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# Old Furnace artist residency: Art is a conjunction

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Old Furnace Artist Residency

Jon Henry

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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**Abstract**

*Old Furnace Artist Residency* is an ongoing body of work that encompasses a long-term art project that relies upon social aesthetics. This project weaves together social sculpture, relational aesthetics, intervention, gesture, performance, community art, and participation art to create a praxis of social justice and art. The underlying principles of the project are rooted in feminist and queer theories of activism that focus on enacting social, political, and economic liberation. Thus, *Old Furnace Artist Residency* focuses on using art as a tool to weave people together.

## **Intro**

*Old Furnace Artist Residency (OFAR)* launched in the fall of 2013 as a free artist residency program in Harrisonburg, Virginia. It rapidly evolved into an entity that describes, archives, and authorizes my general art practices, life, and research while also serving as a project incubator. As I will explain later in this text, *OFAR* has extended into other formal projects including *Tomāto Project*, *Advancing the Frontiers of Artist Residencies*, *SLAG Mag*, and *Goüche*. *OFAR* becomes a tool within my practice, reverberating between various forms, concepts, and traditions based upon the timely usefulness of said categories. *OFAR* is typically classified as socially engaged art or social sculpture when I apply for grants, exhibitions, and academic reviews. The project's multiple components and projects, as well as the incorporation of other artists, has invited comparison to other arts organizations such as The Bridge: Progressive Arts Initiative, Elsewhere Museum, or the US Department of Arts & Culture. While *OFAR* relies heavily on traditional components of arts management such as communication logistics, scheduling, and grant writing, this work exists within the realm of my artistic vision and curation as I work to develop a project that cultivates many different perspectives and applications of social justice-focused art.

The emphasis on hope for transformation via art stems from my academic and artistic training through New York University's Masters program in Arts Politics. The program focused upon the symbiosis between the arts and politics and how they inform, impact, and influence each other. This reliance on hope insists that I have faith that my art practices might lead to a new experience of the world. While the work may not change

the world in readily apparent ways, it *can* help nudge people towards change and shift social expectations. Jose Esteban Munoz remarks, “hope as a critical methodology can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision.”<sup>1</sup> *OFAR* becomes the enactment of a future vision that is built upon the historical practices and experiences of the community in which it exists. *OFAR* represents a culmination of hope. It initially began as my own dream to create a non-oppressive society through art. Pessimistic critics may dismiss hope as naïve, immature, or unsuccessful. Yet the extensive scholarship of Rebecca Solnit highlights the deep impact that hope delivers to communities and individuals. Solnit dismisses an easy read of hope:

Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal... To hope is to give yourself to the future - and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable.<sup>2</sup>

Solnit’s ‘axe’ is made apparent through *OFAR*’s involvement in local political activities including opposing the construction of a new jail in Harrisonburg and spotlighting rural queer exodus and immigrant deportation. Additionally, *OFAR* helped to develop the cultural content, advice, and programs related to the local organizations Southerners On New Ground and Virginia Organizing. This text will examine the theoretical framework underpinning both *OFAR* and, consequently, my own art practice. I will examine the

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<sup>1</sup> Munoz, Jose Esteban (2009-11-01). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Sexual Cultures) (Kindle Locations 186-187). NYU Press short. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *Hope In The Dark*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016. 4. Print.

various extensions of *OFAR* and highlight its underlying epistemology. Finally, I will end with an evaluation and critique of *OFAR*.

My passion for *OFAR* is ignited by my ongoing research into the intersections of art, activism, and queer liberation. The overall framework of *OFAR* initially existed to provide free housing to artists engaged in social justice work in order to nudge communities, individuals, and art activists like myself to center leftist conceptions of liberation. *OFAR* does not charge residents money, but instead asks residents to donate art or artifacts from their stay that can be exhibited; so far the collection includes mail art, paintings, clothing, hair samples, collages, and printed poems. My hope is that one-day the entire collection will be on display within large cultural institutions; thus, an *OFAR* exhibition can enter traditional gallery spaces, acquire honorariums, and create credential lines and exposure for participating artists and *OFAR*.

Each artist's stay is unique owing to personality, art form, season, and other circumstances of time and space. Concurrent with resident visits, *OFAR* hosts a variety of public programs in my home space, including game nights, movie nights, and potlucks in order to foster an audience base and sense of community. These events require low infrastructure investment but yield a high impact of social connections through their accessibility, novelty, and appearance as seemingly normal communal events. Consequently, the residency adapts to the artists and their work as well as to the interaction with the participating guests.

Initially, *OFAR* was conceived as a project in the social aesthetics genre, more commonly referred to as Socially Engaged Arts (SEA). However, my own classification for the project has shifted towards the less contemporary<sup>3</sup> classification of “social sculpture” based upon deeper exposure to Joseph Beuys. SEA is a loose term that encompasses a variety of practices that center around social interaction, justice, community organizing, and audience engagement. Critic Claire Bishop’s definition best captures the ambiguity of the field and its loose identity:

This expanded field of post-studio practices currently goes under a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice.<sup>4</sup>

The pedagogical reviews of SEA, and therefore of my project, are not always positive as some respond to it as an exaggerated form of administrative labor disguised as arts management. However, SEA can be seen in a variety of other well-received artists’ projects, like *Mildred’s Lane* by Mark Dion & Morgan J Puett, *Project Row House* by Rick Lowe, *Open Engagement Conference* by Jen Delos Rays, or *A Lot* by Anna Lise Jensen.

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<sup>3</sup> The visiting critic for the fall 2014 End of Semester Review, Laura Roulet, encouraged me to be more contemporary in citing my theoretical baseline for *OFAR*. Roulet is the Curator of Contemporary American and Latin American Art at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. Coincidentally, the previous End of Semester Review session provided an abundance of criticism for the lack of historical frameworks for socially engaged art. I highlight this encounter to illustrate the dualisms and competing feedback that artists receive.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop, Claire (2012-07-24). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Kindle Locations 54-56). Verso Books. Kindle Edition.



*Mildred's Lane* is a 94-acre site deep in the woods of rural northeastern Pennsylvania; it focuses on coevolving new pedagogical strategies by practicing a generous and rigorous engagement with every aspect of life. The research on engagement centers on notions of domesticity by:

Embrace[ing] every aspect of our collective existence through rethinking new modes of being in the world — evoking a creative, social, and political entanglement that provokes investigations into: 1) our relations to people and to the environment, 2) systems of labor, 3) forms of dwelling, 4) clothing apparatuses, and importantly, 5) inventive domesticating -- all of which compose an ethics of comportment. Here we embrace this working-living-researching-making strategy we call *workstyles*. Being is the practice.<sup>5</sup>

The project has a variety of components but it is most active in the summer when it hosts specific workshop-based residencies such as *Book & Bread*, *Walking, Talking & Social Practice*, and *Experience Economies: Landscape Experience*. Additionally, *Mildred's Lane* runs a public gallery in the local town, hosts weekly dinner parties, and organizes lectures and exhibitions.

While *Mildred's Lane* focuses on reworking pedagogical models, *Project Row House* focuses art's ability to literally build community and thwart gentrification. It is a collection of shotgun houses in Houston managed by Rick Lowe. Originally, the houses were fairly run down but Lowe orchestrated a community renovation project with other artists, designers, and architects so the homes could be refurbished as attractive,

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<sup>5</sup> "Mildred's Lane." *J Morgan Puett*. N.p., 2015. Web. 06 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.jmorganpuett.com/mildreds-lane/>>.

affordable housing. Currently, *Project Row House* hosts residencies, workshops, exhibitions, and health clinics in some of the homes for surrounding community members. Curator and critic Nato Thompson writes, “Over the course of 15 years, Lowe has slowly developed an artist residency and resource program that has inspired the neighborhood to converse with visiting artists, and vice versa.”<sup>6</sup> The project has provided much-needed cultural and institutional support for the community through a bottom up approach that remains aware of the intersections of race and class. Importantly, the project has served as a progenitor of other projects like *1415* by Theaster Gates’s Rebuild Foundation in St. Louis.

Similar to *Project Row House*’s activation of community spaces, *A Lot* by Anna Lise Jensen began when she turned her apartment “into an artist space (“WinterSpace”), invited seven artists to make work about the view of a community garden, and organized a series of conversations.”<sup>7</sup> One example of an artist’s engagement with the garden is Alyssa Casey’s use of the plants to make handmade paper. *A Lot* also hosted community picnics with food foraged from the garden. The project culminated with a large-scale archival exhibition featuring the garden-inspired art, video interviews with gardeners, and photo documentation of the various happenings at the garden.

Typically, SEA relates to social, political, economic, and justice issues like immigration, gentrification, and police violence; it is important to note that many of these projects rely

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson, Nato. "Socially Engaged Art Is a Mess Worth Making." *READING*. SpontaneousInterventions: Design Actions for the Common Good, Aug. 2012. Web. 23 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.spontaneousinterventions.org/reading/socially-engaged-artist-a-mess-worth-making>>.

<sup>7</sup> Jensen, Anna Lise. "A Lot, Community Gardens, 2009+." *Spaceallover*. N.p., 2014. Web. 06 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.spaceallover.org/a-lot-community-gardens-2009-1>>.

upon numerous individuals and their engagement to create, activate, and disperse the work. Pablo Helguera notes that SEA has a strong relationship to transdisciplinary modality:

[SEA] functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines.<sup>8</sup>

These cross-disciplinary connections have created various critiques that the art is not Art but instead a form of social work, community organizing, or museum education. This critique is heightened by the lack of object production that defines traditional forms of art like painting and sculpture.

*Old Furnace Artist Residency* builds upon these modes of art-making and expands their contradictions, complications, and complexities with the additional layer of a queer perspective. The intricacies of competing ideas, stories, archives, and histories require a long, sustained, and participatory viewing from the audience and allow for a more expansive engagement with the work. Through intentional curating, thematic focus, and outreach OFAR relates the specific projects at hand to the discursive injustices facing our globalized, urbanized, digitized, and neo-liberalized world.

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<sup>8</sup> Helguera, Pablo (2012-01-07). *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (Kindle Locations 150-152). Jorge Pinto Books Inc.. Kindle Edition.

