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The Office of Possible Projects

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art
by

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Pomona College
Bachelor of Art in Studio Art, 2013

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation by the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

This writing is a companion to the MFA thesis projects that I presented in the Spring 2022 semester at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas. My thesis work did not exist as a singular, solo exhibition in a traditional gallery space like it did for most of the artists in my graduating cohort; rather, I completed three different but substantial and interrelated projects, many of which occurred outside of traditional art spaces: the *Office of Possible Projects* at the Fayetteville Public Library, the *Cake Stand Biennale* which took place across the city of Fayetteville, Arkansas, and *the office of possible projects' exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces* which occurred in/around/beyond the University of Arkansas SculptureX Gallery. This writing is as an accompaniment to these projects and will eventually take form as an artist publication.

Acknowledgements

I must begin by giving thanks to everyone who helped make this work happen. A special thanks to my brilliant and supportive MFA thesis committee: Jeannie Hulen, Renata Cassiano Alvarez, Dónal O'Donoghue, and Nicole Wilson. Thanks to mentor and friend Breanne Trammell who from my very first semester of grad school showed me that the possibilities are truly endless. Thanks to my steadfast collaborators and friends Maryalice Carroll, Liz Alspach, Miki Skak, Meredith Tinkle, Bia Furtado, and So eun (Summer) Park; I'm so glad that we can make our wild ideas turn into realities together. Thanks to my mom (my forever #1 supporter) and brother, Anthony, for traveling to help me during the exhibition portion of my thesis; and thanks to my older brother, Chris, who has always cheered me on from afar. Thanks to each and every artist involved in this exhibition; thanks for saying "yes!" and believing! Thanks to everyone who has shown up for me, in all the ways it is possible to 'show up.' Thanks to all those who came before me, blazing the trail. And last, but certainly not least, all the love and gratitude to my partner in everything, Devin Shepherd, for editing literally everything I write, dreaming up wild dreams with me, believing in me wholeheartedly, and for making me coffee every morning.

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Introduction / Where I will take you

This writing acts as a companion to the MFA thesis projects that I presented in the Spring 2022 semester at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas. While this writing ‘checks the boxes’ of what is required for a written thesis exhibition statement as listed in the MFA handbook (i.e. provide a conceptual validation of the visual execution, intent of techniques, and understanding of materials and craft, as well as situating the work within the context of contemporary and historical art, etc. etc.), I prefer for this writing to be understood as the story that runs parallel to the artwork and projects. My thesis work did not exist as a singular, solo exhibition in a traditional gallery space like it did for most of the artists in my graduating cohort; rather, I completed three separate, substantial and interrelated projects, many of which occurred outside of traditional art spaces: the *Office of Possible Projects* at the Fayetteville Public Library, the *Cake Stand Biennale* which took place across the city of Fayetteville, Arkansas, and *the office of possible projects’ exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces* which occurred in/around/beyond the University of Arkansas SculptureX Gallery. I write about these projects not to justify or validate these projects, but to create another project to accompany this collection of works. With the gift of time and space to reflect on these projects, I see them as satellites orbiting the same or very similar concepts that lie at the core of my interests and values as an artist. This writing will also guide you through the projects’ relationships and connections. I will officially submit this written piece to the University of Arkansas graduate school, following their rigid formatting guidelines, however this written piece can be experienced in its true form as a printed artist publication, available later in 2022.¹ I implore you to trust my writing to take you on a

¹ Please feel free to contact me through my website to inquire about accessing the publication once it is completed: www.julietwalker.com. At the time of writing this text, I do not know exactly how this will take form, but I plan to make this in 2022 at some point.

winding walk through my process, even if at some moments, you are not sure where I might be taking you. This writing is a story of how I ended up where I am.

The Master of Fine Art degree is the highest degree one can attain in the US for visual or studio art. This degree bestows upon the recipient the ability to teach art in colleges or universities, but other than that it does not tend to have any straightforward outcomes, beyond, ideally, feeding and growing one's practice. It was often amusing to me how many requirements, credits, courses, and critique evaluations we had to studiously pass through to attain this degree, even though I believe artists are best situated to push up against those requirements and bring forth new possibilities. I do love the comfort of structures and I rarely break rules, but perhaps this writing and my thesis projects were simply doing what I think artists do best—stretching the container to fit new ideas. I hope that through my projects, which invited other people from outside of the institution into the work and occurred in alternative spaces, I pushed open the possibilities of what could happen in this specific program. I hope more than anything I helped others find the freedom to continue pushing the walls of this container.

Before I begin speaking about my own work, I would like to introduce two of my peers who I worked alongside for two years in this program, and who illustrated that the container of an MFA thesis in this program could be more than what I had previously imagined. Kalyn Fay Barnoski organized and curated a group exhibition in Perrodin Supply, a community gallery space off-campus in Springdale, Arkansas, guided by Indigenous methodologies and values of collaboration, community and togetherness. She worked with visual artists, performers, and musicians to build an exhibition that was collaborative and could be experienced in-person and via a website. Kalyn made a thesis that was not just about her work; it was about and for her community. Likewise, I was incredibly inspired by close friend and colleague, Liz Alspach, who

conducted interviews with artists who run businesses or organizations to write and self-publish a book and tool kit about the possibilities that can be found in the overlap between art and business. Liz published ten interviews with artists who have “founded and run businesses that reimagine their relationship to their livelihoods and to their careers.”² Through the book of interviews and her essay, alongside the interactive workbook she made, Liz compiled a collection of tools for other people to be able to also reimagine the way they work, and to consider the idea that a business or organization could be an art practice. Seeing these two artists make this work—a book and tool kit for others and a curatorial collective project—immensely informed the way I moved through my final year in this MFA program. Kalyn's and Liz's theses and work will come up again in this writing, because like these two artists I began to look at my relationships and collaborations as truly integral pieces of my practice that needed to be embraced as the work unfolded over time. I knew that I wouldn't have a traditional gallery exhibition, I just needed to trust my creative instincts to get where I wanted to go, just as they did.

In this writing I will begin by introducing the *Office of Possible Projects* and its installation at the Fayetteville Public Library. I will then step back a bit and reflect on my practice, and how I have seen it grow and change, but also remain the same in many ways over the years. This will then be followed by writing on *the office of possible projects' exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces* and that project in which I was able to bring together—curate—others who curate as a practice and use curation as a medium. Finally, I will share reflections on the *Cake Stand Biennale*, a project that I worked on with Meredith Tinkle, and use that project as an illustration of my thinking on the magic that can be found in the everyday.

² Alspach, *2+2=CAKE: A Book of Conversations About Possibilities in Business and Art*, 4.

Office of Possible Projects at the Fayetteville Public Library

In the spring of 2021, after the COVID-19 vaccination was released, I tentatively started venturing out into the public, shared world again, and I often found myself sitting in the bright window-filled public library in downtown Fayetteville. The expansion of the Fayetteville Public Library reopened a couple months before I started more boldly being out into the public world, but even with the new shiny facilities on one side,³ I still found myself drawn to the “old” side with the beautiful pensive reading room overlooking the rolling hills of Fayetteville. During several visits, I noticed that the computer lab—the very one I had visited during my first week of living in Fayetteville to print some kind of document I needed—was sitting locked, empty and dark in the middle of the 4th floor. There were no computers, just empty tables and empty chairs. It was a glaring emptiness, too, as the room has all sides but one visible to the floor through transparent windows. One could look into this room from many vantage points of the 4th floor, but in early 2021 there was nothing to look in at. Just beyond that empty computer lab, I was often amused and intrigued by rows of empty, but well-lit, bookshelves at the back of the floor. When I asked a Reference Librarian at one point about the rows of empty shelves, I was told there would someday be a new genealogy section there in the next stage of renovation (once many more millions had been fundraised). There was no timeline for the end of that emptiness, though, as far as the librarians could tell me. Every time I went back in the summer and fall of 2021, the shelves continued to sit empty, with their lights still on, waiting to shine upon the next occupants of those shelves. With new glamorous spaces, such as the “The J.B. and Johnelle Hunt Family Center for Innovation” and the “The J.B. and Johnelle Hunt Family Gathering Glade,” it was no wonder there were more exciting spaces to focus on filling within the library. One of the

³ The first state of the \$49.9 million expansion does literally shine and glint in the sun with its multi-story full window walls, and sleek metal roof.

infamous Northwest Arkansas giant corporate families—the Hunts—among many other extremely wealthy donors had bestowed these shiny new spaces upon this library. For this reason the empty spaces on the 4th floor felt oddly like a physical representation of the library’s growing pains. The library was like a teenager that did not want to wear an old unfashionable sweater even though it still fit them, so the sweater sat in their closet waiting. But that sweater—like the empty computer lab and shelves—was not worthless, it had possibility. Perhaps if the yarn was pulled out, it could be remade and transformed into something else. What if I could activate those spaces to be something other than shelves meant for books and a room meant for computers? Noticing and wondering and asking about those empty shelves and that empty space at the library is what initially opened up the possibility for the *Office of Possible Projects* to go public at the library.

