

BLOBWORK: A VISION OF CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE & ENGAGEMENT

Kimi Hanauer

.5

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 7

.75

FOREWORD: BLOB OPTIMISM
BY LEE HEINEMANN 8

1

**THE SPECTATOR-ENGAGEMENT
PARADIGM 11**

2

**THE BLOB, A NEW PARADIGM OF
ARTISTIC ENGAGEMENT** 25

2.5

**CONCLUSION: FROM SPECTATOR-
ENGAGEMENT TO THE BLOB 56**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Over my time spent in Baltimore, I have had the privilege to get to know and closely work with a long list of collaborators and friends that span the many blob-friendly projects of this city and beyond. Many of these individuals, either directly or indirectly, contributed to the development of this project. However, this project, perhaps, is a futile attempt to give language to reflexive works that cannot really be communicated in words. The blob situates itself between a demanding call for definite action and an embracement of the groundlessness we may feel when we face our inability to truly know and control the world around us. The blob takes form between people and thus finds its root within the many conversations that have accompanied the projects my collaborators and I have partaken in, especially my many conversations with Max Anderson, Lee Heinemann, and Sonja Solvang. Because of the reactive and constantly changing nature of the blob, I am reluctant to fix its (tentative) definition in these printed words. However, I truly believe there is a power within this vision of artistic practice to transform the instrumental authorities of our world. Attempting to give language to the experience of the blob has been a difficult and rewarding task that could not have been realized without the help of my brother, Tom Hanauer, my advisor Soheila Ghaussy, and the guidance of my many faculty and mentors, to name a few: Marcus Civin, Deana Haggag, Ben Luzzatto, and Jann Rosen-Queralt.

This project is dedicated to my grandfather, Shmuel Rehavia.

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MARCH 2015.

FOREWORD: BLOB OPTIMISM

It is my distinct—but not uncomplicated—pleasure to write alongside my collaborator, friend and sister Kimi Hanauer. It is both incredibly special and intimidating to be bound together in this way. The format of a book suggests an authority and fixity to these words that is perhaps in conflict with this book's content. However, it also provides us the opportunity to reflect on the methodologies and aspirations fueling our intertwining practices, in a way that can be shared and archived at least as a portrait of a moment in time.

With that said, I feel the need to contextualize my writing within the emotional, political and historical significance of the week in which it was written. This Monday marked the funeral for 25-year-old West Baltimore resident Freddie Gray who died from a mysterious spinal injury sustained while in police custody. This Friday, Baltimore City's state attorney Marilyn Mosby announced that Mr. Gray's arrest was deemed unwarranted, his death ruled a homicide and all six involved officers would be arrested with charges ranging from second-degree murder to misconduct in office. In the days between, Baltimore was declared under a "State of Emergency," militarized police faced off against high school kids, stores were looted and a now-famous CVS burned, a curfew was put in place, organizers worked overtime, and usually segregated communities came together—in partnerships of scaling authenticity and sustainability—to clean up messes, host events and demonstrate against police brutality, class warfare and institutionalized racism.

With conditions here differing greatly from day-to-day and many usual activities interrupted, some well-meaning folks have expressed their readiness for things to go "back to normal." Thankfully, I've heard more respond with an understanding of the "normal" (omit: of the past) as a scene of extended, systemic violence, a "normal" that the events of this week exposed and hopefully rattled, a normal we should never return to.

Here is where I find scholar Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism particularly useful. In her book of the same name, Berlant writes,

Optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive

transformation for which a person or people risks striving; and doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside the relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.¹

Or simply, "cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."² Those desiring a return to the apparent "calm" of previous times lock out the potential for positive change in disruption.

In an interview with MSNBC this week, Dayvon Love, of Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle—a local, "grassroots think-tank which advances the public policy interest of Black people."³—defines the cruel optimism of Baltimore's African-American mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake. "Baltimore shows a sophistication of white supremacy and how it operates. How it takes black figures, put[s] them in institutional positions to give the veneer of justice when, really, the same institutional arrangement exists."⁴ Any feelings of comfort or progress attached to a majority black city with a black mayor must be complicated when said black mayor perpetuates and elaborates upon systems of black oppression.

I see the optimism that propels Kimi's blob-engagement project—which we should call blob optimism—as a sort of answer or counter to cruel optimism because the blob is inherently unstable. When efforts are truly reflexive—or blob-like—they are not only born directly from their sites of activity but are in constant states of evaluation and reformation. Cruel optimism is a yearning for solutions or fantasies distanced from the situation at hand, perhaps for something that worked for someone else or for something that seemed okay un-scrutinized. Blob optimism is highly critical—open to and encouraging contradiction, obsolescence and reconfiguration.

With the optimism of this type of engagement so tangible and easy for me to stand behind, it is—as I mentioned—funny to present these ideas, which are at the midst of their formation, on something as static as a page. However, we can only hope that progress, like that conjured by blob optimism, changes the conditions internal and external to these writers to the extent that a second edition is needed.

¹ Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

² Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

³ Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle. www.lbsbaltimore.com/about-us.

⁴ Love, Dayvon interview with Melissa Harris-Perry. Melissa Harris-Perry. MSNBC. May 2, 2015.

1

THE SPECTATOR-ENGAGEMENT PARADIGM

[Humanity] must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of [its] being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

There is a dominant—or traditional—way of engaging with and producing artworks (in the Western world). There are certain norms that govern the production of artworks and the ways in which we engage with the work; the reigning engagement-paradigm is multi-dimensional, but at the core of this traditional paradigm is the idea that engagement with artworks is an essentially passive ‘activity.’ We learn to relate to artworks as passive observers or mere spectators. This traditional engagement paradigm, which I will call the spectator-engagement paradigm, does not foster an active experience and relationship through artwork and ultimately trains cultural producers to create works that merely act as spectacles, ready to be passively consumed by their audience. There is nothing inherently wrong with approaching art passively. But, when passive engagement is the most prominent form of engagement (and of knowing how to engage) with artworks, it becomes problematic. I will outline the problematic facets of the spectator-engagement paradigm in the following paragraphs: (1) it isolates the work outside of our lived experience; (2) it at worst complements, and at best, it merely preserves, some of the degrading and oppressive components of modern life under our distinctive social institutions, e.g. the alienation we experience in an increasingly bureaucratic and fragmented world; (3) and, it only fosters theoretical or metaphorical representations of ideas. These factors ultimately rob art of its socially transformative potential, which is the thrust of my critique in this part of the work. The aim of part I is to clarify the spectator-engagement paradigm and to give a clear outline of its problems.

THE SPECTATOR-ENGAGEMENT PARADIGM EXPLAINED

The full account of the origin of the traditional spectator-engagement paradigm is complicated and goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, I think it is uncontroversial to claim that one of its prime articulators is Immanuel Kant, primarily in his work, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790).¹ Kant’s main contribution to the spectator-engagement paradigm is the idea that when we make aesthetic judgments, or judgments about the aesthetic quality of a thing, we necessarily engage with

IN THIS MOMENT, MAGGIE AND DANIEL HOLD HANDS BEFORE KARAOKE BEGINS. RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE ;~, JANUARY 2015.

¹ The historic significance that Kant played in elevating this paradigm can be found in Bourdieu’s *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, where Bourdieu argues that Kant was the first philosophical articulator of the particular cultural practices of 18th-century bourgeois art-consumers. Therefore, I take Kant to be especially instructive for coming to understand the roots and foundations of what I am calling here the spectator-engagement paradigm.

the object in a “disinterested” manner. Kant writes, “Taste is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or a disliking devoid of all interest.”² For Kant, there are two particular activities of our rational faculty (our “reason”): we judge the world theoretically, as knowers, and we judge the world practically, as moral actors. These modes of engagement, as Kant would argue, are “interested.” They are invested in what actually exists; reason is based in eliminable presumptions that there is an objective truth to the world and moral ways of behaving within it. For Kant, aesthetic judgments do not fall into this cognitive scheme.³ Although finding aesthetic beauty may give rise to a distinct type of pleasure and experience (i.e., the experience of beauty) according to Kant, it does not alone serve any “interest.” It does not exist to satisfy some physiological need, it is not nourishing, it is not sexually pleasing, it does not give knowledge, it does not provide any insight or any real moral guidance; rather it is there simply for us to appreciate in form, to take a merely reflective pleasure in its beauty. It serves no purpose beyond this.⁴

