

# **PEER REVIEW:**

# **Reading Rooms**

# **& Libraries**

**Issue #1**

*April 2019*

**Press Press x Wendy's Subway**

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## Press Press x Wendy's Subway

**PEER REVIEW: Reading Rooms & Libraries** by Press Press and Wendy's Subway is the first in a series of discussions which aim to address key questions facing independent, socially-oriented, alternative educational frameworks, such as independent libraries, publishers, community spaces, and artistic or cultural initiatives. Through in-person encounters, site visits, and ongoing collaborations, **PEER REVIEW** aims to build support structures across organizations by facilitating the exchange of information about administrative models, methodologies for community-engagement, available resources and collections, personal experiences, and by bringing awareness to the specific missions and programming initiatives of participating organizations.

This inaugural conversation between Press Press (Baltimore & Los Angeles) and Wendy's Subway (New York) took place in Spring 2019. Subsequent editions of **PEER REVIEW** will be published bi-annually. Visit [www.peer-review.press](http://www.peer-review.press) for a growing archive of the project.

**PEER REVIEW** was initiated by Press Press and Wendy's Subway in 2018. After each edition, the participating organizations invite the next round of collaborators. Every new edition of the series is fully overseen by the participating organizations. Support for **PEER REVIEW** Issue 1 is provided by Common Field's Field Grant Program.

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**What do we, as alternative and independent libraries, have to offer that larger institutions cannot? How do we build and prioritize community through and around the collections and resources that we maintain? How does a smaller scale of operations enable us to pay closer attention to readers' needs? Does remaining nimble in our**

**collecting and programming practices allow us to reflect and react to the changes within our communities and immediate contexts? What might caring for, maintaining, and growing a collection look like, when accessibility, use, and flexibility are prioritized over conservation, limited access, and inflexible systems of classification?**

# Organic Collectivity

## of Books &

### On the Sociality

Harris Bauer, Kimi Hanauer,  
& Rachel Valinsky

Harris Bauer, Publication Coordinator at Wendy's Subway, and Kimi Hanauer, Founding Editor & Organizer of Press Press, met on March 10, 2019 in West Adams, Los Angeles to discuss context, growth, and collectivity in relation to their respective organizations. Harris and Kimi both recently relocated to Los Angeles from the East Coast. Rachel Valinsky, Artistic Director of Wendy's Subway, contributed from New York.

Harris Bauer: Can you talk about how Press Press got started and developed into the space and collaborative project it is now?

Kimi Hanauer: Press Press started in 2014, when I began to work with Baltimore City Community College Refugee Youth Project, an organization that hosts after school programming across Baltimore City for refugee youth. I was working in partnership with their Catonsville, Maryland site, where I started a creative writing program that was meant to be occupied by only second-language American English speakers. At the time, I had been interested in making independent publications and was bringing that to the group. But there wasn't an overarching idea to make this into a publishing initiative. Rather, the idea was to create a space that wasn't pushing assimilation to American English speaking standards and where the youth were directing the conversation and what they wanted to do. I would share publications, art, and poetry with the group, and from there we started making publications. Press Press evolved out of that. From the start, the motivation of the project was to encourage self-representation, people representing their own narratives, as the primary mode of expression. It

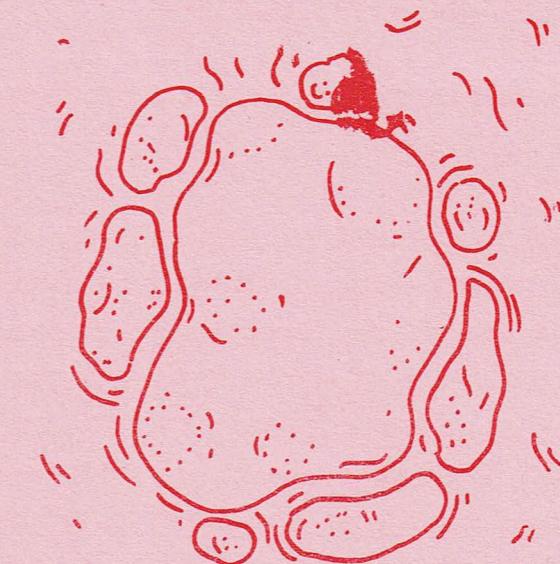
was and is about situating power in the hands of the person who's either creating the content, or whose story it is, rather than the other way around.

HB: Right, inverting the editorial relationship...

KH: Press Press evolved out of that youth program into the organization that it is today. We kept that youth program going for about four years, and this past year we transformed it into a hiring program. The Contemporary in Baltimore supported us with a grant to hire a few of the students in the summer as authors in a recent publication, *Sentiments*. Our work today also includes producing publications, programs, exhibitions, and running a storefront studio in Baltimore. There's different people involved in various aspects of the work.

My thinking about Press Press has been informed by writing I did around the idea of the *blob*, which comes from an architectural metaphor: the blob is in a constant flux, it grows out of and evolves with its context and

the people that participate in it. It's in constant movement and change, and is kind of ambiguous in that way. That ambiguity has both been a strength and a challenge to this work.



HB: It spreads from the inside outwards.

KH: Yeah, from the ground up. Rather than being simply plopped down unto a place. So it has been pretty organic in the sense that projects flow into other projects, and there's people who come in and out of Press Press as an organization. For example, during the 2015 Baltimore Uprising, I participated in some beautiful things that were going on in the city: youth-led conversations, clean-up sessions, things like that. Out of that came this publication that compiled all the rad things happening in Baltimore that were not shown on national media. And from there evolved Press Press' first, multi-authored compilation called *If I Ruled the World*, which

started from conversations I was having during those two weeks. That publication asked Baltimore-based writers, artists, and organizers what they would do if they ruled the world, with inspiration from the Nas classic, “If I Ruled The World.”

HB: How did Bomin, Valentina, and Bilphena become involved?

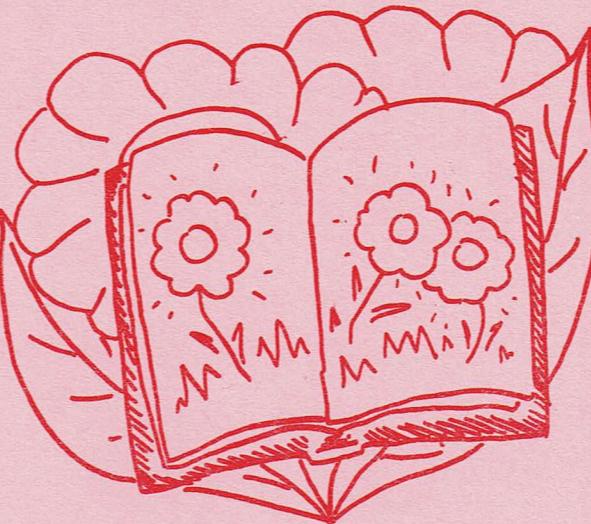
KH: I met Bomin and Valentina at school. Initially, Bomin wanted to get involved with the work I was doing at BCCC Refugee Youth Project. At the time, she was taking time off from school to start Cafe Andamiro, this rad coffee shop with her mom, Ran. That year, she started working with me as co-facilitator of the youth workshops, and for me that meant, “Ok, Bomin is part of the team!” But I do remember us having a funny moment where I was like: “Oh, you’re part of Press Press, right?” And she was like: “Oh, yeah, sure!” This was months into having been working together. Working with Bomin in that first year was special. At first, we didn’t directly talk about our motivations or structuring the program in this or that way, it just really felt like we were navigating it together emotionally and intellectually. I felt so grateful to be on the same page with someone like that while doing something that felt so deeply personal. I feel like that set the tone for how Valentina and Bilphena both got involved. Valentina got involved when we started *If I*

*Ruled The World*; she reached out to me about helping to make prints for the cover of the book. We started with that and then she kept coming back, helping with things as they would come up. At a certain point it also became clear that she was on the team. Bilphena also joined organically through our most recent publication, *Sentiments*. At first, I reached out to Bilphena to talk about the project and to see if she’d be interested in making a chapter. We became friends pretty quickly, and Bilphena joined us to co-facilitate the workshops that happened as part of *Sentiments*. We all just vibed; it soon became clear she was more than a participant in the publication and took on a role as a member of our core team.

