Lewis:** You know, I wanna bring that up and this should be noted. You introduced zines back, or maybe for the first time, to KSJS.

**Sarah:** I did! 'Soundshock' was what Allyssa and I decided to call it.

**Lewis:** You even printed some cool stuff for us too...

**Sarah:** Yeah, I mean it all stemmed from wanting to help grow a community that I finally felt were my kinds of people. I joined in Spring 2022, post-covid and the beginning of "hybrid" learning at SJSU. I struggled to find my people through Zoom and made friends with the very *few* people that were present when I first joined...I always mention the small number of people when I first came because it sticks out in my brain so vividly. The station has grown so much since I've joined.

**Lewis:** It has amazingly recovered.

**Sarah:** Yeah, amazingly! I would table for the station a lot and noticed how many people came by just for the free stickers and shit. Sometimes they grabbed flyers but most times not. People wanted things to keep and personalize, or interact with. Since I was already making zines, I decided to just do it. I teamed up with Allyssa and we made it happen. It worked because we made it worth keeping. It wasn't just a basic flyer you glance at briefly between classes. This had everything you needed to know to be a part of the station and an invitation to know more about the San Jose music scene as a whole. We put interviews, music recommendations by genres and photographs...I mean you were there.

**Lewis:** It was a very fun and tactile experience. You allowed us to promote KSJS in a different medium entirely, in an outlet that welcomed everyone.

**Sarah:** Yeah, and that was the goal of it all. Using an accessible medium to promote an accessible radio station for students by students. It reflected what we were already saying to our community, which was basically "Whatever we're doing here, you can do, too".

**Lewis:** Well, now people are still doing zines without you being here and they're making...not knock-off or bootleg... but individually designed KSJS apparel, as well.

**Sarah:** Wow, that was my goal, honestly.

**Lewis:** You passed the baton. No, you built it! Like those things totally weren't existing before the pandemic. You've created new paths that have rebuilt the station from that time.

**Sarah:** That's sweet to hear. Thank you. It was so nice chatting and catching up with you Lewis.

**Lewis:** You're very welcome.

**Sarah:** Bye! Talk to you later.

**Lewis:** Bye, bye. Bye!!!

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If **Lewis Alexander Geist** (he/him) is not actively assisting in some matter for someone else, or walking in the middle of Haight Street, then odds are good that this San Francisco native is talking. Ever the conversationalist, his humorous and engaging manner meets all folks where they are. Even on his jazz radio show he will try to have (very, very one sided) conversations with the listeners. That motormouth does get put to good use in sports broadcasting where he does all manner of work; from play-by-play and color commentary, to sideline reporting and public address (plus less talkative roles such as camera operator, technical director and broadcast coordinator).

While studying political science at San Jose University, Lewis found his way to the campus radio station KSJS, where he would eventually become the Director for the Jazz/World/Blues Department and the Sports Department. Having loved jazz and sports for as long as he can recall, KSJS allowed Lewis to immerse himself in those worlds in ways he had never imagined...

**Sarah Luu** (she/they) is an interdisciplinary artist and writer. She gravitates towards photography, ceramics, zines and print-making. As a first generation Asian American, her work has touched on themes of her mixed Vietnamese-Chinese identity, intergenerational trauma and cultural tradition. She explores themes outside those topics by grabbing inspiration from her lived experience growing up and being raised in San Jose, California surrounded by a vibrant arts and music culture.

She holds a BA in Studio Art, Preparation for Teaching from San Jose State University and is currently studying for an MFA in the Art and Social Practice program at Portland State University. Her favorite food is her mother's Bánh Canh and she can roller skate backwards.



# What if We Became Artists?; The Audacity To Try It

**Domenic Toliver in Conversation with Xavier Pierce**

*“I see a little me in my students, and I want the kids to see they can be all of these things. You can be an athlete, an artist, a lover of music, a scholar, all of these things together. You don't have to pick just one. That drives my creativity now.” – Xavier Pierce*

What if the question wasn't “Who do I want to be when I grow up?” but “How many things can I become?” I sat down with Xavier Pierce, a first-grade teacher at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary and the Spring Artist in Residence at the King School Museum of Contemporary Art. In him, I saw a version of myself, a Black male teacher, an artist, a quiet disruptor of expectations. We discussed growing up, the scarcity of role models beyond sports, and what it means to create space for kids to see themselves differently. What unfolded wasn't just an interview, but a reflection on what it means to become, again and again. Through our similarities and differences, we realized that questions aren't always meant to be answered. Sometimes, they're just invitations to grow.

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**Domenic Toliver:** Lately, I've really been thinking about art as life, and art as a way of being. For me to view life that way, it really gets me to be excited for each day, because it's what you make it. We have these opportunities to learn, grow, and change. And I feel like listening to you talk at KSMoCA, you might be able to connect to that?

