



# Art and Labor

Tilt West Journal  
Vol. 3 — September 2021

*Phil America, Sam Bodkin, Jessica Brunecky, Patrisse Cullors,  
Jessica Herring, Dulce Soledad Ibarra, Bobby LeFebre, Muna Malik,  
Stacey Putka, Lynde Rosario, Amy Shimshon-Santo, Mike Shum, and  
Rachel Woolf*



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# Foreword

With this volume on *Art and Labor*, Tilt West marks the third installment of our journal. Our first two issues, *Art and Language* (March 2020) and *Art and Community* (December 2020), were produced almost exclusively through the hard work and dedication of our in-house publications team. Since the beginning, however, it has been our hope to expand our editorial structure over time to include commissioned guest curators, and we are now thrilled to introduce Los Angeles-based curator Storm Ascher to our readers. Storm graciously collaborated with our board member Brenton Weyi on the creative vision for this third volume of the *Tilt West Journal*. We thank them both for their inspiring commitment to this project.

Because Storm's professional network is largely based outside Colorado, her partnership with Brenton on this volume enables us to truly *tilt west* and engage with artists and writers in other western states, particularly California, to facilitate an exciting interstate exchange of ideas. If you are part of our local Tilt West community, we hope you will enjoy seeing the work of Denver-area creatives in dialogue with folks outside our region. If you are new to the *Tilt West Journal*, welcome! We hope your engagement with this publication will spark your continued interest in our organization's activities. You can find out more about us on our website at [tiltwest.org](http://tiltwest.org).

# Editors' Note

*a bead of sweat*

*what comes to mind when we think of a bead of sweat?*

*the result of an automatic mechanism rewarding our bodies for exertion*

*rendered in a painting as if it were a diamond or a coveted elixir*

*containing the entire world in its reflection, exuded from a single pore of a  
single being*

*wiped away without thought or ignored entirely, evaporating into a thin*

*layer of salt*

*a bead of sweat*



When we labor, is it rewarding? Is it forced? What pressures transform joyful work into drudgery? Do these pressures stem from within ourselves or from without? What mental and physical journeys must we take in the pursuit of our work? Is that work ever finished?

In taking on the challenge of curating this volume, we thought critically about these questions, realizing that they don't always have straightforward answers. Our curatorial process began with two words: "Art" and "Labor." As we compiled our list of contributors, we prompted each of them with only the volume's titular words, mirroring our curatorial experience and

allowing the broad theme to guide each individual response. We made sure that our final selections represented diverse voices and promoted a healthy balance of written, visual, and auditory responses, so that our audience could glean the varied sensorial experiences that attend artistic work.

This approach yielded a web of subthemes that offered us an organizing structure for this volume. In the contributions of Amy Shimshon-Santo, Lynde Rosario, and Jessica Herring, we find exploration of the passionate labor of artists, for whom creative work is both a career and a way of life. Jessica Brunecky and Sam Bodkin examine wage and labor practices in the arts and culture sector, helping us to imagine a more equitable future. Patrisse Cullors and Mike Shum use their lenses—literally—to highlight creative labor done for the purpose of changing minds; their video works address art as activism. And Phil America, Stacey Putka, Muna Malik, Rachel Woolf, Bobby LeFebre, and Dulce Ibarra all use their work to bring attention to those who labor without adequate recognition. For these contributors, art is a voice for the voiceless.

Many artists use their practice to acknowledge essential workers who keep the world going. But artists, too, are essential workers, absorbing energy through observation and experience, then manifesting that energy as artistic form in an ongoing cycle whose results can both offer comfort and inspire action. As we practice, we find ourselves repeatedly reconciling the contradictions of our industry, using our art to critique the art world and its frequent devaluation of labor. We incorporate designs of dissent, designs of teaching, and designs of healing. In redesigning ourselves, we labor to give others strength. The artists and writers featured here are all practitioners of these explorations. We thank Tilt West for the opportunity to share our curatorial process, and, above all, we thank the minds and bodies—the human beings—who take part in this vital creative cycle.

Storm Ascher and Brenton Weyi,

*Art and Labor* curators and issue editors

# **art + labor**

Amy Shimshon-Santo



<https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/1050020884>

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**art + labor** [english]

artists always have work

but don't always have a job,

food, or a place to stay,

don't always have supplies

but always have material,

don't always have money

but labor incessantly

we always have something to do,

investigate, learn, know

say, always translating life

into new forms, awakening  
and dreaming, alone  
and in communion

artists seize opportunities  
for living, leave “positions”  
to do the real work  
of making culture,  
histories, futures, a present  
worth participating in

we labor in the days  
and in the nights,  
in a job you don’t apply for  
that never leaves you,  
work that changes  
and connects lifetimes

creation is a necessary endeavor,  
— sit on the land  
at the feet of humanity  
saying,      *speak to me*  
*speak to me*

*I am listening*



### **arte + labor [español]**

artistas siempre tienen trabajo  
pero no siempre tienen empleo,  
comida, o un lugar para quedarse,  
no siempre tienen recursos  
pero siempre tienen material,

no siempre tienen dinero  
pero trabajan incesantemente

siempre tenemos algo que hacer,  
investigar, aprender, saber,  
decir, traduciendo la vida  
en nuevas formas, despertando  
y soñando, solos  
y en comunión

artistas agarran oportunidades  
para vivir, dejan “posiciones”  
para realizar el trabajo real  
de hacer cultura,  
historias, futuros, un presente  
que valga la pena participar

trabajamos en los días  
y en las noches  
en mano de obra que no se candidata  
y que nunca te deja,  
trabajo que transforma  
y conecta vidas

creación es un esfuerzo necesario,  
— sentarse en la tierra  
al pie de la humanidad  
diciendo,        *cuéntame*

*cuéntame*

*estoy escuchando*



**arte + labor** [portuguese]

artistas sempre têm trabalho  
mas nem sempre têm emprego,  
comida, ou lugar para ficar  
nem sempre têm recursos  
mas sempre têm material  
nem sempre têm dinheiro  
mas trabalham incessantemente

sempre temos algo para fazer,  
investigar, aprender, saber  
dizer, sempre traduzindo vidas  
em novas formas  
acordando e sonhando, sozinhos  
e em comunhão

artistas agarram oportunidades  
para viver, deixam “posições”  
para realizar o trabalho real  
de fazer cultura,  
histórias, futuros, e um presente  
que vale a pena participar

trabalhamos dias e noites  
em mão de obra para o qual  
não se candidata  
e que nunca te deixa,  
trabalho que transforma  
e conecta vidas

criação é um esforço necessário,  
— sente-se na terra  
ao pé da humanidade  
dizendo,        *conte-me*

*conte-me*

*eu estou ouvindo*

# Quantifying Creation

Lynde Rosario

I am a dramaturg. I believe art is why I am alive. I labor at it daily as a literary artist who works with text in all its forms. I begin by reading the work, usually a play, perceiving the intentions of its writer, and then I develop strategies to execute those intentions. I am a professional collaborator, supporting the director, actors, and designers in a shared vision that morphs as it is shaped by each artist's input. My practice, and the lens through which I see the world, is dramaturgy. This often means that I interpret art made by others. Although my initial experience is textual, rather than performative, I consider myself a new play's first audience member. Though my process may begin with language—the articulation of an idea—ultimately the interpretation and embodiment of that idea determines the worth of my labor. The value of such labor is obvious to me. But it is by no means apparent to everyone.

Every artist's definition of value or worth will be as subjective as their work. Every artist's practice will be as individual as they are; and yet, all artists hold shared experiences. Whether painter or player, building a life's work takes a great deal of physical, mental, and emotional labor. When the monetary value of such labor goes unrecognized, it becomes more and more difficult for artists to accurately judge their own worth and demand fair compensation for it. Vital questions emerge when we start taking a deeper

look at this issue: What is the labor of creation, and how is it measured? How is art defined, and how is it valued? What is born of our labors, and what must be sacrificed to fulfill them?

You'll notice I ask more questions than I answer, a signature trait of dramaturgical inquiry. We can, in fact, read this essay as a dramaturg might approach a new work: digesting the text and then enacting the solutions discussed. Whether trying to achieve that elusive "work-life balance," understanding how artists can be monetarily compensated, or simply recognizing non-monetary definitions of worth, examining the language we use to talk about the value of our labor reveals how we can actively build more equitable practices around professional artmaking.

### A LIFE'S WORK

I once worked for an artistic director who would say, "There is no work, there is no rehearsal, there is only life." She was paraphrasing the Russian clown Vyacheslav Ivanovich "Slava" Polunin. I quickly adopted her phrasing as my mantra. The words always feel appropriate when explaining my own ideas of "work-life balance." Are not all moments spent working also moments spent living? How can an artist separate life and work and art when all are synonymous?