The above highlights a significant issue with Kantian aesthetics: Kant understands aesthetic judgments as “reflective” judgments, or judgments that don’t “determine” the object in the same way that theoretical and moral judgments do. For Kant, theoretical judgments say what a thing is (for example: “this is a table”) and moral judgments say how we should reasonably act in the world (for example: “we shouldn’t kill innocent people”). These types of judgments tell you something definitive about the world or how you must conduct yourself within it. Aesthetic judgments, however, are seen by him as merely “reflective.” They may only involve one’s own reflecting on an object or form, but are not directed towards any moral or theoretical understanding. Kantian aesthetics thus highlights a formalistic approach that emphasizes the detached, ‘disinterested,’ and reflective standpoint of the spectator in making sense of artworks, aesthetic objects, and aesthetic experience. This detached and reflective Kantian spectator provides the basic blueprint for the spectator-engagement paradigm. Passive spectatorial engagement with artworks can be seen as the modern offshoot or result of Kant’s theory of reflective judgment: it is an engagement with art that abstracts it from the ‘interests’ of the spectator and the cultural background out of which the artwork itself emerges.⁵

AESTHETIC ISOLATIONISM

Kant’s biggest misunderstanding lies in his separation and isolation of artworks and aesthetics from our rational faculty. This is the first major problematic facet of the spectator-engagement paradigm. My central argument in this paper is that, contra the spectator-engagement paradigm, the integration of artistic practice into our rational faculty is essential if we are to live morally and create positive social change e. g. enact any reformation of problematic, unethical, violent or cruel socially structuring forces. An integration of artistic practice into our rational faculty means an integration of artistic practice and engagement which is not isolated from our lives and “disinterested,” as Kant would say; I will illustrate some of the ways this integration can take place in the following section where I explain my vision of the blob, a model of artistic practice and engagement. The Kantian theory of aesthetics restricts the capabilities of artworks to those that are inherent in their form, and by doing so it rules out and becomes blinded to many of the other unique capabilities of art itself. For example, this formalism hinders the potential that is latent in art such as art’s ability to put us in touch with deeply personal experiences, or its ability to remind us of our inability to truly know the world around us without the mediation of our own perspectives. In part II, I will argue that this potential is (1) there, and (2) given that it is there, we (artists, cultural producers, and art-engagers) need to bring it out. But, for now, I will confine myself to explaining why aesthetic isolationism is so problematic in the first place.

It is important to note that I am not claiming that formal qualities within artworks and beyond are unimportant. They are, and this is because they can (for one) be used as a tool to communicate ideas and create distinct experiences for their audience.⁶ It is only when—and this is my point—formal qualities are treated in isolation from all other artistic qualities and the context(s) of the art itself, or when formal qualities are taken to be the only significant or relevant elements of any and every

² Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*, 53.

³ Objectivity and morality are not things that we can simply ‘throw away,’ according to Kant, no matter how much we try to deny them.

⁴ Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*, 53.

⁵ This also gestures at another important aspect of Kant’s aesthetics that I will delve into later on: the Kantian spectator fits the paradigmatic habits of the ‘art-lovers’ of Kant’s own time, namely the late eighteenth-century bourgeois (and predominantly male) consumers of culture.

⁶ Inside and outside of the ‘art world,’ form is very important, if not the most important, element of any creative piece of work. A formally pleasing logo, for example, is much more marketable for any institution, organization, initiative and so on, than a logo that is not. Successful branding, in general, seems to be heavily tied to the formal qualities of its aesthetic representation, whatever those might be.

artwork, that formalism poses a problem: it reduces the work to mere form, and limits our engagement with it by placing aesthetics and art outside of the realm of our lived experiences. This understanding limits our engagement with the work because it makes us necessarily engage with the artwork in a “disinterested” manner where we can only gain a superficial pleasure—the work cannot speak to us, it cannot reveal biases or critique, it cannot appeal to our most personal emotions, it cannot reveal histories or tell stories, it is no longer a communicator and has no real stake within our lives—and this is a great reduction of its capabilities even within the traditional art-as-object view.

Richard Shusterman, in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, helps us make further sense of this problem. He explains how art has been isolated and separated from our ordinary, active, lives, an isolation illuminated, most obviously, in the class-oppressive distinction between “high” and “low” art. Taking influence from John Dewey, Shusterman explains,

The compartmentalization and spiritualization of art as an elevated “separate realm” set “upon a far-off pedestal,” divorced from the materials and aims of other human effort, has removed art from the lives of most of us, and thus has impoverished the aesthetic quality of our lives...It is effectively quarantined to the museum, concert hall, classroom, and theater, kept apart from free and casual daily access. Not only does the elitist equation of art with high art alienate and intimidate many people from seeking satisfaction in the fine arts; it denies them recognition of the artistic legitimacy and potential of the so-called “low” arts or entertainment they do enjoy...Identification of art with the high tradition of fine art can thus serve an oppressive socio-cultural elite seeking to assert and bolster its class superiority by making sure that art...will remain beyond the taste and reach of the common man, at once marking and reinforcing his general sense of inferiority. Moreover, for Dewey, even the experience of the cultural elite is ultimately impoverished and constrained...Since they too, to survive and prosper, must be more than aesthetes but active individuals, engaged in life, their appreciation of art can be richer and more satisfying when it more closely relates to and enhances life’s experience.⁷

In this quote Shusterman borrows Dewey's phrase, the “compartmentalization of art,” an idea that explains one of the facets of the spectator-engagement paradigm. The compartmentalization of art refers to the

separation of art outside of our lived experience; in order to experience art, we must take a break from our ordinary, active, lives and go to the museum or gallery.⁸ The isolation of art as something that exists only outside of our lives fosters a “disinterested” engagement with art, while subsequently affirms the oppressive assumption that ordinary life is unimaginative.

INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY

The problem of aesthetic isolationism leads us naturally into our second problem, i.e., the manner in which spectator-engagement provides some further support for oppressive and depressive modes of existence in modernity. Shusterman, again, can help fill in some of the details. He writes,

The idea of art and the aesthetic as a separate realm distinguished by its freedom, imagination, and pleasure has as its underlying correlative the dismal assumption that ordinary life is necessarily one of joyless, unimaginative coercion. This provides an excuse for the powers and institutions that structure our everyday life to be brutally indifferent to natural human needs for the pleasures of beauty and imaginative freedom.⁹

Here, Shusterman suggests that the isolation of artworks outside of our daily lives excuses an attitude of “brutal indifference” to the importance of imaginative freedom and beauty in our lives. He is gesturing at some of the social problems that are involved in the spectator-engagement paradigm. The paradigm reaffirms the idea that active human life is mechanical, indifferent, unimaginative, and primarily concerned with figuring out the means to our various ends. We leave ‘beauty’ and ‘imagination’ to periods of leisure and rest from life, or to those moments when we are no longer productive. Those, however, are the moments for disinterested reflection, to borrow Kant’s phrase. Life is ‘beautiful’ only when we are no longer engaged in our daily activities. But, since life is largely composed of our daily activities of production and work, Shus-

⁷ Shusterman, Richard. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 19.

⁸ Perhaps a similar point applies to popular art, for example in the case of the movie-going public, someone might argue that going to see a movie is a break from ordinary life. This might be true in some cases, but one might also argue that the public views popular art, not as art at all, but for the most part as a kind of entertainment. It's a distraction from their working lives but for most it's still a part of their daily lives. People come home from work and watch television, listen to music, watch movies, but they don't think of these as artistic engagements and one of the reasons for this, possibly, is that these activities are too “interested,” too involved, too a much a part of their lives, and too intelligible to count as real or genuine art.

⁹ Shusterman, Richard. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 20.

terman's point can be rephrased to say that life, under the view of the passive-spectator engagement paradigm, is not beautiful and pleasing. Marx expresses a similar insight in his critique of capitalism, in his claim that workers become alienated from their very means of livelihood.

...the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him – that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity – so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.¹⁰

Here Marx states that our work, which is meant to give meaning to our lives and allow us to feel at home within the world, actually alienates us from it and from ourselves when it is performed within a capitalistic system. This understanding of social reality has been captured neatly, and further clarified by Horkheimer's conception of modernity, as I will explain in the following paragraph.

In *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer analyzes modernity through the lens of what he calls "instrumental rationality," a type of thinking (or engagement) where people and things are understood solely in terms of their use-value. Horkheimer explains that this type of reasoning is "essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory."¹¹ He argues that this type of reasoning only takes into consideration the logic of the ends, as they serve the individual's

need of self-preservation, and disregards the reasonability of the means. Moreover, this type of logic completely disregards "the idea that an aim can be reasonable for its own sake-on the basis of virtues that insight reveals it to have in itself."¹²

We can see, here, how the logic of instrumental rationality and the spectator-engagement paradigm work in support of one another. The spectator-engagement paradigm affirms that art and artistic practice necessarily be placed outside of the realm of lived experience; and the logic of instrumental rationality then reinforces the spectator-engagement paradigm by not allowing any space for imaginative freedom or artistic thinking within the realm of our daily social lives. Instrumental rationality, in Horkheimer's totalizing vision of it, reinforces the spectator-engagement paradigm insofar as it seems to imply that the only realm where humans might find 'rest' from the constant means-ends calculations that are required in modern life is in art and aesthetics. But, if this realm is governed by the spectator-engagement paradigm, it does not provide a kind of critique of instrumental rationality and the modern world that is governed by its rules. This is because the spectator-engagement paradigm is, following Kant, wholly disinterested. It does not provide room for critical engagement within the social realm, as it is meant to be detached, 'free,' reflective, 'ideal,' enough in-and-of itself, and so on. By providing us with a break from our overly 'instrumental' existence as inhabitants of various social institutions and roles in modernity, it makes us all the more ready and able to return to these roles and institutions. Art, under this mode of engagement, does not arm us with the conceptual and motivational arsenal for critiquing modern life, but rather helps reconcile us to modern life (with all its demands and flaws) by providing us with the minimum amount of refreshment we require in order to go on living under the yoke of this 'brutally indifferent' and mechanical world, to use Shusterman's phrase again.