The Office of Possible Projects (O.o.P.P.s) started out as a permission-giving entity for myself in my art practice. When the *Office of Possible Projects* was named in June of 2021, while I was on a roadtrip with close friend and collaborator Maryalice Carroll,⁴ I realized this entity was in fact simply a name for my art practice, a container for building my own rules and ways of making artwork. The *Office of Possible Projects* was a title I gave to my practice when I began to understand all the organizing, dreaming, scheming, planning, working, emailing, and making in my studio as “office work.” This office—*my* office—allowed for mistakes, wild dreams, strange plans, poetic emails, mile-long lists, and extra-long lunch breaks that turned into adventures. This office still got serious work and serious planning done, but within it I could prioritize relationships and friendships and accessible exhibition-making and art. This office

⁴ This road trip was called the *Crust Bucket Trunk Show*, in which Maryalice and I hosted an exhibition in and on my white Honda Fit. My car became a mobile gallery that started in Northwest Arkansas, and traveled to Little Rock, Memphis, Jackson, New Orleans, Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa throughout the month of June 2021. The Trunk Show featured sculptural work from Katie McColgan, Ling Chun, Aisha Bryant, Sam Mack, and Maria Alarcon Aldrete Wolf, and numerous bumper sticker artists from around the world.

could prioritize the celebration of failure and all the intangible things that didn't quite exist in the world yet. I worked on many projects that fall, and all of them felt like they fell under the permission-giving entity of the *Office of Possible Projects*, including: *The Crust Bucket Collective's Hog Art Trunk Show*;⁵ Picnic School of Art radio-listening parties, bike ride record releases, and picnic basket gallery openings;⁶ a risograph book project with Devin Shepherd;⁷ interviews and conversations with arts organizers; starting and building a crowd-sourced collection of unfinished projects and unrealized ideas that I was calling the *Unfinished Project Archive*; making and hand-crafting customized office supplies for the *O.o.P.P.s* (i.e. broadsides, notepads, stamps, seal); among other things here and there. In many of these projects, I found myself in the roles of collaborator, curator, publisher, archivist, office manager, event planner, and of course always artist. By naming and recognizing *O.o.P.P.s* as the organizing structure of my practice, I was allowing myself to do whatever I dreamed up within this container of the *Office of Possible Projects*. *O.o.P.P.s* gave me permission to embrace the shape-shifting possibilities of an artistic practice. As graduate students at the University of Arkansas, we are accepted into this program in specific media areas to become a “master” of that medium, but I knew that rather than going deep into one area, I wanted to feel freedom from specific mediums—the *Office* helped me fully embrace that.

In the fall, when I began considering what a public version of the *Office of Possible Projects* could look like, I very quickly hoped that it would find a home in a public library. In the summer of 2019 before I moved to Arkansas, I had been an artist-in-residence at the Madison

⁵ During the University of Arkansas Razorback football homecoming game on October 16, 2021, Crust Bucket Collective (Maryalice Carroll and I) coordinated an open call exhibition for a tailgate show that happened in and on my Honda Fit again. All of the works, which included prints, buttons, sculptures, and bumper sticker artworks fit within the theme of being “hog art.”

⁶ Beginning in the summer of 2021, Miki Skak and I opened the *Picnic School of Art*, which was a free-form entity that hosted workshops, film screenings, bike rides, choir performances, among other activities, that were open to anyone in Fayetteville. It is also the host of the *Picnic Basket Gallery*.

⁷ <https://www.devinshpherd.com/portfolio/lobster.html>

Public Library in Madison, Wisconsin, and from that experience I learned that a public library seemed like the right space to democratically collect, share, crowdsource, and celebrate unfinished and unrealized projects from anyone who wanted to participate. Public libraries are a space where one can be a beginner at almost anything and can begin the journey to trying something new. One can check out books on how to knit or garden, or how to do one's taxes properly at a library. Libraries may also host workshops on writing poetry, or starting one's own business. Public libraries also have accessible resources, like printers and cameras; they are a space of collective and individual possibilities. I have always been interested in sharing space with others as I explore a project or idea, and again in that regard the public library seemed like the right fit as they are one of the only spaces in American society that is truly built for everyone. After a series of what I thought were dead end emails, and then a more formal written proposal and waiting as committees and staff met,⁸ I was finally approved and allowed to bring the *Office of Possible Projects* to the Fayetteville Public Library in early 2022. I have to extend a thanks to one of my former professors, John Blakinger, who helped me connect with the right people at the library to make this happen! The *Office of Possible Projects* officially opened to the public in the Fayetteville Public Library on February 21, 2022, from its 4th floor location, filling the formerly empty computer lab and empty bookshelves.

The *Office of Possible Projects* at the Fayetteville Public Library became a project focused on considering and making space for the ideas and projects that were never finished, or started, or never quite came to fruition. My lists and stacks of unfinished or unrealized projects in my studio and notebooks partially inspired the name of *O.o.P.P.s*, because all projects that might be in an unfinished state are still *possible*. Every half-finished sculpture or note to myself filled

⁸ While the *Office of Possible Projects* does not enjoy bureaucracy, it is prepared to selectively deal with the bureaucracy it needs to get where it might want to go!

with project ideas is still possible. Possibility often doesn't leave an idea, although it might shift over time. So I began to wonder what it would look like to gather unfinished projects from anyone who wanted to share them. I wanted to witness the quiet beauty of ideas not yet realized, from many people, gathered together into a space to live just as they were in their unrealized states. As artists, but also in all facets of work and society, we rarely share the messiness and complication of our process. We wait to share—and sometimes we never do—projects with others until they can be seen and understood as polished and finished artworks, or products, nicely packaged in their completeness. I also found it exciting and intriguing to undertake a project about not finishing projects for what would supposedly be my “final finished” work of graduate school. Could I get away with making a project that could never actually be finished that was about unfinished projects? Because I believed, and still believe two months now after I took down *O.o.P.P.s* at the library, that *O.o.P.P.s* and the *Unfinished Project Archive* will carry on and may never become finished. How could they, really?

When one looked through the window-walls into this physical manifestation of *Office of Possible Projects* or dared to venture inside the former computer lab on that first Monday, they would see a large oblong institutional room partially filled with an odd mismatched set of office furniture. A permanent particle board counter table ran along the perimeter of the room, and the interior held an emptiness of what at one point contained more matching heavy-duty particle board tables and dozens of computers. Instead of computers, the room held an assortment of office furniture, including two small stainless steel filing cabinets, a table, chairs, and a small desk. Behind the desk sat a wooden chair that looked like it could have been found in some kind of meeting room, or board room; the desk looked comically small for this chair. Directly in front of that desk was a meeting table with a set of wooden chairs that looked like they would fit in a

classroom of some kind. All the furniture appeared to be durable institutional furniture, because they actually had formerly belonged to a very large institution: the University of Arkansas. Each piece of furniture had been sourced from the dumpster behind my studio, which was where the University of Arkansas' old and unwanted surplus furniture eventually ended up, if no one wanted it or it didn't sell at auction through University Surplus. However, the most striking thing one might notice about all the furniture was that it had been painted shades of blue—one might say the colors could have been called shades of robin's egg blue, sky blue, or light cerulean, although by the end of the installation, visitors were calling it "office blue" or "Juliette blue."

