



Crenshaw Dairy Mart (Patrisse Cullors, Alexandre Dorris, and noé olivas), *abolitionist pod (prototype)* (2021). Modular geodesic dome containing autonomous garden. Image courtesy of the artists and Crenshaw Dairy Mart. Photo: Gio Solis.

Learn from this Community

Resisting Hierarchy through a Return to Community Arts



The New Compassionate Downtown (2021), a recent performance by Los Angeles Poverty Department (a.k.a. the “other” LAPD) pitted a fantasy of community against the interests of Downtown Los Angeles developers. The performance—which debuted on the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA’s concrete plaza in May¹—took as its premise the demonstrable fact that Downtown, particularly Skid Row, offers a high concentration of affordable housing and resources for mental health and addiction recovery. The performance then imagines, what if *this*—rather than the developer-touted promises of tall, boxy high rises and loft living—was what attracted new residents to DTLA.

The performance began with a pitch. The 10 actors were situated in plastic chairs arranged in a circle, recovery-meeting-style, when performer Iron G. Donato, donning a fedora, stepped forward. “Looking for a place to move? Consider Downtown L.A.,” he said, with all the practiced zeal of a car salesman:

Downtown’s Skid Row neighborhood is a resource for the entire region. ...Become part of this community... Develop meaningful relationships by getting involved with your neighbors, all of them. Become involved with the social

service and grassroots activities. Not only will you enjoy your new living space, but you’ll do so knowing that Downtown has inclusive zoning, and welcomes residents at all income levels.... Living the guilt and resentment free lifestyle, you will be a beacon to our entire society...

If only. From there, the performance became a sharing circle of sorts, as performers articulated what brought them Downtown. Stephanie Bell’s character said she ended up on Skid Row due to a lack of love and resources, before Maya Waterman, playing one of the well-to-do newcomers, bemoaned paying a thousand dollars a week for a beautician to keep her face pimple-free, saying that she’d moved downtown because she didn’t want to live that way anymore. After asking her how long she’d been in the area (“three months,” she answered), the members of her newly chosen community embrace her without further question.

For decades, powers that be have been reluctant to acknowledge anything resembling community on Skid Row, even as the Los Angeles Poverty Department—which has rehearsed on Skid Row since 1985 and primarily comprises performers who live there—asserts the existence of community in the neighborhood again and again through both their performances and the group’s very existence. As LAPD performers articulated a future of co-dependence and grassroots mutual aid, where DTLA newcomers knowingly join a pre-existing community of unhoused and low-income residents, I was struck by the contrast between this narrative and the recent struggles of the mainstream, institutional art “community,” whose failure to take care of its own during the ongoing pandemic prompted many artists to divert more energy toward mutual aid both for art workers and others who were left in need due to systemic failures. Considering that the art world’s top tier feigns inclusion while others struggle to get by, we are

especially primed to rethink what community means and whom it includes.

Artists and art workers have long tended to use the term “community” to apply mostly to themselves—consider the 1969 treatise by Carl Andre (an advocate for the independence of art workers long before he allegedly murdered artist Ana Mendieta), which claimed that the “art world” was “a poison in the *community of artists* and must be removed by obliteration” (emphasis mine). This argument framed the fight against hierarchies as beneficial to artists in particular, sidestepping the fact that those at the top tend to have a hand in oppressing people who are not artists as well.² Such trends persisted through the Trump era, with artists organizing in rarefied and protected art world spaces that are often unfamiliar to larger publics. (The spectacular failure of the Artists’ Political Action Network’s first meeting in February 2017, where artists planning to organize against the Trump administration arrived at the Boyle Heights gallery 356 Mission only to be met by a picket line of anti-gentrification community activists, perfectly encapsulates the disconnect that can occur when a notion of community includes only artists.)³ The pandemic and anti-racist uprisings have coincided with—or rather, encouraged—a few artist projects that pointedly take a more locally-grounded approach to community, and in doing so, shed a different light on the longstanding friction between the institutional art world and broader communities.