**Xavier Pierce:** You know, I've always been excited to get up and go teach, but now I got this project to do with y'all and now I see the excitement in the students, and they wanna make sure the academics are taken care of so that we can get to the art. And it's just fun to watch the kids be really excited about something. And, I'm really excited. The whole community is excited about this thing.

**Dom:** Yeah I can definitely sense the excitement. I think part of it comes from not many people knowing you as an artist.

**Xavier:** I don't know if you were in the room when Laura asked me if I tell my students that I'm an artist, but I really don't ever tell anybody that I'm an artist because I feel like art is just kind of ingrained in being human. Because humans have been doing art forever and ever. It's natural. I'm always wanting to be creative in life. Do something new with my day, learn something new with my day, wake up and figure out how am I gonna experience this day to the fullest. Sometimes it's through putting some paint onto a canvas. Sometimes it's making a good meal with my loved ones. And I feel those are the same thing.

**Dom:** Yeah, they are the same. Do you feel like this project at KSMoCA brought some of that out of you?

**Xavier:** I do. Now I have this new resurgence of creative energy. And it's because KSMoCA invited me to do this, but it's also helping me understand now that this source of creativity is nostalgia, and this source of creativity comes from being a role model at school. I see a little me in my students, and I want the kids to see they can be all of these things. You can be an athlete, an artist, a lover of music, a scholar, all of these things together. You don't have to pick just one. That drives my creativity now.

**Dom:** No, you don't have to pick one. The kids definitely need to know that.

Being at King School helps reinforce this process of focused creation. The object really doesn't matter there as much as the process. It makes me think of how you mentioned how naturally humans want to create. Like in cave drawings, it wasn't about the drawing on the rock, it was the process, the hunt, and how to express that to others.

**Xavier:** Yeah and they were using berries, charcoal from the fire of the night before, or whatever they could find. That's something I always think about when I'm painting. Maybe I'll run out of colors. So I think of how I can find a substitute or how to morph this idea so that it still has the essence of what I'm trying to say. Like how we used cardboard as a paint brush for this last workshop. That's what I feel art is all about, the process, adapting, learning, way more than the product itself. Even when I don't like the product I appreciate the process. That raw art is real dope to me.

**Dom:** Yeah. I think it's really about being more present. I feel that with photography. Especially when traveling. I'd have my camera and sometimes I would forget to take a photo. And that's what I fell in love with. Being a

photographer that takes no photos. Building relationships and listening to people. I'm currently doing a workshop with older adults and I feel like the conversations, the honesty and vulnerability is what it's really about.

**Xavier:** Exactly. Man, and that is such an important thing too. Intergenerational communication. I grew up with two sets of grandparents and a set of great, great grandparents. My dad's great grandparents raised him. And so they're my great-great grandparents. And they were alive. They died when they were 99 and like 89. So I got a chance to kick it with my grandparents so much. I think that really taught me how to listen. It taught me how to have a good conversation and how to just take people where they're at.

**Dom:** I was close to my grandma. Most of the conversations I remember or moments as a kid that have really sat with me or, you know, had some type of impact. They all come back to something she did or said to me or told someone else.

**Xavier:** I really think kids listen to their grandparents more, they watch them. I mean they're so cool, they have so much wisdom, and they're chill. There's something about that communication, right?

**Dom:** I think it has something to do with the two both not being listened to.

**Xavier:** Yeah, no, that might be it. Both aren't being listened to. So that communication with each other is, I don't know, like one has a lot of patience. Because your parents want the best for you, but they also see you as that extension of them so they don't exactly listen. They tell. Whereas grandparents are usually more patient. Makes me think of my parents. I grew up playing football and running track and I knew that I didn't want to go to school for it. I was always pretty grounded in my academics. I wanted to go to college and focus on school. My dad ran track for Oregon and he was a track coach most of my life. While he never actually told me the plan was for me to run or be an athlete I felt it. So when I chose to go another route the energy was kind of, "so... what ARE you going to do?". My sister ended up throwing at Hawaii U and Biola down in Orange County so they (my parents) still had a star athlete.

**Dom:** Man same. My dad was my coach my whole life, I ended up playing at Idaho State, going the avenue paved for me. About halfway through college though I lost the passion for it. I had other things I wanted to try.

**Xavier:** Yeah exactly, and so they say, "so what are you gonna do?"

**Dom:** Man, yup!

**Xavier:** And so I had to really figure that out, what am I gonna do? Because our guidelines for us were to go to school, get a scholarship so you can go to college and then you figure it out from there.

