

## **SAFETY WORDS**

by Taisha Paggett and Ashley Hunt  
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# INTRODUCTION

Let's begin this story simply: We have received an invitation.

In this case, "we" refers to Taisha Paggett and Ashley Hunt. We have been invited to bring our collaborative project to an art institution in Houston. Our project goes by the name, "On Movement, Thought and Politics," and the art institution is Project Row Houses, located in Houston's historically African-American community of the Third Ward. We began our project in 2004, with an interest in thinking about the world and power in new ways, where our ability to be present in our bodies and conscious of our conditions in life might change how we are able to live in the world. Starting with the conversations that we knew — conversations of *dance, visual art, teaching, organizing, somatic practice* and *activism* — we have tried to work in a way that doesn't belong to any one of these disciplines alone, but works across the tool sets they offer. Since then, we've been building workshops — workshops that sometimes evolve into projects; projects that sometimes devolve into workshops; and in some cases, we've connected this work to social issues in collaboration with community groups.

*Ask this first:*

*From where do you speak?*

*A) From the mind?*

*B) The body?*

*C) The tensile space between you and me?*

*D) The land?*

*E) All of the above?*

*Do you believe in negative space?*

Project Row Houses is an art institution that has deep roots in the neighborhood around it. A part of their investment in this community has been to help build its resources, which among other

things has included the construction of affordable housing. This housing sits on their larger “campus,” among the institution’s art spaces and other facilities, and it’s available for rent to anyone who is interested in also contributing to the community — which includes sharing in decision-making and participating in a residents’ council.

Upon our invitation, we hear that there have been a number of recent thefts nearby. This is causing a good deal of concern, and the residents’ council has begun to discuss ways to address this. We also hear that some kind of a split has formed, between people who want to respond with security measures — like help from the police — and people who, knowing the troubled relationship that the larger community has always had with Houston’s police, want to respond in more thoughtful and creative ways.

In our experience, things called “security solutions” tend to enhance *insecurity* — increasing, rather than reducing, the alienation, disenfranchisement, desperation and mistrust that foster harm and theft in the first place. So the residents’ dilemma resonated with our own thinking, and with debates we’ve encountered in communities around the U.S. facing similar issues. Rather than an occasion to merely criticize a system, this seemed like a chance to ask what resources and visions — in our selves and with those around us — might lead us to new relationships, new possibilities and futures. So we drafted an invitation:

*Call for Participation: We would like to invite all residents of the Project Row Houses community to participate in a week-long workshop, designed to arrive collectively at a creative response to the issues of theft and safety that have recently arisen within the community. We propose to hold a series of workshops throughout the week of June 27th, with the goal of a public statement, performance, artwork, discussion, or whatever else comes organically from our conversations and interactions. Our society provides very few tools for responding to interpersonal harm that don’t in themselves produce more harm, so here we will look to one another and the history of the Third Ward’s social fabric to expand our imaginations and ask what we as artists can do to reduce harm within the community.*

*From the individual body to the collective body.*

*Ownership. Rights?*

*Whose rights?*

*Us and the form(ul)ation of them.*

*How do you respond to a theft?*

*The difference between ownership that hoards and ownership that sets up rightful boundaries.*

*What cannot be taken away from you?*

## FIRST HALF — THE ROAD & THEORY

I.

Now we're driving to Houston from our home in Los Angeles. We're giving ourselves a week to get there, with time to think, plan and organize this workshop. We will begin our days by checking in with one another: What is our body feeling/thinking; what is our mind thinking/feeling; where are we in space and what surrounds us? We journal together.

We stretch out time by discussing how theft and safety are present in our own lives. We want to figure out how we ourselves are located within the issues of the workshop — not simply outsiders to someone else's situation, but how we are bound up and implied in the same time and history?

We make more lists. We try out exercises in parks. Taisha topples out of a handstand on a patch of rest stop grass and we complain to one another: So much of our language for politics is already someone else's — statistics, campaigns, "issues," theory, politicized news coverage, all of them lobbying to capture our discon-

*From Coachella to Phoenix: How does the landscape change around us?*

- 1. Plain bread, pizza dough mountains. The road cuts into them. No elevation, space-like. No foliage, giant pebbles.*
- 2. A little plant life. More definition in the mountains. Beginnings of a valley. Bouldery.*
- 3. Large, angular vegetation. More red, a wider valley. Singular mountaintops give way to multiple peaks that look like hands raised in a meeting.*
- 4. Striation in the mountains.*
- 5. Blond grass.*
- 6. Plains.*
- 7. Drastic elevation increase. More dusty and sandy. Ironwood Prison.*
- 8. Vegetation gets stringy. Matted, clumpy camel fur.*
- 9. First sight of true greens. Minerally rock. Red earth.*

*Perceptual journaling, we say, tracking the seen and the unseen as it surrounds you, locating your grounding and context; this could be a good exercise for the workshop. What fills your vision and what do you refuse to notice?*

*Write that down.*

tent and make it work for someone else's benefit. How can we make our energies work for our own benefit? Can we relax the habits we inherit and restructure our perception of justice? How are we situated, on what ground do we think and speak?

