Public Art + Community:

Building resilience through collaboration

SHIFT WORKS

BOROUGH OF Millvale Pennsylvania

NEIGHBORHOOD ALLIES

Let's Eat: Abundance, Access and Community

Artist:
Lindsey Peck Scherloum

Partner Organization:
The Brashear Association, Inc.

Frofully Connected

Artist:
Rell Rushin

Partner Organization:
FroGang Foundation, Inc.

We Are Windows

Artist:
Jason McKoy

Partner Organizations:
Etna Community Organization and Sharpsburg Neighborhood Organization

Black Queer Affinity Series

Artist:
Noa Mims

Partner Organization:
Steel Smiling

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It is with great pride that I share with you the culmination of the multiyear collaboration of Shiftworks Community + Public Arts, Neighborhood Allies, and the Borough of Millvale to host the Public Art and Communities (PAC) program. As the Executive Director of Shiftworks, I have had the privilege of witnessing firsthand the transformative power of art and community collaboration and how the project team has responded to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and intersecting public health crises.

The PAC program was originally conceived in 2019 to develop creative solutions to address public health issues that were facing our region's communities. Building on the learning from the 2016 Temporary Public Art and Placemaking program, Neighborhood Allies and Shiftworks (then Office for Public Art) designed PAC to respond to community-identified needs. In its original form, PAC was structured around a series of onsite workshops and trainings for both community members and artists prior to developing the calls for community partners and then for artists. As a program fundamentally invested in the value of creating place-based strategies to address community-identified issues, it was critical to PAC's implementation for us to be physically out in the communities that it would serve. Our project team hosted a pilot workshop in November 2019 in Millvale and was scheduled to host the second of three additional workshops in Wilkinsburg on Saturday, March 14, 2020.

I distinctly remember the moment when my social media notifications began exploding on the evening of March 11, 2020—just after the National Basketball Association announced the suspension of its 2019–2020 season due to COVID-19. While our organizations had been aware of the growing threat of a potential pandemic for several weeks and had discussed contingency plans, there was something in that announcement that seemed a particularly ominous portending of what was to come. Two days later, on a Friday, we closed our offices, and postponed all in-person activities for the foreseeable future. As organizations, we were faced with not only the challenges presented by an unprecedented transition to remote work, but also faced with an existential question: how do we develop and implement creative place-based strategies to support communities in need in a time of physical distancing and social isolation?

The arrival of COVID-19 quickly forced us to rework our original strategy and timeline for PAC, while also making clear the urgent need to engage creative approaches to the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic. The project team from Neighborhood Allies, Shiftworks, and Millvale responded incredibly to the challenge. While working from home, unintentionally homeschooling children, managing grocery and supply shortages, caring for loved ones, navigating a health care system on the brink of collapse, and grieving the mounting losses worldwide, the team repositioned their organizations and PAC to ensure that the program would address the very real needs of our communities and artists who were faced with these same challenges and more.

After an initial pause in the program to recalibrate and develop a strategy for moving forward, PAC relaunched in summer 2020. The team established a Public Art and Public Health Advisory Group, composed of regional leaders in public health, community development, and environmental and social justice. The group provided valuable guidance as we crafted a "Call for Partner Organizations" to be part of the program. Unlike the earlier iteration of the program from 2016, the call asked potential partners to talk about the public health needs that were facing their communities and how those needs intersected with the ongoing pandemic.

In conjunction with the release of the call, we announced a two-day online *Public Art and Communities Symposium: Creative Placemaking to Address Community Health*. The symposium featured national and local speakers who have been engaged in creative placemaking projects that support public health needs within communities across the country, and whose work demonstrates the value of cross-sector collaborations between arts and culture, public health, and community development. The symposium was designed to provide artists, community members, and organizations the opportunity to see how their peers were working to develop such partnerships, and to inspire our colleagues and community members as we relaunched the redesigned PAC program.

Soon after the symposium, the project team and advisory group announced the selection of the partner organizations: The Brashear Association, Inc.; Etna Community Organization in collaboration with Sharpsburg Neighborhood Organization; FroGang Foundation, Inc.; and Steel Smiling. Building on the momentum generated by the symposium, the project team, advisory group, and the selected community organizations shaped the Call for Artists. Their collaboration to develop the call ensured that it resonated with the unique needs and aspirations of each community. Supported by a shared vision for uplifting community through art, the Call for Artists was released in 2021, resulting in the engagement of artists who shared a vision for community-engaged work.

From 2021 to 2023, the PAC program supported four talented artists—Jason McKoy, Noa Mims, Rell Rushin, and Lindsey Peck Scherloum—in their collaborative endeavors with community-based partners to develop and implement temporary public art projects across various communities in the Pittsburgh region.

These artworks, developed to address issues identified by the community partners, are not mere aesthetic interventions but powerful expressions of resilience, solidarity, and hope in the face of adversity. Through their partnership with the collaborating organizations, the artists delved deep into the issues that were confronting the community partners, addressing not only the immediate effects of COVID-19 but also the systemic issues of racism, food insecurity, social isolation, and mental health.

At the heart of the approach lies the concept of creative placemaking. At Shiftworks, we believe that art has the potential to transform not only physical spaces but also to support and uplift the social fabric of communities. By engaging directly with the unique contexts and needs of each community, the artists co-created meaningful interventions that resonated deeply with residents and stakeholders alike.

Creative placemaking, as practiced through the PAC program, is more than just the beautification of public spaces; it is a catalyst for community-led change and empowerment. By amplifying the voices of groups who have been marginalized and by fostering inclusive participation, the approach seeks to build more resilient and connected communities.

As we reflect on the achievements of the PAC program, it is impossible not to be inspired by the creativity, passion, and dedication of all those involved. From the artists and community partners to our generous supporters and collaborators, each individual has played a crucial role in making this endeavor a success. Further, the work would not be possible without the generous support of our funders, including The Heinz Endowments, Henry L. Hillman Foundation, and the Our Town program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Their investments in the projects that comprise the PAC program reflect a deep recognition of the role that artists play in the development of connections and fostering resilience among community members.

To capture the trajectory of the projects and the impacts of the work on both the participants and the larger community, the project team hired Pittsburgh-based writer Jason Vrabel to observe, interview, and document the implementation phase of the program. In the pages that follow, you will find accounts of the projects undertaken as part of the PAC program, along with reflections, insights, and lessons learned along the way. It is my hope that this document will serve as a testament to the transformative power of art and community collaboration, and will inspire others to undertake this work.

Thank you for your unwavering support and belief in the power of the arts to effect positive change.

With warm regards,

Sallyann Kluz
Executive Director
Shiftworks Community + Public Arts
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Four Stories from the Pittsburgh Region

What happens when young Black girls see themselves in a larger-than-life mural? Or when people experiencing food insecurity sit down for a white tablecloth dinner with those who don't know what food insecurity feels like? What can community members coping with isolation observe when given the ability to visually connect with a neighboring borough? How do Black Queer people gather in an historic garden that wasn't originally made for them?

These are a few of the scenarios described in *Public Art + Community: Building Resilience through Collaboration*, a report that encapsulates—through storytelling—four public art projects facilitated by Public Art and Communities (PAC), a program of Shiftworks Community + Public Arts, in partnership with Neighborhood Allies and the Borough of Millvale.

These projects, unique as the processes that formed them, share some common ground. First, and quite simply, they started at the same harrowing time. In 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PAC Program Team and Advisory Group selected community partners who would collaborate with an artist of their choosing. Then, the newly formed community-artist teams would embark on a two-year process of discovery and consensus-building. The culmination would be works of public art that could confront—and alleviate—existing community crises worsened by the pandemic.

Responding to this call, artist Lindsey Peck Scherloum and the Brashear Association, Inc. created *Let's Eat*, a project about food insecurity that combined ceramics-making with performance. Artist Rell Rushin joined with FroGang Foundation, Inc. to produce *Frofully Connected*, a mural about Black girls, Black women, and Black hair that speaks to racism and self-esteem; Artist Jason McKoy, with Etna and Sharpsburg—two boroughs working like one—tackled social isolation with technological sculptures in a project called *We Are Windows*. And sculptor Noa Mims and Steel Smiling developed the *Black Queer Affinity Series* to support Black mental health.

The newly formed artist-community teams shared a second piece of common ground: they started in the same place, at the Placemaking Academy. As a six-week program, the Placemaking Academy built an educational foundation for the projects ahead. It included presenters with extensive expertise in the realms of public art, community-building, and civic engagement, to name a few. But the centerpiece of the program was in-depth lessons on creative placemaking.

In a white paper titled "Creating Healthy Communities Through Cross-sector Collaboration" published by the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine and ArtPlace America, creative placemaking is described as providing "a link between arts and culture and the urban planning concept of 'placemaking.'" Used to discourage large-scale, top-down planning, the place-based and human-centric aspects of placemaking are connected to both the arts and public health sectors, the authors of the paper state. "The [public health] field's growing interest in elevating equity and well-being supports expanded collaboration between arts and culture and public health."