## Conceptual Background

Theory and art history are the building blocks of my practice; I have been interested in theory to the point that I devote more time reading than traditional notions of making or studio time. While I reject the notion of creative genius and originality, I hope to ‘stand upon the shoulders of giants’ to engage in larger cultural conversations and to explore how art can serve as the tool to embody contemporary theories. Spending time buried in books, grappling with critical theories and exploring art exhibits connects my body and mind to others and enlivens my understanding of myself in a post-modern sense. This foundational focus is heightened by my transdisciplinary education and degrees in International Studies: World Politics & Diplomacy, Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies, as well as Art & Public Policy, and consequently, theoretical underpinnings become the foundation for many of my projects and activities. An example is that my imagining of *OFAR* was influenced Joseph Beuys’ notion of social sculpture and the transformative powers of art that he articulated.

In Beuys’ work, the roles of educator, politician, mystic, alchemist, and craftsman converged into a coherent art praxis. He was particularly cognizant of the lingering affective traumas of WWII on his home country, Germany, and Western society more broadly. Beuys was invested in the transformative affect of art and paid attention to issues of environmentalism within his practice; seeing the importance of building a healthy sustainable ecology. This ecology would allow for spiritual rejuvenation and liberal transformation following the turmoil, horror, and destruction. Shelley Sacks notes

that Beuys focused on “facilitating perceptual thought and connectedness as the basis for an ecological society, and opening up ‘space for new vision’ and attitudinal change.”<sup>9</sup> Beuys focused on developing large ecological transformations of the human condition and the environment. This trajectory is most apparent in his project *7000 Oaks*, coupled with his co-founding of Germany’s Green Party as these projects sought to politically and practically resolve ecological issues. Art became the catalyst and authorization for serious meditation, rejuvenation, and reinvention in these traumatized spaces.

Many look at Beuys’ works as separate units and disassociate his object-based work, like *Capri Battery*, from his more collaborative and performative pieces like *America Likes Me* and *The Free International University*. Yet Sacks emphasizes that “discussion, dialogue and the conversational form are so integral to Beuys’ work that he highlights this in the term ‘Parallelprozess’ (parallel process).”<sup>10</sup> Beuys’ parallel process is the connection and feedback loops created between his object-based works, actions, and discussion-process works. Thus, any attempt to isolate his projects from one another results in diminishing the involvedness, affect, and histories of Beuys’ work. This feedback cycle, or Parallelprozess, is a key modality of *OFAR*.

I have centered on collaboration and social interaction but have also worked to develop objects—usually using glitter<sup>11</sup>—that have significant formative relationships to the social pieces, serving almost as the totems or detritus of them.

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<sup>9</sup> Beuys, Joseph; Harlan, Volker (2012-12-04). *What is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys* (Kindle Locations 82-83). Clairview Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Beuys, Joseph; Harlan, Volker (2012-12-04). *What is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys* (Kindle Locations 159-161). Clairview Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Within my object-based practice, glitter has become a material symbol to reference my interest in queerness along with the desire for spreading—or infecting—notions of queerness into social spaces.

I also consider this “parallel process” to be part of my queer complex modality that is formulated via Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas of *assemblage*, *becoming*, and *rhizome*. Deleuze and Guattari purposely define assemblages ambiguously as “any number of ‘things’ or pieces of ‘things’ gathered into a single context.”<sup>12</sup> For *OFAR*, a variety of “things” are gathered into its purview such as *SLAG Mag*, my house, residents, public exhibitions, publications, conference presentations, tomatoes, glitter, and more. *OFAR* prioritizes housing and supporting the activation of social justice issues in the surrounding landscapes. Again, this activation of an affect relates to assemblages because they can bring about any number of “effects—esthetic, mechanic, productive, destructive, consumptive, etc.”<sup>13</sup> *OFAR* operates across a wider span of time without a presumed end date.<sup>14</sup> Within this loose affiliation, notions of *becoming-* arise due to the assemblages’ movement:

Becoming- is a process of change, flight, or movement within an assemblage. Rather than conceive of the pieces of an assemblage as an organic whole, within which the specific elements are held in place by the organization of a unity, the process of "becoming-" serves to account for relationships between the "discrete" elements of the assemblage. In "becoming-" one piece of the assemblage is drawn

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<sup>12</sup> "Glossary." *Glossary*. Rhizome, Fall 2002. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue5/poke/glossary.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> "Glossary." *Glossary*. Rhizome, Fall 2002. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue5/poke/glossary.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> Initially, I had defined *OFAR*’s end date as summer 2016 because I could not guarantee its continuation after matriculation from James Madison University’s Master of Fine Arts program. Yet, I aspire to translate the project into my post-graduate life.

into the territory of another piece, changing its value as an element and bringing about a new unity.<sup>15</sup>

Within the *OFAR* assemblage, this “becoming-” relates to my scholarship made manifest in the works *Exchanging Pleasantries*, *Pi Theory by Zander Toefl*, *T.A.Z.*, *Tomāto Project*, and *CommuniTEA*. These various activities act with each other to formulate a larger vision of liberation and its various projects.

I say ‘author’ versus ‘director’ to distinguish *OFAR*’s more collaborative and democratic socialist efforts. These projects become documented, exhibited, and shared through each other and in conversation with each other; full documentation is difficult because of the intersections between the projects. For example, the *Tomāto Project* sponsored a *SLAG Mag* issue curated on the theme of tomatoes and this issue was later exhibited in a retrospective on *OFAR*. This multi-faceted production, formation, creation, and deployment allows for an exhaustive excavation, examination, and execution of various research, aesthetic, philosophical, and personal topics. These formations and connections can be re-contextualized again via Deleuze through his notion of the rhizome: “rhizomes ceaselessly establish connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.”<sup>16</sup> *OFAR* acts as a central orbital point or relative space-time weight within this formation.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue5/poke/glossary.html>

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Print.

Tania Bruguera's projects, such as *Immigrant Movement International* and *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (Behavior Art Department), inform my practice at OFAR.. In his work, Bruguera carved out space, intervened in traditional institutional systems, fostered community, and proffered public platforms to artists and activist. These actions are things that I aspire to in my own work. For example, *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* focused on turning pedagogy into a work, resonating with Beuys' 1969 statement that "to be a teacher is my greatest work of art."<sup>17</sup> Bruguera describes the Behavior Art Department as a space that invites deep learning and again, the notion of transformation arises through the formation of art:

*Cátedra Arte de Conducta* emerged like a piece of public art intended to create a space of alternative training to the system of art studies in contemporary Cuban society. It is a Long Term Intervention focused in the discussion and analysis of sociopolitical behavior and the understanding of art as an instrument for the transformation of ideology through the activation of civic action on its environment.<sup>18</sup>

Critic Claire Bishop visited the project to investigate its claim of 'art-ness' in her contentious book "*Artificial Hells*," which attacks, holds accountable, and analyzes the rise of socially engaged art. Bishop remains firm in addressing, "why *Arte de Conducta* reads to be called a work of art, rather than simply an educational project that Bruguera undertook in her home city." She suggests that this declaration is partly on

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<sup>17</sup> Beuys, interviewed by Willoughby Sharp, *Artforum*, November 1969, reprinted in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966- 72*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> Bruguera, Tania. "Cátedra Arte De Conducta." *TANIA BRUGUERA*. N.p., 2009. Web. 1 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/492-0-Ctedra+Arte+de+Conducta+Behavior+Art+School.htm>>.



Bruguera's authorial identity as an artist, but more poignantly explains that the project is an embodiment of Bruguera's notion of 'useful art' (*arte útil*). In other words, this is art that is both symbolic and useful, refuting the traditional Western assumption that art is useless or without function."<sup>19</sup> Bishop goes onto to explain that this aesthetic or concept of *arte útil* "allows us to view *Arte de Conducta* as inscribed within an ongoing practice that straddles the domains of art and social utility."<sup>20</sup> A Virginia-based group, *Floating Lab Collective*, reframes this notion of useful art as "Art as Authorization" that allows for subversive production. Art becomes the excuse or justification for action,<sup>21</sup> and the gestures have a direct affect on social reality as they engage, highlight, and complicate notions and formations of civil liberties and cultural politics.

Queerness was my entry point into activism and queer theory a backdoor entry into comprehending critical theory, media studies, and art history. It is important to emphasize the queer nature of the *OFAR* assemblage because of it centers queer pride and liberation against the pervasiveness of heterosexism in the (art) world. Queerness is a central component of *OFAR* and this becomes evident in the content, focus, and energy of its political activities, residents, programs, and exhibitions. This strong prominence related deeply to my earlier political engagement<sup>22</sup>, since prior to my MFA tenure, I co-founded the University of Richmond's Student Alliance for Sexual Diversity (SASD). With SASD

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<sup>19</sup> Bishop, Claire. "Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship," Chapter 9 - 'Pedagogic Projects: 'How do you bring a classroom to life as if it were a work of art?,' I. *Arte de Conducta*, Ed. Verso. July 17, 2012. Brooklyn, New York, United States (illust.) pp. 241-250

<sup>20</sup> Bishop, Claire (2012-07-24). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Kindle Locations 4895-4896). Verso Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>21</sup> "Concepts." *Floating Lab Collective*. George Mason University, n.d. Web. 01 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.floatinglabcollective.com/#!/concepts/c2vm>>.

<sup>22</sup> Clay, Kevin. "Meet 2011's Out.Spoken. Richmonder Of The Year." *GayRVA*. RVA Mag, 1 June 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.gayrva.com/2011/06/01/meet-2011s-out-spoken-richmonder-of-the-year/>>.

I envisioned a queering of the university so that it might become the principal example of a queer-friendly and inclusive university among higher education institutions. Consequently, my activism brought me into the orbit of other queer organizations like Human Rights Campaign, Trevor Project, Equality Virginia, Gay Fathers of Richmond, Mothers & Others, Gay Community of Richmond, Get Equal, Southerners On New Ground, and Against Equality. Moreover, SASD augmented its political activities with cultural programming to foster a greater sense of community. These events introduced me to queer artists, arts organizers, and art organizations like Visual AIDS, Justin Credible, AIDS Memorial Quilt, Ryan Conrad, Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay & Lesbian Art, Sonya Renee Taylor, Fire Island Artist Residency, Joan Synder, Andrea Gibson, and a plethora of drag performers.