What about with Wendy’s? Do you feel like there is this kind of organic structure? How have things evolved?

HB: In New York there’s a widespread desire for space, for a space that can be productive and creative, and one’s own, especially if you’re working by yourself on creative endeavors. Wendy’s came out of this desire for space among people who were working in

different ways but looking for some kind of common, support structure.



Rachel Valinsky: Right. Wendy’s Subway was originally founded by a group of writers who were gathering regularly to write, but eventually felt the need to have a more concerted space to do that. This was in the winter of 2013. The original group was mostly comprised of poets, writers, and other folks involved in the various literary communities of New York. And while the initial impetus was to create a space that was open to writers to work on their individual or collaborative projects together, in an environment devoted to this pursuit, Wendy’s quickly became another location that could offer poetry programming to the public: we

hosted readings, workshops, and a range of other program offerings, all of which came in through proposals we received from writers, artists, or publishers in the city or passing through, or which we solicited. Things definitely came together organically, but always with the idea that the world around publications we wanted to create would emphasize the sociality of books: the fact that everything from writing, to reading alone, or as part of a reading group, or out loud in public, to publishing books, or to collecting them is inherently social, based on relationships of care, support, sharing, and exchange. Building a library was very important in this sense, and while the collection is a central aspect of our organization now, it sort of happened incidentally when we opened. All of a sudden we had a space, and writers in it, and we needed books. We brought books in from our houses, friends dropped off donations, independent publishers sent us their catalogues. Soon we had over 1,000 books.

HB: When you’re writing and thinking about writing, you often want to be surrounded by books. So for Wendy’s, this happened very organically. If we were going to have a space to write in, and think in, and talk

in, we'd need books. I was not one of the founding members of Wendy's—I came in around 2016. In the first two years we were doing much more off-site programming, we had the library space on-site and then a mobile reading room that was housed in other institutions and allowed us to go out into the world with a focused collection of books. That's how I became familiar with Wendy's; I was attracted to this mobile library and community, and how it created a designated space for conversation and reading.

But in my time here, it's been the case that the flexibility of the space to being or becoming what its community wants it to be has been crucial. People who are excited about putting together projects or are really excited about the space and its capabilities, have been active members in it. And that's amazing—the idea that we can articulate what we need, and find a way to make it happen. Even though it started as a space for a specific group of writers to read, work, and study, it also became important that that activity be oriented outward to larger publics. Which was more able to happen when we got a storefront space. Wendy's was originally on the second floor of an artist studio building, making it hard to be present to the public because we weren't in a very visible or accessible location. Already in our first location we

had a library collection, acted as a workspace, and as a space for readings and gatherings. But, being on the second floor and not having a buzzer, people couldn't just come in. Now we're on Bushwick Avenue, and people walk in all the time.

When did Press Press open the storefront?

KH: End of 2016.

RV: We also moved to our storefront in 2016.

HB: Did that change the dynamic among the Press Press team?

KH: It was definitely a shift. After *If I Ruled the World*, it became really obvious that Press Press was becoming much more of a social project, in the sense that literally facilitating collaborations and having meetings was getting hard to do in random coffee shops without having a consistent work space. That was the guiding motivation for finding a space. Press Press' space used to be a gallery called BB that was run by Colin Alexander and Allie Linn, and they were really generous in passing the space on to Press Press in 2016. They had a system in place where the storefront was

funded by 5-7 studio spaces they had created in the basement. So we tried to continue that structure in order to make it financially possible.

The storefront created the possibility to build on the community that Press Press had started cultivating in our first three years. For me, that meant building on the idea of understanding publishing as an action of gathering a public. The storefront is a site in which that gathering can happen in a more meaningful way. The storefront allows us to have more control over the space and the rules that facilitate our interactions.

HB: It's also interesting in relation to your idea of the blob. When you ground yourself in a location, you create a door that people can walk through, and so many new opportunities can emerge from that, because you have so many more conversations with people. When people come in, we end up spending a lot of time explaining what we do, and continuing to clarify that in

the process. I don't know if it's the same at Press Press, but we're just constantly getting people who walk in and ask: "What is this?" It looks like a bookstore but it's not; it looks like coworking space, but it's not (definitely not), it looks like a library but it's non-circulating, so it's in fact a reading room...

RV: I think it's unusual or unexpected to be a space for reading and study. There aren't many spaces beckoning people to take a minute, sit down, read a book, at their leisure.

Another part of the difficulty is explaining what we do simply, let's say. Because we don't just do one thing. That's one of our strengths, and one of the exciting things about the organization, that it has a certain flexibility and can be nimble. But it also makes "defining" what we do, especially for certain audiences (like, a funding body, for instance), a challenging task.

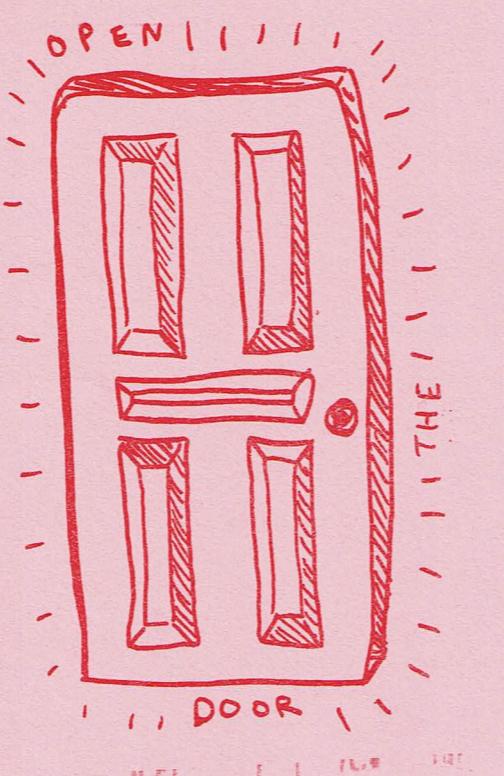
HB: How have things shifted since the beginning of Press Press with regards to its community? Particularly, once you moved into the storefront and acquired a space that was "open"?

KH: That's an important question. How can we be thoughtful about who's involved in this project? Who and what is this space meant to stand for? If this space is open to everyone and everything all the time, I fear that it will become engulfed by the very things that drove us to build this space in the first place. That it will be taken over by whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and so on. It's about thoughtfulness not exclusivity: making a space that can thoughtfully embrace the differences we embody. Of course, everyone is welcome at our public events. It's more about the culture of the space, the rules and norms of the space, not the literal people that come through. Because, actually, it's pretty powerful when men can be down with unapologetic femme leadership.

In thinking about the notion of "openness," one of the other ideas that has guided Press Press' structure is that there are many different ways of getting involved. There are ways of being involved that are really open to whoever, like coming into the space to read or participate in ongoing workshops, or potentially curat-

ing a library shelf.

HB: Was there a point in the beginning of your programming where it did feel like it was being taken over? Or have there been things you've rejected outright?