This paper was developed as part of an initiative called *Creating Healthy Communities: Arts + Public Health in America*, undertaken by ArtPlace America and the University of Florida Center for Medicine. While the primary audience was public health professionals, the project emphasized public health's intersection with other disciplines, such as community planning and development, urban design, and art. A central question to this work was, "What can arts and culture do for public health?"

> " From the report: "Throughout history the arts have been used to accomplish the very things public health is currently challenged to do: support well-being, create social connection, spark and sustain movements, communicate across difference, and transform systems and culture. Both arts and culture and public health work to create stronger, healthier, more equitable communities."

Despite these disciplines sharing common ground, the authors state, "We are missing the power of their combined strengths." Thus, the paper calls for cross-sector collaboration organized around five principles: Collective Trauma, Racism, Mental Health, Social Exclusion and Isolation, and Chronic Disease.

PAC not only falls directly within this framework, it has that "missing" ingredient. The stories that follow will demonstrate that cross-sector collaboration is indeed powerful. The authors specifically argue that "Arts and culture can expose root issues, incorporate and amplify the voices and concerns of those who have been underrepresented…" PAC does this.

The stories in this report will feature a lot of *making*. Lasting "objects" will be made with ceramics, steel, paint, wood, and even food. More ephemeral but no less lasting, the PAC team will

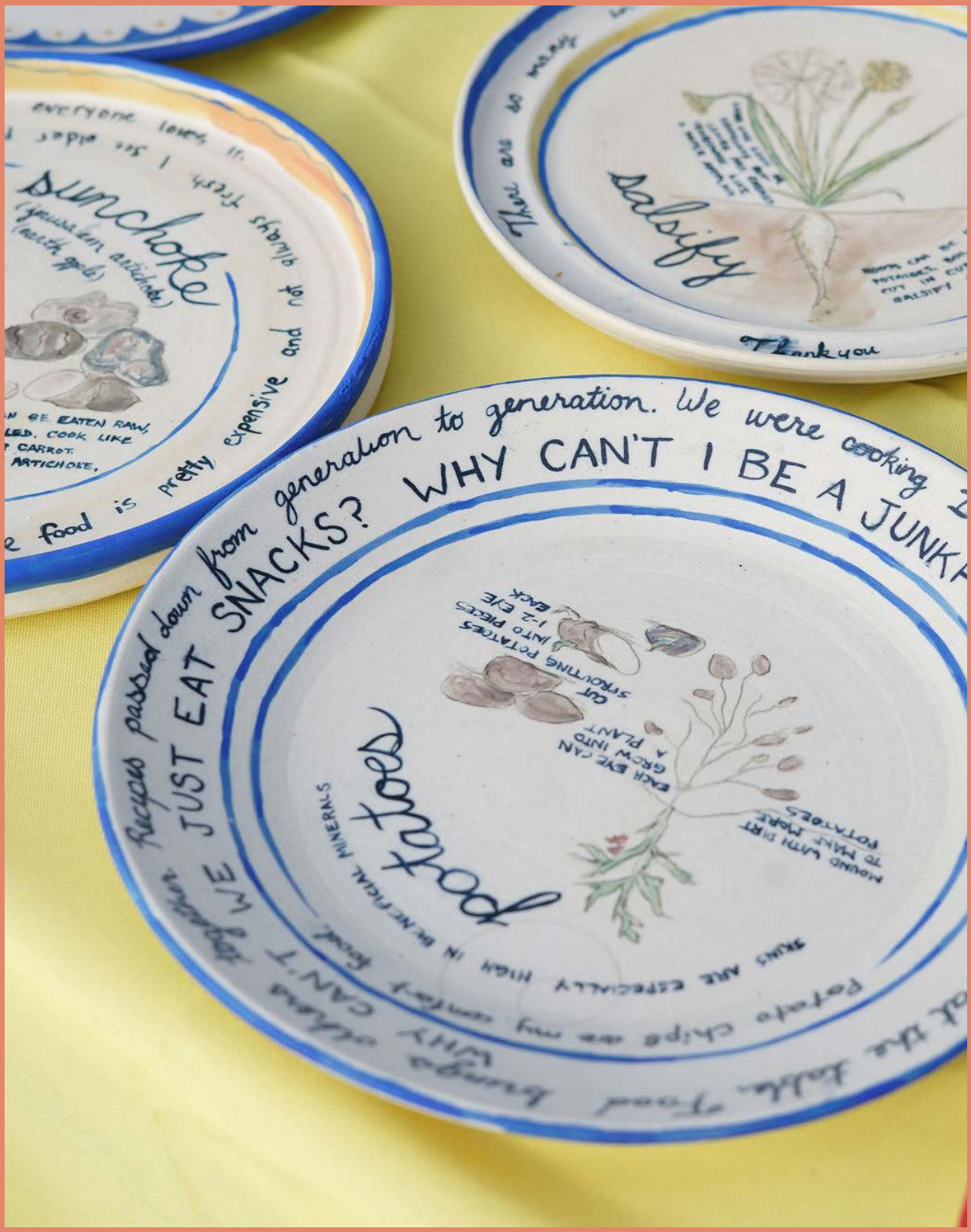
also make space, connections, memories, meaning, a measure of wellbeing, and even, perhaps, moments of peace. These projects will raise questions, and invite more of them, about communities—how they're defined, shaped, and sustained. They will illuminate basic assumptions about the very nature of spaces and places—what are the differences between the two? To whom do they belong? How are they created, repurposed, claimed, and connected? Last but not least: What is public art, and what forms can it take?

Each project was its own journey—for the artists, communities, and the networks of people supporting them. The pursuit of goals related to community crises were met with inevitable setbacks, none of which wouldn't be overcome by perseverance, dedication, and sometimes changes in direction. No project was free from major constraints, including project budgets, property ownership, government regulations, inter-community conflict, and time.

Jessica Gaynelle Moss, a consultant to the *Frofully Connected* team, noted the "loss of hand" in the art field. She used this term to describe the unacknowledged contributors to art, from hands-on apprentices to people who either inspired the work or were objectified by it. Noting that Warhol wasn't pulling every screen at the Factory any more than Koons was polishing his balloon animals all by himself, Moss reminds us that Picasso didn't share credit with Africa—its people or its places—from which he extracted inspiration.

"Your hand is many hands," she said of artists throughout time.

The multitudes of people and organizations noted in these stories made enormous contributions to PAC, but only represent a fraction of *all* those who shaped these projects. As assistants, participants, problem-solvers, conveners, presenters, and organizers, there were more than 1,000 such people. PAC, too, has many hands.


Recipes passed down from generation to generation. We were cooking
WHY CAN'T I BE A JUNK
WE JUST EAT SNACKS?
Potato
Salsify
Thank you
Sunchoke
Jerusalem artichoke
food is pretty expensive and not
CUT SPROUTING POTATOES INTO PIECES 1-2 EYE EACH
EACH EYE CAN GROW INTO A PLANT
POTATOES ARE ESPECIALLY HIGH IN BIONUTRIENT FOOD.

Let's Eat: Abundance, Access and Community

The community members seated beneath a canopy tent were having a lively conversation about the plates on the tables: handmade and colorfully painted ceramic, no two were the same, and from a distance looked like family heirlooms. On one was an illustrated sweet potato with instructions for how to grow one, and circling the edge of the plate was an anonymous quotation about the pandemic's impact on the cost of food. Other plates—dozens of them—featured chives, nettles, sprouts and other fruits, vegetables and herbs, and similar quotes.

Whether they knew it or not, everyone who had come to this grassy lot on Beltzhoover Avenue on a June afternoon was participating in *Let's Eat: Abundance, Access and Community,* a public art project designed to address the issue of food insecurity.

From an amplifier, Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City" faded out as servers dressed in black and white fanned out to deliver "share plates" of salad and bread to each table. After the food was eaten and the tables were cleared, the servers formed a ring along the perimeter of the tent and began the second part of their dual role—as *performers*.

Handmade plates were wheel thrown by ceramicists at the Union Project and decorated with quotes gathered from community engagement events.

"Here are some of the words people shared when we asked them to tell us about food," called Donathan Arnold, a server-turned-performer. What followed were recitations from server/performers, some of whom were teenagers, who embodied South Pittsburgh residents who had responded to a request for statements about people's personal relationships with food.

"I'm proud when food tastes good, when I cook and people compliment me, when I'm cooking with my family. I live in Allentown." "I had to figure out ways to find money to feed me and my two kids. I'd babysit, clean a house, do lawn care. My children are babies. It's a hard time when we don't have enough. I live in the borough of Mt. Oliver." "I've been my mother's caregiver for fifteen years. Myself, I have a heart condition and diabetes. I live in the Southside Flats."

This dialogue then accelerated into thought-provoking questions.

" Do you make a grocery list?" "Where can you even *get* food around here?" "Do you live in a *food desert?*" "Why *are* there food deserts?" "Where can you get food around *here*?" "Other than *Dollar General*, there's nowhere in walking distance to get groceries ..."

Fresh garden salad with a homemade citrus vinaigrette was served alongside warm grilled French bread as the starter for the three-course meal.