A queer emphasis is needed, as articulated by theorist Jasbir Puar, because our times require stranger, multifaceted modalities of thought, analysis, creativity, and expression.<sup>23</sup> Puar's queered notion of assemblage highlights the fact that the components become interwoven as opposed to simply intersecting. This distinction is important within the neoliberalism paradigm because the intersectional frameworks of identity imply components such as race, material, class, audience, etc., actually become reassembled via capitalism. It can instead be assumed that this framework remains attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherence, and

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<sup>23</sup> Puar, Jasbir. "Queer Time Queer Assemblage." *SOCIAL TEXT* 23.3-4 (2005): n. pag. *Jasbir Puar*. Duke University Press, Fall 2005. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.jasbirpuar.com/assets/Queer-Times-Queer-Assemblages.pdf>>.

permanence.<sup>24</sup> This attunement, according to Puar, is important because it allows us to become more aware of intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities.<sup>25</sup>

I uplifted queer work via *SLAG MAG: SoHo*, an issue curated to focus on queer Southern artists, co-organizing WE ARE HERE with Southerners On New Ground, and specifically hosting queer artists and activists like Amanda Hunt, Gregory Hatch, Catron Booker, Hermelinda Cortes, and others. This queer focus has resulted in new pedagogical engagements like the forthcoming presentation “Queering Socially Engage Art – A Kiki” at the 2016 Open Engagement Conference in Oakland, California. What is more, *OFAR* has co-organized a variety of queer events in Harrisonburg including a community potluck with the Shenandoah Valley Gay & Lesbian Association, Shenandoah Valley Pride Festival, and Beers & Queers.

When I have been questioned whether OFAR’s identification is as art, activism, an institution, or other, I was prepared to defend the project’s identification as art. Yet, I realized over time I also needed to defend the project’s identity in these other categories due to its loose nature. Nato Thompson touches upon similar identification problems in Jeremy Deller’s project *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*. Activist friends failed

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<sup>24</sup> Puar, Jasbir. "Queer Time Queer Assemblage." *SOCIAL TEXT* 23.3-4 (2005): n. pag. *Jasbir Puar*. Duke University Press, Fall 2005. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.jasbirpuar.com/assets/Queer-Times-Queer-Assemblages.pdf>>. 127-128

<sup>25</sup> Puar, Jasbir. "Queer Time Queer Assemblage." *SOCIAL TEXT* 23.3-4 (2005): n. pag. *Jasbir Puar*. Duke University Press, Fall 2005. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.jasbirpuar.com/assets/Queer-Times-Queer-Assemblages.pdf>>. 128

to see the work as activism, while art critics failed to see it as art.<sup>26</sup> Thompson's reiteration of political art's ability to occupy another zone of identification reawakened in me a desire to disregard identifying classifications. I realized I had forsaken the radical politics of queerness by becoming obsessed with identity. Shon Faye eloquently outlines the importance, politics, and process of this queerness: "Queer[ness] is about rejecting the entire process of labeling itself."<sup>27</sup> The queerness becomes a rejection of certainty and becomes a campy embrace of the confused, radical, and convoluted in order to dream up a larger, newer, more liberated idea.

### **Pushback**

During my time at James Madison University (JMU), I have experienced varied forms of irrational, uncritical, and homophobic pushback related to OFAR and my practice. Initially, I thought to avoid and dismiss these questions, but I have come to realize they are important to the evolution of my practice. I began to recognize that much of my self-motivations, professional orientation, studio practice, and research were a result of the sometimes hostile and homophobic challenges, to my socially engaged and queer-motivated work. I found myself delving deeper into the history of SEA as a means of discovering catharsis and empowerment and discovered that others, including Nato Thompson, have mapped out full histories of SEA; their texts provide the historical framework for the recent developments of socially engaged practice that establish it as a legitimate art form. Still, I began to resist discussions of my project's "artiness" since this

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<sup>26</sup> Thompson, Nato. "Seeing Power." Art and Activism: A Conversation with Nato Thompson. Minor Hall, UVA, Charlottesville, VA. 16 Mar. 2016. Lecture.

<sup>27</sup> Faye, Shon. "What Does It Mean to Be Queer?" *YouTube*. Novara Media, 13 Mar. 2016. Web. 20 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDO2-sNF2s4>>.

process of naming and contextualizing relates to the ever-exploitive pervasiveness of neoliberalism in contemporary culture that demands knowing and naming, and thus stabilizing identity across space and time.

Much of the anxiety around the artistic status of SEA relates to the development and abandonment of traditional studio practice and gallery exhibition models. This is especially true as direct studio production dwindles; John Kelsey addresses this issue poignantly:

For most artists today, the laptop and phone have already supplanted the studio as primary sites of production. Early signs of this shift were evident in what became known as relational aesthetics, which, in retrospect, seems wrongly defined as a practice in which communal experience became the medium. It is more properly understood, rather, as a capitalist-realist adaptation of art to the experience economy, obviously, but also to the new productive imperative to go mobile, as a body and a practice. In other words, community declared itself a medium at the very moment that it was laying itself open to displacements it could never survive.<sup>28</sup>

This shift from the studio to the communal or performative rekindles general anxiety towards the consuming appropriation of capitalism also illustrated in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. These practices build upon elements of traditional practices but focus on developing innovations that might resist object based economies. Debord reminds us that the spectacle becomes all-consuming; consequently, how can one develop

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<sup>28</sup> Kelsey, John. "Next-Level Spleen." *Discover Blog*. Dis Magazine, 14 Oct. 2012. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://dismagazine.com/blog/37146/next-level-spleen-by-john-kelsey/>>.

a sustainable practice that withstands assimilation? Habitually, I have to reassert that *OFAR* is an attempt to remain outside of categorization and traditional practice by opposing normalizing modalities. In many ways, this conversation of the field's "artiness" reroutes the many tired and dismissed notions put forward by Clement Greenberg regarding high versus low art.<sup>29</sup> The political and social potentials of low art—especially its importance to queer communities and other marginalized peoples—is well demonstrated in Jack Habersham's *Queer Art of Failure*.

Furthermore, contemporary artists operate in post-Beuysian and post-Duchampian paradigms in which *everyone* and *everything* can be art. Consequently, I am interested in adopting Bruguera's notion of the *arte útil* and imagining how we might return the urinal back to the restroom.<sup>30</sup> This notion of useful art can further be explained by the development of a praxis that entangles, or weaves together, our modalities into a transformative political force.

When I began JMU's MFA program, I joined a variety of groups at the university such as the LGBT Faculty & Staff Group and Madison Equality and volunteered for a variety of the art school's programs. These engagements helped to situate myself within the community. I hoped to act within my institutional setting as an agent of change and to develop solidarity with others. I had hoped that possibly, some of these folks might participate in *OFAR*'s work. However, I found that these institutional connections drew a lot out of my practice and shifted my energies. There was not equitable feedback from the

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<sup>29</sup> Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *Partisan Review*. 6:5 (1939) 34-49.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.seismopolite.com/on-the-fallacies-of-useful-art-tania-brugueras-immigrant-movement-international>

institution for my own praxis. Consequently, disengagement with the university system developed and has been an unresolved component of my own praxis' development. Though the disengagement may have initially begun due to issues of time, schedule, and workload, it became a strategic consideration as I questioned the "usefulness" of these various engagements. I am captivated by the anti-hero Kevin Flynn in *Tron Legacy* who encourages his son to not fight the antagonist because the "only way to win the game is not to play."<sup>31</sup> I initially saw this as an important motivation for *OFAR* to not engage in various conversations and institutional dramas around patronage, power, and profit. Yet I realized that there must be a strategic flirting with these systems due to my own place within them. Furthermore, I found that some degree of institutional participation was needed for the continuation, support, and visibility of *OFAR*'s work. Importantly, I realized that institutions control basic infrastructures such as gallery spaces, meeting spaces, and channels of monetary support. My relationship with JMU became more of an opportunity to re-appropriate university centered resources, such as money, towards larger community engagements. I began to wonder how artists and activists might take from the institution for our own good, while limiting the institution's ability to absorb, subvert, and inoculate work. Furthermore, an ethical dilemma arises as the institution includes formations of various personal relationships, lively hoods, and support systems like health centers. How could I then work to empower a larger communal vision while not directly attacking or subverting friendships, colleagues, and mentors?

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<sup>31</sup> *Tron Legacy*. Dir. Joseph Kosinski. Perf. Jeff Bridges. WaltDisney, 2010. Film.

A prime example of this strategic re-engagement was the large-scale presentation of the socially engaged project *Performing Statistics* by Mark Strandquist. *OFAR* co-hosted, co-organized, and co-curated a majority of Strandquist's presentations and engagements. *Performing Statistics* appeared in four gallery exhibitions across Harrisonburg, including two exhibitions at JMU and one at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). The other exhibition occurred in Downtown Harrisonburg at the Laughing Dog Gallery. The original desire to present this exhibition occurred during intensive strategy organizing through my local political involvement with the collectives Better Together and Building Better Communities who stood in opposition to the construction of a new regional jail. I initially hoped to present the work without connection to JMU, yet the quantity of art required large spaces and our groups lacked financial resources. Furthermore, the project's components required the presence of "experts" to validate the work in the eyes of the wider community, even though this was rearticulating our previous conversations, presentations, and ideas without the voice coming from activists.

During spring 2015, I worked with a cohort of local organizers through Better Together to develop a successful campaign to prevent the building of a new jail. A component of this work focused on building a support base within the local community while also developing a cultural connection to our visions of justice. I was already familiar with Strandquist's work and hoped to include it in our campaign. Yet the size of his work and transportation costs prevented our no-resource alliance from bringing the exhibition to Harrisonburg. I realized that we needed to reach out to established institutions to get funding and exhibition spaces for *Performing Statistics*. Funding was greatly needed to



help cover the costs of presenting the art, along with paying Strandquist for his labor. As with most of *OFAR*'s visiting artists, I insist on finding some forms of funding for artists because I believe they should not work for free. Strandquist's visit afforded him honorariums from JMU and EMU along with gallery support that underwrote exhibition costs for places like Laughing Dog Gallery. In addition to financial resources, engagement with these universities lent credibility to the artist and his work. For example, the "Youth, Art and Justice: Ethics, Engagement and Action" panel from the exhibition series repeated much of the data, information, and ideas that local organizers had submitted during the course of the preceding anti-jail campaign. Yet, the appearance of these sentiments in an institutional setting elevated the credibility and persuasiveness of the message. This seems to be a constant issue when bringing in consultants: they repeat what local artists and individual community members who lack a platform have already advocated for in the past.