But living your craft is a double-edged sword. Those who do not wish to fairly compensate artists for their labor often argue, "If you love art, wouldn't you be making it anyway?" Yes, I would, but then the work would be for me, not you. When you pay me, it becomes yours. I make art for the love of it, but I also do it to make a life. When your labor is your life's love, when what you make is a reflection of who you are, and *how* you make it is who you are, must it then, once made, be sold or used for profit?

Even without monetary profit, love's labors are not lost because they come from that place of love. Still, it is important to recognize when it's time to be practical. Therein lies the individuality of experiences that can help you determine your value, whether monetary or not. How were you prepared or trained in your craft? What is your level of expertise? What experiences inform your art and become the tools of your labor? Answering these

questions can help you identify fair compensation for your work, and this work looks and feels different for each artist.

## ART AS SERVICE

Even if artists determine the fair value of their labor, whether monetary, emotional, or social, gatekeepers will still determine what can be called “art” and who gets to make a living from it. These gatekeepers vary depending largely on a society’s economic structure. Capitalism teaches us that profiting off our art is necessary if we wish to demonstrate its worth, and thus our own worth, to others. How much does what you create make for you? Are we the things we produce? Socialist countries whose governments subsidize art may offer more opportunities for artists, but those artists are often subject to censorship not found in the free market. Financial autonomy can lead to freedom of expression. But how much is lost in a culture when art is determined worthy of distribution, access, or visibility by only a select few?

Economically speaking, artists provide an essential service. As an example of this type of “commodity,” I again look to “Slava” Polunin who, in describing his profession’s worth, said, “A clown is trying to protect what is essential for the soul of humanity.” In Russian culture, clowns have long been considered particularly moving and necessary artists. Whether in literature or performance, the clown makes us laugh at our own misery and shows us the follies of our world, but always with a smile. He offers laughter and hope. What is the going rate for providing such a service? According to Forbes, “Slava” Polunin was Russia’s fourth highest-paid celebrity, earning 4.2 million dollars in 2005. I dream that one day all artists will be rewarded for their work so adequately, but as we all know, this is not currently the case. Can we rethink our scarcity mentality and find a more equitable way to compensate artists for their contributions? Everyone’s needs and desires are as individual as they are; therefore, their labors will be equally as distinct. Can bottom-line pay rates and budgets reflect that? What do the ratios of art making to money making tell us? Who will ultimately decide what is equitable? If we replace the current gatekeepers, who will be in charge?

## LANGUAGE FOR LABOR

Typically the theatre—like most systems—establishes a clear, linear hierarchy with a sole arbiter. Ensembles, in contrast, give each member, regardless of role, an equal creative voice, and therefore exemplify labor sharing and power sharing in the theatre. In such a model, artists serve the work first, and to do that, they must understand, appreciate, and advocate for one another’s contributions. The structure of the hierarchy is democratized: a circle rather than a pyramid.

As a dramaturg, I wonder if we can similarly democratize our language. Hierarchical power structures are embedded in the very words we use to describe ourselves in relation to others. Before any system can change, we must first change how we speak. Rather than *submitting* work to a *superior*, which reinforces a disadvantaged position, can we not *share* work with a *colleague*? Even simple changes in terminology, such as these, model inclusive behavior.

Evaluating how your own definitions of “value” and “worth” do or do not align with those of your society is the next step to remedying misconceptions around these terms. An age-old trope advises, “Know your audience.” When speaking of your art, your craft, and your ideas, you want your audience to value them as highly as you do. Is the language you use supportive or self-deprecating? It is our shared responsibility to lift up the value of art for the sake of ourselves and for society as a whole.

What is the power you have and hold over each moment of your life, each creation, each ideation, each collaboration? Must that power be shared with those who pay you? What can you do with the skills that you have? How can you wield the power of your art and labor? These answers will be unique to you as you define your life and your practice. But we can all strive to create an environment that fosters communication and makes everyone feel comfortable enough to participate in the conversation. When a thought is freely expressed, it can contribute to a cumulative culture, allowing for abundance. How do you quantify your art and its worth? You have the power to determine how that value is measured. How will you define it?



<https://youtu.be/4r4ZnBXL2tw>

# To Walk in Her Shoes

Jessica Herring

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ARTIST	Jessica Herring
YEAR	2016
MEDIUM	Video (color, sound)
DURATION	06:59 min.
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

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Choreographer/Director/Performer: Jessica Herring

Videographers: Jessica Herring and Sylvia Herring

Music:

“I'll Never Stop Loving You” by Doris Day

“Protest” by Chapel Fou

When Jessica Herring was invited to contribute this piece to the *Tilt West Journal*, our curators asked her about her twenty-five years of experience as a classically-trained ballet and classical modern dancer. Jessica reflected on the physical and mental labor of dance as a form of expression, particularly the enormous amount of time that dancers spend practicing repetitive movements in order to convey the intentions of a given work and meet the expectations set forth by choreographers. Such labor often begins in an innocent and innocuous manner. Over time, the effort compounds, sometimes achieving a form of “perfection,” but often culminating in results that are quite different from the original seed of inspiration. Jessica believes this labor of practice and repetition has had a profound impact on how she

understands herself, both within the world of dance and within the world at large.

In this video, Jessica's choreography, costumes, and music choices challenge the viewer to consider the female body, gender roles and expectations, and the emotional labor often performed by women. The title, *To Walk in Her Shoes*, references the adage that one can never truly comprehend another's lived experience unless they have walked a mile in that person's shoes. We should exercise caution in our judgments of others because we may not understand the contexts shaping their lives and points of view. Likewise, we should be gentle when judging ourselves because we may not always recognize the factors and conditions that have influenced our own decisions. Often, such perspective is only available after a bit of time and distance.

# **Self-Tape Audition**

Bobby LeFebre

The casting director asks I say my name to camera with a smile  
To show the thirsty lens my hands: front and then back  
Profiles: left, right, then back to center

Some days I rewatch the footage of me doing so  
as a reminder that I am still here  
A reminder that we are all still here

Making art  
Making love  
Making moves or making do

The “normal” we are longing to return to is a bus that will never come  
But today, today is a bench at a bus stop begging us to recognize  
that the world is still moving around us

I don’t know if I will book the gig  
You do not know if you will land the role you are looking for  
We all go about living anyway

# Museums Can—and Must—Do Better

Jessica Brunecky

I love museums. At their best, they can be a tremendous force for societal good. At their worst, they can manipulate, mislead, and undermine. Through my graduate studies, my professional experiences in museums, and my service on boards and as an IMLS grant reviewer, I've seen it all firsthand. These experiences have forced me to critically reconsider our histories and our labor practices. Our field draws upon a rich history of creativity, exploration, and scholarship to share knowledge with our communities and improve society. However, embedded power structures lurk as skeletons in our closet that must come to light if we are to treat ourselves and our peers as the valuable workers and passionate changemakers that I know we are.

I am proud of my fellow museum workers who have led the charge to address these power structures in recent years. In 2015, #MuseumWorkersSpeak ran a rogue session at the American Alliance of Museums Annual Meeting to expose and address labor issues. In 2019, the Board of Trustees of the Association of Art Museum Directors passed a resolution calling on their member museums to provide paid internships. Numerous state and regional museum associations now require pay ranges

for job postings before they will share them with their networks. This transparency is a great step towards addressing our industry's pay inequities.

In 2020, we saw more meaningful action in the field. While organizations like the American Alliance of Museums have advocated for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts for years, the events of last year pushed many museum professionals to pressure leadership to take a stand on social justice, diversity, and exploitation issues. Some leaders listened, and meaningful progress was made. When faced with pandemic-related closures in 2020, resulting in mass furloughs and layoffs, #MuseumWorkersSpeak launched a mutual aid relief fund for museum staff experiencing hardship, and they have distributed over \$100,000 in funds to those in need. These are just a few examples of meaningful change despite troublesome historical legacies surrounding labor. But there are still skeletons to unearth.

The first public museums in Europe opened in the late eighteenth century at a time of heightened nationalism and expanding imperialism. Alongside the European treasures on display were spoils of war and looted colonial artifacts. Such objects were valued primarily as evidence of Europe's cultural superiority. Today, objects remain a core storytelling methodology of how museums present knowledge. Historically, those who shape these stories, such as curators, have been part of academia—i.e. educated and privileged—and their narratives are shaped by that privilege.

One consequence of this narrow storytelling manifests not in object histories, but in the stories we are told about labor. Broadly, museums struggle with identifying value, especially that of unseen labor. Acquisition narratives feature objects that have been *collected* from the natural world or *discovered* by archaeologists, rather than *created* by makers or *pursued* on exploratory missions. The value of this labor by oftentimes nameless people is nearly incalculable. Museums today capably calculate some types of quantifiable worth, like the value of objects for insurance policies or the rate of investment return on blockbuster exhibitions. But what about the workforce? The historical legacy of prioritizing the object over its associated labor makes it difficult for museums to know the value of their employees' work.

We must acknowledge that museums are built upon deeply rooted power structures that fundamentally inform the current state of exploitative practices in our field, and that is precisely why we must engage in critical and honest dialogue to hold museums accountable.