Before the Crenshaw Dairy Mart (CDM), founded in early 2020 by artists Patrisse Cullors, noé olivas, and Alexandre Dorriz, opened its gallery space, it set out to build connections with its Inglewood neighbors and to honor the long history of community arts and organizing in the neighborhood. Its programming includes community artists and organizers both in and outside of the mainstream art world—its founders all have MFAs from USC, even if they also have organizing backgrounds (Cullors co-founded Black Lives Matter), while both of the recent,

inaugural artists-in-residence do not. In collaboration with resident artist Paul Cullors, the Nigerian-American artist Oto-Abasi Attah created a mural outside the Dairy Mart of murdered South Central rapper and local entrepreneur Nipsey Hussle, titled *Saint Nip* (2020). This spring, CDM’s founders installed a geodesic dome (*abolitionist pod [prototype]*, 2021), a prototype for community gardens that could be placed throughout the city, in the parking lot of the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA—still occupying space in the institutional sector. CDM’s presence within institutional boundaries perhaps primes the art world, often inclined to ignore such community-driven ventures, to embrace and pay attention to its work.

Another community-based project founded in early 2020, artist Lauren Halsey’s Summaeverythang, began as a free, local, organic produce distribution project in South Central based out of a building that Halsey turned into a community center in 2019. The artist was able to fund the nonprofit through the sale of her work and outside donations, some of which were garnered through art world fundraising campaigns and promotion from her gallery, David Kordansky. Halsey, who has shown at MOCA, the Hammer, and The Studio Museum in Harlem, has often described her museum and gallery projects as prototypes for public art she plans to do in the Crenshaw District. Before the pandemic, she told the *New York Times* she planned to “throw open” the doors of her studio, a building adjacent to the community center, and invite neighbors to carve their own stories into panels that would be incorporated into a public monument. “We’re all authoring narratives around what it means to be alive now,” Halsey said at the time.⁴ As a result of the pandemic, the produce box project took precedence over this collaborative art initiative, in an effort to meet the more immediate needs of the community. Halsey did press for Summaeverythang, her art world clout and the art world’s desire to appear socially conscious fueling interest, but she avoided telling journalists where exactly in South



25



Top: Los Angeles Poverty Department, *I Fly! or How to Keep the Devil Down in the Hole* (performance view at REDCAT theater) (2020). Image courtesy of the artists and LAPD. Photo: Steve Gunther.

Bottom: Los Angeles Poverty Department, *Jupiter 35* (performance view at Intersection for the Arts) (1989). Image courtesy of the artists and LAPD. Photo: Lukas Fletzmann.

Central the community-center-turned-produce-assembly-line was, as the project was not for them.

The community artist has long been an ill-defined and misunderstood category, often interpreted as connoting efforts “outside” the art world, and thus—given high art’s tendency toward elitism—inviting some friction between the community arts and artists whose social practice or participatory work is more centered in the institutional art world. It doesn’t help that much of the literature on the community arts takes a more metrics-driven approach, evaluating potential impact over critical positioning or historical relevance. Claire Bishop acknowledged this in her 2012 book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, demonstrating the tensions between participatory art and community arts by comparing the late 1960s and 1970s work of the Artist Placement Group (APG) with the rise of the British Community Arts Movement in the late 1960s. The APG, an early London-based social practice collective, aimed to convince businesses and government agencies to employ artists, placing them in a position to influence organizational culture. The APG intentionally distanced itself from “community arts,” seeing itself more as a conceptual project aimed at reimagining institutional and organizational thinking. In contrast, Bishop defined the Community Arts Movement as “positioned against the hierarchies of the international art world and its criteria of success.”⁵ According to Bishop, the community artist aims to use participation and co-authorship to primarily empower marginalized or resource-poor sectors of society. She also notes that “it is conspicuous” that the localized participatory efforts of community artists have been less thoroughly historicized than individual contemporary artists with similar interests.⁶ Conspicuous indeed, especially given that historically marginalized communities—including in South Central Los Angeles—often have rich, sophisticated community art legacies.