ART'S ROLE

Our understanding of art, as I see it, however, should be informed by the role that we want art to play in the social realm of our daily lives. If we want art to play a socially transformative role we cannot treat

¹⁰ Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

¹¹ Horkheimer, Max. *Eclipse of Reason*, 3.

¹² Horkheimer, Max. *Eclipse of Reason*, 4.

it as a mere formal object, as I will explain. But, this is exactly how the spectator-engagement paradigm encourages us to conceptualize and treat art. The spectator-engagement paradigm presupposes that art itself is objectified, that is, all artwork is always instantiated by some object, whether it is a performance, a painting, a sculpture, etcetera. This view seems to be almost entailed by the spectator-engagement paradigm, which necessarily places art outside of our daily lives where it is unable to play a socially transformative role. This is because spectators are passive beings and the world, for passive beings, emerges, not as a field that calls for opportunities for action, but rather as an arena that is populated by inert, static objects. Although objects appear to us in various ways and might communicate various ideas, objects can never be active, they can never do anything in the world; they cannot initiate any projects, they cannot realize any goals, and they cannot bring about any change by their own merits. At most, they can have an indirect influence on agents who then act upon the world on their own accord.

It is easy to see how this conception of art-as-object that is embedded in the spectator-engagement paradigm is ineffective for the purpose of playing a socially transformative role. If we want art to play such a role we must revise the way in which we engage with, understand, and produce art. We must revise and reconceptualize artistic practice as more broadly construed. Art cannot merely be, it must also do; it must be active, and objects alone (as they are conceptualized by the paradigm) are never active, they can only be acted upon. Even when art-objects seem to be animated by some human aim, by some social message, critique, or an attempt to expose social injustice, they nevertheless fail to bring about their purported aim of social transformation so long as they remain engaged with by us as mere objects. This is because critique alone cannot bring about social change, social change requires action—and objects (and their passive absorbers) don't act.¹³ Shusterman provides support for this claim by explaining Dewey's idea of what art should do,

Art's role...is not to criticize reality but to change it; and little change can be effected if art remains a cloistered domain...[Art] should be removed from its sacralized compartmentalization and introduced into the realm of everyday living where it may more effectively function as a



IN THIS MOMENT, SHANE THE DOG ENJOYS THE WORK CREATED BY SHELBY NORTON, CLAIRE DI SALVO AND KIMI HANAUER. *POOCH AT THE PENTHOUSE*, AN EXHIBITION FOR DOGS, DECEMBER 2014.

¹³The critiques that are made by the members of the art world and their art are especially at risk of being ineffective. This is because a large portion of the art world is esoteric: its members are already 'in the know' and inhabit a totally separate and exclusive sphere from that of everyday life. Hence, the possibility of effective dialogue is quite futile as long as it continues with its current esoterism.

guide, model and impetus for constructive reform, rather than merely an imported adornment or wishfully imaginary alternative to the real.¹⁴

As Shusterman (via Dewey) claims, it is not art's role to merely criticize reality but it is art's role to change it; and my claim is that this goal is hindered greatly by the art-as-object view that is attached to, and encouraged by, the spectator-engagement paradigm. We need to find an alternative way of accessing or engaging with art that can harness its transformative potential.

¹⁴ Shusterman, Richard. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 20-21.

OVERCOMING THE PARADIGM

We are now in the position to argue that what we need to do in order to overcome the problems that are inherent in the spectator-engagement paradigm is to (1) de-isolate art from lived experience, (2) reconceptualize art in a non-objectified way, and (3) thus develop tools to make art genuinely transformative rather than complementary or preservative of oppressive and instrumentalizing social institutions. In the following section of this work, I will lay out my positive vision of artistic practice and engagement. The core of this vision is the active, lively, and what I have been calling “socially transformative” impetus of artistic practice. But, in claiming that the role of art, should be socially transformative, I do not want to be misunderstood as uttering the cliché that “we must transform life into art” or create “a new art of living.” These clichés simplify, and therefore fail to capture, the complexity of my proposal. I will now proceed to show exactly in what ways this complexity is manifested.

*You'd do just about
anything to look
into their eyes*

2

THE BLOB, A NEW PARADIGM OF ARTISTIC ENGAGEMENT

Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.

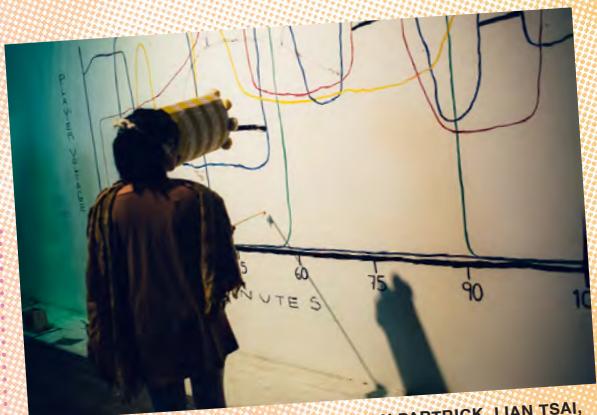
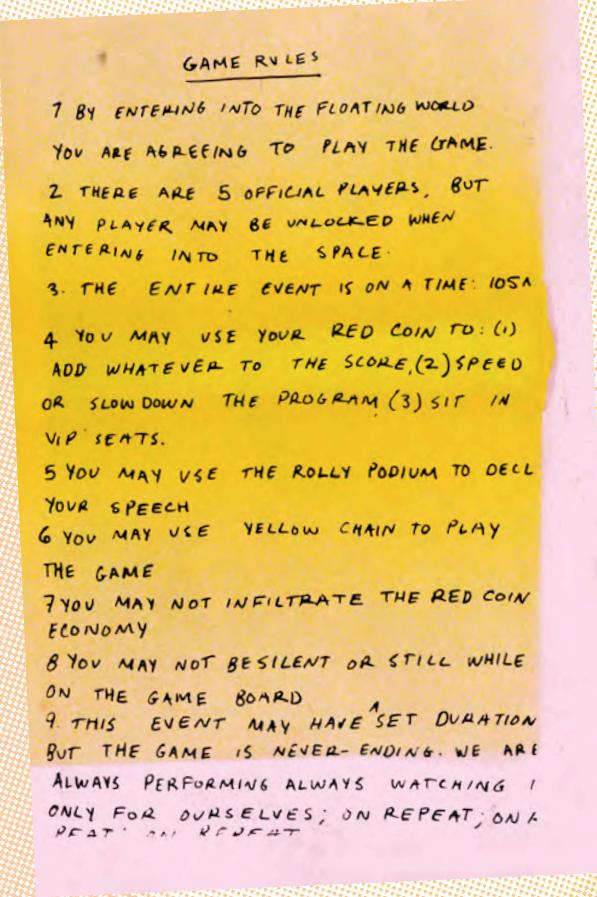
HANNAH ARENDT

IN THIS MOMENT, A REFUGEE YOUTH PROJECT
STUDENT-COLLABORATOR WRITES "MISSING
HOMELAND" ON THE WALLS OF CURRENT SPACE
GALLERY, FEBRUARY 2015.

OPIUM WAMPUM XI: WELCOME TO THE FLOATING WORLD, AN EVENT CO-SCORED BY KIMI HANAUER AND SYDNEY SPANN IN COLLABORATION WITH MICHAEL STEPHENS, NIKKI LEE, MAX ANDERSON AND LIAN TSAI. PENTHOUSE GALLERY, JANUARY 2015.



IN THIS MOMENT, CAPTURED BY SHANNON PARTRICK, YOU SEE TWO UNOFFICIAL PLAYERS WHO HAVE BECOME UNLOCKED ON THE GAME-BOARD, NEAR STAGE B, AND ARE PLAYING THE GAME.



IN THIS MOMENT, CAPTURED BY SHANNON PARTRICK, LIAN TSAI, AN OFFICIAL PLAYER, MAKES HER MARK ON THE SCORE: A MEASURE OF PLAYER VOLTAGE THROUGHOUT THE DURATION OF THE ROUND.