Some might wonder why this is considered 'art' under the auspice of *OFAR* since I didn't directly produce, organize, or fund *Performing Statistics*. Yet, without my/*OFAR*'s initial friendship with Mark Strandquist, community connections, and artistic vision the project would most likely not come to Harrisonburg. Conversely, the project could not come to Harrisonburg without institutional support from James Madison University and the labor of its various directors and faculty. Thus, a catch-22 arises through these various collaborations creating a point of conversation and intrigue.

Instead on engaging in a conversation about the artistic qualifications of *OFAR*, I revert the question and ask “How Is This *Not* Art?” While this revision might undermine my queer notions of identification, it is still a helpful ploy for various systemic projects including grants. This attitude might lack conventional seriousness or rigor, yet it reserves my energy and space for imagination, creation, and contemplation. Furthermore, I am more interested in shifting the rigor away from semantics and toward conversations about the work’s affect, usefulness, application, and process. Jack Halberstam warns fellow academics about academic inflexibility:

Terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy.<sup>32</sup>

As artists, it seems wasteful to concentrate on strict categorization; a messy and playful approach allows for the innovative shifting of paradigms. Thomas Hirshhorn like Tania Bruguera has developed his own interest in the energy or entropy of an art project.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, as a queer person, I worry about the implication of overstepping these supposedly serious categorizations. I find engagement with anti-SEA discourse to be counterproductive, wasteful, fraudulent, and a tactical tool rooted in white supremacy, patriarchal, colonial, and homophobic traditions.<sup>34</sup> Most often, I have found that critics of SEA hold positions of privilege through traditional identity and power constructions.

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure* (Kindle Locations 114-115). Kindle Edition.

<sup>33</sup> "Thomas Hirschhorn." *Art 21*. PBS, 2014. Web. 1 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.art21.org/artists/thomas-hirschhorn>>.

<sup>34</sup> Campbell, Mary Schmidt; Martin, Randy (2011-02-18). *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts* (p. 45). Taylor & Francis. Kindle Edition.

Furthermore, I see socially engaged practices as strongly related to praxis of survival in marginalized communities. I focus on the notion of self-declaration and the notion of empowerment inherent in the creation of a one's own identity. My background in queer theory and activism is the epistemology out of which my thoughts on this subject arise. The influence of queer theory has not been addressed in general discourses concerning SEA.

Though I initially viewed *OFAR* as a SEA work, the longer I have been involved in the work and studied the field, the more I feel compelled to describe *OFAR* as a social sculpture (SS). This re-classification arises from the hope of securing sustaining grants for *OFAR*. Furthermore, this classification is important as a tool to highlight the art history background of the field in the hopes of providing better accessibility to the practice through a more relatable term. It seems like many within SEA forget the political history and relationship of the field to SS. In conversation with other scholars, the term seems to quickly convey my activities without over-complicating the conceptual and literal elements of the work.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the term 'social sculpture' was coined by Beuys to describe his own work and interests in developing art centered on social-political-economic transformation, rejuvenation, and enlightenment:

Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system to build a SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. This most modern art discipline – Social Sculpture/ Social Architecture – will only reach fruition when

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<sup>35</sup> During the *Tomāto Project* exhibition, I used social sculpture as the framing phrase in the exhibition's opening label. I received positive feedback from visitors such as Bridgewater College's Art Department Director, Michael Hough, that this phrase stuck out in their minds and really helped them to better understand the exhibition.

every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, Beuys' notion of social sculpture instills the importance of transdisciplinary practices. The social sculpture retains language connecting to larger conversations, practices, and aesthetics of social practice. The added layer or rebirthing of social sculpture into social practice and/or socially engaged art creates a troubling disconnect or dissolvent of other aesthetics considerations, which add valuable complexities, layers, and connections to the work.

The resulting terminology for socially engaged work varies from artist, critic, audience, and/or curator. Various terms include social aesthetics, socially engaged art, public engagement, social art, and others. As I situate myself in the field I lean toward social sculpture or social aesthetics. The mire of definition, classification, and explanation is important to some extent for pedagogical, critical, and historical purposes. The push toward concrete definitions seems self-defeating when considering the larger *herstory* of art and its rejections of labels as expressed in Queer Theory. I wonder if canonic artists like Picasso or Keith Haring fretted over their exact taxonomy. Furthermore, I am interested in the infusion of queer theory into contemporary practices. This results from personal and political convictions concerning the need for the disappearance of binaries, borders, and boundaries in social spaces and throughout culture more generally. Jose Munoz reminds us that “queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that

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<sup>36</sup> "Joseph Beuys' Quotes & Statements." *Social Sculpture and His Coyote-performance*. Quotes Famous Artists, 2014. Web. 22 Nov. 2014.

allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.”<sup>37</sup> Consequently, I am left desiring a practice, which feels comfortable and looks towards Beuys’ earlier notion of reform, liberation, and rejuvenation. Alan Moore expands upon Beuys’ notion of social sculpture:

[It is] a kind of artwork that takes place in the social realm, an art that requires social engagement, the participation of its audience, for its completion. For Beuys, the concept was infused with both political intention and spiritual values. As spectators became participants he believed, the catalysis of social sculpture would lead to a transformation of society through the release of popular creativity.<sup>38</sup>

This notion of social sculpture aligns with my own hopes for art and its incorporation into life. Again, the act of queering becomes central in my praxis of developing my own SEA.

Hope remains a powerful motivational tool for this work. *OFAR* absorbs infinite attention due to its existence within my own home. Consequently, everything from the act of folding laundry to arranging the contents of my refrigerator is seen through an artistic lens. This perspective was encouraged by my fellowship/residency at *Mildred’s Lane*. *Mildred’s Lane* is perhaps best known for its aesthetically conscious cleaning process called “hooshing.” During a residency at *Mildred’s Lane* in summer 2014, I learned the basics of “*hooshing*” and began to appreciate its attention to detail. I realized that *Mildred’s Lane* entire architecture, landscape layout, and events relied upon “*hooshing*.”

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<sup>37</sup> Munoz, Jose Esteban (2009-11-01). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Sexual Cultures) (Kindle Locations 120-121). NYU Press short. Kindle Edition.

<sup>38</sup> Moore, Alan W. "A Brief Genealogy of Social Sculpture." *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest*, Dec. 2008. Web. 30 Oct. 2014.

it was not just used for table arrangement but for hosting, design of structures, record keeping, etc. The entire compound was intentionally designed using this principle. Even the layout of the road fosters creative energies through those meandering paths in the woods. Art trainings focus so intently on instilling the importance of intentionality. It could also become exhausting to live within this framework that requires such continual perspective, intentionality, political praxis, attention, and engagement. Compromises, spontaneity, and contradictions are sometimes needed to prevent rigidity as evident in the rise of art movements like Fluxism and Dada or the social upheaval of the 1960s.

*The Mildred's Lane* compound is made up of a variety of structures that center around a main house. Many of these structures are the former installations and sculptures from Dion and Puett's career like the *Bee Gaffer's House*. *Mildred's Lane* has received intensive study and praise for its intensive attention to detail and for fostering intradisciplinary collaborations, classes, contexts, and spaces. During my time there, I took a bookmaking class with the owners of Salt & Cedar Press in Detroit. An impressive and extensive number of artists and curators visited the compound during my stay including Jen Delos Reyes of Open Engagement, José Roca, juror of the 52nd Venice Biennial, Paul Bartow, Leon Johnson & Megan O'Connell, co-publishers of Salt & Cedar Press.

While the buildings, aesthetics, conversations, and experiences at the *Lane* were amazing, intensive, and empowering, I could not help but be distracted by the exorbitant costs and fees. Since I was running my own residency, I knew the costs associated with housing, insurance, food, materials, and more. I was staying at the *Lane* on a fellowship and

scholarship, yet others were spending over one thousand dollars a week to live there! A full summer would exceed most MFA programs' tuition costs. Consequently, I became disenchanted with the thought that the ideals, beauty, and intensity of the *Lane* could be translated outside of itself. This rumination was better visualized following a similar luxurious residency at the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. On the exit driveway, someone had erected a sign saying "Entering the Real World." I began to wonder how I might translate the intensive conversation, sense of artistic community, aesthetic focus, and inclusivity to my broader community. While art colonies may not exactly be ivory towers, they traditionally remain unconnected from their surrounding communities without direct input into the local creative ecology.

### **Examination**

Over the past three years, a slippage of identities has occurred between *OFAR* and myself. Over this period, my own work has been labeled generally as *OFAR* while *OFAR* is labeled as Jon Henry's work creating a cycle of identification. Instead of decreasing the confusion and entanglement, I have focused on increasing this convergence and assemblage. The blurring of boundaries and identities is an inherently queer trait, practice, and tradition rooted in the subversion of heterosexual gender binaries and straight time. Categorical confinement is seen throughout the art world; Solnit responds to this issue:

Museums love artists the way that taxidermists love deer, and something of that desire to secure, to stabilize, to render certain and definite the open-ended, nebulous, and adventurous work of artists is present in many who work in that

confinement sometimes called the art world. A similar kind of aggression against the slipperiness of the work and the ambiguities of the artist's intent and meaning often exists in literary criticism and academic scholarship, a desire to make certain what is uncertain, to know what is unknowable, to turn the flight across the sky into the roast upon the plate, to classify and contain. What escapes categorization can escape detection altogether.<sup>39</sup>

Pressing against these confinements results in a variety of pushbacks like violence. This is perhaps most evident in the various aggressive End of Semester Reviews I have experienced over the course of my time at JMU. The two most infamous occurred in fall 2013 and spring 2015. The audio recording lays bare the aggressive discourse elicited by my ongoing work with *OFAR* and its loose identification and classification. The direct catalysts for these violent reactions remain unknown but presumably arise through the synthesis of the works' slipperiness, identity politics, and departmental politics. Some might argue my non-presence was a provocation yet it was previously explained in the supplied artist statement leading into the gathering. In the fall of 2013, blows almost erupted during my presentation due to a faculty member's dislike of the phrasing "complex queer modality" and his insistence that I classify the parts of speech to which each of these terms corresponded. During this event, to highlight the queerness of my developing first-year inquiry, I mentioned how each term in this phrase could be an adjective or adverb or even a pronoun as they stood in for other undefined terms and related ways of movement, dance, and rejection of identification. Furthermore, some of those present objected to the shirt I was wearing which read, "Gay.OK." According to

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<sup>39</sup> Solnit, Rebecca (2014-04-14). *Men Explain Things to Me* (Kindle Locations 802-807). Haymarket Books. Kindle Edition.



these scholars, just because I was gay did not mean I could dictate queer theory. Interestingly, up to this point I had intentionally never come out to my art colleagues and faculty. After this remarkably bombastic encounter, I began to wonder about the “proper” way to engage in art criticism and examination. It didn’t not seem like I was receiving an educational experience within the MFA setting but instead dealing with more catty, sophomoric, personal politics. Initially, I directed this external criticism inwards and thought I failed in ‘properly’ presenting the work. Consequently, I began to research into the conventional ways of presenting socially engaged art. I realized, too, that I needed to become my own critic within school because I might not receive useful information in the coming semesters.