Reducing Stigma through Celebration and Collaboration

Let's Eat was the culmination of a two-year collaborative public art project led by multimedia artist Lindsey Peck Scherloum and her project team, which included the Brashear Association, Inc. as the artist's community partner, and project managers from Neighborhood Allies. The Brashear Association is a nonprofit organization that provides South Pittsburgh neighborhoods with health, education, and economic support, and operates a local food pantry. *Let's Eat* was one of four projects undertaken as part of Public Art and Communities (PAC), a program of Shiftworks Community + Public Arts (formerly known as Office for Public Art) in collaboration with Neighborhood Allies and the Borough of Millvale

A year ago, the project team had identified food insecurity as their theme, with the goal of reducing stigma by "celebrating food" in a communal way, even if they didn't yet know what that would look like.

> "But what about that is art?" Scherloum asked at the time. "It's a cool idea and could not be art, but we're going to make it art."

And they did. *Let's Eat* combined ceramics with a kind of dinner theater into a two-day event that was entertaining, educational, and empowering—and as participatory as the process that led up to it. Throughout 2022, Scherloum sought community input that would jump start conversations about food. Her team used community meetings, social media, and the Brashear Association's newsletter to solicit stories about food, be it in abundance or scarcity, as well as suggestions for kinds of food to serve at the community dinners.

Neighbors were guided to exchange stories and food during the meal.

Recalling advice from a mentor, Scherloum said, "If you're doing art about a place, do it in that place." So it was fitting that the most valuable input came by way of index cards placed in "drop boxes" Scherloum designed and placed in community gathering spots. From these submissions, she selected quotes she would later paint onto each plate.

But engaging whole communities in an art project brings challenges. Andrea Matthews, Brashear's executive director, was intrigued by the community meal concept, but said that the "test meal" they hosted in December 2022 didn't align with what her organization hoped to achieve. Despite its inspiration coming from the community itself, Matthews said the menu was not representative of those facing food insecurity, especially during the pandemic.

"Food insecurity is not white or Black," said Matthews. "[Our clients] were diverse socioeconomically. Some were experiencing food insecurity for the first time; first time pantry-goers who worked hard their whole lives. The myth that you're receiving food at a food pantry because you're unemployed was thrown out the window. People were just hurting."

Tamara Emswiler and Chelsea Contino Eicher, Neighborhood Allies' staff who served as *Let's Eat* project managers, agreed, but believed that this setback enhanced the project in the end.

The test meal revealed a "disconnect between the artist's vision and the organization's vision," Emswiler said. "Lindsey wanted to shine light on food insecurity and the feelings you go through when you're food insecure, whereas Andrea and many others wanted this project to put more distance between people and food insecurity."

Subsequently, the team embraced Matthews' idea for a recipe contest in which community seniors would submit cherished family recipes. The contest generated a lot of submissions, from which the team selected those that eventually inspired the menu.

> "It was a really good compromise because the menu was still very connected to the community," Eicher said. "Seniors submitted recipes that they were proud of. Food can be a source of pride, a source of culture."

The Cast

Earlier in 2023, Nick Grosso was working a shift as a steward at the Union Project, a community art and event space in Highland Park, when Scherloum arrived to oversee a team of ceramicists and kiln technicians who would wheel-throw the eighty plates she would need for the dinners. Their conversation veered towards Scherloum's vision for adding a performance component to the project. Then, a bit of serendipity: Grosso is a dramaturge—a theater artist, composer, and writer.

"When Lindsey said she was looking for a theatrical element, I thought, *That's what I do,*" Grosso said. "I do public storytelling, and I like to get audiences involved." Their collaboration was off and running soon after.

Scherloum said she had envisioned a modest role for the server/performers, "but Nick brought a whole other level of theatricality to it that helped make the event feel special."

Youth from the Brashear Association diligently rehearsed their lines under the guidance of Nick Grosso as they prepared to act as servers for the dinner. Their dedication added an extra layer of community involvement to the event.

While they collaborated on the script, Grosso recruited trained student actors, like Donathan Arnold, from Carnegie Mellon's drama school, from which Grosso graduated; and through the Brashear Association's youth program, he and Lindsey rounded out the cast with teenagers who expressed an interest in performance. Rehearsals began the week before the event.

Seeking an event manager to oversee the community dinners, Scherloum found Terra Ferderber to be more than qualified. Ferderber works for her family-owned farm, Frankferd Farms, about 20 miles outside Pittsburgh. Her primary role there is to manage events like parties and receptions, but she also has extensive knowledge of food deserts: Frankferd Farms is part of an Appalachian food distribution network.

"For a lot of the customers we deliver to in these areas … our truck coming once a month is their main food," Ferderber said. "They get produce from local farmers, but their staples all come from us; they don't have access otherwise."

Finding a suitable location is one of the most challenging aspects of any public art process. The site that had been secured prior to Ferderber joining *Let's Eat* suddenly became unavailable when the building next door collapsed. Procuring a new venue became her immediate responsibility. In addition to meeting city permitting regulations, Scherloum wanted a highly visible site (which Ferderber described as "potentially disruptive") to distinguish this event from other privately catered events seen around the city. The goal, after all, was to confront the stigma associated with food insecurity, so Scherloum needed the event to be *seen*. The new site on Beltzhoover Avenue wasn't perfect, Ferderber said, but was close enough to busy Warrington Avenue to encourage passersby to join the dinners spontaneously.

Even with an understanding of food deserts, the project had an impact on Federber. "I kind of live in two worlds," she said, referring to her urban home life and rural work life. "My experience with food insecurity has been on a more rural scale, but through this project I learned a lot about what's happening in my own city."

A Meal in Three Acts

Scherloum's idea of a three-course meal naturally evolved into a three-act performance, Grosso said, noting how important it is for creatives to "be open to these little moments that reveal themselves."

During act 1, "Opening," which featured a simple greeting, appetizers, and drinks, the servers encouraged guests to join tables with people they didn't know. Act 2, "Sharing," the main course, began with *Let's Eat*'s host Nikki Young stepping to the center of the tent to convey the deeper meaning of this gathering. "We are here to cultivate openness and sharing, to prepare this community as we would a garden, to plant seeds of change and support," Young said, as part of a monologue that celebrated community strength, while confronting "food systems that have failed so many."

The main course was again served on sharing plates, randomly placed on tables to foster the kind of interaction that can turn strangers into acquaintances, maybe friends.

> "This is not an ordinary meal," Young continued. "The one given to you might be too big. It might be too small. It might not be at all what you want to eat … It may require you to ask for, give, offer, and receive what you need."

There was *a lot* to choose from and share: smoked salmon cakes over "forbidden rice," meatloaf over mashed potatoes, chicken salad, collard green wraps, curry stuffed peppers, and penne pasta. These were comfort foods chosen from the recipe contest, then reinterpreted and prepared by Carlos Thomas, better known as Chef Los.

As a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu-Pittsburgh Institute of Culinary Arts, Thomas founded Feed the Hood, an organization whose mission is to expand the culinary workforce by providing mentorship, training, and preparation for employment in the restaurant and hospitality industry. Thomas' passion is for sustainable agriculture and equitable food systems. Where food comes from, who can—and can't—access it, are his primary concerns.

Salmon croquettes that are usually found in fancy restaurants, Thomas told the guests, were traditionally very common and practical, made with leftovers. "Meatloaf?" he asked. *"Leftovers."* And the mashed potatoes were actually mashed yuca, the sweeter, more nutritious, easier to grow alternative to potatoes, Thomas explained.

Over dessert, act 3, "Dreaming" took the form of a call and response, prompted by the question *What do you dream of in your neighborhood?*

Community gardens, supermarkets, peace, loving thy neighbor *and neighborhood* were some of those dreams.

"I dream of open spaces and different faces, just like this," Stephanie White-Stroud added. "As we do that, we garden together, we learn how to cook healthy meals, and just take care of one another."

And from the artist herself: “I dream that this very meal has made this very land full of possibility, and that it becomes a flourishing garden.”

Conclusion

Time will tell how much impact this project had on food insecurity, Matthews said, but the process revealed “deep emotions” and needed the full two years to work through the complexity of the project. “I really appreciate Shiftworks and this experience for opening our eyes, opening Lindsey’s eyes, and opening the space for us to learn from each other,” Matthews said. “It brought us together to say, What does this meal need to do, and be?”

A mix of cuisines and portions was served to demonstrate the neighborhood’s varied access to food.

The final events had concluded, but Scherloum was not yet done. The next day she took all the plates to the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts—a tricky feat, considering that the plates were unwashed; whatever food that had not been eaten was still stuck to them—and sent them back into the kiln.

“I wanted the experience of people coming together to be immortalized in these plates, and have the energy of the event baked into them,” Scherloum said about firing the plates a second time.

Reflecting on the project goal of reducing the stigma of food insecurity, Scherloum said the community taught her about the “beautiful complexities of identity and food” that invoke feelings about taking care of one’s family and community. “Food is a link to culture, and a means to support and care-give.”

Scherloum is now looking for a permanent home to exhibit the plates. Matthews said the courtyard in the new food pantry her organization is constructing might be just the right place.