Now.

### LET'S TALK LABOR

Today we contend with this legacy of unseen labor. Museums and—more broadly—nonprofit arts organizations operate as well as they do because of an overreliance on unpaid labor, the realities of which look different in each organization. But this sets the foundation for valuation of labor at any institution at \$0/hour. Interns, volunteers, and committee members are just a few positions assigned this nonexistent salary. Some organizations even utilize volunteers in place of paid educators and research assistants. Others rely on them to staff large-scale events which should be run by development professionals, to say nothing of the exploitation of artists' labor at such events.

Unpaid labor is endemic throughout arts organizations, and those in our community are prime examples. In a previous publication, I analyzed regional data to quantify the volume of unpaid labor to illustrate its impact on Denver's labor market:

*[Denver-metro area] arts and cultural organizations reported over two million volunteer hours in 2016 alone (Colorado Business Committee for the Arts 2017). This is the equivalent of \$53 million in unpaid labor and equal to the labor of nearly 1,000 full-time employees (Brunecky 2019, 343).*

These figures cover the work of docents, guides, and other volunteers, but not that of interns, who are still seen as a separate labor category based on the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The FLSA guidelines ought to be a safeguard ensuring that interns aren't taken advantage of and don't replace paid employees. Why, then, do we not embrace them? Perhaps because we

know that many organizations would not successfully operate without their vast networks of unpaid laborers.

We must erase the arbitrary distinction between intern and volunteer to fundamentally examine our reliance on unpaid labor as a whole. Both contribute significant work at the lowest possible salary, and when a company's base pay rate is \$0/hour, it's easier to justify lower starting wages for all positions, which results in systemic undervalued labor (Salerno and Gold 2019, 446). A 2016 survey of professionals leaving the museum field showed that their salaries increased an average of 27% when they changed sectors (449). Considering, too, that nonprofit organizations utilizing volunteers in addition to paid staff pay their employees 13% less than nonprofits employing paid staff only, it's clear that unpaid labor must be addressed to achieve both pay parity and equitable opportunities in our organizations (Pennerstorfer and Trukeschitz 2005, 187).

Moreover, undervaluing labor undermines Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. The ability to labor for free is a form of privilege, which is why economist Richard V. Reeves frames unpaid positions as "opportunity hoarding" (Reeves 2017, 96). Opportunity costs must be weighed: an individual must be comfortable laboring for free, often forgoing hours at a paying job. Not everyone can afford to make such a choice, which exposes the underlying classism of volunteerism and the internship industrial complex. Until organizations address the privilege of laboring for free, DEI efforts will continue to miss their mark.

## WHAT TO DO?

What are some next steps you can take to address the devaluation of labor in the arts?

- Pay people. Pay them what they are worth.
- Don't labor for free. Don't let others labor for free.
- Advocate for transparency and equitable pay practices.

## Arts and cultural workers:

Know your value and advocate for each other. The American Alliance of Museums and the Association of Art Museum Directors publish field-wide salary surveys. The 2019 Arts + All Museum Salary Transparency spreadsheet makes it easy to see where you fit. Familiarize yourself with your peers' salaries, both regionally and nationally, and start destigmatizing openness about pay. Create institutional labor policies to codify what work gets paid at what rate. This helps our departments see our value and helps supervisors advocate for pay increases.

#### **Artists and creatives:**

Don't accept offers for exposure only. That's exploitation. Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) is an amazing resource for valuing your creative labor. When asked to speak, show your work, perform, or write for an organization, consult the W.A.G.E. online fee calculator to see whether they are offering you an equitable amount based on their financial position. Please share your experiences with others. Transparency benefits us all.

#### **Those involved with board work or development:**

Push to add staff salary support to endowment campaigns. Ask donors to name fellowships, paid internships, and positions throughout your organization, not just positions at the top. Show fellow board members that an increase in staff pay saves resources over time, ensuring less turnover and investment in training new employees, in addition to the many benefits of a higher paid, less stressed, more loyal, and potentially more diverse workforce (Salerno and Gold 2019, 450).

We can all advocate for increased salary support for staff, stipends for interns, and institutional policies regarding unpaid labor at the organizations we value. Have a frank talk with board members or donors, and emphasize the need to pay staff what they're worth. Tweet museums your concerns and ideas for equity. Money talks. Support organizations making changes and don't support those that aren't doing enough. Tell them why. Pressure from both inside and out is needed to get organizations to address structural

changes and understand the true value of labor. Let's overcome our historical power structures and classist legacies and do better.



<https://youtu.be/NOzJA1Zl/G4>

# Landscape with Live Stream

Mike Shum

---

ARTIST	Mike Shum
YEAR	2021
MEDIUM	Video (color, sound)
DURATION	06:30 min.
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

---

Mike Shum's film, *Landscape with Live Stream*, explores what it means to bear witness during this era of constant social media engagement. In the days following George Floyd's death, protests swept Minneapolis, culminating in the evacuation and burning of the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct headquarters. Mike filmed these events as they unfolded, and dozens of others livestreamed the protests, allowing an international audience to watch what was happening in real time through platforms like Facebook Live, Twitter, and other social networking sites.

Mike's work examines the gaping disparity between witnessing traumatic events firsthand and watching the same events unfold on a mobile device. The important labor of seeing, experiencing, and recording historical events has typically belonged to artists and journalists, but with cameras in every pocket and social media a click away, access to that experience is now quite broad. Despite their level of separation, the viewers who consume social media and watch livestreams also bear witness to history and thus share accountability for our collective response to these events.

Copyright Mike Shum Productions.

# But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began

Phil America

For his contribution to this volume on *Art & Labor*, artist Phil America shares a selection of digitally-remastered images of framed flags taken from his series *But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began*. The title for the series is an excerpt from a book of poems, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, by formerly-incarcerated poet Reginald Dwayne Betts.

Phil's designs for these flags are reimagined advertisements for items that the artist personally encountered while he was in prison. The objects and scenes he depicts are commonly known by people who are incarcerated and include various foods and forms of entertainment, as well as examples of labor that people might be expected to perform while serving their sentences. Many of these references and cues are less familiar to an art world audience. By catapulting this imagery out of the prison context and into the mainstream, Phil challenges us to confront this hidden reality and the financial manipulation that is embedded within the carceral system.

For the purposes of this publication, Phil has embellished the reproductions of his flags with eye-catching text bubbles, mimicking the style of advertisements designed to manipulate the consumer. While normally we

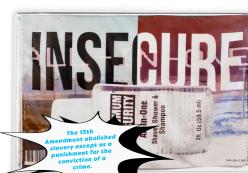
would expect these text bubbles to display special offers or quotes about the popularity or efficiency of the showcased products, here they highlight shocking yet widely available information relating to the prison industrial complex, its history, and its current objectives.

-Storm Ascher



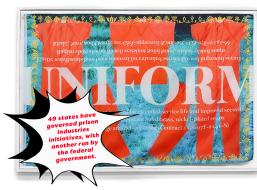
**But Let MeTell You How  
This Business Began —  
*Phil America***

..... 32



**But Let MeTell You How  
This Business Began —  
*Phil America***

..... 34



**But Let MeTell You How  
This Business Began —  
*Phil America***

..... 36



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*Phil America***

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**But Let MeTell You How  
This Business Began —  
*Phil America***

..... 46



# **But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began**

Phil America

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<b>ARTIST</b>	Phil America
<b>YEAR</b>	2020
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
<b>MEDIUM</b>	Print on textile flags
<b>CREDIT</b>	Courtesy of the artist

---

A ‘spit sock hood’ that staff will put over people if they spit.



The 13th  
Amendment abolished  
slavery except as a  
punishment for the  
conviction of a  
crime.

# **But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began**

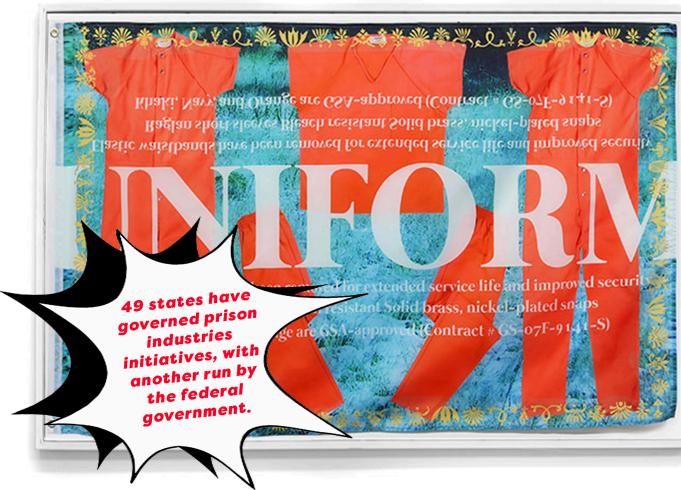
Phil America

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<b>ARTIST</b>	Phil America
<b>YEAR</b>	2020
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
<b>MEDIUM</b>	Print on textile flags
<b>CREDIT</b>	Courtesy of the artist

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Shampoo and soap that is clear so people cannot hide anything in the liquid.