In his book *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles*

(2006), Steve L. Isoardi defines the legacy of the community arts differently than Bishop, tracing a history of arts in Black America and West Africa that long predates the 1960s Community Arts Movement. Isoardi acknowledges that most Black American artists were community artists from the time of enslavement through the segregation era. Even as they began performing or exhibiting in mainstream venues during the first half of the 20th century, they often had no option other than to live and stay in communities of color. Still, when musician Horace Tapscott left the Lionel Hampton band in 1961, disillusioned with the growing commercialization of jazz and compelled by the experimentation happening in his South Central home, he was motivated by a desire to dig deeper into the traditions of African and African American ritual. As many South Central artists were doing at the time, he studied West African rituals, finding models for the kind of collaborative, socially-conscious art he wanted to make. In explaining the roots of Tapscott’s community practice, Isoardi quotes ethnomusicologist J.H. Kwabena Nketia, who wrote that for the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana, “the enjoyment or satisfaction which a social occasion gives to the participants is directly related to its artistic content—to the scope it gives for the sharing of artistic experience through the display of art objects, the performance of music, dancing, or the recital of poetry.”⁷ In other words, art intensified and strengthened the experience of living (whereas, in Tapscott’s experience, touring with Hampton involved catering to hostile white audiences, hustling to succeed in a mainstream commercial milieu that did not value his community’s lived experience). The musicians in the virtuosic Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, which Tapscott founded, based their rituals and musical innovations in part on oral histories they shared with each other.

The narrative of community arts that Isoardi traces—one that also resonates with stories of visual artists like Noah Purifoy, whose work in and



27



Top: Summaeverythang Community Center, Los Angeles (June 2020). Image courtesy of SLHStudio, Los Angeles, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Bottom: Oto-Abasi Attah and Paul Cullors, *Saint Nip* (2020). Mural. Image courtesy of the artists and Crenshaw Dairy Mart. Photo: Gio Solis.

around Watts and later in the desert lead to him being mislabeled an “outsider” artist, despite his education and exhibition history—is less about artists giving back or trying to use their high art know-how to empower vulnerable communities. It is more about choosing to thrive in a different *kind* of artist community: an inclusive, local one not defined by outside hierarchies, and not devoting its time and resources to angling for the attention of or a place in these hierarchies. The overwhelmingly white, mainstream art world has repeatedly viewed such work as “outsider” because it isn’t framed within the institutions most familiar to conventionally-trained curators and academics. Community artists who continue to focus on being present with one another, and on doing work that feeds on collective histories and desires, give the high art world the ultimate snub, completely ignoring its prominence in favor of a different world.