COILS
GOOD
WE SET THE
TONE, PAINT
THE PICTURE
CREATE TH
ATMOSPH

Frofully Connected

On a grassy parcel in Beltzhoover known as the FroGang Lot of Love, dozens of guests had arrived for FroGang's long-awaited mural dedication ceremony, but the refreshments had not. A canopy tent set up in the wrong spot left some guests fanning themselves in the August sun. There were technical problems with the PA system. These event-day hiccups were minor compared to the unexpected twists and turns that FroGang had been navigating for the past year. But the audience continued to grow, and Kelli Shakur, FroGang's founder and CEO, was unfazed.

"There were a lot of challenges that could have deterred the whole mood and atmosphere," Shakur said later about the event, "but instead, because of the love of FroGang and the love of what's going on on that lot, people stayed. That's what the Lot of Love is all about: bringing people together, and turning things that should be bad into good."

FroGang Foundation, Inc. is a nonprofit organization with a mission to promote positive self-image for Black girls. The Lot of Love is a modest-sized lot of outsized importance that FroGang has been seeking to adopt and enliven as an outdoor center for activities and events.

"A lot of these young girls come from this community .... and have seen this space be nothing but a wall with broken down paint and graffiti on it," Shakur said. As a lifelong resident of Beltzhoover, Shakur added that the site has historically been a place of criminal activity and violence.

FroGang girls celebrate the mural's completion.

FroGang's longstanding vision for this site has included a bold and visible mural that would artistically commemorate the space when it's in use, and claim the space for FroGang when it's not. Through the Public Art and Communities program (PAC), artist Rell Rushin created Frofully Connected, a mural celebrating Black girls and women, painted on large panels designed to be installed on the brick facade of an adjacent building.

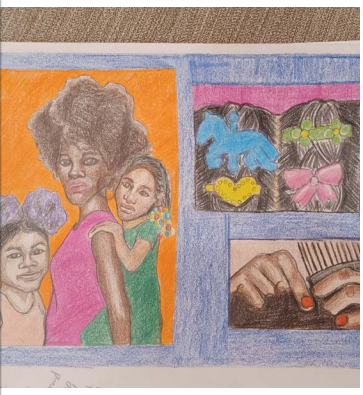
Rushin's artwork, as big-hearted and unafraid as FroGang's mission, is complete, but FroGang's vision for the Lot of Love has not yet been fully realized. Obtaining City approvals and permits would prove so onerous that, six months after the ceremony, the uninstalled mural still waits in storage.

Building Trust

For years, FroGang has hosted "Successful Sister Sessions" on Sundays at the Beulah Baptist Church. During these sessions, the FroGang Girls (girls between the ages of six and sixteen) join with successful Black women to participate in activities and affirmations intended to cultivate leadership skills and a positive self-image. The mural project was conceived as a way to address racism and existing issues of self-esteem and isolation that were worsened by the pandemic.

Process photograph.

PAC provides substantial time (requires it, in fact) for artists to immerse themselves in the communities where they'll work. After being selected as FroGang's artist, Rushin began attending Successful Sister Sessions as an observer at first, later as a participant. As she began conceptualizing what the artwork would be, Rushin was struck by one activity in particular: girls reciting affirmations—positive statements about themselves that they had written in journals—while looking into self-decorated, handheld mirrors. Rushin was moved by seeing them developing important life skills and "loving themselves and each other, and causing no harm by judging or being cruel."



Preliminary sketch of the mural developed by Rushin in collaboration with the FroGang girls.

The latter is learned behavior, Rushin said, and "seeing them unlearn that was really cool."

Throughout the process, Rushin sketched ideas for everything she saw and heard.

"We got to incorporate things the girls wanted to see. They helped me pick out what hairstyles were their favorite. They wanted to see Black people of all different skin tones." The final composition also incorporated the girls' "cultural sense of style, like hoop earrings and nail art," as well as spoken words from their "cheers"—steps and poetry recitals the girls perform during their sessions.

Capturing these details mattered because they reinforced FroGang's "overall mission," which Shakur described as an "awareness that Black hair, natural hair, is beautiful, that it is professional, that it is worthy and should be valued."

Inviting Rushin into the Successful Sister Sessions "created an obvious and immediate bridge of trust." That's according to Jessica Gaynelle Moss, an artist and curator who was hired as primary project manager. "Instead of creating something new, this was something FroGang had been doing for some time. For Kelli to invite someone to a Successful Sister Session meant that Kelli co-signed that person," Moss said.

Having worked as a liaison between nonprofits, museums, and artists and art collectives, Moss has expertise in various integration models for artists and communities. Vouching for Rell "created a

way more successful opportunity for entry," Moss said, adding that Rushin's participation in the sessions was especially important for the girls. "Instead of 'Here's Rell, come meet her,' it's 'Rell's already here in our community, and she's here for you."

A Daunting Process

Any public art piece seen around Pittsburgh is preceded by an approval process that often involves a mix of City departments, divisions, and commissions. Before becoming part of the public realm, public art must be reviewed and approved by the Public Art & Civic Design Commission (PADC), a division of the Department of City Planning (DCP). Projects on City property or in a right-of-way require support letters from the Department of Public Works and/or Department of Mobility and Infrastructure, as well as from stakeholders and community groups. Projects within the geographic boundaries of a Recognized Community Organization require DCP to hold a Development Activities Meeting at least 30 days prior to a PADC hearing. Lastly, some projects may need to be reviewed by the Historic Review Commission and/or Zoning Division, and/or Permits, Licenses, and Inspections (PLI), a separate department with three divisions.

This is daunting, especially for an artist going through this for the first time. Technical assistance provided as part of PAC helped Rushin with both, but even the team of professionals she assembled struggled with City regulations.

When Moss moved out of state, Divya Rao Heffley, Shiftworks' associate director, moved from a supporting role to primary project manager, and took the lead on navigating an arduous process unlike that of any of the other PAC projects. This process that began in June 2022 would still be ongoing 18 months later.

The project's journey through PACD's art commission process was smooth; obtaining a permit from PLI was not. As an attached structure, the mural would function like a sign, and signs require a sign permit. The project team was expanded to include Flyspace Productions, a licensed sign installer, GBBN Architects, and The Gateway Engineers, Inc., all of which collaborated to produce

construction drawings and structural analysis of the adjacent building, seek the sign permit, and address a zoning issue. Meanwhile, FroGang's application to adopt the lot through the City's Adopt-A-Lot program had been delayed.

"This project has been through so many ups and downs," Heffley said recently about the team's continuous engagement with numerous City entities. The City's rigid structures are "put into place for good reason," Heffley acknowledged, "but it can be difficult to find a middle ground with the very necessary flexibility required to do true grassroots community work. I'm hoping that a solution is within reach."

While all of this played out downtown, Rushin was busy painting in her Radiant Hall studio in Homewood. At 8 feet high and 32 feet wide, her mural needed to be created on separate 4' × 8' MDF panels (a plywood-like construction material). Having never worked on a painting this big, Rushin could have made a smaller painting that could be digitally enlarged and printed as a vinyl wrap, but she wanted to challenge herself to hand-paint it. So she hired artist Max Gonzales to teach her a new technique of scaling and hand-painting each panel that would later be assembled into a seamless composition.

By August 2023, the mural was complete. But without permission to install it, the team decided to move forward with the planned celebration, by raising the mural temporarily for that one day.

"The show goes on," Shakur said.

Event Day

Event day finally arrived. While Shakur and her team resolved the last minute miscues, children huddled joyously around an art table, painting stones that would be incorporated into the Lot of Love's community garden. In the background, Flyspace Productions raised the mural on a temporary, freestanding structure. It immediately enlivened the space, its vibrant colors heightened by the sun directly overhead, with Bill Withers' "Ain't No Sunshine" booming ironically from the PA system.

Detail view of *Frofully Connected.*

Rushin's final mural includes four images, with text interspersed in between. At its center are two detailed depictions of "coils" and "kinks." To the left, Rushin painted a woman with expertly braided hair, and to the right she painted a group setting: two girls gathered around a woman having her hair done by a stylist. From the intricacies of hairstyling to the sense of togetherness it embodies, Rushin's composition tells an expansive story about Black girls, Black women, and Black hair.

Rushin's palette of eye-catching colors accomplishes the initial goal of claiming the land for FroGang. But it's the text accompanying the images that most directly speaks to the second goal of confronting racism, and replacing feelings of isolation with belonging:

WE ARE WHO THE WORLD FEARS,
BLACK GIRLS LIVE HERE.

The rest of the event went flawlessly. Approximately 180 guests listened to a blessing of the land, a poetry reading, and remarks from those involved with the project, including two of the FroGang Girls. Based on the rousing audience participation and uplifting mood, you would've thought everything had gone exactly as planned during the past two years.

Placemaking

Shakur's statement about the Lot of Love—how it turns bad things into good—can also be said about Frofully Connected. Rushin's first public art project wasn't an easy one, but it enabled her to grow as a professional artist. Going before the Public Art and Design Commission for the first time was "terrifying," Rushin said, but the commission members soon put her at such ease that she would gladly return in the future. Prior to applying to PAC, Rushin thought that public art wasn't something she would ever attempt. But being put in a position where she could work with a large team made her "feel like this project was so huge and so grand, more than just painting on a wall."