Theorists like Grant Kester have highlighted that “the extemporaneous and participatory nature of these projects requires the historian or critic to employ techniques (field research, participant-observation, interviews, etc) more typically associated with the social sciences.”<sup>40</sup> The appropriate modes of criticism and critical engagement with SEA remain divisive. Some critics, like Bishop, take a strong stance against the political potentials of the work, while others like Thompson hail the arrival of the SEA paradigm. Most of the anxiety around social art concerns shifting aesthetics conversation away from visual principles and toward issues of the generative experience of collective interaction, political ramifications, and ethics.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kester, Grant H. (2011-08-22). *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Kindle Locations 445-446). Duke University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>41</sup> Kester, Grant H. (2011-08-22). *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Kindle Locations 445-446). Duke University Press. Kindle Edition.

I find this shift a useful way to help articulate the complexities of a project like *OFAR* in which the timeline and activities span years, forms, and audiences. Again, I am inspired by Solnit's description of art criticism:

A great work of criticism can liberate a work of art, to be seen fully, to remain alive, to engage in a conversation that will not ever end but will instead keep feeding the imagination. Not against interpretation, but against confinement, against the killing of the spirit. Such criticism is itself great art.<sup>42</sup>

As Solnit outlines, criticism becomes a component of the art. Criticism, such as this monograph, expands the potential connections, stories, feelings, and encounters one may have with *OFAR*. An ongoing worry is that this expansion may become overly superficial and infectious resulting in an exploitative or imperialistic project. Solnit's relationship to criticism relates deeply to the infamous social practitioner Bruguera's reaction to contemporary criticism of SEA:

In terms of criticism I have also been a bit unsatisfied with the constant search for a model of the artist that is not appropriate for socially engaged art. People look for the authorial artist type, but in these kinds of projects artists are initiators. For socially engaged art you need another type, another model of the artist, one where the ethics of the practice is incorporated into what they naturally are. Art critics and art historians need to understand that traditional categories of art and traditional ways of analysing them will not do justice to socially engaged art, political art or Arte Útil practices. These practices are like a branch becoming more independent each day from what we have seen art doing. They come with a

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<sup>42</sup> Solnit, Rebecca (2014-04-14). *Men Explain Things to Me* (Kindle Locations 808-810). Haymarket Books. Kindle Edition.

new way to comprehend the use of art as well as a new way to understand old concepts like audience and participation. These types of practices open a new regime of the symbolic.<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, the field of social aesthetics remains (intentionally) vague when applying notions of aesthetics and principles towards work relying upon social interaction, activation, co-creation, and participation. In my conclusion, I highlight the resulting notions of aesthetics and practice-based principles I have found applicable, relatable, and useable in my own practice.

The activities of *OFAR* are varied and expansive as it offers residencies and public programs, produces publications, co-sponsors protests, curates exhibitions, and hosts political meetings. This wide variety of activities appears in other social art like Jay Koh and Chu Yuan's project, *Networking and Initiatives in Culture and the Arts (NICA)* in Myanmar. Over its tenure, *NICA* organized residencies, workshops, exhibitions, screenings, and festivals. The resulting work of *OFAR* is usually organized and executed by myself with the help of visiting artists, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. In general, these activities help *OFAR* build up a sense of community by creating spaces for new social encounters, conversations, and meetings. This notion of encounter is rooted in my idea of how community is formed. That is, I emphasize the importance of direct, personal encounters with places and people to develop a sense of belonging and identity within a group space. A community might be a series of social relationships, a geographic space, an institutional setting; this is not limited to the physical spatial realm but also the digital.

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<sup>43</sup> Kershaw, Alex. "An Interview with Tania Bruguera." *Spring Issue*. Field Journal, Spring 2015. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://field-journal.com/issue-1/bruguera>>.

Yet the digital component of *OFAR* remains limited and insular to its website and internal listservs that connect *OFAR* artists together for organizing purposes. Like Thompson, I am interested in instigating “an encounter that [is] experiential, and not simply didactic: viewers could express their ideas and ask questions.”<sup>44</sup>

Throughout *OFAR*'s evolution, I have begun to develop my own terms and language for the project. For example, I began to refer to past residents as OFARians. This is impart a play on the notion of cult but more an intentional way to stay connected to residents. If I referred them to as ‘past artists’ or ‘former residents’ it would seem like their engagement with *OFAR* has ended. Instead, I wanted to develop a title that would not imply time but inspire continued engagement with OFAR. I find that many of these OFARians have helped to inform the project's growth and governance. OFARians direct me to grants, provide feedback, co-organize events, and assist in daily house chores like cleaning toilets. The term imparts a more participatory relationship to OFAR versus a standoff title of just being a participating artist. The other important gesture of language is the use of ‘we’ when talking about *OFAR*. It's not about personifying the project but as inclusive gesture to reflect upon the projects various components, authors, and creators. I take participant feedback fairly seriously and have crafted a variety of survey for OFARians, visitors, and on-lookers.

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<sup>44</sup> Thompson, Nato (2015-08-18). *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-first Century* (Kindle Locations 419-420). Melville House. Kindle Edition.

## Examples

Over the past two years, *OFAR* has offered residencies to more than thirty artists. Their projects have ranged from organizing workshops, dance classes, temporary public art installations, lectures, and self-care sessions. An overview of all of these various projects can be found on *OFAR*'s website.<sup>45</sup> Here, I have chosen to highlight three projects in-depth to illustrate the complexity and varying nature of the work executed by *OFAR*'s artists in residence, or *OFAR*ians.

Dana Ollestad was the third *OFAR*ian and first official resident. The first *OFAR*ians, Miho Tisujii and Tran Vu, are colleagues from my graduate program at NYU who agreed to pilot the residency before I expanded the project. Before Ollestad's visit, I did not know of him or his work. Ollestad is based in Richmond, Virginia and is an adjunct faculty member at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). His *OFAR* residency focused on offering a Super 8 workshop. The workshop was, at cost, ten dollars, which included two workshop sessions and all of the materials: film, camera, and development fluids. The sessions occurred at JMU's ArtWorks Gallery. The first session was an introduction to the process and provided participants with some basic videography skills. Ollestad gave each workshop participant a Super 8 camera and one week to shoot a short black-and-white film. At the conclusion of the week, we gathered again to learn how to develop the film by hand. Ollestad then spliced the films together, screened them, and re-recorded them. It is important to note that Harrisonburg hosts the Super Gr8 Festival and

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<sup>45</sup> Visit the *OFAR* online archive to learn more via [Oldfurnace.tumblr.com](http://Oldfurnace.tumblr.com)

many of the workshop participants were key stakeholders in that annual event. Interestingly, this was the first time that any of them had developed film by hand.

The workshop model is a typical component of most visiting artists during their stay. Kester notes “the workshop has emerged as a significant nexus of creative production in a wide range of collaborative and collective projects.”<sup>46</sup> The focus on workshops in SEA arises for a variety of reasons and has multiple purposes. Foremost, the workshop expands upon the tradition of resource and knowledge sharing that is central in many activist and DIY art scenes. I find that many of *OFAR*’s visiting artists have connections to these worlds. The workshop allows for active and engaged collaboration between student and teacher. Yet there emerges a level of cross-sharing as students can improvise, change, and push back on the workshop’s ideas. Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explains the importance of liberating pedagogies as it provides a wider insight into the cultural, pedagogical, and political process of non-traditional learning practices.<sup>47</sup> Kester argues that the workshop has become a social form “in conjunction with a critical remobilization of craft practices, evident in Littoral’s engagement with textile production in England and Ala Plastica’s interest in willow cultivation in the Rio de la Plata basin.”<sup>48</sup> The workshop has been a central way for OFARians to share their experiences, expertise, knowledge, and skills with others in a decentralized format that is also free to participants.

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<sup>46</sup> Kester, Grant H. (2011-08-22). *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Kindle Locations 1751-1752). Duke University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>47</sup> Freire, Paulo (2014-08-18). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*. Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>48</sup> Kester, Grant H. (2011-08-22). *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Kindle Locations 1761-1763). Duke University Press. Kindle Edition.

Overall, the Super 8 workshop resulted in six participants and myself learning about the process of shooting and developing a one-cartridge film. The resulting film screening featured about twenty minutes of footage. Additionally, all participants are now able to list this screening as occurring with ArtWorks Gallery, which is a useful and official performance credential. This workshop occurred within the backdrop of the local Super Gr8 Film Festival and brought together the festival founder and participants with other “outsiders” from both the art and university system. Many of these initial participants continued to participate in other programs organized by *OFAR*. This initial audience proved influential for *OFAR*’s development, as many participants are leaders in the Harrisonburg art and activism scene. For example, participant Paul Somers founded the Super Gr8 Film Festival and owns the local artistic bar The Golden Pony; participant JoAnn Benjamin is a queer activist at JMU and within the larger community through the YES! Alliance, Harrisonburg Pride, and the Shenandoah Valley Gay & Lesbian Association.