# **But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began**

Phil America

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<b>ARTIST</b>	Phil America
<b>YEAR</b>	2020
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
<b>MEDIUM</b>	Print on textile flags
<b>CREDIT</b>	Courtesy of the artist

---

A typical uniform for incarcerated people.



# **But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began**

Phil America

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<b>ARTIST</b>	Phil America
<b>YEAR</b>	2020
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
<b>MEDIUM</b>	Print on textile flags
<b>CREDIT</b>	Courtesy of the artist

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Many say that The Whole Shabang chips are the best chips in the world.



# **But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began**

Phil America

---

<b>ARTIST</b>	Phil America
<b>YEAR</b>	2020
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
<b>MEDIUM</b>	Print on textile flags
<b>CREDIT</b>	Courtesy of the artist

---

A bunk bed on which most incarcerated people sleep.

**While the average wage  
for incarcerated people is  
86 Cents an hour, the  
corporations profit in the  
millions from this labor.**

Everyday drones defend people, property and privacy at commercial airports, powerplants, government facilities, nuclear sites and public events

# **But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began**

Phil America

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<b>ARTIST</b>	Phil America
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<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
<b>MEDIUM</b>	Print on textile flags
<b>CREDIT</b>	Courtesy of the artist

---

A machine that detects drones that might fly over a facility to drop off paraphernalia.



*Inmates  
working for  
companies such as  
AT&T, Verizon and  
Sprint are forced to  
use other phone  
companies with  
extremely  
high rates.*

# But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began

Phil America

---

ARTIST	Phil America
YEAR	2020
DIMENSIONS	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
MEDIUM	Print on textile flags
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

---

JPay MP4 players. JPay enables families to transfer money to incarcerated people but takes a percentage.



# But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began

Phil America

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ARTIST	Phil America
YEAR	2020
DIMENSIONS	36 x 60 inches (91.44 cm x 152.4 cm)
MEDIUM	Print on textile flags
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

---

A security mirror to see around corners.

# **The Art of Rehabilitation: A Conversation with Incarcerated Artists**

Stacey Putka

When I consider the intersection of art and labor, I am drawn to the concept of humanity. As humans, we strive for alignment in our lives. It isn't easy to find a balance between pursuing one's passions and making a living. We can all empathize with the romance novelist who doubles as a waiter to make ends meet or the sculptor who abandons their love of clay to work on Wall Street. Our need to support ourselves and our families often trumps our desire to pursue our passions. How do we ensure that a lifetime of meaningful work is also accompanied by a paycheck? If we are lucky, we train ourselves to identify the art within our labor, and over time our labor becomes art in motion, helping us to express our right to be seen as fully human.

As a society, regrettably, we often use dehumanizing language to remove this right from marginalized populations and—in doing so—block their path to the pursuit of happiness. At Breakthrough, formerly Defy Colorado, we work to restore this right to those who have been stripped of it by the criminal justice system. In the minds of the general public, the prison

environment and experience is grossly oversimplified as “a bad place for bad people.” This could not be further from the truth. At Breakthrough we are redefining the purpose of prison and training community members like you to think about it differently.

Ending mass incarceration is a cause that we can all get behind. It’s expensive and ineffective, and it currently segregates over 2.2 million people from our communities. Instead, let’s choose to be vulnerable, to experience uncomfortable emotions, and to see the humanity of those who are living behind prison walls. Prisons should be rehabilitation centers where people can work to understand their personal values, develop skills in line with those values, and train to transfer those skills into careers.

I have met, interacted with, and been transformed by over two hundred people currently incarcerated in Colorado. These individuals carry their values close to their hearts and express them in some of the most beautiful artistic forms I have ever seen. Many of them have honed a valuable craft that could translate into a career, but barriers remain that prevent individuals with criminal histories from getting jobs once they are released. Knowledge is power, and learning about people who are currently or formerly incarcerated helps us dismantle biases and broaden our understanding of the intersection of art, labor, and prison.

Earlier this year, I sat down with four such artists to ask them about their experiences, and the process of growing through artmaking.

### MEET THE ARTISTS

Rios is an artist. His mediums include graphite, acrylic paint, canvas, murals, wood carving, cake, and frosting. He draws, paints, tattoos, and bakes. His creativity has grown ever since the age of two when he picked up a crayon and scribbled on his grandma’s walls.

Miguel is an artist. His mediums include wood, laminate, metal, and bolts. He learned to build furniture in Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility.

Joybelle is an artist. Her mediums include writing and public speaking. She began her artistic practice in 2019 in La Vista Correctional Facility.

Nick is an artist. His mediums include JavaScript, PHP, and Python. He began learning to code in 2005 at MSU Denver and Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility.

## ART IN MOTION

### *How did you develop the passion you have for your craft?*

**Rios:** “As a kid, I could always keep myself busy with a pad of paper, some crayons, or a pencil, and use my imagination to create anything my little mind could conceive, which was mostly cartoons. Over the years, I would discover other forms of art and the artists who created them, everyone from Jim Davis (Garfield) to Stan Lee (Marvel), Bob Ross, Boris Vallejo, Luis Royo, and Coop. I [am] also...fascinated by the world of Goya, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Monet, and M.C. Escher. I have learned a lot from these old masters, observing how they used their colors, light and shade, and perspective. Through all their influences and my continued self-taught, trial-and-error techniques, I have developed my own style that continues to evolve and push the envelope of my art.”

**Miguel:** “Developing my passion [for] the crafts, unlearning mercifully, and learning plenteously, came with sacrifice. In the early 1990s, Denver, Colorado was experiencing both crack cocaine and [a] gang epidemic. Immediate economic wealth through the drug market was a means for everyone that desired to elevate their poverty status. A 6 p.m. curfew was mandated by authorities to counteract record-high violence in the city. Although my fragile mind was incapable of articulating the contradictions I saw, I chose to inhale the[se] moral pollutants and utilize...my qualities to survive. Unable to choose my consequences, incarceration with no hope to reenter society became my reality. Indeed, I was deemed an [ir]redeemable person, but I learned how true mercy works, although feeling unworthy of mercy. My community began to invest into my illiteracy, apathy, generation[al and] cultural iconoclasm. I experienced compassion for the first time, which led to my personal commitment to no longer live in a

comfort zone requiring no intellectual rigor and non-spiritual enrichment. Studying, praying, and socializing amongst different cultures became my noble reality. Since [then], my skill set has enhanced and has become transferable to society.”

**Joybelle:** “I never thought I was particularly articulate. I loved to read, learning at the age of three, and always preferr[ed] a book to playing outside. As a youngster, I had been encouraged in more musical directions. Coming to prison for the second time gave me the opportunity to really focus on the [self]-worth issues that were negatively impacting every facet of my life, from [my] career to relationships. As strange as it may sound, I’m grateful for the opportunities that I had access to while incarcerated. Without [them], I would never have met the volunteers from Breakthrough or the University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative (DU PAI), to name just two. The freedom that writing gave me, coupled with...positive reinforcement, inspired me to continue and to want to do so much more with my writing.”

**Nick:** “Honing my coding skills in prison was a blessing. What I originally viewed as a highly technical skill began to grow into something more creative. As I began to grasp the concepts of programming, I realized that there is rarely a ‘wrong’ answer when your program consistently produces the desired outcome. This has enabled me to solve difficult problems in fun and even elegant ways. Ultimately, building complex tools with nothing more than keystrokes and imagination allowed my mind to grow positively in an environment rampant with boredom and negativity.”

#### ***What does your craft mean to you and others?***

**Rios:** “My craft is a way for me to meditate and analyze the direction my life has taken as well as where I am going and the legacy that I will leave. Because of the many forms of art I produce and the mediums I am adept in, I have been able to take care of myself and have a business selling my art to corrections officers.”

**Miguel:** “To me, unlearning is the process of challenging the paradigm that enables you to become conscious of your unconscious self. Learning is the

process of consciously seeking knowledge [and] guidance, and comprehending how to apply the new information.”

**Joybelle:** “Writing provides a voice. It shares an experience and allows someone else to walk in your shoes, for a brief moment. It builds empathy and both educates and inspires.”

**Nick:** “Thanks to the internet, my craft allows me to join forces with programmers around the world to collaborate on projects that benefit everyone. I have also come to appreciate the strong community that exists among programmers. I have never approached a fellow programmer for advice and come away empty-handed.”

#### *How has your craft changed you?*

**Rios:** “As my art has gotten better, it [has become] a reflection of my growth in character to be a better human being.”

**Miguel:** “By no means am I a self-[made] man. Hope and compassion gave me the strength to pursue the aligning of my values with my purpose, which has made me another exceptional irredeemable person [who has been] rehabilitated.”