KH: It was never about saying **NO** to certain things, rather it's about saying **YES** to certain things. Like saying yes to embracing a politics of difference rather than identity-erasing assimilationism, saying yes to a space that is multilingual, where English doesn't have to be used in one way, or it doesn't have to be used at

all. Saying yes to multi-authorship in publications instead of singular authorship. It's about making the positive framework that we want our world to be organized around. I see the life of Press Press as a form of critique of the dominant institutions that structure contemporary life.



HB: Right, when you go forward and decide to say yes to specific things that others might be saying no to, you're making deliberate space for a community to grow. But I find that these open, positive, and affirming spaces are often attractive to many people who might not be representative of what you originally set out to support. It's the nature of building an exciting place, people want in! It's unavoidable that the more space you carve out, the more people

further detached from the original mission will flock to you, and eventually you have to ask yourself the question: Do I have to start saying no? How do I preserve what we set out to create?

KH: That's exactly the conflict: how do you unabashedly be intentional about what or who this project is for? I think its OK to say "No, this is just for \_\_\_\_." There is some positive power in that negation. For me, it just comes down to being thoughtful. If I want to make a space where folks are able to be vulnerable and real, then I have to be intentional about how to accommodate that, not just for others but also for myself. There's a limit to what I can handle thoughtfully as a facilitator. Sometimes I feel like I need to be so guarded just so I'll be able to focus my energy on the important things.

I have been thinking about what it means to organize around experience rather than solely through the lens of identity. Organizing around identity can be important and often the only way to get certain things done; at the same time, it can also affirm existing categories of structural oppression that are legible to state-power.

Right now, I'm trying to consider how organizing through the lens of personal or communal experience, something that is not easily legible to the bureaucratic frameworks we exist within, can create similarly thoughtful spaces without affirming existing frameworks of power.

That's an aspect of how the workshops for the last Press Press project, *Sentiments: Expressions of Cultural Passage*, were put together. We emphasized inviting folks who have a relationship to cultural passage, as in people who have experienced passing through multiple cultures in meaningful ways—essentially pulling in people who have a relationship to immigration. The aim here really is to emphasize the human experience of immigration, rather than the legalist language that's often used to dehumanize folks and justify acts of violence.

RV: Our programming to date has really centered around the notion that creative and critical engagements with literature offer transformative social experiences, both on an individual level and as a community. We work with writers and organizers to lead workshops that are typically generative. There's been a range of offer-

ings, but I think some of the most successful workshops really think about pedagogy as an act of care and about what happens in the room on a collective level—what kind of relationships are constructed in that environment, which is at once nurturing and, ideally, agonistic. Where we can understand agonism, critique, and discussion as productive modalities for exchange, growth, and learning within the public sphere that is temporarily constituted by the group that is assembled.

KH: How do you create a supportive space?

RV: There are lots of ways in which support can be offered, beginning with keeping the door open and inviting folks to spend time reading, which is a practice they can certainly elect to do for themselves, but sometimes need some support and guidance to realize. Support is also understanding that care starts within the organization and its members—that we have to be there for each other

personally and professionally and have clarity about how those two modes can complement each other but also how they are distinct. Support is being accountable to ourselves and the organization so that we can be responsible and accountable to our community. And through programming we can really support the visions of writers and artists we work with, but also hopefully make space for new and important relationships to form. For example, we just launched a reading series called LINEAGE, curated by Emily Brandt, where a guest writer is asked to invite a mentor and mentee they have worked with at some point (within or outside of an academic or institutional context). The three read together. The series brings out the intergenerational support structures that have been created across this group of writers, and how each writer's work impacts, challenges, and nurtures that of the others in different ways.

HB: I think that figuring out how to represent yourself as a space that is open and inviting to people beyond, perhaps, your immediate community can require more effort than you might initially expect. At first, the idea was to make Wendy's

a place that felt readily available for people to spend their time in and make use of. And part of the intention behind maintaining a large collection of books that vary across different fields and themes was to make sure that our doors felt open to multiple communities. It's an ongoing effort to make sure that's actively happening.

KH: It's like you're evolving from being an introverted organization to a more extraverted organization. I can imagine there are so many tensions around that.

HB: Right, it's interesting when you're dealing with books too... does Press Press have an actual collection that people can access in the space?

KH: Yes, the collection is shared between Baltimore and Los Angeles now, since I moved in the past year. It's funny that you bring that up, because for us the library collection was one of the main ways we reached out to involve people in the space from within and outside of our community. The idea of the library came out of this public conversation we hosted with local artists and organizers when we first got the space and were still working

on fixing it up, repainting and all that. It was a conversation around what would be productive in the space, what people want to see happen there, and the library idea was solidified through that. To organize the initial book collection, we reached out to twelve people who had an existing relationship to Press Press to pick books that they loved and felt should be included in our collection. Then, we asked those twelve people to nominate other people to pick books, who then nominated other people to pick books. Every few months the library shelves became more mixed up with all of the different books. The idea was that this process would keep our programming grounded in the interests of our broader community. The books served as a kind of guide for the programming and a way to consistently mold and remodel the culture of the space. During that first year, we were actively building the collection, so that **the culture of the space was never a static thing that was in one person's control, rather it was meant to expand and change all the time through the library.**

RV: I love that idea and I'm so happy that you reached out to us early on to suggest some books for the collection, too! I think that we have a lot to learn from what other organizations collect and what their libraries look like. We tried to actualize that in our second Reading Room

at BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) in 2017. The previous year we'd been invited to produce a Reading Room on the occasion of the Next Wave Festival in the Fisher space, and while the Reading Room has always been intended to be a site-responsive project—which is to say, incorporate contributions that are related to the programming in the site we're installed in—we decided to take this a step further the second time around. In 2017, we invited twenty-five independent libraries and organizations to recommend titles for inclusion in the collection that came from their own shelves. It was a way to begin to build relationships within that network of organizations, learn about what other people were reading, discover titles that were nowhere near our peripheral vision, and make a small sample of those organizations' holdings available to the public, so they could inquire further if they wanted to. This also lead us to solidify our vision around our Residency Program, which is intended to support organizations, publishers, and artist-run projects, rather than individual writers and artists. The idea is that if we work closely with another organization-in-residence at Wendy's for two or three months, we will each come away from it with

more resources, more knowledge, and amplify each other's work and community.

HB: When we did the BAM Reading Room for the first time, we acquired a collection of performance, choreography, and theater-related titles, books we didn't have in the space yet. Now we have an extensive collection of titles in that area because we were able to work with supportive institutions that gave us funds for acquisitions. The Reading Rooms have been an amazing way to build specific collections and support (especially independent) publishers, but they're also how we've done a lot of outreach to readers, by being in residence in other institutions that have more foot traffic and larger audiences. All of these books come back to our space in Bushwick, so that they can be a permanent resource to readers and visitors here.

RV: Right, though I think perhaps unlike Press Press, the main way we do outreach in the space is through programs, often programs that activate the collection, or publications more generally, like

writing workshops, or reading groups. This is what brings people out more than the collection itself, which is unfortunately still an underutilized resource. But the collection reflects all this incredibly collaborative thinking—amongst our staff, but also with other organizations and libraries—about what books could be useful and interesting to people.

KH: What do you think we can offer as as (independent) library spaces that is different than what might be offered by a larger institution? It sounds like one of those things is **having a flexible and shifting collection.** Such malleability doesn't often happen in larger institutional organizations because things are so much slower, and there's more bureaucracy and probably more limitations on what is allowed to be collected.