I have long been infatuated with the color blue, just as many artists and scientists before me. The color blue has always felt like possibility or freedom to me. There is a feeling of limitlessness when looking at the bluest ocean or sky; blue can make one feel miniscule, in the way it can show that there are expanses so far beyond what we know and can imagine from our singular viewpoint. In her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit writes about the color blue, as being the color of distance and of the places one can never reach. She writes of the color seen as the edge of the horizons and in remote mountain ranges, saying: "The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go."⁹ When one reads this poetic prose by Solnit, it seems contradictory to try to contain the color blue in an office, yet somehow it felt very right to me. The primary mission of the *Office* at the public library was to collect, display and archive unfinished projects and unrealized ideas, so the mystery of the color blue matched the mystery of creative practices, and the distance we often feel from "finishedness" in life and projects. I wanted to build a space where one could sit and bask in this mystery. A line from Maggie Nelson's book *Bluets* reads, "For just because one

⁹ Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 29.

loves blue does not mean that one wants to spend one's life in a world made of it.”¹⁰ And, this is true, absence makes one appreciate the thing that is missing. I would not love blue if it were the only color I knew or saw. However, I had decided that if I was building my own world within this world, I wanted it to be blue.

If one came closer and continued to explore the space, one would find an “office log book” sitting atop the desk, where each time I opened the *Office* to the public, I noted how many visitors stopped in, or if there were other happenings of significance during that time. There was also a blue (of course) 1963 Olympia SM7 Deluxe Portable Typewriter that could be used by office visitors to record their unfinished projects or unrealized ideas to submit to the *Unfinished Project Archive*. Later on in the project, one of the library staff members lent their typewriter to be used as well, and it too coincidentally matched the blue color scheme. There was also a manual silver pencil sharpener perched on the edge of that table that could be used to sharpen and use the light blue pencils that were engraved with silver lettering: *OFFICE OF POSSIBLE PROJECTS*. Across many of the surfaces in the office were other supplies, placed in organized, neat arrangements, such as *O.o.P.P.s* branded notepads, the archive submission sheets, *O.o.P.P.s* letterhead, and slipcast *O.o.P.P.s* office mugs. Using a classic mass-produced 12-ounce mug form (the very ones that are branded with everything from corporate logos to tourist destinations to “#1 Mom”), I had made a porous plaster mold to slipcast—or pour liquid clay into—to make my very own *O.o.P.P.s* mugs by hand. After going through their first bisque firing, and then their glaze firing, I added a final decal firing, where I fused the *O.o.P.P.s* logo—in blue, of course—onto the surface of these mugs. I had handmade almost all of the supplies when possible, either risograph-printed, screen-printed, handbound, or slipcast. The mugs were one of

¹⁰ Nelson, *Bluets*, 30.

the most labored over office supplies, which felt fitting due to my background in the labor-intensive field of ceramics.

Being situated in the library, I was interested in the people who might come in to *O.o.P.P.s*: those who were working on job applications using the nearby computers, students studying, a mother with her young child on an afternoon outing, the Reference Librarians and library staff members, University employees, a gardener, an elderly retired couple, among others. Whoever we are and whatever we do, so many of us spend so much of our time thinking about projects; it doesn't matter one's profession or position we hold in life. Toddlers have the project of learning to walk and then run and skip without stumbling; many adults have the often mundane projects related to work or making a living; and retired people may have the project of finding meaning outside and beyond their work life. As artists, grant applications and proposals are constants in our practices, yet many of these "unsuccessful" proposals never become the projects we dream of them becoming. My art practice is built upon the writing of hundreds of proposals for dream projects that will probably never exist beyond the proposal. Boris Groys writes in his book *Going Public* in a chapter about projects:

The formulation of diverse projects has become a major contemporary preoccupation. These days, regardless of what one sets out to do in the economy, in politics, or in culture, one has first to formulate a project for official approval or funding from one or several public authorities. Should this project be initially rejected, it is then modified in an attempt to improve its chances of being accepted. If the revision is rejected a second time, one has no choice but to propose an entirely new one in its place. In this way, all members of our society

are constantly preoccupied with devising, discussing, and rejecting an endless number of projects.¹¹

Groys goes on to rightly claim that the generation of project ideas has become an art form itself. My interest in compiling this archive of unrealized or unfinished projects was, and continues to be, multifold. I am interested in the idea that artists become idea generation machines, and how this connects to capitalism, production, and value, especially if and when these ideas do not manifest as actual projects. I am interested in the immensity of creativity that exists in all of us, and the infinite possibilities that also exist within all of us. I am interested in the idea that a project proposal or idea that has made it into some kind of proposal form is a draft for the future. A proposal is a projection of what could exist and be built into the future if resources were allocated to it, whether those are time, money, care, or any combination of those things. I wholeheartedly believe that these ideas can still be valuable things in themselves even if they are not fulfilled in the form of a finished project (or product)—I have built my practice around this idea without fully acknowledging it publicly until now. I am interested in the idea of a project that was never meant to be started, or finished, too.

In publicly and accessibly sharing these projects in the *Unfinished Project Archive* from the formerly empty bookshelves at *O.o.P.P.s*, these unfinished projects are given a different life. If one exited the *Office* room and walked to the back of the 4th floor toward the adjacent shelves, one would see light blue half-sheets hanging from the shelves. Over the course of the public installation, the eight shelves were filled with close to 100 unfinished projects typed or handwritten on these blue sheets and hung on the shelves with small magnets. Scattered in the shelves, some people also left the physical pieces of their unfinished projects, such as a

¹¹ Groys, *Going Public*, 71.

half-finished needlepoint project, pieces of fabric that were going to become a dress, a collection of toenails that wasn't yet finished, among others. Each unfinished project exists as a snapshot in time of someone's reflection on something they had at one point hoped or planned or dreamed of doing. The *Office of Possible Projects* at the Fayetteville Public Library, a public shared "work space" of sorts allowed anyone perusing or using the library to witness the process of being human on public display. What I mean by this is that our unfinished and imperfect projects show that we all often have messy and failure-filled endeavors that we tend to keep hidden, and there are very few moments when we are invited to see and spend time with these failures. When I was initially gathering office supplies, I ordered a custom stamp that stamped the word "UNFINISHED" in bright red ink. People submitting their projects to the archive could stamp their submission with this red stamp—a color and gesture that felt like it should match the feeling and idea of rejection or failure, yet it became a celebratory gesture of solidarity. The stamp ended up being a joyful and fun act of allowing oneself to join the ranks of everyone else who had shared unfinished works. One of the visitors to *O.o.P.P.s*, stamped the bright red "UNFINISHED" onto their hand when they visited. Their action and gesture was another reminder that it is a human condition to be in-process; we are all unfinished projects.