Ollestad’s other work at *OFAR* included a series of photos and audio recordings. One particular recording captured a visit to my family’s farm while my uncle was field dressing a deer. The recording is featured on *OFAR*’s walking tour. I have stayed in touch with Ollestad following his residency. We have met each other’s friends, and we often dream up new collaborations together. Ollestad’s visit highlights the multi-layered activities, connections, and outcomes that occur through *OFAR*. Ollestad’s relationship to *OFAR* also highlights the ongoing entanglements of *OFAR*ians with both *OFAR* and

myself. I typically stay in his home during visits to Richmond; we have forged an authentic friendship. *OFAR*ians become integrated into my network of support for *OFAR*-related work. However, *OFAR*ians do not seem to be collaborating among themselves. In order to sustain *OFAR*, the entire process must not hinge upon my personal participation and collaboration with the artists. Thus, following my matriculation from JMU, I hope to secure institutional funding to offer creative grants for collaborations among *OFAR*ians. These would require at least three artists in order to secure the funding.

Another model case study example of an *OFAR* resident involves Catron Booker's visit in May 2014. Booker's main objective during her stay was to facilitate the creation of a promotional video for the Yes! Alliance. The Yes! Alliance is a relatively new organization in Harrisonburg that provides support, resources, and community to the region's queer and questioning youth. One of their largest hurdles as an organization is connecting with students in the region. Consequently, I connected Booker with Yes! Alliance to create a promotional video on behalf of the organization. The resulting video has been utilized by Yes! Alliance to recruit more youth into the organization, and the viral video received an Honorable Mention at the CTLPDX International Film Festival. I highlight the various places, purposes, and audiences that the work from *OFAR* ends up in order to emphasize the multiple communities and contexts of the work.

The production of the video was highly collaborative and educational. Booker and I co-organized a series of workshops with Yes! Alliance clients and organizers to facilitate the story mapping, shooting, and editing. The shoot spread across the city of Harrisonburg



and incorporated students from local high schools, JMU, and Mary Baldwin College. Again, workshops were a central component of the process and allowed for highly collaborative interactions between community members and the visiting artist. Booker neither envisioned nor directed the filming. Furthermore, the final product was edited by a series of participants who learned from one another how best to edit the footage.

The other central component of Booker's stay related to the racial history of Harrisonburg. Some of this work was later featured in *OFAR's SLAG Mag: The Return*. I introduced Booker to Stan Maclin who founded and runs the Harriet Tubman Cultural Center in Harrisonburg. He shared his vast knowledge about black history in the region. Inspired by this encounter, Booker decided to create and enact a series of performances at several local historic sites. Travelling to these spaces took time, so Booker and I spent a weekend driving and talking. Many of our conversations involved Maclin's stories and their connections to contemporary race issues, news, and events. Booker's resulting work led to a reconceptualization of the places and their connection to contemporary history.

And lastly, *OFARian* Jessica Caldas's experience is significant because she has repeatedly returned to *OFAR*. As *OFAR* entered its second and third years, *OFARians* began returning to further develop the friendships, connections, and projects that began in this space. Many remarked that they needed time to process their first experience in order to better create work related to *OFAR's* purpose. Caldas has returned to continue exploring her work with domestic violence and gender-based assault. She works with the Collins Center to offer workshops to their clients. She has also done a public performance

on Harrisonburg's Downtown Square visualizing issues of child abuse in our community. This performance presented the traditional art activist practice of using art to raise consciousness about a subject as evident in the news coverage of her work.<sup>49</sup> Caldas returned for a third visit in April 2016 to present her work along with the work from the Collins Center workshops at the Arts Council of the Valley's Smith House Galleries. Synchronically, an off-site exhibition of work by past OFAR resident Jessica Caldas developed alongside the main OFAR focused exhibition at James Madison University at the Arts Council of the Valley location.

### **Components**

The *Old Furnace Artist Residency's* name highlights its central component: artist residencies. But consider other components of artist residencies that are central to their activities, functions, and explorations. This reimagining of artist residency components arises from my political aim to see cultural institutions expand their programmatic offerings and engagements. Over the past three years, I have worked to develop other projects, components, and activities of *OFAR* that extend *OFAR's* presence in local activist and artist communities.

### ***SLAG MAG***

Besides hosting artists, another central component and main financial focus of *OFAR* is its ongoing publication series: *SLAG Mag*. *SLAG* is a quarterly published 'zine that focuses on a new topic, issue, or idea in each issue. The name *SLAG* aligns with *OFAR's*

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<sup>49</sup> Cloos, Kassondra. "Chalking It Up." *DNROnline*. Daily News Record, 21 June 2014. Web. 23 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.dnronline.com/article/062214chalk>>

fire and metallurgy branding as slag is defined as “the stony waste matter separated from metals during the smelting or refining of ore.”<sup>50</sup> This definition departs from the idea of the zine because it becomes a platform to examine the residue from the refining and smelting occurring at *OFAR*. For example, an *OFAR*-hosted workshop with the Valley AIDS Network was featured in an issue of *SLAG Mag* via photos of art, photos of communal activities, and printed text. In another instance, my ongoing entanglement with *Southerners On New Ground* resulted in the SoHo edition of *SLAG*, as I was curious about other Southern queer artists and their work. That issue also featured the work of *OFARian*, Catron Booker.

*SLAG Mag* becomes a credential for *OFAR* through its literary, textual, and physical formats. This notion of credibility underpins my ongoing efforts to ensure *SLAG* appears primarily as a physical print. The physicality of the ‘zine lends its own authority and authenticity in the contemporary, digitized world.

As Valley AIDS Network director explains in the introduction to one issue:

Last month we teamed up with Jon Henry from the Art Department at JMU. Through this collaboration we were able to provide a collaging workshop to clients, which in turn gave clients an opportunity to connect with each other and engage in a project that was stress relieving and empowering.

The resulting publication received some larger press via New York City-based Visual AIDS. They reached out to me and asked if I would contribute a blog article. Though this

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<sup>50</sup> "Slag." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University, n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/181259?rskey=IUbwmn&result=1#eid>>.

community engagement, I collaborated with another artist, Hermelinda Cortes, to craft an article about HIV, activism, art, and ‘Southernness.’ This extended encounter allowed for continued engagement with a subject through further investigation, creativity, and dialogue around the intersection of activism, art, and HIV/AIDS.

### ***Movie Nights & Game Night***

From *OFAR*’s beginning, game night & movie night have been central features of *OFAR*’s monthly event offerings. Initially, these evenings provided a space for audience and community development around social activities like board games and films. As they have matured, the events have moved towards more pedagogical and creative objectives. For example, we typically attempt to make a specific game during game night. *OFARian* Jacqueline van de Geer spent considerable time to develop a social board game for one evening. Likewise, movie night has shifted away from featuring blockbuster hits towards more artistic, obscure, and imaginative films.

### ***Oak View Bank Gallery***

A comment I have received from various *OFARians* was the lack of a traditional exhibition space. As luck might have it, my personal bank, Oak View National Bank, offered their headquarters’ walls for curatorial projects. Since 2015, I have been inviting past *OFARians*, including Daniel King and Denise Phillipbar, to have solo exhibitions in this corporate setting. The artists are given one hundred percent of the money from sales and typically receive some form of press coverage for these shows. Besides exhibitions of

*OFAR*ians, I have also curated and invited collaborators to contribute to exhibitions inside *OFAR* itself.

### *Goüche*

As a shared living space that also operates as a public gathering place, cleaning becomes a concern related to livability and navigation of the space. To reframe the conversation of cleaning with residents, *Goüche* becomes the term to re-imagine how we might clean. It is based upon Susan Sontag's writings on Camp.<sup>51</sup> *Goüche* acts as a practical activity to see how Camp could be applied to daily and mundane activities like cleaning.

During my experience at *Mildred's Lane* with "hooshing,"<sup>52</sup> I thought it a practical exercise to personalize cleaning to *OFAR*. Curator Mary Jane Jacobs remarks how "hooshing" is not about "learn[ing] how to arrange stuffed birds and dried flowers [but] to experience how to locate your own creativity and how to live it."<sup>53</sup>

After *goüche* was successful in serving the practical purpose of initiating cleaning conversations, I turned the project outwards as a community workshop. It appeared in places like the Spitzer Art Center and University of Richmond Downtown. These appearances fostered a dialogue about participants' relationships to cleaning. An overwhelming number of the participants were women and our conversations usually

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<sup>51</sup> Sontag, Susan. "Notes on camp." *Camp: queer aesthetics and the performing subject: a reader* (1964): 53-65.

<sup>52</sup> Randolph, Sal. "Social Places: Mildred's Lane." *Word Object*. N.p., 11 Aug. 2011. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<https://wordobject.wordpress.com/2011/08/11/social-places-mildreds-lane/>>.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, Alastair. "In Her Own World." *Home & Garden*. The New York Times, 28 May 2008. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/garden/29puett.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/garden/29puett.html?_r=0)>.

revolved around the domestic divisions of labor that leave women with a majority of the housework. This parlayed into strategies as to how one might create one's own cleaning method to get spouses or children engaged in cleaning.

### ***A.F.A.R.***

*Advancing the Frontiers of Artist Residencies (A.F.A.R)* is a subsidiary artist residency of *OFAR*. It focuses on offering micro-residencies that last under thirty minutes and these residencies occurs in various sites such as rest stops, beaches, galleries, museums, sidewalks, cafes, and other spaces. The array of space symbolizes that art can be anywhere. *OFAR* lacks the capacity to host multiple residents yet receives an abundance of applications and inquiries. I began to think about how *OFAR* might further connect with individuals to develop a larger base and engage more artists. As I was ruminating on this idea, I received an invitation for gallery exhibition at ArtWorks Gallery based on *OFAR*. I realized it might be best to develop a residency within a gallery space: *AFAR!*

### ***Tomāto Project***

The *Tomāto Project* is an ongoing project exploring the intersections of commerce, food access, and social practice.<sup>54</sup> For the project, I sell locally grown tomatoes—many grown by myself—and other produce in my father's front yard in Warrenton, Virginia. Typically, the transactions with customers are based upon the honor system; the project is able to directly support and fund *OFAR* throughout the year. The full extent of the project was exhibited at the Arts Council of Valley's Smith House Galleries in September 2015.