RV: Exactly. So many institutional libraries have specific agendas that are hard to break through, or might place a freeze on new acquisitions till they've catalogued the thousands of back-titles they have to process. We have lots of books to catalogue still, but in some ways **the fact of having to be constantly in contact with the collection, see-**

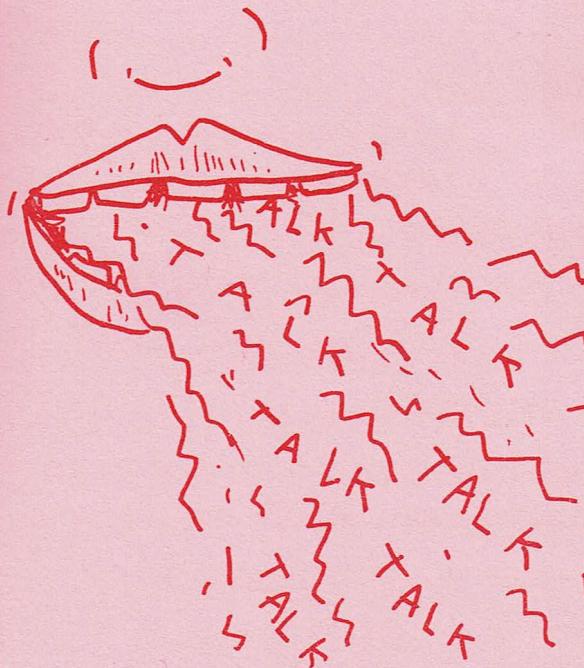
ing what it's made of, processing new books, keeps it close at hand and gives us better knowledge of what we have and how it works as a collection. We have over 3,000 titles now, but strangely I could probably tell you where every book comes from. That's one of the most important fields in our cataloging, actually, provenance. It matters to us how we got a book: who dropped it off as they were passing through town because their friend told them to check out the space, which writer left us a copy after a reading, or which independent publisher donated their titles to us and when. It matters because embedded in each of those encounters, those donations, and acquisitions is a relationship that has continued beyond the date the book came to live on our shelves, and that continues as readers pick up the book to read.

HB: Right, there's also this kind of cool situation of kinship and familiarity that happens where, for instance, there's so many small presses in and around Brooklyn that donate their entire collections and cat-

alogues of new books to us each year. Ugly Duckling Presse gives us a copy of every one of their new publications so we have this entire archive over the last few years of their books available to be read in the space. A lot of smaller presses will send over books like this, and you wouldn't necessarily find this in a larger county library or institution.

We're also really actively building up the collection to have non-English language titles. We have a pretty great and actively growing Spanish language collection which is supported significantly due to our relationships with some incredible South and Central American publishers. Our desire for that bilingual availability has been really important to us, and it's also opened up some fascinating conversations around translation that have taken the form of public programs and talks, or simply information gatherings and discussions.

RV: And that's the most important thing the collection can do, is to spur those long hours of talking...

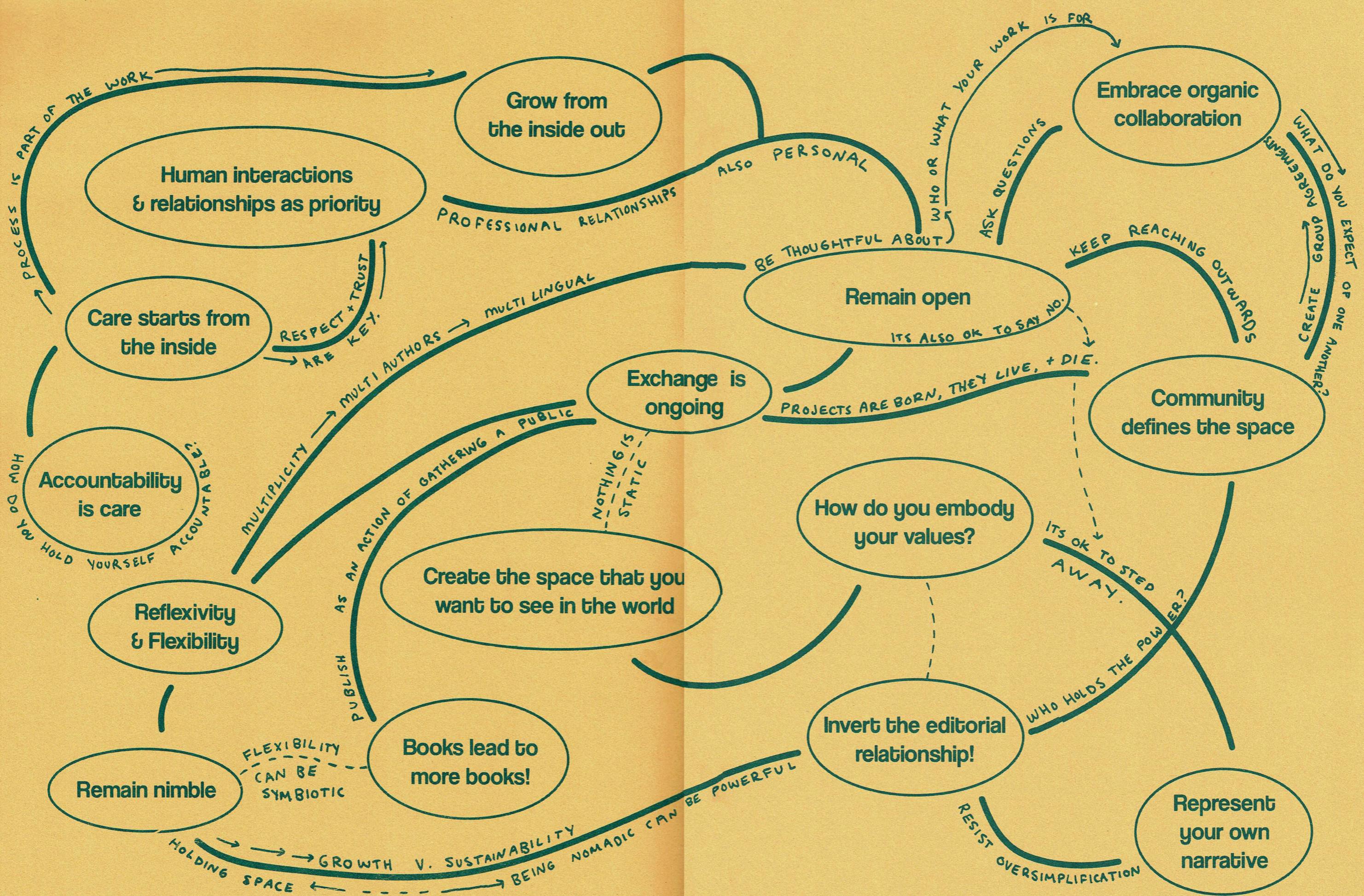


KH: Yeah and there is a power dynamic that exists with Press Press having a space in Baltimore that wouldn't be the same here.

HB: What would you say that power is?

KH: Well, there's a sense of positive power around having the storefront because we're able to hold space with our community there. Especially in that landscape, where there's many inactive or empty spaces. And because, at the time we moved in, the art spaces that did exist around were mostly very monocultural and catered to specific forms of art practice; they were not socially-oriented. But this has changed a lot in Baltimore since the time we got the space. Here in LA, because gentrification is so real in a different way, and because there's so much more money present... Its a very different situation. Plus, I'm a transplant here, I just got here. I've been thinking about what it would be like to be a nomadic organization here. But I think its important to take the time to learn and be with this city first.