Furthermore, when people came into *O.o.P.P.s* at the library and shared their unrealized proposals and unfinished projects, each individual was giving up whatever kind of ownership they might have felt they had over those ideas; it may still be their idea but it could also be taken and cared for by someone else. Marc Fischer wrote an essay in 2006 titled *Against Competition* that was originally published in the short-lived journal *B.A.T.*, but then later republished by *Temporary Services* in 2014, and it speaks about the destructive nature of the market-driven competition in the art world. Fischer writes about the idea that collaboration and idea-sharing can

actually be a more fertile soil for growth. This doesn't mean that conflict can't happen—in fact Fischer argues that tension and disagreement are important—but that creating a more open community amongst artists can strengthen networks between people with shared values.¹² Ideas are shared, ideas are collective, and so by situating this project in a public library, these ideas became collective. In a space where people can borrow library books and communal tools, why should we not also be able to borrow and share ideas? As adrienne marree brown said to Angela Davis in a public conversation last year: “My ideas are built on your ideas, and they're collective ideas.”¹³

Kayln Fay Barnoski and Liz Alspach's theses both embraced the notion that collectivity can be more powerful than individual actions. Kayln wrote of the exhibition she organized and curated:

The idea of collectivism over individualism is an important aspect of this exhibit, too; not only the focus on a responsibility to the whole, but also the belief that the most important work comes within and alongside community. Together, we learn about ourselves. Together, we build empathetic communities. Together, we hold each other accountable. Together, we create. Together, we grow.¹⁴

Like Kalyn, I hoped the *Office* was a space to generously be together, where we could find commonality and empathy. Liz Alspach, my friend and colleague who I also wrote about earlier, interviewed Mark Allen, who was the director of Machine Project, a storefront space that existed

¹² Fischer, *Against Competition*.

¹³ On November 17, 2020, UC Davis' Women's Resources & Research Center virtually hosted “50 Years of Imagining Radical Feminist Futures: An Intergenerational Panel with Angela Davis and adrienne marree brown.”

¹⁴ Barnoski, *in search of ourselves*, we find each other, 8.

in Echo Park from 2003-2018, which hosted workshops, events, science experiments, performances, among many other happenings. I also happened to be lucky enough to be a student and employee of Mark Allen when I was in undergrad at Pomona College; he has been an inspiring force in my practice for many years, so it was exciting to read a conversation between him and Liz. In their conversation, he said:

Sometimes I have students who don't want to tell people their ideas because they think someone is going to steal their concept. To them, I usually say 'Ideas aren't worth shit. Ideas are a dime a dozen.' I had 100,000 ideas for events, and we did a ton of them, and that was fun, but it was only when you actually do things that you learn. Ideas aren't a possession. They are a thing to be passed between our brains as they are generated. We are not really individual thinkers. We generate things, and then we end up being vehicles for the ideas that are floating around."¹⁵

O.o.P.P.s' Unfinished Project Archive embraced this same notion that ideas are not possessions. One visitor to *O.o.P.P.s* asked what would happen if someone stole someone's idea from the archive, and I was hit with the reminder that to survive in this capitalist society, we often feel the need to hide and protect our ideas as precious possessions. 'Good ideas' can be worth status and money, so I understand there can be intense vulnerability in setting one's ideas free in the public. I answered that question by saying, if anyone was concerned about their idea, there was no need to include it in the archive, although there was always an open invitation to join. I could offer no legal protection of the ideas; I could only offer care for them in their new collective home. In fact, these projects were there for others to "take" and use in their own way.

¹⁵ Alspach, *2+2=CAKE: A Book of Conversations about Possibilities in Business and Art*, 63.

Throughout the open hours of the *Office*, when people would bring in unfinished works for the archive, I also found that many of them expressed that they were happy to be giving up the burden of carrying an unfinished project; they were letting go of projects that had been nagging at them, sitting on a literal or metaphorical dusty shelf. Our culture has taught us to feel guilty about the things that we don't finish. In a world where we are expected to continuously be productive, rest and inaction is seen as lazy and bad. So, people often expressed a new freedom or a lightness when they handed over their unfinished project.

Most artists don't hold exhibitions of unfinished work (although some do!); we are typically taught to present something in its most perfect, finished state. But what if there is something important to be found in sharing the process that is inherent to everything humans do? Paul Soulellis, founder of Queer.Archive.Work curated an exhibition at International Print Center New York titled *Unfinished* that opened in early 2022. He said of the exhibition, "Within the loose theme of unfinished, we push up against capitalism's relentless drive towards market-based success by making way for other kinds of stories. *Unfinished* includes actual works-in-progress, abandoned work, failed work, and work that is simply unfinished due to the myriad aspects and conditions artists experience while living and working during crisis—the radical turbulence of racial injustice, police brutality, class inequity, global pandemic, and climate emergency."¹⁶ I did not find out about this exhibition until after *O.o.P.P.s* had opened its doors to the public at the library, but I see the *Unfinished Project Archive* holding many of these same concepts and pushing up against the constant grind of capitalism that urges us toward perfection and the idea that our value is based upon completion and monetary success. The *Unfinished Project Archive* was and continues to be a place for you and me, and anyone and everyone. It is here where we can be together in our imperfect and unfinished states.

¹⁶ <https://www.ipcny.org/unfinished>

Reflection on Practice / Office Work

Before I began this MFA program, I didn't really anticipate that the most surprising thing about a graduate degree would be reflecting upon my practice so intensely. I now have a much clearer understanding of who I am as an artist. It may seem obvious that this would happen, but catching glimpses of myself sometimes surprised me. I realized through deep reflection that I cannot stop myself from being the kind of artist I am, it's part of who I am. I can see the patterns in the way I currently work that intimately relate to some of the first artworks I made when I was a teenager. An incredible gift of being in school was learning to decipher my unique and individual way of being an artist in the world—my “fingerprint” as an artist.

As I began to wrap up my academic art education, I circled back to my beginning as an artist to understand how it all started. I became an artist after a series of hardships in my late teenage years, including losing my father. I turned toward studio art classes at Pomona College as both a place to distract myself as well as a place to build things and worlds that could become a new reality. I made a lot of “bad art,” whatever that actually means, but through this new-to-me way of working, I was constructing worlds. I learned that not only could I construct physical things, but I could also build connections and social experiences as artworks, too. I used my art practice as an excuse to meet people, or ask for people to share their stories with me. At one point I started a project at a local Claremont retirement center collecting recipes from the residents, in exchange for baking with them. I would gather the residents into their communal kitchen, some of whom could no longer physically make food themselves and some of whom could no longer remember how to make food themselves, to bake some of my and their recipes together. And that was how I became an artist, like many others, out of desperation to make something real in the world that wasn't already there, and to try to connect with and understand

other people. I officially changed my major to Studio Art, and I continued to learn about artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and read Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity*, and the expansiveness of art invited me in farther.

I've also been recently thinking about two projects that made me believe that I could be an artist when I was a 19 year old urgently trying to figure out my path forward. Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher's *Learning to Love You More* project pulled me into the possibilities of art when I first read about it. I was infatuated with that project (and still am). This project showed me that an online crowdsourced archive could be a magical space, and that the artists in the project—alongside Miranda and Harrell—were everyday people from all over the world who wanted to participate in simple, yet poetic assignments from wherever they were. The second work was the Bread and Puppet Theater, a political theater space known for its larger-than-life handmade puppets, based in Glover, Vermont. Bread and Puppet Theater is also known for their *Cheap Art Manifesto*, which begins by stating: "People have been thinking too long that art is a privilege of the museums and the rich. Art is not business! It does not belong to banks and fancy investors, art is food. You can't eat it, but it feeds you."¹⁷ Before I was able to make the journey to Vermont in 2017 to visit Bread and Puppet Theater, I only imagined it as a fairytale-like theater space in the rural woods of Vermont. After visiting, I still think about it as a magical fairytale space, but I know it is real, just like the very real mud that stuck to the bottom of my shoes when I walked through the farm to get to the initial performance barn. Led by Elka and Peter Schumann, and collaboratively run by many many artists and performers over the years, they made barns into theaters and saw the potential in everyday materials. Every performance, including the one I attended that summer of 2017, ends with one of the performers cutting handmade sourdough bread and serving it to the audience and performers alike. Art can literally

¹⁷ Schumann, *The Why Cheap Art Manifesto*.

be bread. There is potential everywhere. I hold these two projects close to my heart, 12 years after I first learned about them, and thus 12 years of learning to be and being an artist.

In conversation with others—faculty and peers—and in self-reflection, I have learned that my motive as an artist deeply revolves around the idea of expanding the possibilities for how art can come into the world. I am excited by stepping into the unknown as an artist to see what can happen and how my practice can shapeshift to build different ways of being in and with the world. I truly believe that the form of an artwork could really be anything. I relate to what Joseph Beuys famously said about everyone being an artist, as well as to what Mierle Laderman Ukeles showed about anywhere and any activity being a space and action for art.