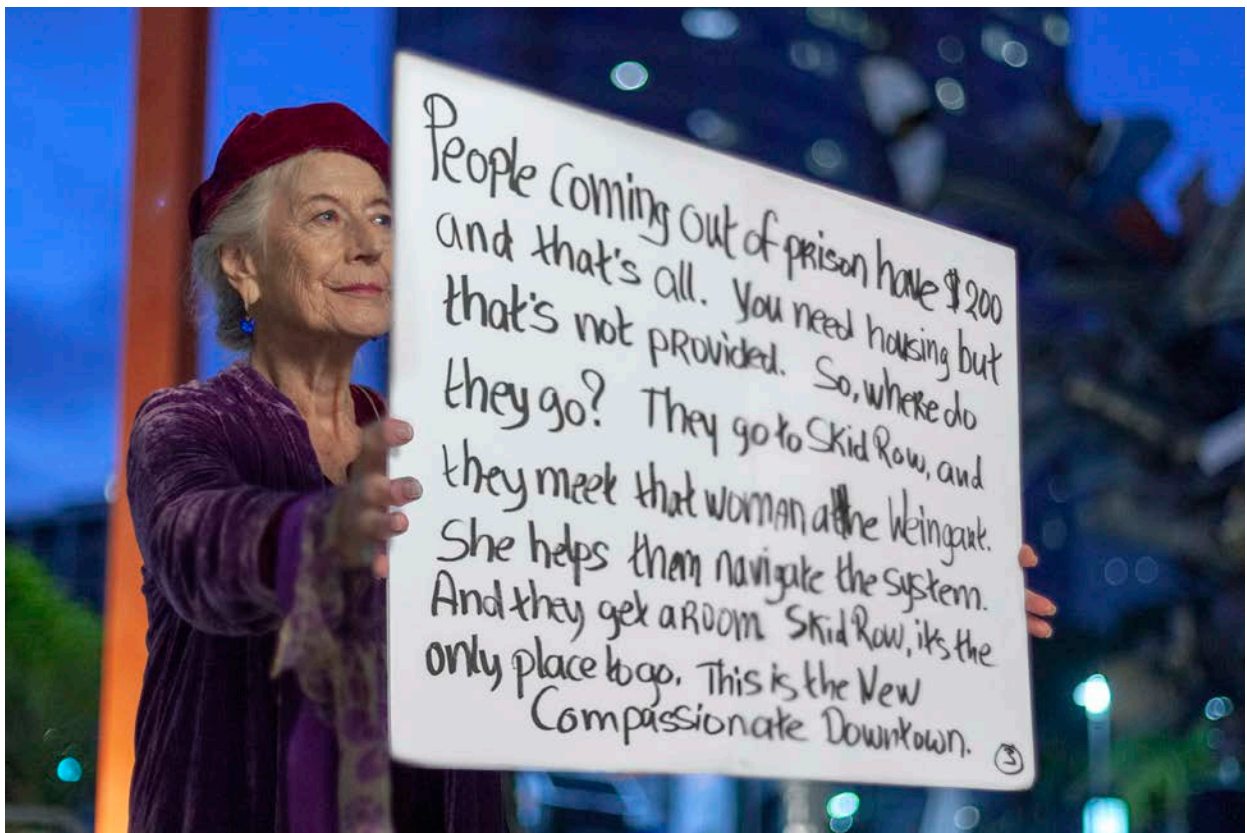
As recent interest in Summaeverythang and the Crenshaw Dairy Mart has demonstrated, the hierarchical art world does want to pay attention to community efforts driven by the right kind of artists (ones that have come up through their ranks, and still to some extent promote their projects within the institutional art world), support of which can make traditionally elitist and disproportionately white art institutions appear more diverse, aware, and conscientious. But if a resurgence of interest in community arts is driven by a desire to virtue signal and appear on the right side of urgent social justice issues, it likely will not last. Rather, a community arts resurgence will have a better chance to thrive if it is motivated—to call back to Nketia’s rich description of community arts—by a desire for the enjoyment and satisfaction of a raucous, collaborative, locally-rooted, anti-hierarchical approach to art-making. Perhaps, given art institutions’ newfound desire to appear inclusive, this approach can trickle up, but the goal has to be to leave the closed-mindedness bred by institutional

elitism aside in order to shift focus to something else.

At the end of LAPD’s *The New Compassionate Downtown*, former criminal councilmember José Huizar, played by Clarence Powell, makes an appearance, having been placed as a hotel concierge (rather than sent to prison) by the New Compassionate Downtown, who have advocated for restorative justice on his behalf. It isn’t quite clear from his posturing monologues if he has accepted the damage caused by his corrupt dealings with developers, but his neighbors in *Downtown*, affected by this damage firsthand, don’t judge. “Ain’t nobody an angel,” says Lorraine Morland, drawing out the words, as other performers take up this anti-sanctimonious refrain and the performance insistently crescendos to its close. The playing field is leveling, and the community is complicated, fully alive, and just taking shape.

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles.

1. The performance was part of the city-sponsored mental health awareness initiative WE RISE 2021: Art Rise.
2. Carl Andre, “Proposal,” from *Open Hearing* (The Art Workers’ Coalition, 1969).
3. Matt Stromberg, “L.A. Artists and Activists Clash at a Political Action Meeting in Boyle Heights,” *Hyperallergic*, February 23, 2017, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/360636/la-artists-and-activists-clash-at-a-political-action-meeting-in-boyle-heights/>.
4. Hilarie M. Sheets, “Lauren Halsey Is Making Monuments to South Los Angeles,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/arts/lauren-halsey-frieze-award-new-york.html>.
5. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 177.
6. Ibid, 185.
7. Steve L. Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 5.



29



The Los Angeles Poverty Department,
The New Compassionate Downtown
 (performance view) (2021).
 Image courtesy of the artists and MOCA.
 Photo: Monica Nouwens.