Yet, Rushin wonders what impact these complications have on other artists.

> "If we were struggling—a whole team of people—to get this mural up, what would this process look like if I wasn't working with Shiftworks? There would've been no chance of my artwork getting out there."

Rushin hired artist Max Gonzalez to teach her new techniques that were needed to paint a mural of this scale.

Detail view of *Frofully Connected*.

"We had a team of superstars with extensive expertise," Heffley said. "The fact that we've come so far is testament to the incredible perseverance of Rell, Tom Brown at Flyspace, Crystal McCloyn at GBBN, and the engineers at Gateway."

"But Kelli is a powerhouse," Heffley continued. "The level of trust she has with her neighbors is amazing, and that was evident at the mural opening. Many people there had come to support the project, but I think the vast majority were there to support Kelli and FroGang and what she has built with the girls. Seeing that was deeply inspiring."

As for the FroGang Girls, Shakur said, "I know the girls were super ecstatic to have Rell in the space, and being able to reach out and touch her. She's a professional, but she's in front of us, and she's a Black woman who looks like us. So I think that whole dynamic gave them an outlook that might spark something, because we have some nice little creatives in our program."

Rushin's feelings about those little creatives is evidenced by her signature on the mural: *By: Rell + the girls of FroGang*.

That detail was important to Moss, who said that the broader field of art often neglects to acknowledge all those who exist "between the artist and artwork we see."

> " Many hands make up your hand," Moss said. "What a model Rell has adapted. I hope it ripples into the rest of the field."

Finally, in November, FroGang's lot adoption was finalized. But as of February 2024, the project was still held up by a zoning issue: the proposed mural would cross the property line between two parcels, both owned by the City of Pittsburgh.

Soil was delivered to the lot to fill ruts and create a safer surface for the poetry readings and block parties FroGang is planning for 2024. Until then, FroGang will continue to stock a self-serve pantry on the Lot of Love with canned food, books, toys, socks, and personal hygiene items. Even without the mural in place, this pantry itself is a form of placemaking, which Shakur described this way:

"It's a place where you're walking past and you might not have any money, might be a little hungry, and everything you need is right there. It has changed the whole dynamic on that block. There's white people, Black people, Hispanic people, African people … and so now we're creating an atmosphere of inclusion and support and conversation."

Frofully Connected
Epilogue

Hovering twenty feet above the Lot of Love in a utility truck bucket, Fred Ruprecht, owner of Fred's Signs, was attaching furring strips to the brick façade of the adjacent building. Below, Carly Trimble-Long and Cara McLaughlin from Flyspace Productions were reviewing construction specifications and drilling holes in lumber. It was April 14th, about two weeks after zoning approval was finally granted for the mural installation.

Doing this work on a Sunday wasn't the plan, but days of heavy rain had delayed the installation a few days. Kelli Shakur arrived late morning, overjoyed.

"If I wasn't on my way to church, I'd cry," she said.

She then turned her attention to two children bouncing a basketball down Climax Street. Leading them to the Lot of Love pantry, Shakur told them they could have first dibs on the new books and toys she had put in there.

The *Frofully Connected* mural installation was completed the following week.

Frofully Connected
installed in Beltzhoover.


NAPPY
WE ARE WHO THE WORLD FEARS, BLACK GIRLS LIVE HERE
WE SET THE TONE, PAINT THE PICTURE, CREATE THE ATMOSPHERE.
Frogang
Neighbors Protect Neighbors
See Something
Say Something
DIAL 911

We Are Windows

Artist Jason McKoy leads a walking tour of *We Are Windows* in Etna and Sharpsburg.

The similar mill town histories of Etna and Sharpsburg have led them on similarly innovative post-mill town journeys toward becoming sustainable communities. Sitting side by side along the Allegheny River, these two communities are quite alike. Their differences in population, household income, total housing units, and other census data are slight. Their adjacency to the river and major roadways, combined with outdated infrastructure, have yielded shared environmental challenges, especially related to flooding and air pollution.

Yet, they are separate boroughs.

That Etna and Sharpsburg's aspirations are closely aligned is more than happenstance. Community leadership, which has been especially in sync of late, has enabled the kind of collaboration needed to further long-term community goals (while also responding to a pandemic), without losing sight of a broader community vision that includes investing in public art.

Being accepted as co-applicants into the Public Art and Communities program (PAC) led Etna and Sharpsburg toward a public art project unlike any other in the region. *We Are Windows*, undertaken by artist Jason McKoy, demonstrated how innovative public art can facilitate, or *provoke*, civic engagement in unexpected ways.

What *is* public art?

Both boroughs have community-based organizations staffed by one person. Megan Tuñón is the executive director of Etna Community Organization (ECO) and a member of Etna Borough council. Brittany Reno, Sharpsburg's mayor, was the executive director at the Sharpsburg Neighborhood Organization (SNO) during the entirety of this project. Combined, the organizations are known as ECO+SNO. Together with Millvale Borough, to the west, they form the Triboro Ecodistrict, a formal partnership established to address complex environmental and economic challenges common to all of them.

Investing in public art has been a longtime interest of both communities, so Tuñón and Reno jumped at the opportunity to commission a major project through PAC. Tuñón said they originally envisioned something traditional.

> "I came into it thinking we were going to do something like a mural, but it turned out to be so much more than that."

It was during the artist interview process that McKoy's previous "tech-based, out of the box" projects not only opened their eyes to new possibilities, but convinced them that he was the right artist for the job. While all of the PAC teams needed to respond to the pandemic in some way, McKoy would have the added challenge of working in two municipalities simultaneously.

Installation of *We Are Windows*.

Sister Boroughs

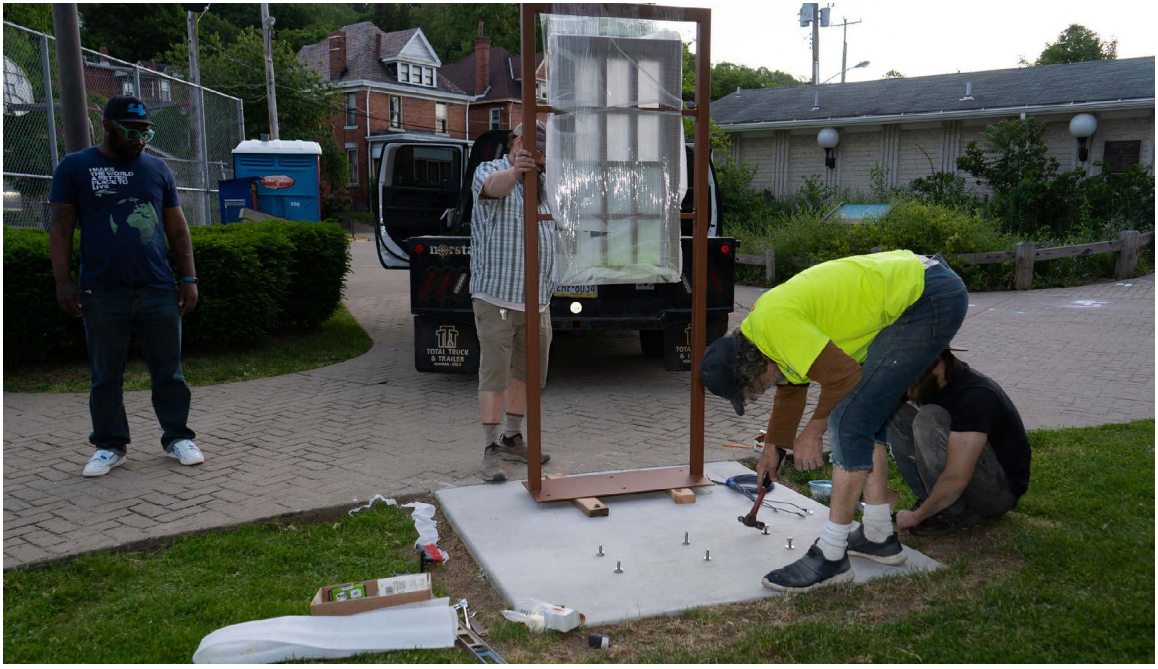
Early on, McKoy found the longstanding "rivalry" between Etna and Sharpsburg amusing (a "beef," he called it in jest), but he respected each community's autonomy and identity. Videoconferencing had already become central to businesses, schools, and family life during the pandemic, but ongoing limitations to in-person interactions resurrected some near-forgotten means of communication, such as postcards. Like Lindsey Peck Scherloum in *Let's Eat,* McKoy used postcards to solicit input about the issues the communities wanted to address. The response showed two boroughs speaking with one voice.

> "What was coming directly from the community was isolation, isolation, isolation," McKoy said. Both places experiencing the same thing became the impetus to create "one work of art that would knit the communities together, instead of pursuing two separate projects."

His idea was to create electronic "windows" that would "look" from one borough into the other. Placed in publicly accessible locations, digital screens (think flat-screen TV, oriented vertically) would display video feeds from cameras placed in the corresponding community. To incorporate a multitude of images, McKoy conceived two "paned" windows, each with a pane linked to a video camera. Kind of like a group Zoom call, featuring places more than faces.