The solution to the problems outlined in the previous section lie in the creation of a new paradigm of engagement and arts practices. I call this paradigm, following Greg Lynn's architectural metaphor, the blob-engagement paradigm. The blob is a form that is in constant change and interaction with its specific site, a structure that transforms and moves between disciplines and spaces, all the while interacting and reacting with its audience. As Lynn writes,

[Blobs] do not ingest material into an interior cavity, but like a single-cell organism, stick to things that are then slowly incorporated through their surface... The blob is all surface, not pictorial or flat, but sticky, thick, and mutable.... Blob form is determined not only by the environment but also by movement.... The term blob connotes a thing which is neither singular nor multiple but an intelligence that behaves as if it were singular and networked but in its form can become virtually infinitely multiplied and distributed.¹⁵

The blob is a system of ordering that, rather than containing its various components, flows through and between them as they expand and contract. It is order that occurs through interaction; an infestation that parasitically feeds from, and thus connects, the various parts within its system. Lynn talks about the blob as an index of continuity and differentiation.¹⁶ The blob's existence is based in its constant deconstruction of structure and the integration of change. The blob is infinite because its context and connections always have the potential for expansion. The blob is singular because it can be located within any one of its various constituent parts. The blob is a living organism that it is born, lives and eventually dies.

When applied to artistic practice and engagement, the blob form has the capability to create positive social change while actively democratizing and broadening artistic practice and engagement itself. Because the blob-engagement paradigm is pragmatic, I understand how it evolved out of existing practices I have participated in. This is also why the blob itself is subject to radical change over time: it always emerges from its interaction with its site, participants, and general environmental circumstances, i.e., its context. I will provide a more expansive definition of the blob and the blob-engagement paradigm, but it will have to

¹⁵ Lynn, Greg, *Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays*, 29.

¹⁶ Lynn, Greg, *Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays*, 166.

remain a tentative definition as there is no possible way of capturing any genuinely essential properties of the blob, given its dynamic and changing character. So, with this in mind, the major components of the blob (all to be clarified later) that undertake the three major tasks I outlined in the previous section, are the following: (1) the blob is radically open, and by virtue of its openness, it de-isolates arts practices; (2) it is democratic, and thus opposes the logic of instrumental rationality and social institutions that are animated by it, instead of preserving or complementing such institutions; (3) it is alive, and thus requires a reconceptualization of art away from the art-as-object thesis that is encouraged by the spectator-engagement paradigm. These features collectively allow art practices and engagement to be genuinely socially transformative.

The most fruitful way of exploring and explaining this theory of the blob-engagement paradigm is through a discussion of the projects I have undertaken and the ways in which the blob features in them. This is most fruitful approach, I think, for two reasons. First, a discussion of concrete projects—past, present, and future—is the only way to do justice to the idea of the blob because it contextualizes this pragmatic model within specific times and spaces that it has evolved out of. The blob-engagement paradigm attempts to de-isolate art from lived experience, as I have mentioned, and so this definition must also stem from my own lived experiences. Overly-abstract and densely theoretical discussion, while useful, opens up the threat of artistic isolation anew. Abstraction is always abstraction away from particularity, but the blob's point is to celebrate and illuminate particularity (and universality through particularity). Discussing particular artistic projects is, therefore, a more promising way of illustrating and explaining the theory than merely stipulating its precepts in a quasi-universalistic fashion. In short, the blob is meant to be practiced and applied. Secondly, the blob-engagement paradigm does not stand with an already well-entrenched movement in art. It's a vision for the future. Although examples for it do sparsely exist all over the globe, my (collaborative) projects attempt to describe and inhabit blob-theory in ways I have more access to investigate and explain directly.

It is important to note that there is a certain humor and a certain frustration that accompany my intuitive naming of this vision of artistic practice. In a sense, naming this theory “the blob,” is giving a name to the experience of contradiction: ultimately, the blob is at once, a call for action and a celebration of uncertainty. Action is certain, it is definable and it does something distinct. How can I act with certainty while em-

bracing the groundlessness of my world? The blob, therefore, humorously leaves us in a paradox. It is an attempt at naming something that exists within intuition, within a moment. It is something that there are no words to describe, rather it is an experience to be created. There is a futility in describing ‘what the blob is,’ not only because attempting to communicate it in words is contradictory to the theory itself, but also because this description will constantly circle us through the many contradictions that are latent in the blob. I do not wish to offer a resolve to the central paradox that the blob leaves us entrenched in (action vs. uncertainty), rather I hope to celebrate this, and the many other paradoxes these blob-friendly projects bring on, as they mirror the complex, layered landscape of the everyday and the ways we choose to navigate it. I will begin by exploring an art space called The “Penthouse Gallery” because of the scale of its collaborative network and long-term active existence since late 2008, but I will also discuss other blob-friendly projects I have participated in, including “Alloverstreet: East Oliver Street Art Walk” and “Press Press”.

THE PENTHOUSE GALLERY

The Penthouse, as it is colloquially known, is a residential art space that was created by a group of Baltimore-based artists in 2009. This group built all gallery spaces and the rooms, had some shows, and then moved out. By giving it a name and building the physical space, the founders of Penthouse were able to mark the potential for projects to exist in the space; and so, the space was adapted as a type of project itself. The Penthouse is just one example of the many fluid and open art-related spaces or collectives that are based in a tradition that resists the

what is living room
what is gallery this where is a place readers are sculpture this is a where sculpture is poetry this a place where place this is poetry is image image is space is where this space is my living living boro gallery this living is a where



reification gestures and elitism of commercial gallery spaces. Specifically in Baltimore, there are many long-standing independent art spaces and artists projects that fall into this tradition of resistance such as Open Space, a collective and art space that hosts a range of events and various art fairs in the city, The Compound, a large collectively-run property that encompasses live / work spaces, a radical library and urban farm, or Wham City Comedy, a comedy collective that commonly incorporates video, improvisation and crowd participation in absurdist presentations and performances.

The Penthouse emerges as a blob, as I will talk about in this section, because of several key characteristics it embodies: its hybridism as a living space, gallery space and music venue, its large and growing network of collaborators, and its radical openness.

The Penthouse is a large loft space on the very top floor of a warehouse building called the Copycat in the Station North Arts and Entertainment District in Baltimore, Maryland. When the Penthouse is used as a public art space, it incorporates the whole of its central space, including: the living room, two large white walls, doorways to residents' rooms, a kitchen and dining room area that is sometimes separated by pedestals, and a series of windows on a brick wall near the living room area. The

Penthouse has old wooden floors and moldy ceilings with large pipes running through. A couple feet of white painted floor surround the space at the points where the floor meets the gallery walls, like some sort of marker of 'what is gallery' and 'what is living room.' This marker is significant not only as a marker in the space, but also as a marker of a certain vision somebody had for the gallery at a certain point in time—this collaborator wanted to establish a visual divide between 'gallery' and 'living room,' where as the collaborators currently living in the space embrace that this division is unnecessary and impossible. In any case, these couple feet of painted floor remain as a marker of this history much like other details that structure our historic space.

Over the past three years that I have spent living in and collaborating on this project, the Penthouse has gone through many different phases, cycles of roommates, and styles of events. Through this flux, the Penthouse and I have become intimately acquainted—by this I simply mean that I care for this space, not only because of what it has enabled me to do, but also because my time spent at the Penthouse has illuminated its most beautiful qualities to me, many of which I will talk about in this section of the work. It is through this experience that I have come to understand the Penthouse

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THE WHITE PAINTED STRIPE MARKS THE EDGES OF
GALLERY WALLS AT THE PENTHOUSE.

SOMETIMES IN THE AMAZING IGNORANCE I HEAR THINGS AND SEE THINGS I NEVER

and my engagement with it as a “blob.” Thinking through the lens of the blob has allowed me greater and more meaningful engagement with the Penthouse, and other projects alike. It has become a way of understanding how the Penthouse behaves and how to engage with it and its participants both ethically and productively.

THE BLOB IS RADICALLY OPEN

Blob-engagement is anti-dogmatic and open to revision. It de-isolates art from static venues which place art outside of our living experiences by (1) encouraging a collaborative practice that is not constrained by one particular vision or a static group of individuals; rather it consists of multiple and changing participants and their perspectives; it is a growing and changing network of collaborators. This, in turn, allows engagement to move between different disciplines and forms; and by (2) allowing audiences to participate or contribute in many ways, instead of limiting their involvement to mere spectating. As such, the Penthouse project treats all individuals as agents. In the following paragraphs, I will give examples of how openness features in the Penthouse Gallery.