We growl across hot asphalt, crossing border after border. The borders that are most visible are the ones drawn up without regard for the space's indigenous inhabitants. Their borders — remaining despite their historical trespass — are graffitied all around us, but are disappeared too, marked only by understated signs that announce, “now entering...now leaving”; the same signs announce rivers, canyons and things from the past.

## II.

Arizona is on fire, north and south of us. We exit the interstate to move our limbs and apply all this thinking to our cramped bodies. Picacho Peak State Park: “Closed due to the fires.” Or maybe it was budget cuts? Our map says another prison is coming up on the right: Picacho Unit. Ashley wants to photograph it. It can't be seen from the interstate — 220 men hidden in the desert, disappeared by a horizon.

Later we detour from the interstate in order to walk through a forest of giant Saguaro cacti, which the map indicates is to the left. The road is flanked by sprawling tracks of resort housing, still fresh under construction. Throughout these not-quite-yet neighborhoods weaves a maze of golf courses. We wind our way through, unable to find a road out to the forest; finally we try a dirt road marked for construction vehicles.

We bump along this road until we find what seems like a piece of this cactus forest, we park and exit the car. The heat is cruel; the car sweats and pants behind us as desert things present their armor to us. We walk between them on what seems like a path until we see a mirage. Another golf course, butting the manicured edge of its green against the red pebbled earth that surrounds it, like the neckline on a boy's fresh haircut.

*For example: Walk or drive a distance, 5 hours or 5 minutes. Note how the environment transforms. What changes? What stays the same? How are lines drawn? The enforcement of those lines: What purposes do they serve and for whom?*

*How do those boundaries organize one's self, shaping one's capacity to move through space? How do those lines and borders perform a conception of safety: A controlled port of entry, a threshold of identity, a dam of political pressure, a home.*

*Is your home a geometry of lines?*



*Land use. Property. A border: Where two opposing desires meet. They push into one another — the uniform planning of one community pressed against the radical diversity of everything else. Ecology. Each a machine of desire that weaves itself outward, meeting here in some heated equilibrium. A threshold of rights, law and economy; biology and leisure; the security of a straight line; an image.*

Driving through Las Cruces we talk security devices: locks, alarms, walls, barbed wire — we've been tracking them in towns as we drive through or stop for gas. We ask whether we feel safe here. How about here? We ask how borders are produced, naturally or unnaturally? Painted with the colors of alarm and the politicization of safety. Homeland Security is parked in a truck on Main Street. Architectures, environments, insides and outsides, the edge of me and the beginning of you. Wall, fence, mountain, state-line, topography, skin.

On the flatness that begins East Texas we start wrestling with the word "safety" itself. The word has so much baggage. So we list synonyms. Reading back our list, we see that the concept of safety forks into two distinct branches: one meaning cooperation and mutual support; another meaning militarism, policing, defensiveness and the paranoid distancing of others.

Houston is close. We watch San Antonio pass by as we try one last exercise, one to model on ourselves:

We have critiqued ideas of "safety," but we have yet to ask:

*How do we begin to think differently about safety?*

*I ask you then you ask me:*

**(1) What does safety mean to you?**

*Answer: Not having to be suspicious, not having to feel that your surroundings are a threat, expecting that one's desires and ways of being will be respected and defended by those around you. A stability of space — I know that the space I call mine is not going to change out of my control; that my walls are solid; that my neighborhood won't be gentrified out of existence. Having a body that's capable of sticking up for itself, moving in the way I want it to; not having one's capacities limited.*

**(2) How does personal safety imply or rely upon the presence of others?**

*Answer: Safety rests on trust; trust is what my relationship to the people around me is based upon. I can trust them and they're trust-worthy. Instead of hostility, fear and estrangement, we're familiar, we share commonality and respect. There's a responsibility that the individual holds, and that which the community holds. Together they imply a "common stake" between myself and others; we're not the same person, but we share a goal. The real question: How can others benefit from my safety just as much as I do, where others are as interested in my definitions of safety as I am in theirs. Safety means showing up for one another, being present for each other and dependable.*

*"Branches of safety." Write that down too: Map the concepts in the word.*

*The architects of "public safety" have almost always come from communities of people who wish to protect their wealth, privilege and power from communities excluded from that wealth, privilege and power. Borders. Divisions. Property. Police. Concepts filled with racial fear and class hatred — so firmly welded into the scaffolds of American thought, we seem to defend the powerful just by using the language we are given. "Protect m(in)e from them." The police have never been for the protection of everyone, or they wouldn't be the police.*

## SECOND HALF — ARRIVAL & PRACTICE

I.