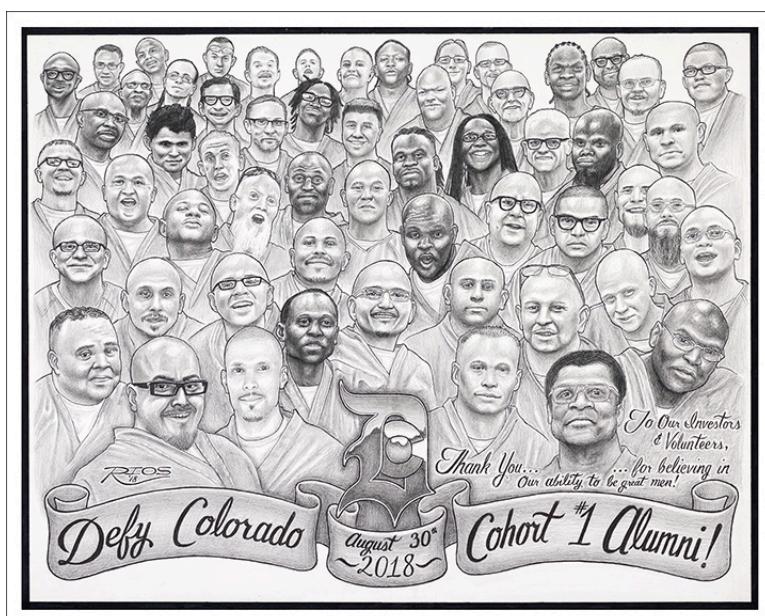
**Joybelle:** “Writing has allowed me to express deeply hidden truths and...to safely explore much of the trauma that molded so much of my experience. It has created a harbor to safely remove those masks and illuminate the shining soul that was buried so deeply, I had forgotten who I was meant to be.”

**Nick:** “Learning to code has completely changed the way I see the world. I now tackle most of life’s obstacles as if they were programming tasks. By mentally breaking large projects into smaller, more manageable pieces, it is easier to spot trouble before it starts.”

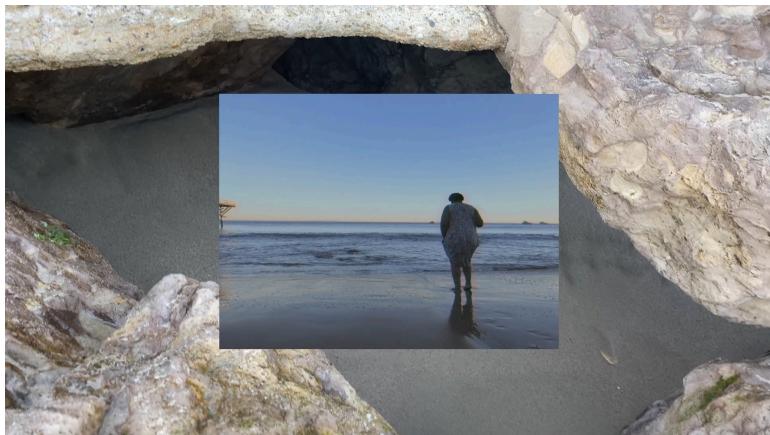


I would like to express my gratitude to Rios, Miguel, Joybelle, and Nick for sharing their perspectives with me and with you. Getting to know these four people and other incarcerated individuals has compelled me to work to end

ineffective mass incarceration and redefine post-prison opportunities for those impacted by this problematic system. Conducting these interviews helped me to understand how the arts can serve as an impetus for self-reflection, rehabilitation, and economic opportunity. My mission—and the mission of Breakthrough—is to encourage this kind of rehabilitation for all. Criminal justice reform is personal. For me. For these artists. And for you.



Drawing by Rios, 2018, graphite on paper, 20 x 30 inches.



<https://youtu.be/pFtEcH3mh1g>

# Whispers: Pray For LA

Patrisse Cullors

ARTIST	Patrisse Cullors
YEAR	2021
MEDIUM	Video (color/sound)
DURATION	05:03 min.
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

Concept: Patrisse Cullors

Video shot by: Patrisse Cullors

Assistant: Alexandre Dorriz

Edited by: Giovanni Solis

Score: Meshell Ndegeocello

Black Lives Matter founder Patrisse Cullors created this video work, *Whispers: Pray For LA*, in January 2021, amidst an unprecedented surge in Covid-19 cases in Los Angeles, where she lives. Her video is part of the larger, ongoing *Pray for LA* project launched by Crenshaw Dairy Mart, an artist collective founded in 2020 by Patrisse, Alexandre Dorriz, and noé olivas. The *Pray for LA* initiative and associated artworks are intended as offerings to the thousands of working-class Angelenos who have suffered under the weight of Covid-19, systemic racism, and the neglect of a county, state, and country that have continuously and deliberately prioritized profit over people.

*Whispers* functions both as a prayer for the Los Angeles community and as a meditation on the emotional labor and toll of activism: “There are days where I pray for LA; there are days where I mourn LA; there are days where I love LA; there are days where I hate LA,” the artist intones. She invites us to the ocean to offer up our hearts and our grief over the sickness and death that have impacted Los Angeles and the nation at large. *Whispers* asks us to fight for a world in which every family has meaningful access to healthcare, food, and shelter—“We deserve so much more”—and concludes with an impassioned call for abolition.





# Bolsote (wearable no. 2)

Dulce Soledad Ibarra

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ARTIST	Dulce Soledad Ibarra
YEAR	2019
DIMENSIONS	65 x 63 inches (165.1 cm x 160.02 cm)
MEDIUM	Bolsa de mercado, thread, buttons
CREDIT	Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit LA, photographed by Jeff McLane

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Constructed from Mexican market bags, the works in Dulce Soledad Ibarra's *Bolsotes* series pay tribute to laborers and their uniforms. Much of Dulce's work is inspired by the Piñata District of Los Angeles, a regional landmark and community defined by Latinx (primarily Mexican) culture and migrant methods of survival. Even in the best of times, the resilience of the laborers and small-business owners in this district is tested daily due to economic uncertainty and limited resources. Since the spring of 2020, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the community has been profound, intensifying the need for new strategies of adaptability and sustainability.

Hecho de bolsas de mercado, las obras en la serie *Bolsotes* de Dulce Soledad Ibarra rinden homenaje a los jornaleros y sus uniformes. Las esculturas de Dulce están enfocada en el Distrito de Piñata de Los Ángeles, una callejón con cultura, arte, comunidad y historias de supervivencia de inmigrantes latinos (mexicanos). A cualquier hora y época, la resiliencia de los trabajadores y vendedores se prueba a diario en una economía incierta y recursos limitados. Desde la primavera de 2020, las implicaciones de

Covid-19 en esta comunidad ha sido profundo, intensificando la necesidad de nuevas estrategias adaptables y sostenibles.





# Bolsote (wearable no. 3)

Dulce Soledad Ibarra

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ARTIST	Dulce Soledad Ibarra
YEAR	2020
DIMENSIONS	64 x 32 inches (162.56 cm x 81.28 cm)
MEDIUM	Bolsa de mercado, thread, buttons
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

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# **Deported: An American Division**

Rachel Woolf

In *Deported: An American Division*, Rachel Woolf's poignant photographs chronicle the deportation of Lourdes Salazar Bautista, a domestic laborer who lived in the United States for 20 years. After receiving her deportation order in August 2017, Lourdes returned to Mexico with her two younger children, Bryan and Lourdes (Lulys). In Mexico they were reunited with Luis, Lourdes' husband and the children's father, who was deported in 2010. Lulys has since returned from a year in Mexico to continue her education in the United States with her sister Pamela, who chose to stay in Michigan.

Thousands of families have been torn apart as a result of United States immigration policy. Rachel's project documents the emotional toll of deportation and traces the struggle of one family to remain connected despite their prolonged separation. Through her photojournalistic work, Rachel shines a light on individuals and situations that may otherwise be overlooked. In making our shared humanity visible, her intimate photographs elicit an emotional response and effect change.



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**Deported: An American  
Division — *Rachel Woolf***

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# Deported: An American Division

Rachel Woolf

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ARTIST	Rachel Woolf
YEAR	2017
MEDIUM	Digital photograph
CREDIT	Image courtesy of the artist

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*Sunday, July 30, 2017 at Lourdes Salazar Bautista's home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.* Lourdes and her daughter Pamela (19) embrace during a meeting with friends, family, and immigration rights campaign leaders.

Copyright Rachel Woolf.



# Deported: An American Division

Rachel Woolf

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ARTIST	Rachel Woolf
YEAR	2017
MEDIUM	Digital photograph
CREDIT	Image courtesy of the artist

---

*Monday, July 31, 2017 at the Consulate General of Mexico in Detroit, Michigan, USA.* Pamela rests her head on a table after the meeting confirming her mother's deportation order. The three Quintana-Salazar children were born in the United States and hope their dual citizenship will help them travel back and forth to Mexico with ease.

Copyright Rachel Woolf.