When the original founders of Penthouse slowly moved out, new residents came and went as well. As a residential space, the Penthouse has often been used as an in-between: a place to live in for a little until you get your shit together, until you go to school, until you move to New York, until you have enough money to live in a “normal apartment,” until you graduate, *et cetera*. As these residents come and go, myself being one of them, the Penthouse continues to be an active venue for various art communities in Baltimore. There are many active arts venues in the Copycat that have come about and evolved over the years, often being founded by one group of people and then changed or wiped clean by another, but the Penthouse is not like these other spaces. The Penthouse’s identity was not created by a certain individual, or even by the close group of collaborators who founded it. The Penthouse’s identity is complex and ambiguous at its elusive ‘core’: it is a project that is based in embracing uncertainty and in trusting the arts community it was made for. For example, as residents come and go, they may affect, to a certain extent, the Penthouse’s projects and work, but the Penthouse has retained its identity over its existence. This is what distinguishes the

Penthouse as a blob: it is a collaborative project that is not specific to one group of close collaborators, to one specific aesthetic or intention, or to one specific identity as the “Penthouse Gallery.” The Penthouse’s identity is based in its ambiguity and in its openness: it is a space of potentiality. Its identity is recreated over and over again by an evolving community of artists, musicians, writers, *et cetera*. In fact, The Penthouse’s identity is the evolving site itself: an open platform reserved for arts practices and events.

Although the Penthouse chooses, at times, certain projects over others, and is committed in particular to ‘arts practices,’ because of the evolving and changing list of collaborators, it cannot, stay fixed for too long in one aesthetic realm or bind itself to one particular interest. It is left open to constant revision and change, and therefore cannot find its base in just one type of practice or permanent “specialization.” The evolving list of individuals involved in the space, stemming from the founders of the space in 2008 to today, creates a rhizomatic network, i.e., a non-linear network of collaborators and projects that is in constant flux. It is a network that embraces the fluidity and flexibility of its non-hierarchical structure: a system for group-work that is not limited by the constraints of one static group or one specific vision. It is a structure that must “necessarily change as it expands its connections.”¹⁷ It is always open to new revisions, ideas, collaborators, *et cetera*, because the growth of this structure, of the project and collaborative practice itself, is based on the integration of change. This constant integration of change might be the most definitive aspect of the Penthouse’s elusive core.

This network itself could only evolve because of the openness of the project. The Penthouse is left open to the failure of its existence as an arts venue: its daily upkeep and its receptiveness to events from the community is left up to the wish of its residents, who often know and understand this space as a semi-public venue. The Penthouse is always vulnerable to the possibility of being wiped clean or changed entirely – but, so far, it has not been stripped of its identity. It is a space that is cherished and loved by a community of people: a wide range of people who have keys to the space, who may check in from time to time, who may admire the Penthouse’s work, who may have thrown a party or art show in the space. But it has no sole commander or executive director who calls the shots. Of course, there is always some level of hierarchy within this, or any, collaborative practice; however, this hierarchy is also

¹⁷ Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 8.

put into constant flux. Because the collaborators involved with this project come and go, no one person may really claim a fixed role within the project for too long. This allows many people to feel a sense of ownership over aspects of the project and happenings in the space.

My vision of this network of collaborators can be illustrated by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "body without organs."¹⁸ The network is made up of collaborators who are simultaneously one and many bodies centered around, in and out of the Penthouse. The exchanges that happen between the different collaborators actually form this new body, or network, that is based in what Lynn would call continuity and differentiation. Lynn uses these terms to define architectural models which follow an internal order "that expands without changing its nature"¹⁹ and internalize "external, differential, disparate forces such that a stability emerges that is greater than the constituent elements."²⁰ These bodies, thus, create stability and unity out of a network of moving parts. Using this example, the Penthouse's network of collaborators is a networked-body, which is both multiple and singular, unifies and orders itself by being open to the movement of its various parts. Lynn writes,

The concept of multiplicity allows for the theorization and modeling of such bodily matters that are folded continuously between the one and the multiple, between organs, free bodies and composite bodies. This multiplicitous insight into bodies is only possible when unity has been loosened from the concept of the whole and can be considered as a stability that emerges from differential forces that move from the bottom up rather than from the top-down.²¹

Here, Lynn's comment on "the loosening of unity" is kindred to my concept of openness that allows for a stability that evolves out of the network of moving parts and exchanges, rather than a structure that is imposed onto the fluctuating network.

Over the past two years I have taken somewhat of a fixed role at least for the time being, as a central force to activate the Penthouse as an arts space. This is a role that would ideally be taken on by all residents of the space but that is not always the case. There have been phases where most of the roommates were excited and involved in the activation of the space and phases where most were not. It is not a requirement for all Penthouse roommates to be actively involved in running the space. Sometimes the Penthouse really is just an apartment for

individuals who are not interested in running an arts venue but just need somewhere to live, and this is also an important facet of the Penthouse. When the residents of the space are not invested or involved in the events, although this has its definite cons, it also opens up more possibilities for experimentation and freedom for the visiting collaborators or coordinators of the event.

I talk about the blob as an organic structure, which forms naturally and is born out of existing potentials and context; however it is important to note that in order for the blob structure to actually come alive, it needs to be constantly acted upon. This is why I view my concept of openness as radical. Radical openness and radically open collaborations question what it means to be open by asserting their openness within action, rather than in a state of 'being.' Radical openness means reaching out to new collaborators, initiating projects, creating opportunities for others; it means being actively critical and actively engaged, rather than being blissfully open to possibilities. In order to attempt to be radically open, we have to constantly question our own work, constantly integrate changing perspectives, and we have to be in constant action. This is a central feature of blob-engagement: it requires collaborators to be agents. More specifically, it requires collaborators to be sensitive, mindful, critical, radically open agents. This is because complete openness, much like other features the blob strives for, is not possible. It is just not possible to be inclusive of everyone, everywhere, all the time. That is why the blob is anti-dogmatic and so open to revision—the blob's existence is based on the constant and active integration of change.

ALLOVERSTREET: EAST OLIVER STREET ART WALK

My first year of living at the Penthouse encouraged the initiation of the second project I discuss, "Alloverstreet: East Oliver Street Art Walk." Alloverstreet is a monthly night of simultaneous art openings and events taking place in the Station North Arts and Entertainment District of Baltimore, Maryland. It is an event that spans various spaces from DIY venues, to warehouse lofts, to houses, to commercial galleries, to hallway spaces and more. Experiencing the progression and specific

¹⁸ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 30.

¹⁹ Greg Lynn. *Folds, Bodies & Blobs*, 139.

²⁰ Greg Lynn. *Folds, Bodies & Blobs*, 139.

²¹ Greg Lynn. *Folds, Bodies & Blobs*, 141.

initiation of this project, which I will explain in the following section, is one of the ways that I have come to understand the blob as a form that is democratic. I use the term democratic to refer to systems of interaction that are based on egalitarian relations between individuals and have the capability to promote basic principles such as tolerance, respect and honesty. Alloverstreet embodies several key features that can be called “democratic”: (1) Alloverstreet is a project that was born directly out of the potential of its site and in response to those who operate it; (2) it is based in dialogical interaction rather than instrumental interaction—this dialogical interaction is apparent in the way that events are set up, and in the events themselves; (3) the event is curated democratically, i.e. any art space or artist in the area is invited to participate and the content they produce is not controlled by any other party. Alloverstreet—like any successful blob—strives to counteract oppressive social institutions. This doesn’t mean it cannot in principle ever complement such institutions, but simply that it strives not to and has a mechanism that helps prevent such colonization i.e., its dialogical and democratic component that gives a platform to all voices, concerns, and interests. The democratic component to the project takes form in several ways that I will outline in this section including open meetings between Alloverstreet collaborators, accessible advertising, collaborative coordination, and various methods of communication between collaborators, participants and the general public.

THE BLOB IS DEMOCRATIC

Similarly to Penthouse Gallery, where an ongoing dialogical practice is an important component to the operations of the space and its evolution, Alloverstreet is based around dialogical-democratic social engagement that is inclusive. My use of the term democratic does not refer to a system of voting and elected officials that represent masses; rather I use this term to refer to spaces, both conceptual and physical, which recognize all individuals as equals and as potential participants. Democratic spaces are spaces of creative, open-ended dialogue and participation that is not measured by a distinct final product or action (although dialogues do involve some goals, including producing a form of knowledge and insight that is necessary to collaborative and blob-engaged projects, as I will explain in the following section). It is important to note that there is a difference between spaces that allow inclusivity of all individuals and spaces where all individuals actually feel included and represented. Ideally, democratic engagement harnesses a sense of

ownership for all individuals over a space—the idea that an entity might allow participation automatically infers a certain hierarchical system, where as democratic spaces, as I refer to them in this work, are reliant on egalitarian relations between individuals.