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<sup>54</sup> The project is archive online via: [tomatoetomatoproject.tumblr.com](http://tomatoetomatoproject.tumblr.com)

This exhibition served as a prototype for the upcoming *OFAR* exhibition at JMU. The exhibition featured textual and photographic documentation, ephemera such as buttons, ‘zines, letters, participant creations like canned food, and participant costumes. Furthermore, the space was continually activated by public programs focusing on lectures and workshops related to the themes of food justice, environmentalism, and ecological art practices.

### **Outside of *OFAR***

Outside of my direct work, coordination, creations, and organization of *OFAR*, I keep up a studio practice focusing on object creation, performance, and writing. This component of my practice still relates to *OFAR* as I find myself continually inspired by the events, developments, and conversations at *OFAR*. This component of *OFAR* reveals the embedded intricacy it has created in my own praxis as an individual. Again, this harkens back to Beuys’ own notion of social sculpture that seeks to create a sense of transformation.

### ***Glitter***

Glitter has slowly grown in my practice as a central material and component. Through its very material characteristics, this medium infuses ‘Parallelprozess’ into my *OFAR* work. The power, affect, and aesthetics of glitter arise through camp, accumulation, and infection. These are issues directly related to my work with *OFAR*. *OFAR*’s own power and presence grows through its accumulation of people into spaces. My hope is that *OFAR* might infect others with energy for queer liberation like glitter infects spaces. Physically, *OFAR* is infected with glitter. It is embedded in the carpet, affixed to the tub,

and continually appearing in surprising places like the freezer. It has become an aesthetic component of the space itself. Even our food features glitter thanks to Martha Stewart's innovative edible glitter.

### ***Performances***

I will admit that my background as a performance artist is limited. It was not something I was ever exposed to directly in my undergraduate studies. Yet it was instrumental in my MA studies at NYU. While living in NYC, I attended a variety of performance shows and helped with one at the Glasshouse Gallery in Brooklyn. Like my interest in SEA, I was drawn to performance work due to its queer and anti-capitalist history. Furthermore, I was intrigued by how it acted out body politics within an art context. Consequently, I began to develop a series of performances during my tenure in JMU's MFA program. *OFAR* proved instrumental in supporting my performance work through exposure to visiting performance artists like Amanda Hunt, Catron Booker, and Alex Romania. The following paragraphs summarize the three most significant performances from this period.

### ***Untitled Bag***

As I mentioned previously, *OFAR*ian Dana Ollestad and I spent an afternoon visiting my family's farm in Mt. Jackson, Virginia. During the visit, we witnessed my uncle butchering a deer, a first for Ollestad. He recorded the process via audio and visual forms to use in an unknown future project. During our drive back to *OFAR*, we chatted about hunting and my relationship to the pastime. Traditionally, I have not shared this practice



in my life out of shame and unease; unease that the liberal art world would reject the bloody practice of hunting and butchering.

Our conversation created a sense of ease for me when thinking of this practice. Consequently, I began to investigate it further by looking at the tools for field butchering. I discovered large cloth butcher bags for field dressing and became enamored with them because of their white sterile simplicity that seemed to stand in direct opposition to the complexity, messiness, and fleshiness of butchering. The bag hides the mess and protects the butchered meat from contamination. I began to fill the bag with objects as an investigation of form and space. What is more, I found that donning the bag created a sense of energy as I explored how my body might fill the bag. I became particularly interested in trying to find the limits of the bag by seeing how much force was needed to rip through it. Surprisingly, it took a great deal of effort. Based upon this investigation, I began to develop a performance related to the sense of Covering,<sup>55</sup> violence, and identity performance individuals - particularly queers - experience. The performances became a vehicle to engage both my creative interests and my activist interests concerning body image and queer community. Again, the performance relates to developing a praxis of politics, engagement, and culture making.

My first performance was at BBQQueer night at *OFAR* in conjunction with a performance by *OFAR*ian Alex Romania. Following this event, we gave each other feedback and I further explored senses and practices of movement for this performance. This became a

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<sup>55</sup> Yoshino, Kenji. *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*. New York: Random House, 2006. Print. Kenji discusses how minorities, especially queer folks, cover up their identities through performance, fashion, language, and misidentification.

common trend with performance-based *OFAR*ians as they usually conducted movement workshops. Based upon the feedback I received during these experiences with *OFAR*ians, my performance evolved and I went on to share it at Harrisonburg's 24 Hour Festival, the Northeastern LGBT Conference in Albany, New York, and at JMU during End of Semester Review. For each public performance, there is a bit of deviation and variance. I initially did the piece until the bag ripped. I would be naked or wearing rainbow underwear and roll, move, and dance within the bag—never leaving it aside. Based upon feedback, I incorporated a monologue feature that focused on body image issues. Viewers were always surprised by my near-nudity or empowered that I would show my non-athletic physique in such a public way. Based upon ongoing conversations and in collaboration with *OFAR*ian Greg Hatch, I was concurrently interested in the structure and system of classification within the gay Bear scene. The scene is not just Bears but also Cubs, Wolves, Foxes, Pandas, Ewoks, and my personal favorite, Manatees. Consequently, the final series of monologues attempted to find my place within this gay animal kingdom—Manatees seeming the most logical fit due to my naturally hair-free body.

### ***Exchanging Pleasantries - Parking Garage***

*Exchanging Pleasantries* grew out of ongoing conversations that I was having with *OFAR*ians, visitors, friends, and lovers. I wanted to synthesize these various groups together via a project and began to dream up a performance that might be of interest. The resulting performance for which there is no direct documentation is a result of this interest and pursuit; the only “official” documentation is via a written piece by the artist

Stephanie Williams.<sup>56</sup> The performance featured collaborators, guests, *OFAR*ians, and lovers as various actors, singers, musicians, and technicians.

The performance synthesized my own interests in queer love, glitter, performance, and public art. The performance focused on notions of exchange and was developed through collaborative input and rehearsals.

### *Pi Theory*

The *Pi Theory* performance grew out of my ongoing research into performance and the common practice of developing an alter ego. My own alter ego, Zander Toefl, led this performance. I was particularly interested in the lecture format of performances based upon my experiences of lecturing at conferences. Further, I was interested in continuing the non-direct mode of documentation as mentioned above in *Exchanging Pleasantries*. Instead of sourcing a written response from one audience member, I invited the audience to collectively write a response and document the performance via a shared Google Doc file.

During my tenure in Harrisonburg, I continually struggled to explain *OFAR*'s location. They did not know the street or its most infamous landmark: Harrisonburg's only synagogue. The only landmark that resonated with most was my proximity to the pizza franchise Papa Johns, even though I have never eaten there. Over time, I began to notice a developing trend in Harrisonburg of new pizzerias. It seemed reasonable to have a few

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<sup>56</sup> Williams, Stephanie. "Exchanging Pleasantries." *Jon Henry's Portfolio*. Old Furnace Artist Residency, 19 May 2015. Web. 18 Apr. 2016. <<http://jonwhportfolio.tumblr.com/post/119417032096>>.

since there are so many college students; pizza is an infamous college diet staple due to its affordability. Yet there seemed to be a rapid expansion of new pizza restaurants during my time in Harrisonburg. Specifically, I was enthralled by the notion of the expensive *Bella Luna* restaurant that justified its prices because their ingredients were all locally sourced. Additionally, Downtown Harrisonburg markets itself as Virginia's First Food District, yet its restaurants are primarily American fair like burgers. One of the most-loved ethnic restaurants, Blue Nile, offered Ethiopian cuisine but, sadly, closed. When the space reopened, it had become a (hipster) pizza buffet bar.

This performance situated itself precariously between the tension of performance and institution. It remained aggressively critical of JMU, yet it relied upon JMU for a venue for the performance. Coincidentally, it was only JMU-affiliated individuals who attended the performance. A bit of a quandary is created by the performance because it is critical performance whose audience is the one being indicted in the performance.

### *Lectures*

Over the past three years, I've spent a considerable amount of time and energy attending and presenting at conferences. Conferences are interesting events as they relate to space due to their temporality, mission, and expectation of exhibitionism. Conferences are a fairly easy platform to present the work of *OFAR* because they synthesize the oral with the visual via the traditional lecture format. There is an expectation of explanation versus the expectation that just visual exhibition presents a full explanation. Furthermore, there is direct interaction with the audience via the traditional question and answer section at the end of a presentation. Thus, I found conferences a good format for presenting *OFAR*

due to my ability to simultaneously perform, exhibit, explain, and interact with listeners. However, conference audiences are often highly curated and specific to a particular field, political stance, or craft. This specificity becomes troubling in relation to *OFAR* because of my interest in creating accessible spaces. Almost all of the lectures reflect my ongoing interest in queer theory, social practice, and activism.

The main lectures talks have been *Art of Change*, *Screw Oz Give Me Kansas*, *OFAR|Artist Talks*, *FLartSh Collective*, *A.F.A.R.*, *Post-Gay Politics & Aesthetics*, and a forthcoming presentation on *Queering Social Practice*.

*Screw Oz Give Me Kansas* is a collaborative presentation with *OFARian* Greg Hatch exploring the development of a queer art praxis outside of contemporary queer urban settings. This presentation developed based upon our shared interests in rural and blue-collar communities and how these landscapes affect queer visions. Scott Herring's *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* provides foundational arguments in relation to this research. Together, we presented this talk at the 2015 Mid-Atlantic LGBT Conference; I had previously presented my research into *Post-Queer Aesthetics & Politics* at this conference in 2013. These presentations allow us to share our experiences, which counter the hegemonic vision of queer urbanism. This focus on urban queer centers like NYC parlay into contemporary art practices focusing on New York City exhibits and "Blue Chip" artists and their related professional practices. Our presentation focused on developing community outside traditionally queer urban organizations.

*Art of Change* is an art history-based lecture that examines various politically-motivated art projects over the past forty years. This lecture's contents grew out of my own research in the lineage of SEA. I was particularly interested in the work of ACT Up because of its various artistically political activities. I conclude the lecture by talking about *OFAR* and placing *OFAR* on the political art history timeline. Additionally, instead of holding a questions & answers session at the conclusion of the talk, I use the remaining time to break up the audience into working groups to develop artistic-based response to contemporary political or social issues in their community. This finale birthed the *FLartSh Collective* presentation.