HB: Being in New York—a city where space is hard to come by—with this storefront, we began discussing how New York is such a publicly expressed living situation. We are going and moving and doing and being outwards all the time. So to provide a space that you can step into to



just read, or while you're waiting for your kid, or waiting to be picked up from a school nearby, or because you have nowhere else to go for a moment, is a service that we saw as lacking in the city's environment. It's a city of people working and overworking, and the one thing we want to do but never seem to have time for is just reading, or just personal work. It's kind of a funny crux: we've created a space that is hard to fully utilize. But it comes from this desire of wanting to build a space for people that counters New York's inaccessibility, the monetization and privatization of space here. It's a different relationship to space and escape.

KH: How does remaining nimble allow you to do certain things that pushing towards growth wouldn't? I'm reminded of something that Jessica Lynne from Arts.Black said in a talk at Pioneer Works during Press Play Fair in 2018, about how Arts.Black is very intentional about how many articles they publish a month because their priority is being able to pay the writers and to be supportive. They know there's a limit to how many articles they can publish while being thoughtfully supportive of the writers they work with. That stayed with me, because I feel like that is spot

on how I strive to operate, but has been far from how I've actually operated. I'm always getting way too excited about all the things we could do. Often, we set out to do these big things before we've built our capacity up to actually do them. I think there's so much wisdom in how Jessica was talking about it, because she's prioritizing being a supportive organization that is intentional about the work they do from the inside out.

RV: That's such an important question. I think of a lot of organizations whose efforts are so geared toward growth and expansion. We definitely needed to think about growth at a certain moment, especially in 2016 when we moved to Bushwick. We incorporated and became a 501(c)3 at that point, so that we could start applying for grants and becoming more sustainable, hold regular open hours, and support artists and writers who were doing programs here at the space. And to some extent we're still thinking about growth, but I'm actually much more interested in the figure of the plateau, in how to maintain what we have and grow from the inside so that we're fully supported and able to support others, without dream-

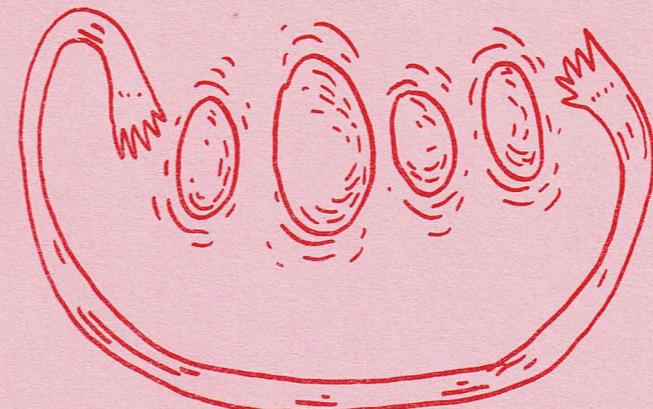
ing too big. Wendy's is only ever an expression and extension of our own capacities, dreams, and desires for what it is and can be. And it's important that we stay focused, not overextend ourselves.

HB: It's such a hard thing to do! That's a big thing Rachel and I have been speaking about a lot recently. We're both people who take on a lot at once and I think this last year we've been so excited and driven towards outreach within our publishing mission, and we want to do so many things. But beyond wanting to do these projects, there's the fact that Wendy's Subway still needs to function as a space. So there are tricky relationships to balance between all the things we want to do and all the things we're capable of doing. I think we find ourselves feeling invincible because of our excitement sometimes, and it's easily done when you're surrounded by such inspiring and incredible people. Do you guys feel like you often bite off more than you can chew?

KH: Definitely. I do it all the time, I need to work on it.

HB: I wonder if that's quite female of us, also. I think about Hailey Loman [the co-founder and organizer of Los Angeles

Contemporary Archive] as well, and conversations I've had with her and other womxn running similar sorts of spaces, who are trying to hold everything together. Maybe it's a desire for holding and going going going, which can not only be self-sacrificial but also sacrificial of the work at hand.



KH: I think there's also some scarcity politics going on. My unconscious thinking about new projects or opportunities is usually: "Wow, if we don't do this now we'll never have this opportunity again." I always operate out of that place of, "I don't deserve this, so now that I have the chance I need to make it happen..." I think that's an underlying aspect of how I work. Realizing this over the last couple of years, I'm trying to manage it more. It's not a healthy way to think.

HB: Do you think that comes from a place of feeling like people are listening right now? Or that people want it right now?

This work?

KH: I don't know. I don't know if people are listening. I think some people are.

HB: I don't know either, I'm just curious if that brewing feeling of "now or never" is coming from feeling like if we don't do it now, things are just going to implode. Which they very well might at any given moment.

KH: It could be. I think about how Press Press has been around for five years, and we've been focused on issues around immigration, race, and local politics since the start. Now, there's seemingly more attention being paid to these kinds of issues, maybe because people have heard some phrases of explicit forms of prejudice that they weren't aware existed. Or maybe it's because there have been some changes to people who occupy positions of power in a positive way. Or maybe because yeah, things are breaking at the seams. I think that's probably an aspect of why it feels urgent, like, we have to make use of this moment where it's cool to care.

HB: I think there's something really intimate and tender about library spaces and what they foster, so that's something that feels important to hold onto right now.

KH: It's been really important to me to understand the friendships and relationships

we have as part of this work, if not the ultimate product of the work. Being open to the fluctuations that happen when we prioritize relationships means that the work we make isn't always going to be consistent: we're not always going to be able to have the same expectations of one another. That's what makes it possible and what makes it hard. I think acknowledging that this is all part of the labor is really important. Recognizing our relationships as part of the work puts into perspective how much we can actually take on production-wise.

Something I have struggled with is learning how to build accountability processes as part of what it means to care for one another within shared projects. Being able to hold others accountable, being open to being held accountable, and being able to hold yourself accountable, is part of how you can show care for others you are working with. Emotional sensibility is what makes a lot of what we do possible, and that's something that's unfortunately so often pushed out of every other working structure.

# Space & Roles On Holding Space & Negotiating Roles

Valentina Cabezas, Bomin Jeon,  
& Corinne Butta

Valentina Cabezas and Bomin Jeon, Storefront Organizers of Press Press, and Corinne Butta, Managing Editor at Wendy's Subway, met on March 13, 2019 at Red Emma's, a worker-owned cooperative and bookstore in Baltimore, to discuss the tensions between flexibility, organization, and remaining open to community.

Valentina Cabezas: In what ways are we—as individuals, or within our collaborative settings of Wendy's Subway and Press Press, able to build and prioritize community through and around the collections and resources that we maintain?

Bomin Jeon: For Press Press, when we were actually building our collection, the community input was crucial. Part of the original collection was just our personal books and part of it was donations, but most of it came through asking other people who are part of our community to suggest to us what should be in our library. We asked local artists, people who are resources in town and abroad...

VC: Yeah, not necessarily just in Baltimore. Essentially the questions were, “What do you think should be accessible to others? What should be in our library?” It was just about leaving it to the public rather than us deciding for those that want to interact with our space. It’s for whoever is wanting. We accept donations. I’ll be at a book fair and I’ve had a friend come by like, “Hey, look we have this book, do you want it? Is this something that you’d want to acquire and maybe we’ll do a trade?” And I think that’s really beautiful. In acquiring this knowledge you’re also giving away something that you’ve created; there’s always that ongoing exchange.