This theory of blob-engagement and practice recognizes the actual dialogical practice as both ‘the work’ and as a tool that is used to create the work, i.e., the coordination and organization of this project is done entirely through an on-going dialogue between groups of collaborators. A dialogical-democratic practice is important to blob-engagement because it can act as a backbone to the indefinable nature of blob-like projects, like a system of checks and balances. It is the grounding counterpart to the uncertainty and freedom that collaborators experience as they participate in their projects. The blob demands from the participants to be sensitive to others, to themselves, and to their own changing roles within their surroundings. This practice creates a dynamic that places social interaction at its center. Participants are asked to be trusting, to be honest, to be tolerant, to give others an equal space for their voices to be heard, and to be respectful towards one another—I see these as central facets to a democratic practice and engagement. As Grant Kester notes in his work *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, “Dialogical practices involve the co-presence of bodies in real time. They encourage a heightened awareness of bodily schema—our capacity to orient ourselves in space relative to the world around us—and in increased sensitivity to the process by which our bodies feel, relate, and produce meaning. Further, they revolve around an experience of reciprocal modeling, as each subject shifts roles, anticipates, mirrors, and challenges the other.”²² Kester interprets that a dia-

²² Grant Kester, *The One and the Many, Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 114.



logical practice involves, what he calls reciprocal modeling, or our ability to react to each other and our specific context in real time. A dialogical practice is necessarily tied to the experience of reacting, shifting, and challenging the other. Although not all dialogical practice must necessarily happen through the co-presence of physical bodies, it does require a social co-presence in some form. This practice then ties cultural or artistic production and knowledge to the social co-presence of individuals. This reminds us that cultural production, knowledge, or any type of artistic practice, cannot exist as an isolated experience outside of our lives. We cannot produce in a vacuum. We are always affected by and reacting to others around us. Dialogical-democratic practice reminds us that artistic production and practice is directly correlated to our own lived experiences as social beings.

Alloverstreet is not the first attempt at a monthly art-walk event in this part of Baltimore. There have been artists and various art spaces on this specific block of East Oliver Street for years; thus, there have been several other attempts at creating first-Friday events, open studios, gallery tours, and more by various arts organizations over the years. However, these past attempts, have been for the most part, fairly unsuccessful. I cannot speak specifically about these past attempts because I was not involved in them and they took place, for the most part, before I lived in Baltimore. However, The failures of these past approaches to creating an art walk prepare the ground, for Alloverstreet's communal approach to the project rather than the more so individualist, or top-down methodologies taken in the past. There are specific characteristics to Alloverstreet, and the way in which it came about that have been very central to the evolution and success of this event by molding the communal approach we have taken.

The way Alloverstreet was conceived is one way that dialogical and democratic engagement features most strongly in this project. The organization of the first Alloverstreet did not happen out of a specific intention to start an art-walk; rather it came from the capability of a few individuals to be trusting, tolerant, inclusive, and sensitive. Alloverstreet was conceived as a reaction to a perceived lack (the experience of a collective or community of artists), and as a response to a potential (the various arts venues and artists living in the area). Thus, Alloverstreet is inextricably tied to its site and the people it exists for and that exist in it. This evolution exemplifies one key idea of blob-engagement: blob-friendly projects do not impose a specific structure onto a site, rather they let the site, and all of its history, communities, and constit-



SPRINGSTEEN GALLERY, OCTOBER ALLOVERSTREET 2014. PHOTO BY OLIVIA OBINEME.



901 ARTS DRUMLINE PREFORMING ON EAST OLIVER STREET DURING OCTOBER ALLOVERSTREET 2014. PHOTO BY OLIVIA OBINEME.



TERRAULT CONTEMPORARY, OCTOBER ALLOVERSTREET 2014. PHOTO BY OLIVIA OBINEME.

uent parts, dictate a specific structure that is constantly informed and redefined by the site as the project evolves.

The first Alloverstreet took place about a year ago when I reached out to co-coordinate two simultaneous art openings at the Copycat building, Yes And No But at the Penthouse Gallery and Warm Space at Bodega Gallery, and another opening across the street at Area 405 decided to move their opening to the same night as well. This co-coordination between the art spaces continued to happen sporadically, with no exact structure in mind until we realized, at least at Penthouse, we had openings planned for every upcoming month. My collaborator and honorary sister, Lee Heinemann, and myself took on the job of advertising the monthly event and coordinating between the spaces. Soon, new art spaces began to open (Lil' Gallery, Lil' Porch and Terrault Contemporary at the Copycat Building) and spaces that had never been active before (Bodega Gallery) began to hold complementary monthly openings. By encouraging these shows to happen every month and by making them a bit more accessible to larger audiences (by advertising to a broader public), we were able to shed some of the mysticism and elitism that seems to haunt most artists and art shows. Arts shows at Alloverstreet became just a casual thing, that is generally accessible and open to anyone—and this contributed to the social and open nature of Alloverstreet. The curatorial organization of Alloverstreet is open and democratic as well: no space in the area has ever been declined participation. This is also because no one individual really has the authority to decline someone's participation. Lee and I may send an official list of the events happening (that incorporates any information that is sent our way from participants, i.e. is democratically curated) but we do not control the content of any event or have official authority over any of the buildings or the actual block of Oliver Street. We merely find a way of framing the existing practices and events in these spaces and coordinating with them so they happen on the same night. This is one of the defining characteristics of Alloverstreet: we never asked anyone if we were allowed to do this or that; in fact it never even occurred to me that that is something that we needed to do. Why shouldn't the 901 Arts drum-line (a local arts center in the Better Waverly neighborhood of Baltimore) march up and down East Oliver Street during Alloverstreet to celebrate their peers opening at Gallery CA with Get Your Life! Productions (a youth-oriented production company based out of Baltimore)? Our role as co-coordinators is to guide the audience of Alloverstreet through the events that are happening in an attempt to make them accessible to

broader audiences. We do this through communication between the art spaces, various advertising methods, branding, making signs, and holding occasional meetings with usual participators. The way we operate as co-coordinators is one way that Alloverstreet creates a non-hierarchical, open structure for community events, where individual and group involvement is not limited to any one form or way of participation, but is opened up to new possibilities of interaction and creation.

In the case of Alloverstreet, the blob becomes a way of ordering or framing a fluid and maybe sporadic series of parts (various art spaces, various events inside the art spaces, various participators, audience, and general public crowd, organizations involved, media coverage, press, and more) without imposing an alienating structure. The blob is parasitic, as Michel Serres might suggest via Greg Lynn in his work *Folds, Bodies & Blobs*,

*The parasite discovers unity and stability within an entropic system through connectivity. A parasite does not attack an already existing host but invents a host by configuring disparate systems into a network within which it becomes an integral part. There is no interior before the parasite, the parasite is the active agent of unification.*²³

As Serres conceptualizes via Lynn, this vision of a parasitic relationship is active, unifying, compositional (rather than de-compositional) and supportive. The non-alienating structure that is, essentially, Alloverstreet, supported the opening of new art spaces, unified relationships between various individuals and communities working within the project as collaborators, participators and visitors, and activated existing parts of the area such as the East Oliver Street block as a communal public space or performance space. The parasite, in this case, Alloverstreet's structuring of the existing happenings and art spaces, creates stability and order.

Although, as mentioned before, starting an art-walk was not the intention when Alloverstreet started, I did have specific goals in mind: accessibility and inclusivity within the specific Baltimore art scene I had started to become involved in. When Alloverstreet first started, my personal frustrations with the prominent attitudes of elitism, superiority and the general inaccessibility of art events happening in the city—all constituents of the spectator-engagement paradigm I critique in Part I—began to grow. By the positive response to this blob-engaged event, it was

²³ Greg Lynn, *Folds, Bodies & Blobs*, 138-139.

clear that I was not the only one with this sense of frustration. My personal frustration grew out of a certain lack of a collective experience or community with my neighbors. It grew out of the divorce between lived experiences and art-making that the spectator-engagement paradigm encourages.

This lack correlates strongly to one of the faults of the spectator-engagement paradigm; the spectator-engagement paradigm trains artists and art-engagers to think in very hierarchical and separatist terms by encouraging an individualist practice and a hierarchy between artist and spectator (e.g. the artist as brilliant creator). It is easy to understand how a lack of community or collective experience develops when the reigning engagement paradigm is the spectator-engagement paradigm. Not only does it discourage a type of collective experience of cultural production, but the reigning paradigm also discredits the intense amount of work that goes into creating any type of collective experience of cultural or artistic production. Such projects often involve hours of organizing, communicating and behind the scenes work that constitute a necessary and yet, unseen, part of the artistic process. The reigning paradigm also totally discredits the possibility that social interaction could actually be an artistic form itself. Often, with projects like Alloverstreet, the objects that are produced, such as publications, banners, art objects shown in the various spaces involved, *et cetera*, are constituent parts of the work itself; the work being the engagement that happens between the event, its physical manifestations and the process of coordination. I will explain this idea of ‘where the work is’ further in the following section where I talk about the blob as a form that is “alive,” but for now, I will clarify how dialogical and democratic practices complement the feeling of uncertainty that the openness and ambiguity of blob-engagement and process creates.