"It's a concept that cities very far apart, like sister cities, do sometimes," Tuñón said. Once the locations were confirmed—at an Etna playground and outside the Sharpsburg Community Library—these screens would only be separated by two miles.

It's worth noting that it's *possible* for pedestrians to get from one borough's business district to the other, but doing so is neither



Installation of *We Are Windows*.

easy nor pleasant. A rail line, semi-industrial riverfront parcels, a stream, and an elevated roadway seem to conspire against physical connectivity. So McKoy's preliminary idea also included a website, accessible to anyone, that would live stream the images displayed on both screens.

But an online forum held to discuss *We Are Windows* brought about mixed reactions. Privacy, and possible "surveillance," were central to community concerns. This was especially true for the proposed camera location inside the Sharpsburg library, where community members spoke to individuals' privacy rights when borrowing books. Others were concerned about the public realm in general, and the safety of individuals who might be viewed online.

Reno remarked that many of her constituents weren't as concerned about themselves as they were about others who might be put at risk. Tuñón said Etna residents and business owners had similar concerns.

Reno said, "We were trying to connect people who are feeling isolated by giving them a way to look at the outside world and see what's going on in different places … what's happening at the park,

the coffee shop …" Adding that "compromise is the only way to get things done," she said the vision was scaled back to closed-circuit video, viewable only at the windows, not online.

Without even having yet made anything, McKoy's project had achieved something significant: an important discussion about cameras in the public realm was taking place. There are already an abundance of such cameras, hovering over highways and intersections, and at entrances to businesses, institutions, and residences. "No one knows who sees that video footage or where it's stored. It can be used on social media for any number of purposes," McKoy said, adding that he understood the concern.

By making them viewable by anyone, McKoy intended for *We Are Windows* to be transparent. Recording the video was never part of the project. Moreover, the cameras didn't even need to capture people.

"It could be a stream, cars passing on a road, or anything that involves movement," McKoy said.

As a project manager for *We Are Windows,* Derek Reese, Shiftworks' program manager for artist services, says real community engagement allows for these kinds of issues to arise.

"We don't steer away from controversy. We don't try to sanitize situations," he said.

Noting that institutions can play a valuable community engagement role, Reese said the Sharpsburg library convened a meeting between a small group of concerned residents, the artist, Reno, and himself, which enabled McKoy to answer questions and present the original intent of the project.

> "The participants were just blown away by it," Reese said, noting that a lot of people don't typically have many opportunities to talk about art. "We had a great conversation about public art's impact, and why it's important."

To Reese, this was a good example of Shiftworks' grassroots approach to engagement. "It's not a glossy presentation telling people why public art is important, but rather an experience that happens over time."

Having reached consensus on the closed-circuit feeds and camera locations, McKoy concluded, "It's just a live feed, broadcasting from one place to another. That's it. It lives nowhere else in the world except at these two locations."

Placekeeping

This consensus-building process made the project better. By removing the option to watch the feeds from a computer or phone, *We Are Windows* would become more of a gathering place, where people could interact directly with the artwork—and each other. Not only would this help to relieve community isolation more effectively, it would better encompass PAC's objectives for placemaking. The final design included a combination of moving images, still images, and text in each of the paned windows.

To varying degrees, public art affects the whole public realm. It contributes to the experience of being in a community, as a resident, business owner, or visitor. Independent of any public input governing bodies may provide, PAC ensures multiple opportunities for community members to engage—to learn, make suggestions, object or even resist—and become part of the decision-making process.

As board president of the Millvale Community Library and co-founder of New Sun Rising, Brian Wolovich sees clearly the challenges facing under-resourced communities. His involvement with the Ecodistrict goes back more than a decade. Though his participation with *We Are Windows* was limited, Wolovich says that the PAC process, starting with the Placemaking Academy, upheld good community planning principles. Like Tamara Emswiler from Neighborhood Allies, Wolovich prefers the concept of place*keeping* over placemaking.

"We *have* a place," Wolovich said. "We have culture and we have values and we want to celebrate that. This process that honored the wisdom of the community members also honored the creativity and ideation of the artist."

Locally made

The pandemic slowed the supply chain for just about everything. A custom-designed, steel-fabricated sculpture with an electronic display would prove to be no different.

"It was important to me to keep everything local, so I wanted to work with Pittsburgh makers," McKoy said. Because it would have likely been faster and less expensive to have the windows fabricated elsewhere, he appreciated Shiftworks' support for this decision that extended the timeline and budget. Tuñón and Reno's ability to quickly secure permits and approvals—a benefit of being part of small boroughs—expedited the eventual installation.

McKoy leads a walking tour of *We Are Windows*.

While acknowledging the challenges of having limited resources, Wolovich appreciates the nimble nature of small municipalities. Likening Millvale, Etna, and Sharpsburg to kayaks on the river, he said, "We can shift and change directions quickly. Cities are more like barges; they're hard to turn, but when you do, there's a lot of power behind them."

Even so, time was not on ECO+SNO's side. By the time the windows were in place, winter was near. The plan was always to turn the system off in the winter, so *We Are Windows* was up and running only for a short time before it was shut off for the season.

Looking Back, Forward

For ECO+SNO, the two years spent developing *We Are Windows* will have long-term benefits.

"The process was extremely successful for me as a nonprofit director, someone who wants to invest more in public art," Tuñón said, adding that the process involved some hard lessons. As ECO's only paid staff person, Tuñón said simple tasks, like knocking on doors or posting fliers, were time-consuming and difficult to accomplish while trying to support a community struggling with food and shelter at the same time.

Reflecting on the community-based approach to creating art, Tuñón said of *We Are Windows*, "I appreciate how innovative it is, and that it aligns with how we see ourselves as a community. It was right in step with Etna and Sharpsburg being Ecodistricts. We want to do innovative things moving forward."

The Etna playground was closed for maintenance this past winter. Tuñón sees its spring reopening as an opportunity to relaunch and celebrate *We Are Windows*.

Having experienced the same staffing challenges as Tuñón, Reno drew similar conclusions about what it takes to create public art that fits with the community.

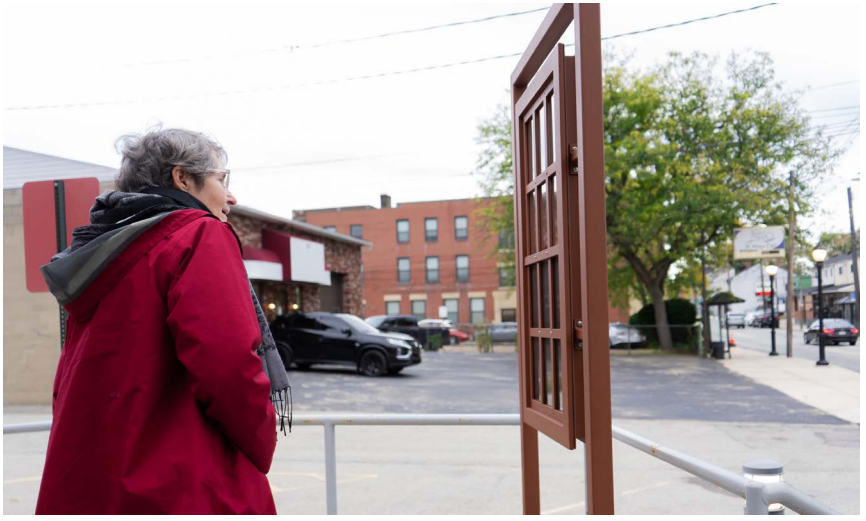
> "We thought about art in terms of how we can visibly demonstrate investment in placemaking," she said. "This process challenged us, and definitely led to me feeling more cognizant of the fact that the entire process is art, the reaction is part of the art."

As an elected official, the civic process is critically important to Reno, even if that means "stirring up people who disagree with me." But that process can be uneven, with over-represenation by "those who know how to be heard, know the lingo and process." Reno added that the members of Sharpsburg who are coping with serious financial or health problems can't come to council meetings with prepared statements, or participate fully in projects like these.

Still, she said, "The conversations we had were new, and the candidness with which we had them was new."

McKoy, who has historically sought an element of disruption in his art, anticipated some resistance to *We Are Windows*. When asked if his project shifted public awareness about cameras in the public realm, he said, "I want to say yes, even if only an increment."

About the project's impact on public perception about art, he said, "In places where art isn't in the forefront … part of my job is to change people's minds, or at least make them think deeper and more critically about what art can even be. I believe, I hope I accomplished that."



Black Queer Affinity Series

Black Queer Affinity Series programming.

There once was a nineteenth century estate with a Walled Garden in Pittsburgh's East End. Its immodest 60-room house was demolished in the 1940s, but the Walled Garden remains, tucked away in what is now a 33-acre greenspace called Mellon Park. For decades this pastoral *public* park has hosted weddings and events such as *Bach, Beethoven, and Brunch*.

More recently, artist Noa Mims claimed the Walled Garden for anyone who was Black and Queer and wanted to participate in an experiential public art project.