Corinne Butta: When Wendy's started five years ago, a group of writers wanted to gather resources and to grow that into something that was useful for all of them. At first, it was much more of an inwardly-focused group; they pooled their collections

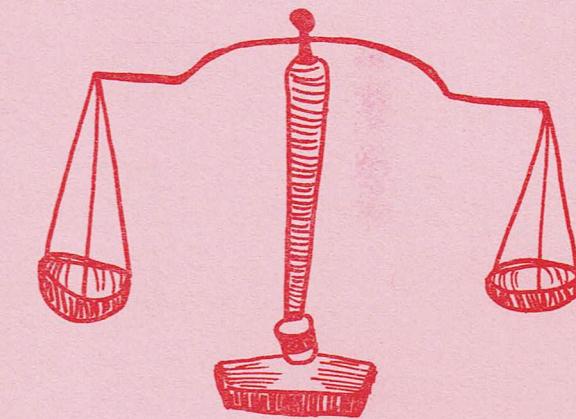
as a communal resource. Over the years, they started to think intentionally about how to build that library into a public resource. It became a question of, “What do we want to provide for people?” In achieving that, they asked members of the community, “What do you want to see here?”

Our current collecting practices are very community driven. For example, we invite publishers in residence to take over shelves in our space, and with them come whole new collections of books. And so, through initiatives like these, our library continues to grow according to the interests of the people that we invite into our space, the people that find our space. It’s really organic in that way.

VC: In terms of maintaining all of what's collected, how do you go about that process? Are books allowed out of the space? Is someone that's not part of the inherent collective able to come in and take some resources and come back? Is it important to be able to read in the actual space?

CB: It's something that we're always thinking about because we have a space that is too small for the amount of books that we have, and so at any given point we have so much more to offer than is actually visible from walking into the space. We've installed Reading Rooms at other spaces in

the past. We did one at the Bard Graduate Center; we did one at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. These are ways to both grow our collection and take it out into other spaces for people to interact with, usually alongside an exhibition or program in order to create a dialogue with other work and creative practitioners. But then, these books come back to us and they're often in boxes. How do we get them out of the boxes and onto the shelves and keep them alive and moving through people's hands? That's where our programming comes in, but activating the extent of the collection is still one of our biggest challenges, particularly when space is limited.



BJ: I think we have the same concern. As of now, we have pretty limited open hours, which usually happen on Saturday afternoons due to our schedule and lack of current volunteers. So that's when we're truly open, when people tend to be inside the space and really read as much as they want. We don't have a solution for this, but how do we lend the books to others?

So far, when it happens at Press Press it's been purely based on trust.

VC: Yeah, exactly. Or we'll bring books with us to book fairs, if we're going to do a workshop. When we're going to be facilitating something, we'd like to bring something to draw inspiration from, or just to cultivate ideas. And that's usually where we're able to pull from our library and just have that be a part of what we're doing. For example, we had books set up when we were at Pioneer Works' Press Play Fair.



We paired some books from our library with what Pioneer Works had already. We had a whole room where people could just sit and read if they wanted to. Which was cool and I think that's something that I feel like we could do more often. But it is a difficult thing to navigate, bringing the books to different places. We do have the space, but how can we also bring the books outside of the storefront?

CB: This idea of a non-circulating library, a place where people come to read, is inherently a tricky thing to draw people to because I think so many people don't feel like they have the time to read, particularly according to a space's open hours. It's about trying to figure out how to make the collection something that people can utilize and draw people into the space, even at the same time as thinking of how to get the collection out of the storefront and into the world. Taking our books to fairs, doing the satellite Reading Rooms—it's also about making relationships with spaces, with readers, with other organizations to introduce ourselves and grow our community. When the idea of a reading room isn't always legible or recognized as a resource, how can we introduce our space as accessible as possible? How can we use our collection to connect with people and draw them into the room?

VC: That's where programming does come in, an intentional use of our storefront outside of just having an existence as a reading room. Which is also a drive for what Press Press is, to bring people in, not just into our space, but to gather people in general. And then to know that this library is their resource, that this space is

a resource. Though what we do in our programming might not necessarily involve the literal books at a given time, hopefully by bringing people into our space they'll be reminded that this is not the only time that they're welcome here. It is a very difficult thing to navigate.

CB: How do you decide on programs? Are they community driven in the sense that people are coming to you and saying, "Can we do this?"

VC: Right now, yes. I actively try to make it apparent, I'm like, "Listen, we use this space for ourselves, but it's not just for us. It is genuinely for whoever needs a space." And that's currently what's happening at Press Press.... We also don't generally run programs that have a fee, that cost money. We do have a certain amount of funding; so, we want people to access the space.

There's someone who wants to come in to do a workshop on sexual energy. I feel like that's cultivating a space for talking about things that people are uncomfortable talking about. I think that's what I would love to bring home and create room for. A lot of the books in our collection also help generate that kind of energy. Right now, one of the programs we're trying to re-initiate is hosting a studio space for people to make publications. Our open

studio hours for publication-making were running for our first two years in the space, and now we are in a transition process. We're trying to install a screen printing studio in the back and allow that to be another way for people to make use of the space and know that this is here for anyone, with the knowledge that it works on our Exchange Economy. It's not based on what you can contribute financially. The exchange is based on anything that can be contributed.

BJ: What is the relationship between printed textual materials and programming? How do we keep our collections active through programming beyond recent acquisitions and new titles? So far, in my opinion, it has been very much through reference, the texts in our collection act as a reference.

VC: I feel like we are very intentional about our workshops. At least most of what we've been doing is directly tied to our projects, our publications.

CB: I see so many of your publications as documents of things that have happened in your space, things that you've organized as a community. I think it's a really interesting model of publication wherein the publication is the thing that comes after, that rephrases or recirculates in a different context.

VC: Yeah, that's exactly what we do. We can always go back and reference them and continue pulling from that to create more workshops.

BJ: So books lead to more books, literally. I think the space itself, the Press Press storefront, is very significant for us because it allows us to host events, even though it is a small space. We do whatever we can to the brim, DIY to the extreme, to the capacity of what that can hold. We've done parties in there with loud music and DJs and we've done workshops that were intensive, skill-based.

VC: Whatever anyone thinks can happen in that space, something we can facilitate, and they are capable of doing, we will make it happen.

CB: I think we have a similar way of operating at Wendy's. We take proposals for events and a good amount of our past programming has come from that. But we're in this moment of change where our publishing program is growing very rapidly, almost too fast, but in a very positive way. At the same time we're starting to have conversations about how we can allow our programming and our publishing to grow together in intentional dialogue, without setting aside the community-generated programming. Because I think that it has been something that really helps us to

grow: to draw new people through the door, to expand the types of conversations happening within our walls. We're in a moment where we're renegotiating the two practices of programming and publishing and how they feed into each other, but at the same time trying to do so in a way that is continuing to support the public that can and does use this space currently for programs, meetings, etc.

VC: That's what is important about bringing in people outside of just the internal, core members of both our organizations, Wendy's Subway and Press Press. Having the opportunity to have such intimate conversations with the community itself allows you to better create a structure, or to meet their needs.

BJ: Do you get a lot of proposals that are very different from (or that deviate from) Wendy's trajectory? New or surprising ideas?