Alloverstreet strives to encourage and create spaces of democratic and open social engagement through an interaction with art in a variety of different types of spaces that are open and accessible to broad audiences. It attempts to create democratic spaces, or spaces that harness a sense of ownership for all individuals over a space and encourage open-ended, creative dialogue and social interaction, that are also coordinated democratically (open to anyone, no content is controlled by an authority). As I discussed earlier, the way Alloverstreet is run is just as important as the event itself; the end does not justify the means. What I mean by this is that if we want to create an event for democratic and dialogical social interaction that is open, tolerant and



respectful, then we must also be democratic, open, tolerant and respectful in the way in which we coordinate the event itself. If we achieve the result we want, but purposefully do something unethical to get there, then we have failed. I see Alloverstreet as this kind of regulative model for democratic social interaction. It’s not perfect, it’s not beyond criticism, it’s not a paradise, but it has a vision that it tries to meet. If Alloverstreet is to meet the vision that we set out for it, then we, those who collectivity coordinate and/or participate, must also act in line with that vision. The existence and success of Alloverstreet is dependent in its openness and inclusivity and so we, as coordinators and participants, become dependant on one another if we are to meet our collective vision for the project and our own goals, whatever they may be. Alloverstreet is a space dedicated to positive democratic social engagement and dialogue; it is a vision for a space that is tolerant, respectful, non-hierarchical and safe.

Having that in mind, this project attempts to walk a very thin line between supporting independent art spaces, groups, and communities and the potential of alienating them by making them more accessible to broader audiences and/or alienating other communities that live in the area. I understand and can respect that some communities depend on their independence and don’t want to be inclusive of other larger groups. Sometimes making something more accessible to others can entirely change the essence and identity of the space and make it unsuitable for the people it was originally created for; it is a thin line to walk. When is it not right to let someone else into our personal spaces that we work so hard to preserve? When does my support or advertising of an art space actually become violent to the identity and core of that space? At what point do independent art spaces and artists take too much liberty to transform spaces and neighborhoods? When thinking about Alloverstreet, so many of the spaces are housed inside of people’s homes; Penthouse Gallery for example is my living room, and the Copycat building is ultimately a residential building. When we choose to be democratic and inclusive of anyone who wants to be included,

COMMUNE WITH FEELINGS MORE THAN PRAYER FOR THERE IS NOTHING



this means we also are open to including individuals and groups whose perspectives and ideas we don't always agree with. Being open and democratic might mean being inclusive of intolerant assholes. Is there a line that we should draw? When do we say no? These questions do not have distinct answers, rather they follow the development of our work as we create a path for ourselves and face different difficulties. As I have already stated, blob-engagement emphasizes specificity. Although these questions and others alike may arise many times when working in this way, there cannot be one distinct resolution to each of them. One of the most significant things we can strive for as individuals, as collaborators, and as members of a community, whatever it may be, is to be sensitive to and to be kind in the ways which we engage with others. This may be a naïve response to some of the serious questions posed above—we cannot change the world merely by being sensitive and kind. However, at the root of blob-engagement, is a vision of working and engaging with human beings in an ethical and kind manner. And so, we must at the very least be sensitive, and we must be kind not only within the processes we undertake to do our work, but also in the ways in which we live our lives.

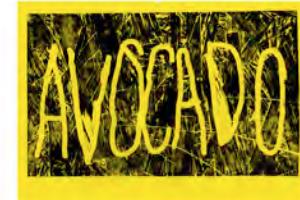
PRESS PRESS

Press Press is an interdisciplinary publishing initiative based out of Baltimore, MD that aims to create open platforms of communication through collaborative and social projects. This initiative was born out of an existing practice and interest of mine in publications and methods of distribution, i.e., the act of making something public, creating multiples, various methods of spreading and sharing information and through conversations with my Press Press collaborator Sonja Solvang, a printmaker and artist from Milwaukie, Wisconsin. For the duration of the 2014-2015 academic year Press Press partnered with the Baltimore City Community College Refugee Youth Project (RYP) where we hosted

PRESS PRESS POP UP AT LEXINGTON
MARKET IN COLLABORATION WITH KATIE
BACHLER AND THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF
ART, MARCH 2015.



ELSE TO ASK FOR THAT COMPANIONSHIP IS AND IT IS SUPERIOR TO ANY OTHER IS.



weekly English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) poetry and art workshops with a young group of refugees from Burma, Thailand, China and Yemen. I want to use this project here to illustrate the blob's feature of "aliveness:" as a form that reacts and anticipates, the blob is in constant flux, and exists in multiple ethereal dimensions. This feature of the blob responds to the spectator-engagement paradigm with a complete reconceptualization of art, artistic practice, and artistic engagement by affirming a vision of contemporary art as a form of engagement that is alive, rather than one static object or idea. Forms of engagement may produce objects, products, events and more, however these physical manifestations are constituent parts of the artwork. The artwork exists in the objects, subject(s), and the relation between them all. All elements are constituents of the artwork. For example, within Alloverstreet, the artwork consists of the intertwining of many parts and their evolution over time: the varied crowds of people that gather together, the way the crowds move from space to space, the various art spaces and their histories, the artists and cultural producers who inhabit the art spaces, the physical art objects, performances, and more that are exhibited, related publications and their distribution, the press releases and media coverage, the relationships that have formed over time, our impact on the neighborhood, and so on. This requires us to include the subjects who interact with the object (as spectators and producers), and who interact with one another through the object. The artwork is something, in other words, that is active and dynamic—living and breathing—not something that just stands there to be looked at. This is not to say that these objects are unimportant, rather these constituents are often completely essential to meaningful processes of engagement between individuals and groups, as I will explain through my work with Press Press and our group of young collaborators at the Baltimore City Community College Refugee Youth Project.



THE BLOB IS ALIVE

We hold our meetings at the computer room of a church in Catonsville, MD. Every Thursday at 3:15 a crowd of young middle and high school students run into a giant room in the basement of the church where they are assisted with homework, play games, and hang out with friends. During this time, about 15 of them come upstairs to our, slightly more secluded meetings. These meeting are made up of a smaller group of individuals who choose to participate in our project and take place in a more isolated space away from the other activities that happen at the program. At the beginning of each Thursday, before our group heads upstairs, the entire program gathers on the stage to play a game. The games often involve some sort of socializing and absurd interaction, for example, the banana game. The banana game is when one person stands in the middle of a circle made by the participants and goes up to each participant and asks them a question. The only answer the participants can give is 'banana.' Whoever laughs must switch with the person inside of the circle. These games play a significant role in the culture that is created within the RYP and within our smaller group meetings. By defining a separate set of rules that participants may follow for only a short period of time, games have a way of disregarding the social rules that are present in our various social groups. They create a momentary separate world, that is defined by rules that are often unexpected and fun. For example, in this situation they break down the traditional relationship between "teacher" and "student" by placing us all as equal players in the game. This is why games have a big role in the specific culture and atmosphere of the RYP; attempting to understand, interact with, and often, sometimes unknowingly, clash with social rules, is a big part of a migrant's experience in a new place. At the RYP these experiences are sometimes broken down, even if only momentarily, and the games play a big part in light-heartedly defining this church basement as a space where that break(ing) can happen.

SOMETIMES IN MY AMAZING IGNORANCE

OTHERS SEE ME ONLY AS THEY CARE



VISITING ARTISTS, GET YOUR LIFE! PRODUCTIONS, WORKING AT THE PRESS PRESS SHOP.
CURRENT SPACE GALLERY, FEBRUARY 2015.



MANG ANNOUNCING THE 100% YES MANIFESTO. CURRENT SPACE
GALLERY, FEBRUARY 2015.



THE REFUGEE YOUTH PROJECT STUDENT-COLLABORATORS CELEBRATING THE OPENING OF 100% YES.
CURRENT SPACE GALLERY, FEBRUARY 2015.



CLOSING POT LUCK OF 100% YES. CURRENT SPACE GALLERY, FEBRUARY 2015.



Every week, at our workshops upstairs, we host a varied group of individuals, some who come consistently from week to week and others who show up occasionally. The culture and atmosphere within our group is defined by those more consistent members, as their work and involvement changes and grows. These changes also inform the development of the exercises and themes we bring forth to the group as facilitators. Some of our initial meetings focused on attempting to encourage individuals to think about personally significant moments. These attempts were motivated by the idea that literacy and tools of expression develop when individuals have a desire to express something that is personally significant to them. Responses to the exercises varied; some brought forth dark memories from their past experiences with war, illness and death; some expressed their experiences of migrating to Baltimore and of living in poverty; and others expressed joyful moments of their lives. This space was created through different conversations individuals in the group would bring up about—for example, homosexuality, about their families, about coming to Baltimore, about American social norms, and ultimately about themselves as young individuals. This environment we created together was really the most significant and central aspect of the work; the poetry, publications, drawings, and other physical manifestations that came out of it were the tools we used to form this specific atmosphere within our so-called classroom. It's important to emphasize that the artwork is not the 'artworks,' or physical objects, that emerged from the project, but the project itself. The publications are just one part of this. This is a very different way of looking at what art "is." The spectator-engagement paradigm always wants to find the object that is the artwork. It assumes that art is something static, a product, something that is just there. The new model asks us to look not just at the object, but also at its situated context, its space, and the world from which it emerges. In this project, the context is made up of the histories, experiences and stories each individual brings fourth, our different and/or similar experiences of Baltimore, the languages we speak, the church we work in, and how all of these different contexts collide within this



one room to produce our group dynamic, the relationships between us, and the various drawings, writings, publications and prints. The artwork also then constitutes how these objects, experiences and relationships evolve and change as they come into interaction with other people and situations that happen outside of this room—as I will show in this section of the work.