I am invested in expanding the way art can be understood, and expanding the idea of who can make it and where it can be made, because I am aware of the capitalist structures that shape the way art is understood and valued in Western cultures. In adrienne maree brown's book *Emergent Strategy*, she writes about the concept of “emergence,” which considers small, intentional, and relational connections and actions as a strategy for change. She writes about how in the US and many Western societies, we are trapped inside someone else's imagination, an “imagination that gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability,” and this pushes her to “engage in [her] own imagination in order to break free.”¹⁸ She continues further in her writing, saying, “Perhaps the most egregious thing we are taught is that we should just be really good at what's already possible, to leave the impossible alone.”¹⁹ While her book often references the work of social justice organizers, I see this same action of imagining beyond what is possible as a key role of the artist, too. Likewise, the artist Fritz Haeg writes in *The Questions We Ask Together*: “I am more interested in charting intentional directions

¹⁸ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

towards mysterious and unachievable ideals, than I am in just taking on knowable problems that I think I can actually solve.”²⁰ My practice has become about trusting the questions I am asking, even if they guide me outside what is known or accepted in my current environment. The small gestures of artists can be the actions that begin to change the way we understand our world.

When I was in my final year of undergrad I interned at the magical and wondrous art space run by Mark Allen: Machine Project. Every Friday, I would take the hour-long metrolink train from Claremont, the town where I lived and where my college was, into downtown Los Angeles, and then hop onto one of the infamous L.A. buses to coast down Sunset Boulevard to Echo Park, where Machine Project’s storefront space was situated. It was a curious thing being an intern during the day at Machine Project, because during most weekdays from nine to five, the space was turned into an office. As Mark Allen writes in *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection*:

During the day, we use the storefront as an office, where we draw, work on our computers, discuss ideas, and have meetings. Much of our time is taken up with various forms of human communication. Emails fly right by your head as you walk around, and if you are lucky, you might even spot a meeting with an artist taking place. Is that a future exhibition being born at this very moment? Probably.²¹

²⁰ Turnbull, *The Questions We Ask Together*, 92.

²¹ Allen and Seligman, *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection (live by Special Request)*.

This was one of my first “office work” experiences, and perhaps it changed the definition of what I understood an office to be. An office is simply a container for making things happen—just like a studio, or gallery, or an art practice. It’s all about how you craft it.

My practice and the *Office* value the expansive possibilities of what art can be, and believe that the form of an artwork could really be anything. My role as an artist is to show what can be possible in an art practice, and that an art practice can belong to anyone.

the office of possible projects' exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces

Part of the *Office's* responsibility is to be concerned that deadlines are met (i.e. that I would actually complete an MFA exhibition in order to graduate!). So, in late 2021, the *Office* began to panic as I had not secured an exhibition venue for a very amorphous (at that time) exhibition idea; I had not yet found the right person to speak with at the library, and at that time I felt sure they would not let me do the project. However, I had continued to curate alternative exhibition spaces, so what was stopping me from hosting a thesis exhibition in one of those locations: a picnic basket? A filing cabinet? A refrigerator?

In December 2021, I opened the *Filing Cabinet Gallery*, which was an actual filing cabinet made of galvanized steel and aluminum. The cabinet was a light gray color, small (about 26" tall), and had two drawers. It was salvaged from the University of Arkansas Surplus dumpster (the same one where the *Office* furniture was also sourced!), so it had a couple small dings on the corners. It was a short, squat, rectangular shape, which could be seen to mimic a traditional art pedestal—a perfectly humorous imitation. The first public exhibition in the *Filing Cabinet Gallery* took place during the group show *Good Soup* at the University of Arkansas Ceramics Studio (the annual end-of-semester exhibition for the area). Shiny blue-green vinyl lettering in Apple Chancery script font indicated that this was not an ordinary filing cabinet: on each of the two drawers, the text read, “*Please Open,*” and on the back of the cabinet, the text read, “*The Filing Cabinet Gallery.*” During this inaugural exhibition the *Filing Cabinet Gallery* featured a three-person show, with work from Maryalice Carroll, Devin Shepherd, and myself. Collaborator and friend, Maryalice Carroll, had two ceramic sculptural works displayed on top of the *Filing Cabinet Gallery*. These pieces, which were the beginnings of her thesis exhibition, had two varying shades of an orange ‘crunchy’ matte glaze on their surface, with light blue glaze

“droplets” dripping out of the sculpture’s ‘pores.’ The shiny blue-green vinyl text on the cabinet nicely echoed the color of the glaze droplets. Inside the top drawer was the first copy of the collaborative risograph-printed, coil-bound book made by myself and Devin Shepherd reflecting upon lobster trap “trash” (or found sculptures) that we stumbled upon during a beach walk in April 2021. Bound with a yellow coil, the three colors of ink that were used to print this book were: sunflower yellow, blue, and maroon. This 21-page book included screen shots of the lobster laws of Maine, a poetic reflection on our interaction with these objects, and fifteen risograph prints of photographs of the lobster traps/trash. A label inside this drawer invited viewers to take the book out and gently flip through. In the bottom drawer of the *Filing Cabinet Gallery* was a collection of the *O.o.P.P.s* “office supplies,” which nodded to what the original purpose of this cabinet might have been; *Filing Cabinet Gallery* visitors were invited to take an *O.o.P.P.s* pencil with them. These office supplies were mostly all printed in blue ink and/or on shades of blue paper—a hint that the *Office* would eventually be immersed in this color.

The process for this gallery piece started with an ‘ah-ha’ moment when I noticed this filing cabinet in the dumpster behind the ceramics studio and University Surplus Center, and brought it back to my studio. I knew there was something funny about using this dull gray filing cabinet as an art space. Formal art galleries and museums are charged with the safety and protection of their collections, or the artworks that are being lent to them, and likewise a filing cabinet is made to keep documents safe from fire and other potentially harmful elements. The filing cabinet is a functional symbol of safety and protection of important things, so it also felt very fitting to be the space holding and caring for artworks.

In the *Filing Cabinet Gallery*, among other recent curatorial and collaborative projects, I have been questioning singular authorship of artworks, and also situating my work of organizing,

curating, platforming, and communicating as my art practice. Without collaborators, participators, and friends this work would not work. This work is about scrappiness and friendship—pulling together the invaluable resources that we have around us in our community that are often free. Part of what the *Filing Cabinet Gallery* questioned was the usual forms and roles we think we understand as artists. This piece questions what the form of the exhibition could be, and asks if something as everyday and boring as a filing cabinet could be generative as an art space. This project manipulates artistically familiar forms, such as the exhibition pedestal to become something more imaginative and freeing. This project also acts as a tool to propose an art world that is not one of gatekeeping and scarcity, but one of possibilities and abundance.

When I opened this new gallery space, I knew it wouldn't be “finished” after that first exhibition. So, naturally, I considered this *Filing Cabinet Gallery* as an initial step to “securing” an MFA thesis exhibition space. I had wild dreams for this space and all the artists I admired being a part of it, but then I also began to think about all the other spaces I had previously curated—my car, a picnic basket, a cake stand—and all the alternative spaces other people have curated that have been incredibly inspiring to me. A part of me also wanted to have an exhibition in a white-walled gallery like many of my other peers, but to use the work to break outside the white walls of the gallery. So I began to gather a list of spaces, both ones I had crafted and curated, as well as spaces that have inspired me, to coordinate an exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces.