In collaboration with Steel Smiling, a nonprofit organization committed to Black mental health, Mims created the *Black Queer Affinity Series*, an art project designed to support Black Queer mental health. The two-year process that shaped the series says something about how far Pittsburgh has come during the past century, but more about how far it has yet to go.

Project evolution

Above all else, the desired result of the Public Art and Communities program (PAC) is the creation of mission-aligned public art. To accomplish this, artists immerse themselves in their host communities, where they get to know the humans who advance organizational missions, and those served by those missions. With a mix of creative expression, personal perspective, and professional experiences, the artist creatively interprets and expresses community goals and aspirations through art that is physical or experiential.

Yoga in Highland Park with Alecia Dawn of YOGAMOTIF.

Steel Smiling's mission is to bridge the gap between Black community members and mental health support through education, advocacy, and awareness. It is a community partner for PAC, and an Organization-in-Residence Partner with Neighborhood Allies, which is part of PAC's leadership team. Steel Smiling's core program is Beams to Bridges, through which participants earn certified training to provide mental health support in everyday situations. Operations Director Courtney Abegunde says a primary goal of her organization is to provide every Black person in Allegheny County with a positive mental health experience by 2030. With a psychology degree and a Master of Art in Psychology, Abegunde brought extensive experience as an educator and counselor to the project. That Steel Smiling was able to choose a Black artist with a degree in studio arts and psychology is a testament to the efficacy of PAC's selection process.

As an artist, Noa Mims is primarily a sculptor. Their business, Mims Ceramics, includes a studio that offers "Clay Dates" to the public, as well as a mobile studio that brings a full ceramics-making experience to private events and parties. Yet Mims's early engagement work for PAC and Steel Smiling didn't assume that ceramics would be part of the mix. Instead, Mims and participants from a Beams to Bridges cohort got to know each by undertaking a variety of artistic pursuits.

Over time, Mims's project evolved, and shifted toward a specific aspect of Pittsburgh's Black community: those who identify as Queer. The result, the *Black Queer Affinity Series*, was a three-part

project that incorporated group yoga sessions, social gatherings, and, yes, ceramics, into a creative healing process centered on mental health.

Affinity

Steel Smiling runs numerous "affinity programs" that complement Beams to Bridges, which Abegunde says are rooted in trust, coming together, and sharing experiences. "They're about getting people who have gone through similar things together to talk about it, discuss it. The topic is usually Black mental health," she said.

By "deepening our commitment to all aspects of Black culture," Abegunde credits Mims and the *Black Queer Affinity Series* for impacting Steel Smiling's mission. "Steel Smiling has always sought to serve all aspects of the Black community. This was our first effort at providing support to the Queer community specifically. In that way, it expanded our offerings, and we appreciate that."

Abegunde also said this evolution led both Mims and Steel Smiling in a better direction because the project represented "who we are, why we do this work, and how we use our identity to inspire and motivate us."

Not only did this project evolve, it *grew.* In total, Mims organized and hosted 21 events during the summer and fall of 2023. According to Divya Rao Heffley, the partnership's primary project manager, the strong artist-community foundation that was built early on was one of the reasons the project was able to evolve so successfully. Heffley noted the immediate bond Mims formed with Steel Smiling's executive director Julius Boatwright, who was Mims' primary point of contact during the first year of the program, prior to Courtney joining Steel Smiling's staff.

> "I have never seen such an immediate affinity between an artist and an organization before. In those early meetings between Noa and Julius, the way that they were both speaking about their approach to community, to mental health, and to self-care, it was in complete alignment. This only deepened after Courtney joined the team. It was just incredible," Heffley said.

Ceramics workshop led by Mims.

Placemaking, Spacemaking

All public art needs space. Like murals and sculptures needing walls or plots of land, events need to happen somewhere. Mims had studio space for the ceramics workshops, but where would they find—in *Pittsburgh*—space for a group of Black Queer people to come together and engage around shared mental health experiences?

Nowhere. So they had to make it.

Mims had already known that Black-run spaces accommodating of large groups were scarce in Pittsburgh, bordering on non-existent. "At a certain point in time, I stopped looking at it as a challenge, and started looking at it as an initiative to carve out space within the city for us to exist, to gather, to find community," Mims said. Drawing from their own personal experiences, they added, "The odds of me walking out of my apartment and going to some space or event and finding twenty other Black Queer people is pretty rare, if not impossible. Curating that kind of experience came down to, How can I make everyone comfortable with this thing that normally doesn't get to happen?"

Part of that comfort would come from finding the right space, and the Walled Garden had much to offer. Unlike most of Mellon Park, the Walled Garden's lawn is flat, and the stone wall and ancient trees encircling it provide a sense of seclusion. It also already hosts two permanent public art pieces. But another key aspect of comfort is safety, and the Walled Garden didn't offer enough of it.

> "We decided to hire security to give everyone that extra level of assurance that someone was looking out for us, that we didn't need to be made to feel like we're a spectacle because we're twenty Black Queer people gathering in the Walled Garden," Mims said.

Safety is both physical and psychological, said Abegunde. “We have to think about where is safe for us, where is safe for the community we’re trying to serve. It’s about being confident that people will see our outreach and they’ll know, this is a place I can go and be okay.”

This degree of literal *spacemaking* takes the more commonly known concept of placemaking to another level entirely. Its complexity was about more than merely finding a suitable venue, however; it was about Pittsburgh culture.

Pittsburgh Culture

For individuals who identify as one race, recent census data shows that Allegheny County is about 80 percent white and 14 percent Black. By contrast, counties that include the comparable Midwestern cities of Cleveland, Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and St. Louis have Black populations between 26 and 31 percent, roughly double. It follows that the culture of the Pittsburgh region is more white-centered than most cities.

One result of this is a general lack of understanding about the additional steps that organizers of events like these have to take. Abegunde says that people advertise events that “they think cater to the general public, but actually cater to the local majority, which might not take into consideration the people whose identities don’t represent the majority.” As an example, when event organizers hire police, Abegunde said, “Some people might say, ‘Okay, the police are here, I feel more safe.’ But in Black communities, we’re less likely to feel comfortable with a police presence.”

Noting that this region doesn’t have many events organized by, and for, Black people, Abegunde was grateful for this opportunity. “We were able to envision culturally aligned practices that would work for who we’re trying to serve,” she said.

Affinity Circle in the Walled Garden at Mellon Park.

Community identity

Mims needing to create space where none existed highlights current cultural realities of the Pittsburgh region that no single project or organization can change outright. But cities are made up of *communities,* which *can* change, and also affect change. The *Black Queer Affinity Series* impacted Steel Smiling and a segment of the city's Black population in ways big and small, but it also raised questions about the nature of Pittsburgh communities—how they're defined, where they are, how they are created, and how they're sustained.

> " Sometimes community isn't where we are, it's who we're with, what we're doing, what we're talking about and how we show up for each other," Abegunde said. "Many people don't feel like a part of the community they live in."

How this region defines a community has wide-ranging significance, especially with respect to the funding and resources that support mission-based work and underserved populations. Though Allegheny County's Black population has grown somewhat since 2000, the City of Pittsburgh has lost more than 20,000 Black residents during that time.

Historically, "community" in this region has been defined mostly by geography. Neighborhood identities are strong here, so where one neighborhood or municipality ends and another begins is not lost on civic leaders, elected officials, community planners, or others who shape the region's community support infrastructure. While some of these "geographic communities" collaborate more than others, vital philanthropic and government support often flows toward *places*. So what does this mean for communities that are defined less by geography and more by social identity?

"Communities have been self-identifying for millennia," Heffley said, noting that many of Pittsburgh's neighborhood boundaries were shaped by redlining. "Communities can be place-based, but can also transcend place. The Shiftworks approach is to ask communities how they self-identify. We never want to assume how an individual self-identifies, so we ask communities, How do you define yourself, and then how can we support that?"

While Mims's project furthered Steel Smiling's long-standing conversations on this topic, Abegunde said that affinity programming is of equal importance to communities that aren't Black, such as immigrants and people with mobility challenges.

> "When cities think about how to make themselves healthy for all, then they'll think about all of the dimensions of culture that are here, and will seek to support all of them. When we acknowledge all of the parts of our communities, then that's how our communities feel more whole, and feel more respected and better taken care of."

Mims summed up their experiences this way: "Community work is a delicate thing. It's people, it's humans, it's culture, it's all of these things."

You're not alone

Even though most of the *Black Queer Affinity* events were ephemeral, the impacts can be long-lasting. "Queerness was not part of Steel's past practices," Abegunde said, adding that it is now, and will continue to be. Stating that Steel Smiling has a "tremendous responsibility" to understand and communicate what mental health for Black residents looks like, she said, "We can't do just one thing and expect that to satisfy 160,000 people. No, we have to do all the different things, and we have to find the people who have the vision and the desire to meet that need for themselves and their communities. That's what we found with Noa."