So I went to North Carolina AT right after high school. Greensboro, North Carolina for a semester. I didn't really like it 'cause the town was just too small. It was fun though, HBCU, real cool. But I had walked that small town a few times in that short span. I decided I was just going to go home. So I went to PCC, got my pre-reqs. I still didn't know what I wanted to do. So I started going to art shows just with the homies. That was real tight. The community was tight. Everybody's having fun, everybody's doing something. I started thinking to myself, "man, I'm not doing anything but just coming and drinking a little wine and, you know, head banging at a house show from time to time. But what am I contributing to this? I was living with my homie from high school at the time, and he was like, "man, what if we became artists." I was like, "What are you talking about? How are we just gonna become artists?"

Lo and behold, I was sitting around one day, I was playing Super Mario Sunshine on the Game Cube, on this big TV that I dragged into the house. I was tired of it. So I went over to Scrap, and just started looking for things that I could maybe make something with. That's really how I started painting. Was just out of boredom and I like trying to figure out how I could be a contributor to the communities that I operate in.

**Dom:** Dang. That's crazy, just a big what if question led you down a new path. What if I became an artist, what if I use something other than a paintbrush? That's dope. I had a real similar experience with my roommate, he wanted to act. At the time, we were all like okay man, go act then. But over time, that childlike mindset got contagious, I was asking myself what if I wrote scripts, what if I acted too. We fed off that energy, that childlike imagination. It led us down this creative path, trying new things and really just pretending to be what we wanted to be. Soon enough you start to be it.

**Xavier:** I figured out like you really can't take yourself that seriously, man. If you take yourself too seriously, you're missing out. You have to stay open to change, growth, and trying new things.

**Dom:** I agree. I think you have to be curious and vulnerable so you're not stuck in doing one thing your whole life.

**Xavier:** Do you think traveling influenced you to be more open-minded?

**Dom:** Yeah most definitely. I think traveling introduced me to that openness. Seeing all types of perspectives, different lifestyles, honestly different ways of coping with life. It definitely changed me.

**Xavier:** Travel puts you in situations that influence you for sure. This one time Hannah and I, we were on a road trip down to California and we ended up having to get gas in Trump territory. This dude, I'm just sitting there chopping it up with him.

He got his little Make America great again hat on and we're just sitting there having a conversation and as a black dude I have to play a cool, you know, or I'm gonna mess around and get shot. I have to play it cool, gotta be the mediator.

I'm laughing with him and talking with him. We get on the subject of teaching and he says "You some kind of communist?" I'm like we just started talking about teaching bro. Like how did you get that? But after talking to him again, I still don't agree with everything he was saying, but through talking to him, I was like this dude is just another dude. That just made me realize that I do need to talk with the opposition more often. Especially right now, everybody is so divided, so polarized and like the only way to get over that is not to move to one side of the spectrum more. It's honestly to move closer to the middle.

And it's not that my beliefs have to change, it's just that I need to be more comfortable talking to those people who make me uncomfortable. And also in that process, making them more comfortable talking to people who they might not agree with. Through that you can start to kind of heal. Cause man, it's getting weird. It's getting really sticky right now. I feel like people need those conversations with outsiders to start to change their minds a little bit.

Yeah. And I'm not, I'm not saying like I'm gonna go out to every single place. I, you know, I walk in and I'm gonna change somebody's mind, but at least I can have a conversation with them and I can better understand. If they listen to me, they can better understand my stance. Maybe over time, like we were saying before, like they might not change their mind right then and there. They might sit on it for a little bit and then later on when they're met with the same question or. Met with somebody who has the same conversation. They can bring that different idea and then through that, just like those little, those little trickle effects, you know?

**Dom:** That's true. While travelling I've met so many people with conflicting ideas and beliefs but I think just being honest, you'll find those common things that'll make you both reconsider why you differ with each other in the first place.

So where do you go from here, what are some ambitions you have?

**Xavier:** I think I really wanna try being a professor. But not in a traditional sense. So I think it'll take a lot of building blocks to get there, I feel like it's gonna be a long process. 'cause there's not necessarily a department or a class for what I'm thinking. I gotta kind of wiggle my way into an institution and then you know make that class. I've always had this idea of taking a class where it's more focused on questions. A conversation class, but focused on asking questions. Cause I like questions more than I like answers. It gets people's minds moving. You just learn so much about another person through asking questions. I guess I'm just overall more of a listener.

**Dom:** Lisa Jarret always says, "Live in the question." Right now that's my favorite quote. Crazy part is I could totally be wrong but I guess the way I interpret that is like living in the response really. Not the answer to the question, but the response to the question. So like if your question is "what does it mean to be a, a black man in America?" What does that really mean? There's no answer. Because everyone's experience is different, you know. But there's a response to that question that we live in and it changes overtime too though.