*FLartSh Collective* refocuses the *Art of Change* presentation to solely focus on the artistic collaborative moment. I provide various arts and craft supplies so participants can prototype their political conceptions and art ideas. This presentation has previously appeared at the Q-Summit gathering at the University of Richmond. Gathering together the states' LGBT youth activists and leaders for a day of networking, this summit focuses on leadership development, education, and skill sharing. I was invited to develop an artistic component for the gathering because there seemed to be a lack of cultural politics represented in the event's offerings. *FLartSh Collective* was developed in part with other OFARians including Ha Tran.

### **Embodied Research of OFAR**

As part of the research for *OFAR*, I have been heavily invested in better understanding my local community. This research is multi-faceted in relationship to learning more

about places, histories, politics, people, and communities. For my first six months in Harrisonburg, I purposely explored the city and surrounding cultural and public attractions like the Natural Bridge's Wax Museum, Taubermen Museum, Quilt Museum, walking trails, and others. I also invested a considerable amount of time in meeting local artists and activists in the community including Valerie Smith at Larkin Arts and Stan Maclin at the Harriet Tubman Cultural Center. The culmination of this aspect of my research was my participation in the Harrisonburg Citizen's Academy.

The Harrisonburg Citizen Academy is a three-month program comprised of weekly two-hour sessions designed to teach residents about the city and the services it provides.<sup>57</sup> I initially applied based upon a Master Class at the Queens Museum with Mierle Laderman Ukeles who encouraged artists to learn more about their civic system. Perhaps we might even develop residency programs within city structures as she did in NYC's Sanitation Department. Until very recently, this directive didn't exist outside of thought.

Interestingly, this venture provided me with networking opportunities and policy knowledge, both of which have proved useful in various *OFAR* projects. For example, I knew which office to contact during Caldas' public art installation in the Downtown Square. During *OFAR*'s collaboration with the Moving Beyond Jails initiative, I felt better informed about the legal and political processes related to the efforts to construct a new jail. Furthermore, I was able to develop personal relationships with city employees that helped foster the success of the USDAC Imagining Harrisonburg event. The event's

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<sup>57</sup> "Harrisonburg Citizen Academy." *Get Involved*. City of Harrisonburg, 8 Apr. 2016. Web. 10 Apr. 2016. <<https://www.harrisonburgva.gov/citizen-academy>>

resulting artwork was later incorporated into the city's archives thanks to these relationships, as well.

The most important outcome of this class was that I learned about vacancies on city commissions and committees. Based upon available vacancies, I was appointed to Harrisonburg's Tree Advisory Board. Again, activism and art become interwoven through this process as my application for the position situated my knowledge on trees via my art practice's incorporation of plants as a material. I also think back to Beuys' and his *7000 Oaks* project. I wonder if my long-term participation on the board might allow for a direct extension of Beuys into Harrisonburg mirroring the project's extension into Baltimore City and Walker Art Center?

### **Exhibiting *OFAR***

Crafting an engaging exhibition based upon *OFAR* has proved difficult. The difficulty parlays to contemporary dilemma when attempting to curate and exhibit social sculpture, performance, relational aesthetics, and participatory work. My main concern is maintaining social energy and interaction during the exhibitions even though participation, spontaneity, and public accessibility are traditionally diminished by the politics of the gallery space.

For the culminating MFA exhibition, I focused on developing a playful and campy installation that would lend itself to participation and direct interaction.<sup>58</sup> I focused on

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using kitsch materials like astro-turf, displaying OFAR's various knickknacks and tschotchkes, and inducing accessible interactive objects like Legos and sidewalk chalk. Originally, I envisioned the exhibit would act as a space for a "pop-up" school. Over the course of the exhibition's planning, this idea has waned in favor of focusing on the hybrid think-tank incubator that *OFAR* presents for my own practice and the practice of others. Consequently, the events and programs focus on past workshops and the presentation of new topics aligned with *OFAR*'s emphasis on social justice. Conversely, I am treating this gallery exhibition as an experiment to see the transformation of SEA into a gallery. The exhibition acts as a retrospective of past *OFAR* programs and projects; however, I do not believe the vitality of the projects will be lost through their re-presentation.

While this exhibition is in a shared space with other MFA students, *OFAR*'s space is marked by green AstroTurf across the gallery floor. Atop the carpet, a variety of *OFAR* furnishings are placed including couches, bookshelves, beds, and tables that are artifacts of *OFAR* as place but also serve as props for the gallery-based programming and interactions. Hopefully, visitors will use the furnishings as they would use them at *OFAR*: sleeping in the bed, reclining on the couches, reading a book, grabbing a drink from the fridge, etc. Additionally, I am reusing components of other *OFAR* supported exhibitions like the Atomic Priesthood Reading Room's large table and benches that are repurposed as a shared workspace for this installation. The table is a useful spot for a variety of our events and workshops, for working, eating, and communing, and also for playing games. A small net is added to the table to allow visitors to play pingpong with *OFAR*-labeled balls

Coupled with the exhibition of the objects is an ongoing series of performances, workshops, events, happenings, and public programs. Some of these events involve past *OFAR*ians. For instance, Ollestad's will offer a workshop. Other events are lead by *OFAR*'s community collaborators such as Beth Schermerhorn. These events, performances, and programs will highlight the public, social, and interactive components of *OFAR*. Some of them will be retrospective like Ollestad's workshop while other events like Ha Tran's guided workshop on healthy relationships will be new. This mixture allows participants to develop a comprehensive analysis and engagement with *OFAR*.

The tentatively planned event schedule is as follows for the exhibition:

<b>Exhibition Dates: 4/11/16 - 4/27/16</b>						
<b>Mon 4/11</b>	Tues 4/12	Wed 4/13	Thurs 4/14	Fri 4/15	Sat 4/16	Sun 4/17
<b>Opening reception</b>	<b>Mornin g:</b> Artist Talk					
	<b>Afterno on:</b> Art of Change Lecture					
<b>Mon 4/18</b>	Tues 4/19	Wed 4/20	Thurs 4/21	Fri 4/22	Sat 4/23	Sun 4/24
<b>Morning: Bread Making Demo by Hermalinda Cortez</b>	<b>Day:</b> Super 8 Worksho p Day 1 with Dana Ollestad	<b>Morning:</b> Bridge Building Performan ce	<b>Morning:</b> Goûche Workshop	<b>Mornin g:</b> Queerin g Socially Engaged Art Talk	<b>Afterno on:</b> Walking Tour with Harriet Tubman	<b>Mornin g:</b> Queer Brunch  <b>Afterno on:</b> <i>OFAR</i>

<b>Afternoon: Untitled Bag Performance by Jon Henry</b>	<b>Night: SLAG Mag's Release Party at Golden Pony</b>	: Ecologic Design with Beth Schermerh orn	ons with Ha Tran & Virginia Anti- Violence Project	<b>Afterno on: Ecologic al Art with Jeremy &amp; Allyson Taylor</b>	Cultural Center	Open House (Off-site)
<b>Mon 4/25</b>	Tues 4/26	Wed 4/27				
<b>Morning: Peaceful Lawns lecture by Dr. Poti Giannakou ros</b>	Super8 Worksho p Day 2 with Dana Ollestad: Film Screenin g	Closing conversati on and community art exhibition				
<b>Evening: Pi Theory Performan ce</b>						

Throughout the exhibition period, I will be presenting my own performances, lectures, and happenings that have been birthed out of the *OFAR* experience. Specifically, I will be presenting the performances *Untitled Bag* and *Pi Theory* and the lectures *Art of Change*, *Queering Socially Engaged Art*, *Post-Gay Aesthetics & Activism*, and an artist's talk. At the conclusion of the *Queering Socially Engaged Art* talk, I will be conducting a short demonstration on seed bombing. We will each make a seed bomb of pansies for placement [planting?] after the lecture.

Additionally, I will present a new performance titled, *Bridge Building* which will explore the rhetoric around community engagement through movement, imagery, and drawings.

This performance is a culminating moment as it presents via lectures my own experiences, theories, and ideas of the ubiquitous phrase within community development programs to ‘build bridges.’ The talk will address the historical significance of bridges, their engineering components, and their philosophical meanings as addressed by Heidegger. The performance will begin in Duke Hall at the exhibition but will end underneath the Grace Street Bridge along Route 42.

Other projects of the *OFAR@DHGFA* exhibition include the release of a new ‘zine series called *Keep off the Rocks*. This ‘zine extends previous investigations around the potential for orgies and sex parties to be forms of SEA. The work will appear via a one-fold letterpress printed ‘zine that will be accompanied by recently released issues of *SLAG Mag* based upon the themes of *Eggplant*, *Teaching Art*, and *Social Engagement*.

Also concurrent with the exhibition, there will be related programs at *OFAR*’s original site on Old Furnace Road, including guided tours that allow visitors to see the difference between the gallery space and the domestic space, as well as an exhibition by *OFARian* Caldas at the Arts Council of the Valley’s Smith House Galleries. At the conclusion of the *OFAR@DHGFA* exhibition, there will be a pop-up exhibition, screening, and spoken word event to reveal the work created throughout the tenure of the overall exhibition that will lend the Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Arts credentials to participants; they will be encouraged to add the exhibition to their resume. Thus, this main exhibition will allow *OFAR* and the associated artists to present and spread into new spaces, expanding the connections made from this project.

### **Unknowns**

The future of *OFAR* remains unknown. After I matriculate from JMU, *OFAR* will be distanced from the institution and will be without access to institutional resources like libraries and exhibition spaces. This will be an important moment of reflection and development, since I may find that I am able to develop a stronger relationship to community participants who feel alienated by the institutional connections. Consequently, I will be instigating a facilitated dialogue to envision its future towards the conclusion of the exhibition.

### **Conclusions**

As *OFAR* has matured over the past three years, I have come to better understand and embody the knowledge of individual artistic value and how All of our actions, creations, arrangements, encounters, and perspectives can provide extended moments of engagement that transcend the continuous cultural onslaught that we sift through on a daily basis. Consequently, *OFAR* has allowed me—and others—to reflect on a developing praxis of creative, radical liberation. *OFAR* is not just an object, but a system for developing connections through art. Thus, through this journey, I have realized that art is not just a noun but also a conjunction.

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