# Deported: An American Division

Rachel Woolf

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ARTIST	Rachel Woolf
YEAR	2017
MEDIUM	Digital photograph
CREDIT	Image courtesy of the artist

---

*Tuesday, August 1, 2017 at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport in Romulus, Michigan, USA.* Bryan (13) cries as his former teacher, Jennifer Walsh, wipes tears from his face before he enters the security line with his family to travel to Mexico. Following the deportation of their mother, Bryan and his older sister Lulys (16) are joining her in Mexico to keep the family together.

Copyright Rachel Woolf.



# Deported: An American Division

Rachel Woolf

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**ARTIST** Rachel Woolf

**YEAR** 2017

**MEDIUM** Digital photograph

**CREDIT** Image courtesy of the artist

---

*Friday, Oct. 20, 2017 at the former home of Luis Quintana Chaparro in San Nicolás, Mexico.* Bryan looks at a family photograph displayed in the home of his father, Luis Quintana Chaparro. The picture was taken shortly after his father was deported from the United States in 2010, and it was sent to him as a reminder of the family he was forced to leave behind.

Copyright Rachel Woolf.



# Deported: An American Division

Rachel Woolf

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ARTIST	Rachel Woolf
YEAR	2018
MEDIUM	Digital photograph
CREDIT	Image courtesy of the artist

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*Saturday, May 26, 2018 at the children's grandmother's house in San Nicolás, Mexico.*

Luis kisses his daughter Lulys as his son Bryan, now 14, watches television. Lulys and Bryan grew up without their father after his deportation in 2010.

Copyright Rachel Woolf.



# Deported: An American Division

Rachel Woolf

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ARTIST	Rachel Woolf
YEAR	2018
MEDIUM	Digital photograph
CREDIT	Image courtesy of the artist

---

*Tuesday, May 29, 2018 in Lulys's room at home in San Miguel*

Zinacantepec, Mexico. Lulys looks down as she registers for classes at her former high school in the United States. She is surrounded by photos of her friends and family from the United States. According to her mother, "She doesn't want to lose what she has [in Michigan]. She told me, 'Mom, I have to go.' It's really hurting my heart. It's broken. But I left home when I was her age, and I'm going to support her."

Copyright Rachel Woolf.



# Deported: An American Division

Rachel Woolf

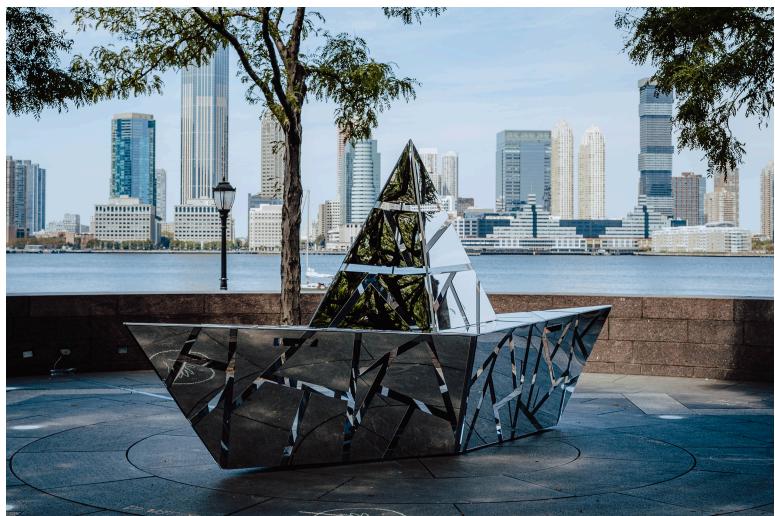
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ARTIST	Rachel Woolf
YEAR	2018
MEDIUM	Digital photograph
CREDIT	Image courtesy of the artist

---

*Thursday, May 31, 2018 in San Miguel Zinacantepec, Mexico.* Lourdes looks out the window at the landscape near her house as she sits in the backseat of a taxi. “I never prepared myself to not live in the United States. I never had any problems. I never got into any trouble. I was never a problem for anyone. I thought that since I was doing things the right way, I would be able to stay in the United States.”

Copyright Rachel Woolf.



# Blessing of the Boats: River to River

Muna Malik

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**ARTIST**

Muna Malik

**YEAR**

2020

**DIMENSIONS**

84 x 48 x 192 inches (213.36 cm x 121.92 cm x 487.68 cm)

**MEDIUM**

Steel and mirrored plexi

**CREDIT**

Courtesy of the artist

---

Muna Malik originally conceived of her sculptural installation project, *Blessing of the Boats*, as a tribute to global migration and the millions of people who have left the countries where they were born with the hopes of finding reliable work and more secure futures for their families. These migrants are an indispensable, if often undervalued, segment of the workforce in nations like the United States.

Muna has expanded the focus of her project as she has replicated her *Blessing of the Boats* installation in public and private spaces around the country. Building on the topic of global migration, the artist's goal now is to prompt people to consider how we might come together to create a better society. She asks: "What message would you leave if you knew your words would have a major impact on someone?" and "Given the opportunity to sail toward a new future, what society would you create, and how might we get there?" The project invites the public to share in the labor of creating the

artwork by encouraging viewers to craft origami paper boats, which they inscribe with heartfelt messages for the future. The paper boats are collected and added to each installation, allowing the large vessel to slowly fill.

This iteration of *Blessing of the Boats* was installed in Belvedere Plaza in Battery Park City, NYC in 2020.





# Music and Labor: A Groupmuse Perspective

Sam Bodkin



<https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fapi.soundcloud.com%2Ftracks%2F1050045712>

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*In December 2020, one of our Art & Labor issue editors and curators, Brenton Weyi, sat down for a virtual interview with Sam Bodkin. Sam is the founder of Groupmuse, a platform that supports the hosting of chamber music house concerts (called groupmuses) nationwide. His conversation with Brenton touched on a broad range of topics, including the early days of the startup, pivoting in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the organization's decision to become a worker cooperative. You may listen to the full recording of their interview with the SoundCloud link provided above. The following passages are excerpts from the conversation, edited for clarity.*



### ***On the origins of Groupmuse:***

**Brenton:** Can you share the story of how Groupmuse started?

**Sam:** Absolutely. I became obsessed with classical music during my freshman year of college. I packed my iPod full of the stuff and was just pumping it into my head at all hours. I decided that I wanted to devote my life to expanding the listenership for this art form. I found that many people think they can't understand classical music; they can't see themselves as classical music listeners because the music has become saddled with the connotation of the concert hall and a culture of privilege. Classical music needs to confront that and situate itself in the modern world.

After college, I fell in with a group of musicians who were studying at the New England Conservatory, and they used to gather on a regular basis in an apartment in Allston, Massachusetts. It was really quite an amazing thing to go to these evenings with some of the best young chamber musicians in the world, listening to one another play their hearts out. It brought together these worlds that had felt so separate: the world of inner enrichment, the life of the spirit and the mind, AND having a good Friday night, getting drunk, laughing, the whole thing.

So that was the inception of the idea for Groupmuse. Couch surfing was another major inspiration. The year before I got into classical music, I took a gap year and traveled all around the world on the generosity of strangers who were willing to share their space. Groupmuse is really a combination of those experiences I had in Allston and couch surfing. We can build joyous, beloved community in living rooms around the country by sharing some of the greatest aesthetic accomplishments of Western culture. The first groupmuse was in January of 2013. I was joined by my first cofounder, Ezra Weller, in June of that year, and then by Kyle Schmolze, my second cofounder, in September.



***On Groupmuse's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift to online performances:***

**Sam:** In January of 2020, we organized 204 groupmuses in one month alone with 76 groupmuses just in the city of New York. And then in February 2020, we had our biggest revenue month ever. Then, of course, we all know what happened in March. We canceled every groupmuse. In a flash, we raised twenty-five thousand dollars as a part of a relief effort to support musicians who had been affected by Covid, and we dispersed that money to our musicians who'd had groupmuses canceled. So that was a wonderful moment where the community really showed what it was made of.

Then Groupmuse made this transition to the online world, and that has actually been remarkably successful. Our model is that it costs three dollars to RSVP, and that money goes to Groupmuse to offset our costs. And then, at the actual event, you're encouraged to give to the musicians as generously as you can, but ten dollars is the minimum. We have always managed to pay musicians respectably, especially considering that they can program anything they want and really share this music on their own terms. But, especially in the online era, we really came into our power as one of the most robust ways for musicians to make money at a time when the classical music ecosystem as a whole is more or less in freefall.



***On empowering musicians and creating a 21st-century model for experiencing classical music:***

**Sam:** A huge challenge during this pandemic is that it's hard to scale out acoustic music so that people can be socially distant and still have an evocative experience. The big institutions and concert halls, which have all the power, just can't make the changes that are needed at this time. What we're looking at right now is an ecosystem of musicians—a labor pool—that creates incredibly great art but is disempowered. Institutions are monopolizing the patron rolls, keeping the listserv, keeping the resources, and putting it all back into the concert hall, putting it into the administration.