I became drawn to creating platforms for other artists when it became clear to me that the best ideas do not come from one person alone. My best ideas are not really mine at all. My roots are in ceramics, and I do still call myself a ceramic artist sometimes. The making of ceramic works, though, are most important to me for the reflective time they give me—they give me time

to process thoughts and ideas in tandem with the movement of my hands; the process of making with clay often feels intuitive, because that time in the studio is all about unknowingly coordinating my body movements with the movement of my thoughts. As I work through masses of clay, I work through ideas. While I can often be happy or excited by the result of these ceramic works, I more often relish in the thinking space those pieces give me during their making process. The artworks and projects that started becoming the most conceptually interesting to me were ones where there were aspects that were partially out of my control because there were other people involved, like with the *Filing Cabinet Gallery*. I realized that when I work with other people and artists, there is an unpredictability that makes the work not only more interesting, but also not mine alone. Making with clay is like writing for me, helpful and clarifying, but potentially the end result is not as rewarding as the projects that are organized with and for other people.

I realize that I have been doing this kind of collaborative curation/artmaking for years without understanding that it is in fact an integral part of my practice. The first alternative art space that I crafted was in 2016, when I had my first opportunity to attend the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts—the large annual U.S. ceramics conference. I gathered friends from the studio I was currently working in at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where I was a post-baccalaureate student in ceramics, and I invited them to make artworks that were no larger than two inches by two inches. I then constructed a miniature gallery, with folding walls and miniature pedestals that could break down and fit into my backpack. A friend who became invested in the project, Jacki Whisenant, sat with me for hours as we sanded the miniature pedestals before I left on that trip. I carried the exhibition with me on a plane and exhibited it during the conference even though none of those pieces had been specifically selected to be a

part of any of the special conference exhibitions. I knew at the time that I was trying to get my friends, who were also emerging artists, into a space that we hadn't necessarily been invited to exhibit our work in. I was trying to make space for us, in a lighthearted, but serious way. I traveled after the conference to visit friends in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, and found host locations for the tiny show in those spots, too. I knew this would also give the artists, my friends, exhibition lines for their CVs—something that at the time felt valuable and elusive.

It was in my first semester of graduate school at the University of Arkansas in 2019 that I again found myself drawn to making exhibitions as a part of my practice, and it was here that I realized that this practice was in fact an artistic practice. The first alternative art space project happened in the span of a week—Maryalice Carroll, a new friend at the time and fellow first-year grad, and I found a broken refrigerator unit behind our studio building that was the perfect form with its front glass doors to be an exhibition vitrine of sorts. Just weeks earlier we had christened ourselves Crust Bucket Collective during our work hours of scrubbing out the crustiest glaze buckets we had ever seen. Rather than grudgingly doing this Sisyphean task, we laughed through it, deciding that anything grungy or crusty could inspire artmaking or curating. So, working as our newly formed collaborative team of Crust Bucket Collective, we gathered eleven of our peers to exhibit works in the refrigeration unit and hosted a one night pop-up exhibition. We moved quickly because we didn't know how long the fridge would sit there, and also because we knew the longer one sat with an idea, the more likely we would edit and second guess our idea. We also wanted to embrace our creative impulses without overthinking—something that seemed to be happening a lot all of a sudden in graduate school where every move and gesture needed to be explained and conceptualized.

Since then, I have curated zines and artist books as curatorial, platformist art projects. Crust Bucket Collective has curated many other exhibitions, including the longer-term exhibition that happened in and on my Honda Fit during a summer roadtrip—the *Crust Bucket Trunk Show*—with ceramic sculpture works that were safely packed in their pedestals while we drove between exhibition pop-up spots, and bumper stickers that were designed as artworks that were added at each new stop by a new friend or exhibition viewer. Last spring, during another pandemic-related quarantine of sorts, I curated my mother-in-law’s cake stand as an artspace. The biggest joy in these projects is building friendships with artists, and also meeting strangers who when confronted with an exhibition in an unusual spot don’t quite know what to do with the idea of the exhibition—it’s strange and weird, but also funny and inspiring. I love watching people grapple with the idea of art in unexpected spaces.

So, as I moved forward with thesis planning, I pulled together a list of alternative art spaces that I had learned about through friends and mentors, social media, *Hyperallergic* articles, and other internet research. Much of this research began when I met and worked with Breanne Trammell, an Assistant Professor of Printmaking at the University of Arkansas. I worked as a Teaching Assistant for Breanne my first semester in this program for a foundation class called Collaborative Thinking. I learned just as much as the undergraduate students taking that course, both through her teaching but also her practice as an example. Upon moving to Fayetteville, Arkansas, in 2019, to begin teaching at the University of Arkansas in printmaking, Breanne shaped her home into an art space called Public Storage. She hosted one exhibition in her home, which included printed and sculptural pieces from her own archive/collection before Public Storage had to pivot to outdoor and yard spaces only due to the pandemic. While it is not currently physically based anywhere, Public Storage utilized yard signs, garden beds, porches,

windows, and fences as spaces for exhibiting works publicly during the pandemic. I learned about many of the artists and curators that I invited to be a part of the exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces directly from Breanne, but then also through research beyond and inspired by our conversations. This was some of the most joyful research I've undertaken.

Refrigerator exhibition spaces are both so amusing and smart to me, as they are such a practical object found in almost every home in the Western world, but also the perfect echo of a “white cube.” I learned about the *Curated Fridge*, which uses the fridge door of Yorgos Efthymiadis, as a platform for sharing photography works from artists around the world with audiences around the world. Each quarter there is a new exhibition on the fridge, and each exhibition has a guest “RefrigeCurator,” which could be anyone who reaches out to express interest in curating a specific kind of show on that fridge. I later read about *Seattle Freezer*, which is described by its organizers and curators Elisabeth Smith and Michael Milano as “just a chill white cube,”²² mostly based in West Seattle. Seattle Freezer hosted an amorphous sculpture by Francesca Lohmann that, over time, oozed through the fridge slates, as well as many other sculptural exhibitions and even performance works. I was thrilled when Michael and Elisabeth were onboard to work with me on the exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces I was beginning to coordinate. Furthermore, I find flagpole spaces also very exciting, as they can be so visible, yet so minimal in terms of space they actually require. STNDRD, a space initiated by Sage Dawson in St. Louis, opened in 2016, and is described as an artist-run space that uses exhibitions to “examine the power and potential of flags, richly evidenced by history and within contemporary art as cultural objects that abstract, encapsulate, and canonize.”²³ A 2020 exhibition at STNDRD was by artist Mira Dayal, and consisted of a raised fitted white bedsheet.

²² https://www.instagram.com/seattle_freezer/

²³ <http://stndrd.org/about/>

There is vulnerability in flying one's bedsheet in the open. Raising a white bed sheet could be seen as the act of raising a white flag in surrender, but as the exhibition description says, it could also be "an airing of dirty laundry, of this country's whiteness."²⁴ There were so many other spaces that I found and read about, including an elementary school that was curated by the students into a contemporary art museum: the *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr School Museum of Contemporary Art*, which puts the decisions of art displays in the hands of children. I was also particularly intrigued by an exhibition installed on an ice floe in the Arctic co-curated by Raimar Stange and Andreas Templin titled *Goodbye World*. The 10 curated works, that include an installation of a picnic set-up for no one, sculptures of skulls made out of bread, and among other sculptural works, will remain indefinitely on the floe, until the ice melts and sinks into the sea. Stange uses this exhibition to ask: "What options do the visual arts have in the face of the climate catastrophe?"²⁵ The places and spaces of these exhibitions can guide artists and viewers to see and understand the world in different ways. They remind us that anything can be possible anywhere, and that care of people and places are also vital for survival. They remind us that joy can be simple to find.