During our weekly meetings we asked our group serious questions and took their responses seriously as well. We met them eye-to-eye in every aspect of our interactions. In correspondence with the other features of the blob, our meetings were democratic, or reliant on egalitarian relations between all individuals, and radically open, or always in flux and integrating constant critical, reactionary change; this means we never directly imposed any activity on any group member who was not interested in participating, all group members made decisions regarding what we wanted to do together and what would be included in our publications, all group members were respected equally, and all work got published and distributed in publications that were shared, not only with their own communities, but through various distribution outlets in Baltimore.

I have two collaborators who facilitate these sessions with me; Leila Khoury, a fellow MICA student, close friend and daughter of Syrian migrants living in Cleveland, Ohio, and Layla MacRory, another fellow MICA student who migrated from Cairo, Egypt to New Jersey before moving to Baltimore. Leila, Layla and I facilitated these processes, but there were often situations where our authority as facilitators was questioned and challenged. For example, apart from sharing and relating to some of the students through our own experiences as migrants, there were several situations where various younger members would correct my spelling or question the language used in the room. Because English levels varied, we had to change the ways in which we communicated with the entire group and with each individual. Idiomatic language was often used in addition to hand movements and images. This dynamic language that developed between us could only come about when

each participant made an effort to be open and sensitive to each other's ways of communicating. This situation is very characteristic of the struggles second-language speakers' experience with language; having to use words, phrases and various ways of communicating creatively in order to express 'simple' ideas. This created a sense of ownership over the language between us and broke down the presupposed hierarchy between expert and learner.

Some of the heavier conversations that came about encouraged the 100% Yes Manifesto Project. The 100% Yes Manifesto started as a list of ideals we believe are '100% Yes,' meaning ideals we whole-heartedly believe in or envision in a perfect world. Each group member presented their own 100% Yes list and any item on each individual's list that all group members agreed on became a part of the 100% Yes Manifesto. The manifesto includes the following:

100% YES MY MOM
100% YES ANNOUNCING THE TRUTH
100% YES COMMUNITY
100% YES KOREAN DRAMA
100% YES UNITY
100% YES LEARNING ENGLISH
100% YES RYP!
100% YES JESUS
100% YES EQUALITY
100% YES MANGO

These ideals were then made into a series of posters that were plastered around Baltimore in promotion of the release of our first publication, *The Chilly Smart Model*, and *100% Yes (fill in the blank)*: Press Press Pop Up, our month-long residency at Current Space, a gallery located in downtown Baltimore. During the residency at Current Space, outsiders were invited to participate in the manifesto during open weekend work hours, when they could create contributions in our workspace. The work space consisted of a small block printing press, large work





table, materials and artists-in-residence there to assist. Phrases contributed in the gallery were routered into plywood sheets and printed on the spot, following the same manufacturing process as the original set of posters. Also in the space were copies of *The Chilly Smart Model*, a newsprint publication that includes poetry, photographs and drawings by group members. Thematically, most of the work included addresses individuals' memories of exile and personal moments from their migration to Baltimore.

One of the goals of this month-long residency at the space was to bring some of the living aspects of this work into a more traditional art context where they can be accessed or experienced in some way by outsiders (the "art crowd"). We did this by setting up a print shop, inviting visiting artists and groups, throwing a pot-luck, and setting up a manifesto-reading by our group to a crowd of artists and art-engagers (our group members reading our original set of 100% Yes ideals on a little stage through a megaphone). However, actually accessing the living and breathing work, requires a lot more of the viewer than the traditional spectator-engagement paradigm asks. In order for an outsider to understand and even approach the work, she must become engaged with it, through the object, event, or any other constituent part, in a much more immersive and participatory manner than just looking. This is because the object alone is not the artwork; rather it is the experience of all of the constituent parts and their interrelations throughout the duration of the project. The feature of "aliveness" that is inherent to the blob can only be experienced or felt, i.e., it cannot be viewed, it cannot be touched, it cannot be theoretically accessed or reduced. This feature of aliveness is the combination of the project as it evolves over time, its changing collaborators, its evolving site, the objects and events it produces, and any other parts it may have. As Dewey states in *Art As Experience*, "Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and

achievement in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience."²⁴ The artwork exists within an experience, i.e., when an individual is either placed in or places herself within the experience of the various constituent parts of the artwork as they interrelate and change over time. It is important to note that this feature of aliveness that is inherent to the blob is not as simple as the cliché of art into life. Rather it is a much more complex integration of both fabricated and naturally occurring forms of engagement, relationships, objects, events and situations that come together to exist as meaningful life experiences or occurrences. These experiences can be shared and/or experienced in an infinite number of ways and ethereal dimensions. In this way, this feature of aliveness reconceptualizes art practice and engagement by asserting that the artwork cannot be fully accessed unless it is experienced. In turn, this asks the art-engager to necessarily become a participant, and thus an active agent, within the artwork, if it is to be accessed. By asserting the art-engager as an active agent within the work, this de-isolates art by placing it within the realm of that art-engagers' experience and by placing the art-engagers experience within the work. The art-engagers become a dynamic part of the work itself. 'The work' is essentially indistinguishable from its experience; an experience, which varies from individual to individual as each enters into the project. This places the artwork, the art practice and the engagement within the realm of our human experience where it holds real implications, consequences and stakes in our lives.

I SEE THEM AS THEY ARE TO IS AND NOT THE SEEMING ISNESS OF THE WAS. - SUN RA

²⁴ Dewey, John. *Art As Experience*, 19.

CONCLUSION: FROM SPECTATOR-ENGAGEMENT TO THE BLOB

The blob leaves us in a paradoxical space. It calls us to act, to become agents of social change and then to subsequently, embrace the groundlessness of our world. It is in this very tension, between definite action and radically open uncertainty, that blob-friendly projects can flourish. This tension appears and reappears in many ways throughout the projects outlined in this work; within the intentionality of an action that is paired with a sense of openness, within the invitation of an outsider to participate in something that can never be fully experienced, within the neurotic ambition to achieve a true democratization of art, real inclusivity, or real diversity in a world structured by instrumental rationality. It is within this tension, that I also humorously name this vision of art practice and engagement ‘the blob,’ which comes dangerously close to naming it something like ‘the everything.’ This naming of the blob, again, hints at the futility I feel in communicating the potential of this tension, of the paradox that the blob leaves us within, and of the socially transformative potential of art.

At the core of blob-engagement is a vision for an ethical engagement with other human beings. This vision of the blob-engagement extends beyond our own object-based work and into ways of being and acting in the world. This is important because we do not exist in a vacuum; we are connected to others who inhabit the space around us. We depend, in part, on others to bring meaning to our lives and our work, to keep us alive when we are ill, to save us when we are in trouble, to make sense of our engagements and so on. When the work we do is not isolated from our lives, but is directly intertwined with the world we live in, we have a much larger responsibility to be ethical in the production of our work and to be sensitive about how the work functions in the world. The work that we create is always affected by and affects other structures and persons (and creatures) in our environment. We are not able to completely control every facet of the blob just like we are not able to control every facet of our own lives. The most we can do is become aware of this condition, our inability to truly control the blob and subsequently the world around us, so it can inform the ways we navigate the existing structures of our world.

The spectator-engagement paradigm is wedded to a particular view of art that removes it from the world and, in doing so, robs art of its socially transformative potential. In the previous pages I have attempted to develop a new theory that restores this potential to art. The blob-theory does a valuable service not just to art and the possibilities of our enjoyment of it, but it does a service to life itself. It prompts us to see ourselves as related to others in one large artistic community that requires our mutual interaction and cooperation for its preservation and flourishing. That’s really where we find the blob’s “ethical core”: in de-isolating art, it also de-isolates individuals. This doesn’t mean the blob can and should replace other means of ethical progress. It is simply another vital piece that can be added in our ongoing efforts to better our and other’s existence.



FLUCT
PERFORMING AT
PENTHOUSE
GALLERY, 2015.



EACH OTHERS
PERFORMING AT
PENTHOUSE
GALLERY, 2009.

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