When municipal ordinances state that crowds of fifty or more people cannot legally gather, when the concert hall is legally obliged to close, the musicians aren't given access to the patron rolls. They don't have access to the big mailing lists that might make it possible for them to have a fighting chance to create communities of their own through Zoom or YouTube. I want to be clear: I have a lot of respect for the large institutions, and without them, classical music would not have survived the 20th century. But it's not the 20th century anymore. It's the 21st century. And I do think that there's a growing recognition that we need models for sharing classical music that are rooted in a sense of empowerment, a sense of musician autonomy, a sense of resilience and interconnection, and a less fractured, more integrated cultural ecosystem.



#### *On becoming a worker cooperative:*

**Brenton:** Let's dive in a bit more into Groupmuse's organizational structure. Groupmuse started off as a public benefit corporation, and now it's a cooperative. Could you explain the journey from one to the other?

**Sam:** Sure. Actually, at first Groupmuse was a C-corp, the most conventional form of a startup. I guess I had dreams that maybe this thing would scale and be this big unicorn startup, making me a ton of money. When I was joined by my two cofounders, we were working in the trenches every day for a long time. As we labored together, Kyle and Ezra became my comrades and brothers in this process, and it increasingly felt wrong that I would own more of this thing that was totally a product of their love and labor, too.

We knew we ultimately wanted to be a worker-owned cooperative, but we weren't ready to go all in yet, so first we became a PBC, a public benefit corporation, which is kind of a hybrid. It's a middle step, a legal formation structure whereby an organization, a for-profit company, is committed to a mission beyond the needs and desires of the investors. Investors can't sue

you, saying, “You didn’t maximize my return this quarter.” You have a larger mission, and investors sign up for that.

We became a worker-owned cooperative after Covid happened. Ezra left Groupmuse in February 2020 to pursue a new career path that had opened up for him. We were sad to lose him, but by that time we had hired a group of part-time folks around the country to do local organizing. We decided we needed to bring all the part-time people on full-time. Once they were full-time, we decided that we should start talking again about cooperativism and timelines, that we should put them on a track so that they could vest a true ownership and stake in Groupmuse, so that we could all be equals.

When Covid first hit, we were able to pivot to online concerts quickly, so April and May were actually two of our most lucrative months ever. We were able to put together huge online performances, where we’d get top artists, and sometimes five hundred folks would show up and split the tape with the musicians. We were high on the hog, and we actually gave everyone a raise. But then, as the pandemic continued, people got Zoom fatigue. Summertime came around; people didn’t want to be inside. Our fortunes changed, and we started running out of money. We thought we might not necessarily make payroll. So we called the team around the table and said, “We’re all family in this common purpose. We’re not about to fire you.” We decided instead to have an honest and vulnerable conversation about the needs of the team. And that was the moment when we decided to become a cooperative as soon as possible, because we were having the hard conversation about money and resources, and we were all invested. So we all became worker-owners after that.



#### *On the logistics of a worker cooperative and building for the future:*

**Sam:** At Groupmuse, people choose their own salaries. It’s true. Of course, resources are finite, and we’re all highly transparent. If you want to change your salary, you have to get advice from everyone on the team. You do not need their consent, but you do need their advice and emotional input. By

having a community practice of real, honest, vulnerable communication, people hold themselves to a high standard. We are not worried that a worker-owner is going to decide to pay themselves ten thousand dollars a month when we can't afford it. It would just never happen because of the trust and love and coherent team culture.

**Brenton:** Has anyone raised their salary?

**Sam:** No one has raised their salary. People have diminished their salaries. Not everyone, but some people have renounced their salaries for a time, just because of life circumstances and because they care about Groupmuse, and more importantly: they own it. So they'll go for a few months without getting paid, if it means that this thing can continue to live. And we know that it's temporary. These past couple of months, our revenue has been back on it. So it's only going to be a matter of time. With coherent culture and a true community of shared intentions and common purpose, anything is possible. That's real resilience.

**Brenton:** How are decisions made? Do you need consensus? Do you need some kind of quorum?

**Sam:** It's evolving, because the team is going to grow, but right now there is a steering committee, made up of Kyle, myself, and Mosa Tsay, who is a wonderful cellist. The steering committee is the highest management body, but it is appointed and approved by the worker ownership. The buck still stops with the worker ownership, but the steering committee sets company priorities. Also, anyone can submit themselves as a member of the steering committee. You can self-nominate. So that's how the leadership works, but—for the most part—we do make decisions by consensus. People also have well-defined departments, and they are trusted to make decisions themselves.

It has felt so good to give Groupmuse over to six beautiful humans. Just imagine how it will feel to give it over to a hundred beautiful musicians, then a thousand beautiful musicians, then five thousand. We're in such a favorable position right now in the industry, having made this pivot with such vigor. Now a lot of the best classical musicians in the world are using

Groupmuse as their platform. Last week we had Derek Olson and Jonathan Biss. We're in a position to become a dominant cultural force in classical music, and it won't be by becoming just another extractive monopoly, but through our decision to become a musician-owned cooperative. Because classical music needs transformational, structural change.



*We invite you to listen to the audio recording of Brenton and Sam's full conversation. It spans an hour and forty-five minutes and touches on many more details about the inner workings of Groupmuse and their future plans. And don't miss Brenton's improvised poetry, which closes out their interview!*

# For the Workers

Bobby LeFebre

And together we watched it happen  
Watched the stars come out at night  
There, right before our eyes a grand reveal  
And the stars—the people  
they did what they always do

They got up  
They packed their lunch  
They clocked in  
They delivered their bodies  
They took orders  
They didn't complain

They were grateful  
They smiled  
They cashed their checks  
They paid their bills  
They stretched  
They were broke again

They prayed  
They sacrificed  
They made miracles  
They raised children  
They held their heads high  
They endured

They worked in grocery stores  
and fields and janitors' closets  
and restaurants and shelters  
and classrooms and factories  
and banks and offices and warehouses  
aboard buses, trucks, trains

They dreamed  
In emergency rooms  
and clinics and morgues  
and mortuaries  
and nursing homes and cafes  
and in despair

Because rent  
Because food  
Because bills  
Because integrity  
Because heart  
Because power

Capitalism commodifies the constellations  
commanding that someone—a celestial body even—  
be the labor that makes the money  
for those at the top  
who don't really make it themselves

# Contributors

## Phil America

Phil America (he/him) is a California-raised artist, designer, and activist. He has lived and worked in numerous locations throughout the United States, Europe, Asia, and Africa, chasing individual moments of freedom while exploring global dynamics of class, gender, and race. Phil's creative work includes installation, sculpture, performance, photography, video, and fashion. He has created numerous artworks in public spaces, from fabricated living quarters in a suburb in Bangkok, to 'illegal galleries' on the US-Mexico border, in an abandoned New York City subway station, and at a Los Angeles swap meet. Phil's recent monograph, *Above The Law: Graffiti On Passenger Trains*, presents his photo documentation of graffiti around the world. His work has been featured in books, newspapers, and magazines internationally, and he is a three-time TED speaker. Explore his website to learn more.

But Let Me Tell You How This Business Began

## Sam Bodkin

Sam Bodkin (he/him) is the founder of Groupmuse, where he's also a worker-owner and a member of the organization's steering committee. Sam grew up outside Boston, attended college in New York City, and returned to Boston after graduation in 2012 to start Groupmuse. The idea for the organization grew out of Sam's deep belief in the metaphysical power of music to inspire community and the power of historical music in

particular to connect us with our cultural ancestors. Groupmuse now hosts events from coast to coast, earning millions of dollars for musicians and connecting hundreds of thousands of attendees with one another and with themselves. When he's not working on Groupmuse, Sam can be found building eco-spiritual community in the Mid-Atlantic, writing his own music under the name Heavy Meadow, or hiking barefoot in search of a spot with a good view where he can put up his hammock and play ukulele for the Earth until the sun goes down.

### **Jessica Brunecky**

Jessica Brunecky (she/her) received her MS in museum studies from CU Boulder in 2010, and she currently works as the divisional administrator for social sciences in the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Colorado Boulder. She has over ten years of museum work experience and strongly believes that the museum field is overdue for change. Jessica's professional research interests include ethical labor standards for museums, institutional collaborations, and millennial audience trends. In 2020, she co-presented 'Pay Your Damn Interns: The Whys and Hows for Academic Museums' at the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries annual conference, building upon research conducted for her chapter 'Professional Associations and Labor Policies' in the book *For Love or Money: Confronting the State of Museum Salaries*. Jessica is president of the board of directors for the Colorado–Wyoming Association of Museums and also serves on RedLine Denver's exhibition committee.