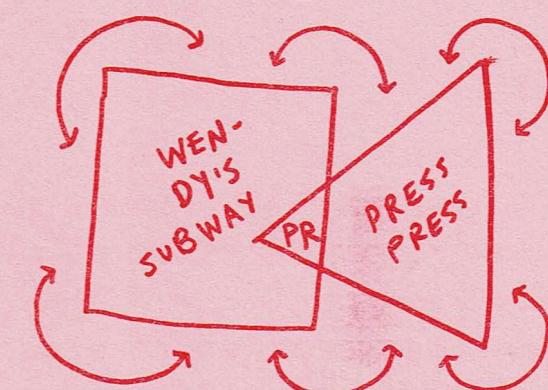
CB: I think we get a lot of that! Something that is surprising—but happens relatively often—is when visual artists come to us with a proposal, because we're not really

an exhibition space in a traditional sense. We have shelves. We have a window, and we have one central wall that can have a wall text or poster on it. I think it's really interesting when we have proposals that engage those spaces, because it's a renegotiation of how we see our space as well. That can be really exciting sometimes. We're doing a collaboration with ISCP (International Studio and Curatorial Program). They are installing an exhibition, a sort of "living room" in their shared exhibition space. We were asked to contribute the custom book forms, or book supports, that we use for display at Wendy's. They've proposed in return that one of the artists, Johannes Helden, hangs a text-based work on our wall. It's interesting when those elements of what we do are engaged by other people in a more prominent way.

VC: It's kind of like when Press Press creates posters, taking excerpts from things that we've created or from conversations. It's nice to see them displayed in a completely different manner and digested differently too. You mean, from what I understand, these projects are engaging research that started at

Wendy's, in a way?

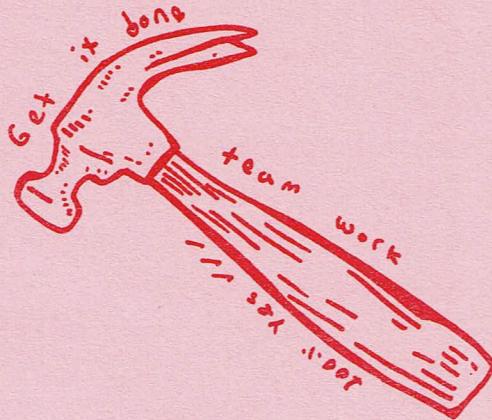
CB: More than they're really engaging particular items we have in our space. The books are our focus, but then maybe these objects that are supporting the books are something that people are noticing and are interested in engaging or having a dialogue with. It's an example of a programming idea that is not exactly what we were thinking about within ourselves, but that is interested in and engaging what we do. Expanding what we do.



VC: I'm not sure how long you've been there, but have you seen any dramatic changes in the lifespan of Wendy's that have changed its mission, in a sense, or helped to shift things?

CB: I think I've been there for about a year. Over that year I feel we've gained a lot of momentum within ourselves and our community has really grown. Our publishing program is evolving and we have so many more projects than when I first came on.

I think that they're taking us in a new direction; we're participating in more fairs, we're moving towards something new in a way. But we're still in conversation with ourselves about what that looks like.



BJ: On the Press Press side, all of us have very different jobs; we are mostly full time working on something else that is not Press Press. And I'm assuming it's similar situation for a lot of people at Wendy's. Is there anyone who's full time just focusing on Wendy's?

CB: Rachel Valinsky is full time focusing on Wendy's, but also is doing many other things at the same time. Everyone does have multiple other responsibilities and a good number of us are in different places geographically right now. It is definitely something that is exciting and challenging—how do you negotiate work and workflow, over distance? It's something that we're figuring out and at the same time

it's growing our capacity to reach people and have Wendy's, in some form, enter different spaces.

BJ: We're in a similar position. I mean, it's just Kimi in LA—

CB: And you said before, Bomin, even though most of you are in Baltimore, maybe you don't even overlap within the city?

VC: Our schedules do not line up.

CB: How do you split up work?

VC: It's funny that you ask. We've been having weekly meetings. We're being very intentional about what projects we take on at the moment because we are essentially in the process of determining what our roles are. We are setting up meetings in order to move forward with our projects, but we're working on the things that will sustain us as a group, rather than just immediately jumping into projects. That's still happening in the background non-stop. I don't know: I feel like we're right there, so close.

BJ: We're still in the process of defining what Press Press is. I think we signed ourselves up in the beginning, like, "Oh, let's all do all of this

together." There was a vague differentiation of who was in charge of what and it came to, as you were saying Corinne, as you were expanding and growing, it became very clear that we need the boundaries and roles amongst us to help us in doing that. For example, I realized I actually enjoy packaging and sending things out and making sure things get shipped, taking a tally on what we have, our resources. So I signed myself up for that role; I'll be in charge of sales, of an online shop, or if we need to ship something out.

VC: That conversation had somehow never happened. Specifically considering the storefront, things were happening, things were getting done, and a lot of it was because Kimi was still based here. She was a propeller, essentially, of a lot of things we were doing. She still is. But that's the difficulty, trying to navigate what our dynamic is on both coasts. That's been a disruption from what we were accustomed to.

CB: With Wendy's we went through a similar thing this past winter, renegotiating roles and titles—and what that means.

VC: Ideally, you want everybody to be like, "We're all fully agreeing on everything."

CB: When everyone is busy with the other things that they're doing, in the other parts of their lives, are you going to be able to read every email on everything related to this organization that is growing under your feet? Not every person can keep up with every part. We did the same thing, we discussed who wants to do what. That's an essential conversation, but something that can also be renegotiated. I wonder if that's something that ever stops? As an organization grows and changes, personally, I think that if it does that responsibly, these are things that are always in flux—but in a way that is organized.

VC: An organized flux?

BJ: Yeah, I love that actually. Coin it! Like an organized mess. A pile.

VC: We are a pile. We know what's in that pile. We know where things go in this pile. I mean, we're

all very excited, and that's the thing. We want to just keep moving forward, but we need to take a step back and really define how to move forward.

BJ: Best practices, as they say.

VC: For me, what really made me realize that was the last workshop we hosted. We are currently artists-in-residence with the Institute for Expanded Research, and as part of our residency we hosted a workshop in Baltimore that gathered artists and organizers who work in cooperative, collective, or collaborative frameworks to talk about our experiences. We're working on gathering tools from similar organizations and DIY spaces on how to work in groups. All of these questions were being asked then, and it just seems that everyone's kind of struggling with this right now.

CB: It's, by nature, a very collaborative kind of work. I think that if roles are set in stone, things can get stuck, stagnant in a way that they don't if structure is responsive to the people within it. I think that there's a real value to having your role be solid, but still flexible in the ability to help others and shift priorities in a way that is reflective of what needs to be done. I don't think rigidity is helpful, but I think there comes a point when you need to know how to

step in in order to be functional.

I'm curious because I know that in this series we're going to eventually invite other organizations to have this conversation. We've discussed inviting organizations that are larger and that have long had formalized, hierarchical structures and operating budgets, and whose activities are happening on a bigger scale, in some sense. I wonder what the differences are and how that fits into the conversation that we are having?

BJ: Because I've been working in the nonprofit world, the way I talk about collaboration in my day job—the youth program that I work at—versus collaboration at Press Press is different because my job is still hierarchical. I'm definitely one part of many parts; it's very well defined. So, even though it's a very casual work environment and everyone's friendly, collaboration happens in this very structured way. There always have to be proposals for things to move forward and then there is a procedure for everything that is preferred by the organization. That's one of the things: It has the same kind of "get shit done" mentality, but it's a very different way of working. I don't know what

is actually more efficient because sometimes it's very inefficient to be in that setting versus just the four of us deciding to get it done and really putting our mind into it. We can get something done really quickly.

VC: Yes. Getting something done really quickly rather than going through fifteen other people—I can't see that being the same at Wendy's; I feel like y'all are significantly bigger than us. In terms of the core group.