**Xavier:** If I think about how many times I've been asked that question and how many different responses I've given based on the time in my life, or the person who I'm talking to. I've been thinking about representation in art, in making these new pieces, I was like, okay, it's gonna be in King. Kids are gonna be walking past this every day. They do need to see themselves in the work. Reflected in some way. So I just tried my hand at it and I got out my anatomy books and tried to figure out how I'm going to do this, so that they are reflected in some way. They'd see full lips, a wide nose, an afro. Then I got some gold leaf. I put gold in his mouth instead of teeth. It came out pretty good. It took a lot for me to bring that out. One of the hardest things, it's just not in me to do portraits and portray us like that. It became a study of the body as well.

**Dom:** I get that. I think I struggled with that too. When I was in France, I used to send my pops a few photos I would take. One time he was like, man, there ain't no black people out there.

He made me really look at all my photos. There were black people everywhere, all around where I was staying. But in the photos, no black people. It made me think for sure, maybe there's some resistance in not wanting to mess up. I got to get the lighting right, I can't portray us the wrong way. There's a lot to think about. And then also, to me, there's also a fear of doing it wrong. And misrepresenting your own culture, you know what I mean? Who am I to be representing all of one people?

**Xavier:** That was a huge fear with this portrait that I did. Because I knew I wanted full lips.

I wanted a wide nose, but I don't want this to be a caricature. I have to do this right. I'll probably still keep tweaking it until I have to give y'all, cause it needs to be right.

**Dom:** I feel that. And I think that's always going to be evolving. You'll always ask yourself if you're doing it right. You might try to do something new every time. For me there's a lack of knowledge there too, as far as in film and photography. They don't really teach how to light for darker shades of skin so you have to learn by just doing it, by trying. Then I think once you mess up a few times or you feel you might have misrepresented, that might lead to a version of avoidance too. I know a lot of filmmakers and painters that are black that resist black topics or subjects, and I think it's because you don't want to be wrong. Or you don't want to be put into a box.

**Xavier:** Yeah, I've always tried to figure out like, why, why do I resist it so much? Yeah. And it is, it's because I don't wanna misrepresent it.

**Dom:** Yeah. And maybe there's a privilege to it. Like, dang, I have the privilege to be speaking for all my people. I don't want it. That's too much responsibility, so you resist it. And I think once you stop resisting it, the intentions in our art might be clearer. But within that, we also get put in a creative box, being categorized as a black artist who only makes black art, rather than an artist making work, who is black.

**Xavier:** We have to have the audacity to do something different. That's kind of what I'm trying to show. I am a black man making art. Making abstract art. I do also want to start representing more of my culture though. So breaking that wall with this painting I'm working on. I'm excited honestly to see how the kids receive it and how my community receives it because that feedback will also inform how I continue. Art is a conversation like that.

**Dom:** I think it's gonna be important for them. Like in terms of how the art is presented. It's been up to an amazing level. Last term, Napoleon's work was up and he had the blind boys of Alabama. You got these three dudes with glasses, singing, with the gold behind them,

That hit me, because it was the culture. Represented for the culture, in collaboration with the culture. Man, so I think your work is gonna speak on that level. Displayed in a professional way for the culture. I've noticed a lot of the little black boys at that school and they don't look at the walls as much. Especially at that age, I feel like they're learning a lot about their masculinity and masculinity is different for us. Being a painter or a dancer isn't a common option. That's a different level of masculinity. But having that representation and knowing the possibilities, knowing they can go hoop but they can pick up a paint brush too. That's different.

**Xavier:** Exactly. That gets me so excited to read the commentary from the kids. Once they start looking at their own work on the wall. How they see mine. That's gonna be crazy, that's what I'm most looking forward to!

**Xavier Pierce** is a multidisciplinary artist whose work explores memory, emotion, and the act of being present. Raised in Northeast Portland just off Alberta Street, he received both his undergraduate degree in Liberal Studies and a master's in Education from Portland State University.

Pierce draws inspiration from his lived experience, using art as a metacognitive tool to navigate the emotional currents of life. What began as a personal process to make sense of change and growth has become a lifelong practice rooted in the belief that creativity is essential to the human experience.

As a teacher at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary and now visiting artist at the King School Museum of Contemporary Art, Pierce continues to develop a body of work that invites reflection, groundedness, and emotional clarity.

**Domenic Toliver** is a storyteller. Working across film, photography, performance, and socially engaged art, he explores how personal and collective narratives shape memory, identity, and community. Whether through photography or collaborative projects, Domenic invites others into the storytelling process, creating space for layered voices and shared meaning. Currently pursuing an MFA in Art and Social Practice, he sees storytelling as both an artistic method and a tool for imagining new ways of being together.