So, I invited artists and curators of alternative art spaces to participate in an exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces that would take place in/around/beyond the University of Arkansas SculptureX Gallery. Some people I never heard back from, but many enthusiastically joined the group. As it was curated by me from the *Office*, I titled it: *the office of possible projects' exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces*. I was thrilled to be able to share multiple exhibitions and happenings throughout the duration of the exhibition, occurring in/on/around a filing cabinet, a flag, a dashboard, a mini fridge, a publication, a telephone pole, a car's bumper, a classified ad

²⁴ <http://stndrd.org/portfolio/mira-dayal-an-airing-of/>

²⁵ Bury, *Art That Goes With the Floe*.

space, an elevator, a cake stand, a website, and a picnic basket. Artists and curators who were involved were: Liz Alspach, who installed an installation based on her book *2+2=CAKE* in the *Filing Cabinet Gallery*; *BODYHOLES*, which is a project of Tilman Hornig & Paul Barsch, who say “if the body were a museum, there would be seven galleries;”²⁶ Maryalice Carroll, who has been a steadfast collaborator on Crust Bucket Collective projects, and helped bring together a mini “retrospective” of all the exhibitions and publications we had made since we started the collective, including a new showing of the *Crust Bucket Trunk Show* gallery on my car in the loading dock outside the gallery; Eva Gabriella Flynn, who has used flags as a medium and space in her work as a way to investigate borders, belonging and placemaking; Bia Furtado, who made a ceramic and mixed-media installation in the *Picnic Basket Gallery*; Philippe Hyojung Kim, who was curated into Michael Milano and Elisabeth Smith’s Seattle Freezer space which was a Magic Chef Mini Fridge for this exhibition; Alex Lucas, who curates ca53776v2.gallery on the dashboard of his 2007 Ford Ranger in Santa Barbara, California, and who took over my car’s dashboard space for this exhibition; Jesse Malmed, who invited in April Martin, Bobby Gonzales, and Larsen Husby to display works on *Western Portal*, the version of *Western Pole* that for this exhibition was located in Fayetteville on a street lamp outside the University of Arkansas SculptureX Gallery; Chris Reeves & Curtis Miller, of Flatland, which was an exhibition/project/event space located in McKinley Park’s Clock Tower Industrial Center in Chicago, but is now an occasional publisher and organizer of events, who for this exhibition considered the publication as a space and platform; DJ Sloppy Alien and the Picnic School of Art choir—Cat Hudgens and Melissa Loney—who performed a piece of music composed by Erik Satie in the elevator; Breanne Trammell, who as Public Storage purchased a classified ad space in the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, to become a space for an artwork; and last but not least,

²⁶ <http://newscenario.net/bodyholes/>

Meredith Tinkle, who was a new but amazing collaborator on the *Cake Stand Biennale*, where we hosted over 50 artists in cake stand galleries around the city of Fayetteville.

One week prior to the exhibition opening, the Women’s Studio Workshop hosted an amazing talk, featuring Sage Dawson, Alex Lukas, Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, and Imin Yeh and led by Faythe Levine and Erin Zona,²⁷ all of whom have crafted and cultivated contemporary alternative exhibition spaces. I had begun curating the exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces months earlier, but this talk reminded me (in the best way possible) that there are so many artists and curators making hyper-localized incredible alternative art spaces. Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, who was the Lead Curator of The Nook from 2015-2020, where they worked with over 80 artists, writers, performers & musicians in their apartment kitchen, shared some words that resonated with me deeply. They said: “All of these spaces can be more than what they are. Oh it’s in the kitchen! That could be in my kitchen. It could be in my dream house—it is my dream house!” In my time in graduate school, I invited others to make and share art in refrigerators, filing cabinets, cake stands, my car, among many other unusual spaces, and in doing these projects, I’ve made them into my dream spaces. My little Honda Fit that has held multiple exhibitions and carried many, many artworks is my dream car! The filing cabinet I pulled from the dumpster behind my studio is my dream filing cabinet! Imin Yeh also noted in the conversation in relation to her alternative spaces—*Dreamcabin* and *The Chute*, both of which are on a miniature scale—that: “Real people can live with real art. The scale of all of these projects are real liveable things.” Dream spaces can live with and belong to you and me, and anyone else.

Prior to installing all the exhibition spaces within and around the SculptureX gallery, I was not sure how it would all come together. I of course knew that each of the projects stood

²⁷ Levine and Zona, *Up from the Archives #2: W.I.N.G.S.*

alone well, but also each project was typically found in its specific and highly localized place. What would it be like to bring them all into one shared space in Fayetteville, Arkansas, revolving around an institutional gallery space? Of course, each alternative space became something new in this new location, but they also started to have conversations. The bright colors of Eva Gabriella Flynn's flags were echoed in Liz Alspach's colorful and bold printed graphics and broadsides, as well as the iridescent vinyl that coated the interior of Philippe Hyojung Kim's installation in Seattle Freezer's mini fridge space. Minimalist cube forms were repeated throughout the gallery in the form of the mini fridge and *Filing Cabinet Gallery*. There were moments where the exhibition embraced the white cube traditions, for example, the Crust Bucket Collective retrospective works from artists Aisha Bryant, Anthony Park Kascak, and Jasmine Baetz, and the *Cake Stand Biennale* artworks located in the gallery, all sat on top of sleek white gallery tables. Yet, there were moments when the language of the fine art gallery was slightly off, as with the wall text vinyl being blue rather than black—a nod to the *O.o.P.P.s* color scheme. And then there were moments, where the exhibition acknowledged that these artworks and projects could not actually be contained in a white-walled gallery, as with the elevator performance piece led by DJ Sloppy Alien—think live personalized elevator music. Public Storage's piece exhibited in the Sunday edition of the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, and Jesse Malmed's coordination of the lamp pole gallery space outside the gallery did not even touch the white walls of the gallery, but were integral parts of the show. Crust Bucket Collective's *Trunk Show Retrospective* of all the bumper sticker artworks that had ever been a part of Crust Bucket projects, and Alex Lukas' dashboard gallery work, traveled around the city of Fayetteville with me throughout the duration of exhibition, including when I was at the grocery store or pharmacy, or wherever. These two car projects were parked outside the gallery from time to time to be in

closer proximity to the rest of the projects, but they existed out on the road or parked in front of my apartment in their fullest, truest form, too.

During the process of coordinating, installing, and presenting this exhibition, I felt like I was a conductor of a wild orchestra. I wasn't extremely worried about hitting all the right notes, but rather I wanted each curator/artist to share their most beautiful music. There were moments of chaos, but there were also moments of harmony, where all these alternative spaces from across the world joined together to make a kind of music I had never heard before. It was thrilling and rewarding to make an exhibition that included so many artists and people I admired, and to be able to see the magic that happened when they were all in close proximity. Furthermore, it was also very exciting to see my hypothesis proven correct that these projects and works cannot be contained—they belong out in public, in our shared spaces, and sometimes where we least expect to find art, like the grocery store parking lot.

The Cake Stand Biennale / Magic Spaces

I recently read about Hans Ulrich Obrist's earliest curatorial endeavors that took place in his kitchen in 1991, the year I was born. He wrote about how the choice of the space was, first of all, pragmatic, saying: "I didn't have access to an exhibition space in a gallery or a museum, of course, but I did rent an old flat in St. Gallen. I never cooked. I never even made tea or coffee because I always ate out. The kitchen was just another space where I kept stacks of books and papers... The non-utility of my kitchen could be transformed into its utility for art."²⁸ Obrist is now artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries in London, and one of the most well-known curators in the world, so reading that he too started with the modest mundane spaces of his home was a pleasant surprise. Needless to say, Obrist is no longer curating shows in his unused kitchen. Yet, there is a magic in the kitchen show that was organized by an unknown 23 year old at that time, because a show like that could have been organized by anyone with a kitchen. Whether one goes on to become someone who works with the most famous artists in the world, or one is struggling to make and show their own work, if one has access to a kitchen, one could make an exhibition. If one has the energy and time (which, yes, are valuable and hard to come by), one could make an exhibition anywhere.

Boris Groys writes about curating as artistic action in his chapter "On the Curatorship" in *Art Power*. He begins by saying: "The curator may exhibit, but he doesn't have the magical ability to transform nonart into art through the act of display. That power, according to current cultural conventions, belongs to the artist alone."²⁹ Yet, then defying these "current cultural conventions," he later writes of curators and their ties to visibility:

²⁸ Obrist, *Ways of curating*, 84.