### **Patrisse Cullors**

Patrisse Cullors (she/her) is an artist, organizer, and freedom fighter from Los Angeles. In 2013, she co-founded the Black Lives Matter Global Network, and she served as executive director of the organization until May of 2021. Her 2018 book, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, is a *New York Times* best seller. Patrisse completed her MFA at the USC Roski School of Art and Design in 2019. In 2020, she designed an online MFA program in social and environmental arts practice with Prescott College. The program—which she now leads as faculty director—combines art, social justice, and community organizing. Patrisse has exhibited and performed widely throughout the world, from traditional arts institutions to public spaces, including Art Basel Miami, Hauser & Wirth, The Broad, and Frieze LA, among many others. In 2020,

along with Alexandre Dorriz and noé olivas, Patrisse co-founded the Crenshaw Dairy Mart, an art studio and gallery in Inglewood, California.

### **Jessica Herring**

Jessica Herring (she/her) holds a BA from Skidmore College with a double major in dance and psychology and an MA in critical dance studies from the University of California, Riverside (UCR), where she was recognized as a Gluck teaching fellow and a dean's distinguished scholar. After completing her graduate degree, Jessica returned to her native Colorado to dance for the Hannah Kahn Dance Company and teach ballet at the Denver School of the Arts. She has since transitioned to teaching yoga, both as a yoga class instructor and as a yoga teacher trainer. Jessica has also studied acting as a Lewis Myers Scholarship recipient at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. She continues to create and perform her dance work under the moniker 'Herring Like the Fish', and she offers yoga workshops and consultations through her business, The One Beautiful You. Jessica's goal, in all her endeavors, is to create more space to love the entirety of her being and—through that pursuit—to enable others to do the same.

### **Dulce Soledad Ibarra**

Dulce Soledad Ibarra (they/them, she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist, designer, and curator who is deeply invested in community and identity. Expressing a queer Xicanx perspective, Dulce explores issues of culture and generational guilt through their videos, installations, and performances, and they often invite public participation and dialogue with the work. Currently, Dulce's practice is centered around the Piñata/Party Supply District of Downtown Los Angeles, a community of businesses and a zone of familiar cultural commodities. Dulce has exhibited, screened, performed, and programmed their work at venues across Southern California, including Angels Gate Cultural Center, Charlie James Gallery, Consulado General de México en Los Ángeles, Craft Contemporary, Echo Park Film Center, Guggenheim Gallery at Chapman University, Human Resources, ONE Gallery, and Pieter Performance Space. They hold a BFA in sculpture from California State University, Long Beach and an MFA from the University of Southern California. View more of Dulce's work on their website.

### **Bobby LeFebre**

Bobby LeFebre (he/him) is an award-winning writer, performer, and cultural worker fusing a non-traditional, multi-hyphenated professional identity to imagine new realities, empower communities, advance arts and culture, and serve as an agent of provocation, transformation, equity, and social change. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, *American Theater Magazine*, *NPR*, and *Poets.Org*. In 2019, Bobby was named Colorado's eighth poet laureate, making him the youngest and first person of color to be appointed to the position since its establishment in 1919. He holds a BA in psychology from the Metropolitan State University of Denver and an MA in art, literature, and culture from the University of Denver. Learn more about Bobby's creative work on his website.

### **Muna Malik**

Muna Malik (she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Los Angeles. Her bold and poetic work tackles contemporary issues—particularly those concerning women of color and refugees—and has been featured in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Vogue Magazine*, *Art Forum*, and *i-D Magazine*. Muna has exhibited her work at Band of Vices Gallery in Los Angeles, the Annenberg Space for Photography with Photoville LA, the International Center for Photography, Soomaal House of Art in Minneapolis, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Northern Spark Arts Festival, Artworks Chicago, and the University of Minnesota/Humphrey School of Public Affairs, among other venues. In 2018, Muna was a billboard artist with For Freedoms: 50 State Initiative, and she recently contributed to their 2020 Awakening project. Find out more on her website.

### **Stacey Putka**

Stacey Putka (she/her) believes fiercely in the power of transformation and the importance of challenging perceptions. She grew up in an entrepreneurial household with a father who took full advantage of his second chance in life after recovering from addiction. This experience inspired Stacey to devote her career to facilitating transformation in the lives of others. She currently pursues this mission as executive director of Breakthrough, an organization that provides people with criminal histories with entrepreneurial education while inside prison, so that they may

pursue new business ventures and careers upon release. Stacey holds a BS in psychology from Colorado State University and an MSW from the University of Denver.

### **Lynde Rosario**

Lynde Rosario (she/her) is a dramaturg and literary artist. She holds a BA in drama from Hofstra University and an MFA in dramaturgy from The American Repertory Theatre/Moscow Art Theatre Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University. Originally from Brooklyn (Canarsie land), Lynde now lives in Denver (Cheyenne, Arapaho, Núu-agha-tuvu-pʉ (Ute), and Ochéthi Šakówin land), where she is the literary manager for the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA) Theatre Company. Her other affiliations include Boulder Ensemble Theatre Company, Curious Theatre Company, Athena Project, The Catamounts, Theatre Artibus, Local Theater Company, Letter of Marque Theatre Company, and The Anthropologists. Lynde is a board member and vice president of regional activity for the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas and also serves on the board for the National New Play Network.

### **Amy Shimshon-Santo**

Amy Shimshon-Santo (she/her) is a poet-in-residence on Earth. Her interdisciplinary work connects the arts, education, and urbanism. Her 2020 poetry collection, *Even the Milky Way Is Undocumented* has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rainbow Reads Award and is now available in both print and audiobook from Unsolicited Press. Amy's writing has previously been nominated for Best of the Net in Poetry (2018) and a Pushcart Prize for Creative Nonfiction (2017), and her work has been featured in *Prairie Schooner*, *ArtPlace America*, *Zócalo Public Square*, *Entropy*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Lady Liberty Lit*, *Full Blede*, *SAGE*, *UC Press*, *SUNY Press*, *Imagining America*, and *Tiferet Journal*, among others. Amy has performed throughout the United States, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Singapore. Her teaching career has spanned community centers, K-12 schools, arts organizations, spaces of incarceration, and large research universities. She lives in California and has immediate family on three continents. Learn more about Amy's work and background on her website.

## **Mike Shum**

Mike Shum (he/him) is a journalist and filmmaker who specializes in cinematography and production. In his documentary films, Mike explores the spectrum of human experience—from abuses of institutional power to individual trauma—and his work often highlights the ways in which we perceive and define home within the context of historical and cultural conflict. (Indeed, as the son of Hong Kong immigrants, he sees his work as relating to his own struggles with defining home.) In 2015, Mike was a finalist for the News and Documentary Emmy Award for Outstanding Interview with the *New York Times* for his work in Iraq. In 2017, he served as producer and director of photography for the Tribeca Film Festival’s Audience Award-winning film, *Hondros*. In 2019, he was director of photography for the film *Predator on the Reservation*, a finalist for the 2020 News and Documentary Emmy Award for Outstanding Investigative Documentary. Most recently, Mike was the writer-director and producer on the Frontline | PBS post-election special collaboration, *American Voices: A Nation in Turmoil*.

## **Rachel Woolf**

Rachel Woolf (she/her) is an independent visual journalist and photographer, based in Denver. She specializes in storytelling through documentary photography and portraiture. Her pictures reveal intimate aspects of humanity intersecting with broader economic and social issues. Rachel holds a BA in documentary studies from Ithaca College. She has been a freelance contributor to publications such as *The New York Times*, *Kaiser Health News*, *TIME Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and *ESPN Magazine*, and her work has been recognized by the National Press Photographers Association, the Michigan Press Photographers Association, and ART WORKS Projects. Explore more of Rachel’s work on her website, and follow her on Instagram.

Deported: An American Division

# About

Tilt West is a Denver-based nonprofit dedicated to stimulating inclusive community exchange about art, ideas, and culture. We believe critical discourse is vital to the health of an arts ecosystem. We are committed to supporting artists, writers, thinkers, and all cultural workers who make Colorado an interesting and inspiring place.

For every issue of the *Tilt West Journal*, we commission a range of cultural practitioners to respond to a central topic. In addition to our publishing activities, Tilt West regularly hosts roundtable discussions across the Denver metro area and beyond. Tilt West maintains an open invitation list for all our roundtables; sign up at [tiltwest.org/join-us](http://tiltwest.org/join-us). Roundtable prompt materials can be found at [tiltwest.org](http://tiltwest.org). We post the audio recordings of our roundtables on Soundcloud, and we commission written responses to these conversations for our Medium channel.

Tilt West's activities are supported by a talented group of volunteers culled from the region's growing arts and culture sector. We thank board members past and present for their contributions: Olivia Abtahi, Tya Anthony, Ruth Bruno, Maria Buszek, Jaime Carrejo, Whitney Carter, Sarah McKenzie, Bianca Mikahn, Sharifa Moore, Kate Nicholson, Gretchen Schaefer, Geoffrey Shamos, Marty Spellerberg, Brandi Stanley, Joel Swanson, Derrick Velasquez, Sarah Wambold, and Brenton Weyi.

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*Cover art: Muna Malik, Blessing of the Boats (detail), 2020. Steel and mirrored plexi. Courtesy of the artist.*

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