CB: That's something, actually, that I was thinking about. When I started at Wendy's as a fellow, one of the things that I felt was so accessible about coming into the space was that it wasn't overly bureaucratic or hierarchical; I felt able to contribute in a way that wasn't predetermined. I wonder, for larger organizations, how does that impact shaping community? We have a lot of people that keep Wendy's going and even though we're in this process of figuring out roles, I think that we are as an organization still really open to people coming in and contributing as much as they

like to what we are doing, expanding that with what they're bringing into our space. I wonder about balancing formalization with that openness; there's a fragile tension there. It's something I've been thinking about because of how welcome I felt coming into the space.

What are ways that people enter into Press Press? You have interns—what is that like?



BJ: Yeah we have had interns.

VC: They were college students. Obviously, we're always hoping that once a Press Press member, always a Press Press member. They don't have to do work with us. Having interns was so sick, it really didn't feel like they were interns. We just knew that, even if they weren't our interns, we would want to be working with them.

BJ: Right.

VC: But we did have to go through that process of interviewing and being very careful with who that collaborator was gonna be.

BJ: Yeah. Right. Like, "Why do you want to work with us? Why are you invested in this? Why are you spending time on this? What is the thing that makes us connected?" That was important.

What is the fellowship?

CB: We're also in the process of renegotiating what that looks like as we apply for funding, because our hope is that the program eventually is a more solidified position: the fellow comes in with a determined set of responsibilities, in exchange for a stipend. But right now, the fellowship program is somewhat more malleable on both sides of the relationship. Because Wendy's is in Bushwick and our core team is very disparately located, there need to be people in the space. And it can't always be the core New York-based people. So much of what we do is nomadic in the sense of planning, writing, and editing, but the other half is very much grounded in our storefront.

So, our fellowship program is, right now, an opportunity for people to come into the space and really immerse themselves

in that side of the work, from running events to talking with readers, to shipping books. But then, they are also able to use the collection in a personally useful way, spend time with their research or creative interests within it. The fellowship provides us support in extremely crucial ways that we need it, and hopefully offers that person the resource of the collection, the opportunity to organize events, space and time to work.

BJ: Kind of sounds like a residency.

CB: And we do a fellowship publication series, so that everyone has the opportunity to publish something. We have a riso in our space now! It belongs to Be Oakley of GenderFail.

VC: Yeah, I spoke with Be and they were like, "I just want people to use it! It's just sitting there."

CB: We've been trying to organize a way to have regular, open to the public community riso hours. The problem is that somebody who

knows how to use it has to be in the space. And that's what's hard. People have to be taught how to use it, taught how to take care of it, taught how to troubleshoot, taught how to teach people. That's something we want to facilitate in the near future. It's a really great resource that both us and GenderFail want to have available.

VJ: We want to have all this be accessible. And that is the never-ending drive.

# Acknowledgements

## About Press Press

Press Press is an interdisciplinary publishing initiative established in 2014. Press Press's publishing practice is organized around two key goals; first, to shift and deepen the understanding of voices, identities, and narratives that have been suppressed or misrepresented by the mainstream, so far focusing on immigration and race in the United States; and second, to build networks of relationships through publishing practices centered on self-representation and gathering. Press Press operates out of a storefront studio and library in Baltimore, Maryland and a production space in Los Angeles, California. Learn more at: [www.presspress.info](http://www.presspress.info)

## About Wendy's Subway

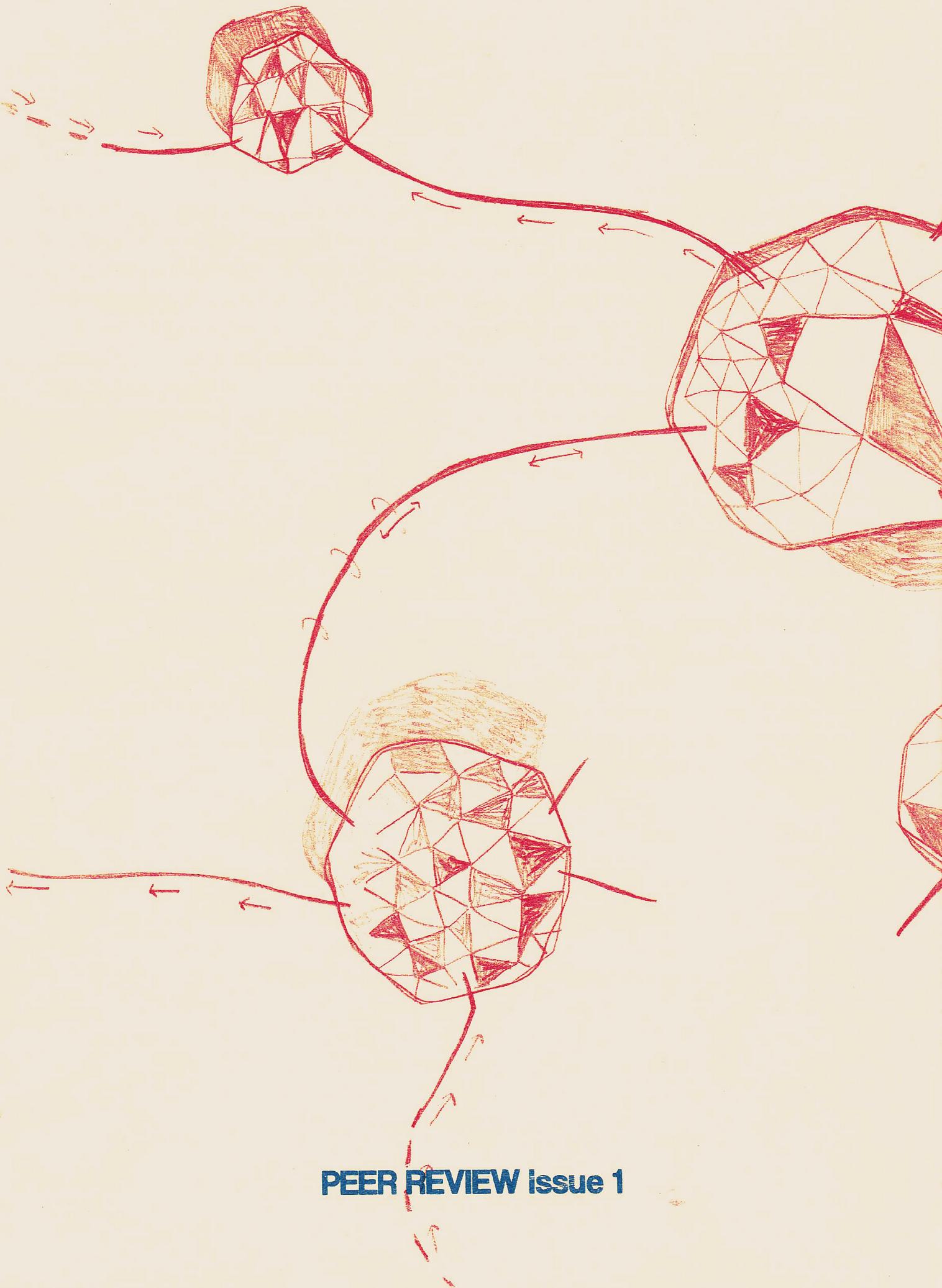
Wendy's Subway is a non-profit reading room, writing space, and independent publisher located in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Since 2013, Wendy's Subway has provided an open and versatile platform for expanding modes of reading, writing, and publishing together. Our interdisciplinary program presents readings, talks, performances, and workshops regularly throughout the year. Our residency program highlights the work of independent library projects and publishers. The non-circulating library holds a collection of over 3,000 titles, with a specific focus on art, literature, and critical theory. The collection is available to readers during public library hours. Learn more at: [www.wendyssubway.com](http://www.wendyssubway.com)

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