²⁹ Groys, *Art Power*, 43.

Indeed, curating acts as a supplement or a ‘pharmoncon’ (in Derrida’s usage), in that it cures the images even as it makes it unwell... What is the right kind of curatorial practice? Since curatorial practice can never entirely conceal itself, the main objective of curating must be to visualize itself, by making its practice explicitly visible. The will to visualization is in fact what constitutes it and drives art. Since it takes place within the context of art, curatorial practice cannot elude the logic of visibility.³⁰

If a curatorial practice is, in fact, a visual practice, that also both cures artworks and makes artworks unwell, then the curator practices a specific kind of artmaking. A very human kind of artmaking that is one of communicating, arranging, and caring. Groys continues:

The independent curator is a radically secularized artist. He is an artist because he does everything artists do. But he is an artist who has lost the artist’s aura, who no longer has magical transformative powers at his disposal, who cannot endow objects with artistic status. He doesn’t use objects—art objects included—for art’s sake, but rather abuses them, makes them profane... He is an artist, but he is atheistic and “normal” through and through.³¹

While Groys claims the curator is an artist that is “normal,” or without magic, I would argue that a curator is an artist that believes *the everyday and the normal are already magic*. I would argue that this way of artmaking, especially in unconventional curating, is a way of believing that

³⁰ Ibid, 46.

³¹ Groys, *Art Power*, 51.

anyone can be an artist and that any space already holds the potential to be an art space. This kind of artist does not believe themselves to be in a position of bestowing magical powers from themselves onto other things and therefore transforming them into “art,” this kind of artist believes that there is magic that exists around them already. This kind of making is that of coaxing and exposing the potential and magic in others. If one believes that this magic belongs to anyone and anything, then it is also about believing that art doesn’t belong to a certain class, and that it doesn’t have to be an exclusive space based on the buying and selling of art objects/commodities.

In fall 2021, I met Meredith Tinkle while I was teaching my first wheel throwing class at the University of Arkansas. I got to know her as a student, but was intrigued by the work she was making and doing outside of the wheel throwing class. During an exhibition reception of a show Meredith was a part of, we got on the topic of cake stands; we quickly realized this topic was very important to both of us. As Meredith cut into a delicious and beautiful cake she had baked for her reception, I told her about *The Cake Stand* project I had worked on and curated earlier that year. In April 2021, I hosted *The Cake Stand*, which was an art/project/exhibition/space based at my in-law’s home in rural Farmingdale, Maine. During another pandemic-related quarantine of sorts, I found the opportunity to curate my mother-in-law’s cake stand as an art space. Initially through invitations and then an open call, various works and projects were exhibited from that platform. Over the course of a month and a half, 26 artists held solo shows or collaborative projects in *The Cake Stand*. Artists exhibited cakes, zines, bread, sculptures, paintings, plants, and more. Some works were recipes (Sol LeWitt style), some spilled over onto the table, and some ended up as performances. Artists truly had their cake and ate it too. Artworks were viewed on my instagram, and local visitors could arrange a visit from outside the

window. So, Meredith's cake sitting beautifully atop a cake stand at that reception seemed to be the perfect candidate to be an artwork in its very own cake stand gallery. After I explained the project, Meredith went on to tell me that she had a huge collection of cake stands. She had always dreamed of opening up a bakery, so throughout her teenage years, her mother would pick up cake stands from garage sales and thrift stores for Meredith's future bakery. Our collaboration began during that very conversation, and very soon after the *Cake Stand Biennale* was born.

We dreamed of the idea of having artworks displayed in the various cake stands dispersed throughout the city of Fayetteville, hosted by different local organizations, businesses and landmarks. In the first months of coordinating, we walked around downtown Fayetteville together asking local businesses if they would like to host a cake stand with an artist's work for the biennale weekend. I found so much joy when, after explaining the premise of the project, the people we talked to started to grin enough so that we could see the crinkle of their cheeks and eyes despite their mask. It is a comical idea, but also a very practical and logical idea. If one wants to host a large art fair or biennale event, why wouldn't one use cake stands in different spots around the city? During a time when many businesses had been struggling with another wave of COVID-19, and people had then been living through two years of a pandemic, hosting a cake stand art exhibition in one's business might have been the most relieving thing to be asked to do.

On April 1-2, 2022, 30 local businesses and Fayetteville landmarks across the city hosted cake stand galleries. Each cake stand featured the artwork of one of the over 50 participating artists. While many artists were Fayetteville locals, the open call drew in artists from around the world to exhibit their work during the inaugural *Cake Stand Biennale*. We received artworks from artists living in Belarus, Australia, and Scotland, among other countries. This city-wide

event celebrated the idea that anywhere could be a gallery and anything could be art. From paper snack sculptures, to traditional functional ceramics, to literal cakes, the *Cake Stand Biennale* had just about every art medium that anyone could imagine inside the cake stand galleries.

The difficulty in turning plans like the Cake Stand Biennale into a reality was not in using a magic only supposedly bestowed upon artists, like Groys writes about, to transform something ordinary into artwork, it was in inviting others in on the project and convincing artists and locals to see the magic that already exists in them and their space. It is the work of making others believe that there is so much potential in the ordinary. It is about making anyone who wants to be involved into a collaborator, or a coauthor. It is about saying yes, and giving wild and experimental ideas a public to exist within.

In a book compiled by Gemma-Rose Turnbull after Open Engagement 2013, *The Questions We Ask Together*, Turnbull used the idea of Sister Corita's "quantity assignments, to generate 100 questions before embarking on intensive work and research"³² to craft this publication. 100 questions that arose during the conference were sent to contributors and it became a blog, which then was turned into a book. In an essay answer from Hope Hilton, she writes about social practice projects: "It's about showing your neighbor that they have power, and reminding yourself of your own power, and reflecting that power back with a mirror as big as the sky and believing, just believing."³³ Deborah Fisher also wrote in this book, "I only gained the ability to influence others when I decided that the most interesting thing I could do as an artist is to help other artists."³⁴ And these two artists and writers poetically summarize my feelings about building alternative spaces with friends and collaborators, like the *Cake Stand Biennale*. Art can be about reclaiming power in places that are accessible to more than just

³² Turnbull, *The Questions We Ask Together*, 3.

³³ Ibid, 36.

³⁴ Ibid, 64.

wealthy art buyers and sharing that power with other artists who want to share their work. The artists and people who get involved not only make the projects interesting and worthwhile, they make the projects and they are the magic. More than that, it is about showing that if my collaborators and I can do it with little (or no) budget in places like my in-law's kitchen, or in my car, so can you. An artist's work is not to hold a special kind of magic, it is about exposing the magic that is already there.

Conclusion

After I wrapped up my final semester of graduate school, I was able to see the *Office of Possible Projects* at the Fayetteville Public Library, *the office of possible projects' exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces*, and the *Cake Stand Biennale* as the three puzzle pieces that fit together to make up my thesis. They also fit together like nesting dolls, holding each other within themselves. The *Office of Possible Projects* acted as the organizing entity of all the projects I worked on, and the *Cake Stand Biennale* and the empty computer lab were also able to find a home within *the office of possible projects' exhibition of alternative exhibition spaces*. Everything is connected, and the projects never really completely finish. I submit this writing and those artworks to officially complete my MFA degree, but they will continue onward beyond my time at the University of Arkansas. The ideas may evolve and grow, but I will carry them forward.

As I wrote in the introduction, this writing is simply the story that connects these projects; this writing creates something new and compelling in reflection upon these works, rather than justifies their existence. Just as this writing stretches the definition of what the written thesis statement is supposed to be in this University program, I hope this writing and these projects invite others to become artists who question the systems and structures around us. Our questioning and exploration will expand the containers we exist within, ideally making space for others and new ideas. Let's follow adrienne maree brown's lead and follow our own imaginations that allow us to dive into the "impossible."

I invite you, too, to take these ideas—any and all—and make them your own. Make art anywhere, for anyone. Find the magic and freedom that is everywhere.

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