For Mims, the value of a project like theirs is partly measured by what people see, express, and commit their time and energy to. The *Black Queer Affinity Series* brought together seventy unique participants, many of whom came to multiple events. Some attended every ceramic workshop Mims offered. "The tone of the last ceramics class was somber, because they knew it was the last one," Mims said. Then Mims described an occurrence, months after the event concluded, when they encountered acquaintances—people who didn't know each other prior to participating in the *Black Queer Affinity Series*—gathered together in someone's kitchen.

> " People were able to come together," Mims said. "For folks who had been isolated for quite some time, it was really refreshing to say, 'I'm not alone with these experiences that I'm facing.' That was a huge success in and of itself: You're not *alone* … you're *isolated*, and that takes active engagement to counteract. That's where the success lies, in breaking down that isolation."

Place Matters

According to "Creating Healthy Communities Through Cross-sector Collaboration," the white paper described in the introduction to this report, there is a high correlation between where someone lives and life expectancy, incidence of chronic conditions, poverty, and socioeconomic mobility. Put another way, it is sometimes said that zip codes matter.

As stated by the authors: "Special patterns of economic stratification and racial segregation are highly correlated with health disparities; public health strategies, if they are to be effective, must address the complex environments of the populations they serve."

If public art strategies are to be effective, then they must address those complex environments, too. For the past decade or more, the Pittsburgh region's hyperactive real estate market has only added to that complexity, and this city has struggled to protect art when properties have changed hands. That includes *Lend Me Your Ears (2003)*, a two-story, two-block-long mural created with extensive community engagement. Occupying a prominent corner in the East Liberty neighborhood were images of Black youth, but following the sale of the building, the mural was erased with gray paint. A new mural created to right this wrong faces side streets and does not include imagery of Black people; instead, it presents the words "*We Rise Together.*" People from the community or elsewhere may find inspiration, or even "see themselves," in this artwork, but in different ways than in *Lend Me Your Ears* or *Frofully Connected*.

And nearby, on the skeleton of a defunct billboard-turned-public art project, artist Alisha Wormsley sent this message: THERE ARE BLACK PEOPLE IN THE FUTURE. Beyond the private property ownership issues that became central to a dispute that led to the removal of the piece, this artwork raised questions about the ownership of public space; namely, who gets to speak and be heard in a zip code that lost 30 percent of its Black population between 2010–20. That this censorship occurred two blocks from painted-over artwork which had asked us to lend our ears, to *listen*, underscores the importance of art's placement within "complex environments."

There is a strong sense that public art, over time, belongs to more than whoever commissioned it, created it, or owns the deed for the land upon which the artwork resides. By intention or accident, public art invariably becomes part of the public realm in ways that can't easily be measured. Created by many hands, art—public art especially—belongs to many people.

Artist Rell Rushin signing *Frofully Connected* "By Rell + the girls of FroGang" tells us a lot about who made it, but doesn't dictate who it's for. It is, of course, for FroGang, from Kelli Shakur to the girls who participate in Successful Sister Sessions, but it's also for those who live nearby, and those merely passing through. We know that the women and girls of FroGang see themselves in the mural today, but we don't know who else might see themselves in it tomorrow.

So, then, who else saw themselves, and their contributions, in these four Public Art and Community (PAC) projects?

In *Let's Eat*, community members saw their words artfully painted and baked into ceramic plates, and heard their statements repeated back to them by professionally-trained and novice actors alike. They tasted variations of their family recipes as prepared by a professional chef.

We Are Windows provided a visual connection between members of neighboring boroughs who were experiencing similar isolation, but also created a place for members to gather with those from their own borough; by enabling them to do more than *see*, they were encouraged to meet and engage in a more immediate way.

The *Black Queer Affinity Series* transcended geography by bringing Black Queer individuals from across a county of 1.25 million people face to face. The art was mostly made from *moments*, in which participants could see themselves in others, and be seen by those with whom they share an affinity.

These projects had many other notable outcomes in common. Starting with Placemaking Academy and continuing throughout the two-year processes, participants developed a common understanding of terms like "placemaking," "placekeeping," "civic engagement," and many others. Establishing a *shared language* was essential to everything that followed, and is part of the educational foundation of good community development practices. For communities, questions about what public art *is* turned into questions about what it *can be*. Artists, meanwhile, learned about how community organizations operate and engage their constituents, and how to incorporate many additional hands into their work.

True creativity doesn't come from being able to do anything, anytime, anywhere, or at any cost—but from constraints. Pragmatic limitations challenged both artists and communities. Project budgets, for example, were not limited to the cost of materials, financial compensation for artists, or stipends for those (like the FroGang girls) who devoted their time, energy and creativity to the projects, but also the unanticipated costs associated with supply chains, security, and bureaucracy. An artist aligning their work to their community partner's mission is another constraint, but also an opportunity. The result was the growth of artists and the enrichment of organizational missions.

Public art intended to be temporary from the outset can be bittersweet. Its lack of permanence enhances its value while it lasts, be it years or hours. But because temporary public art is less expensive to create and maintain than something that needs to survive the elements for decades, money and resources can be directed elsewhere, like community engagement. Temporary art can also be relocated more easily, should the need arise. Yet temporary public art has no less of a responsibility to engage communities in meaningful ways. The Public Art and Communities

program provides a model for anything in the built environment that affects how the public realm could be treated, including much more *permanent* things like architecture, riverfront access, public parks and plazas, even infrastructure.

According to the authors of the white paper, one way to bring about change is to "stimulate upstream [root cause] interventions—aimed at systems, cultures, and policies—that reduce barriers to health and well-being." Of the various methods that the authors present to accomplish this, one stands out:

> "Make ordinary moments extraordinary: Aesthetic experiences are fundamental to human meaning-making and identity formation. They can shift perspectives and generate shared meanings that motivate and transform individual and collective behaviors."

In each PAC project, we find the ordinary—recipes, hair, windows, gathering—made extraordinary. Launched during the greatest health crisis in a century, PAC shifted collective and individual perspectives by directly confronting upstream causes of persistent racism, stigmatization, and social isolation. PAC's final artworks will be temporary, but the aesthetic experiences produced by them, and the processes that created them, will endure.

Acknowledgments

The Public Art and Communities program came about through the passion, dedication, and perseverance of a truly inspiring group of people. What follows is a list of the partnership teams and project partners without whom none of this work would have been possible. Although it is impossible to list the hundreds of individuals who participated, ideated, and co-created in the experience of this process and these artworks, we remain both humbled and grateful for all of the many hands who contributed to this program.

We are particularly thankful for the energy, enthusiasm, and support of the program's four partnership teams. In a process that began during a global pandemic, they were willing to meet one another and build trust in an exclusively online forum for over the first full year of the program. Throughout the program's three-year run, the entire cohort met bimonthly fourteen times to share successes, workshop setbacks, and support one another.

During the last year of the program, we were able to hold three of these cohort meetings in person. It was deeply moving to see us all gathered together in real time and space to discuss each team's individual in-person community work and build on the many months of digital collaboration that ultimately led to four truly transformative artworks. Although these artworks represent an endpoint to an incredible, years-long process, we also hope they are but a starting point for many more community conversations and collaborations in the years to come.

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Kelli Shakur, FroGang

FroGang Girls: **Alexionna, Amora, Angel Rose, Auvai, Destiny, Donè, Havenli, Makenzie, Nakala, Naudia, Samaudi,** and **Toryana**

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Aviva Kapust, Village of Arts & Humanities

Njaimeh Njie, artist

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All photographs by Ishara Henry, Visuals by Ishara, with the exception of images on pages 24, 25, 28, and 29, which are by Rell Rushin, courtesy artist.

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Public Art and Communities Symposium:

Creative Placemaking to Address Community Public Health

October 22–23, 2020

As part of the Public Art and Communities program's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Shiftworks and Neighborhood Allies hosted a two-day online symposium. The PAC Symposium featured national and local speakers who have been engaged in creative placemaking projects that support public health needs within communities across the country, and whose work demonstrates the value of cross-sector collaborations between arts and culture, public health, and community development.

The symposium was created to provide artists, community members, and organizations the opportunity to see how their peers are working to develop such partnerships and to address serious issues that affect the public at large.

Speakers for the first day of the symposium included Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD, coauthor of *Creating Healthy Communities through Cross Sector Collaborations: Public Health, Community Development, and the Arts,* and current Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts; **Michael Rohd and Rebecca Martinez** from the Center for Performance and Civic Practice; **Joseph Claunch, Zuni Youth** Enrichment Project; and **Aviva Kapust and Faith Bartley**, Village of Arts & Humanities and the People's Paper Co-op. The day concluded with a panel moderated by Shaunda McDill, former program officer for arts and culture at The Heinz Endowments.

Speakers for the second day of the symposium included **Alisha Wormsley, Jessica Moss, and Naomi Chambers** of Sibyls Shrine; **Deborah Reed, PhD**, Farm Dinner Theater; **Edith Abeyta** of Arts Excursions Unlimited along with **Hanna Beightley** from Women for Healthy Environment, **Joy Cannon** from Center of Life, and **Matt Dean** from New Voices for Reproductive Justice; and Los Angeles-based artist **Anu Yadav with Shannon Scrofano**. The day concluded with a panel featuring Pittsburgh-based artists **Njaimeh Njie, John Peña, and Molly Rice**.

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