Now we're beginning our workshop. We arrived last night, and thirteen people have joined us in a large room, with a circle of chairs, snacks, paper, pens and a video projector. We have an agenda built from the ideas we developed on the road. The air has a feeling of curiosity and excitement, while a sense of exhaustion has dragged in behind us all as well — the saturation of too much work in an economy of too little stretched too thin.

We are conscious that we might be asking people for a lot, an amount of time that few may have to give. People have not committed formally to the week-long process that we proposed, but we're hoping that they'll want to by the end of this meeting.

We begin by asking what each person brings into the room:

*Music*

*Wit and spontaneity*

*Critical thinking*

*Openness to giving and receiving*

*Curiosity*

*Meta-awareness*

*Desire for creative problem solving*

*Versatility*

*Strength*

*Cooking*

*Listening*

*A concern for coming together as a community and as a strong force*

*The last person adding: "I bring myself, my thoughts and ideals, my perceptions and observation."*

*Thanks for joining us.* We introduce who we are and what we do. We describe our larger project and explain our ideas, reiterating the spirit of our call for participation. We show examples of what we've made in the past, and then we say, "Now that we've had a social introduction, let's bring our bodies in."



## II.

*Let's stand and close our eyes.*

*While daily life requires that most of the observation we do be done on the outside of us, let's take a moment to observe on the inside. We're often taught that 'our feelings' refers to superficial or abstract emotions, but for now, let's take seriously that the way we 'feel' is important. Imagine that your feelings are a language your body speaks, telling you what is actually happening within you. Start to ask, 'How do my legs feel? How does my stomach feel? How does my neck feel? How do my eyes feel? And as you let your attention move around your body, think about it with whatever imaginative qualities you like. Think in terms of colors, patterns, or amounts of light; think in terms of temperatures, balance, amounts of tension and ease. How does the right half of me feel different than my left? Think of different tastes or textures. Perhaps you feel different emotions in separate parts of your body, like your feet are angry and your ears are happy, your stomach is exhausted and your lungs are lonely. Let this kind of thinking stir around within you. These thoughts may not apply literally, but as concepts, as ideas, they can help us to differentiate, to consider and interpret what a complex machine we each are, and it can deepen our awareness of how we are doing.*

*Now bring your awareness down to your feet. From here, begin to move your attention upward: to your ankles, shins, calves, knees. Whatever you feel in each place, try to relax it, soften it, so what you feel is not the squeezing or tensing of your muscles, but the gentle architecture of your bones. Your bones are strong, they are always strong enough. Continue to move this attention upward, let it spiral slowly up your hamstrings and around your thighs, relaxing your muscles at each step; over your hips, into your lower back, up your spine and throughout your chest. Let this relaxation flower upward like water from a sprinkler that then showers back down over your whole self, lifting tension out of your head and pulling it from your neck, your chest, shoulders, arms and hands; down and out through your feet.*

*Now, just relax. Relax, and listen to your breath. (Inhale. Exhale.) Compare how you feel now as opposed to when we began. (Inhale. Exhale.) You probably feel at least a little different, and we could say that this means you have just experienced some small measure of power — a power that we each have (inhale) to change our bodies and the way that we feel, any time we want; moving from tension (exhale) to relaxation, from gripping tightly to releasing. Feeling the power to change ourselves so simply within a society that trains us to think we have no such power, and that we can only purchase power from the products the society sells (inhale, exhale), this just might be a radical thing.*

*And this is where we can begin to find connections between the inside of our body and the outside. Begin this by asking yourself a question: Is the world in my body?*

*[Pause.]*

*What does this question mean: "Is the world in my body?" Well, is your work or your job inside of you? Is your family inside you? Your school or your church? A movie you just watched? An accident you saw, or a surprising act of generosity? Perhaps there are borders and boundaries that cross your body, or a sense of threats and safety that clench at you, holding you, bunched around a joint, gathered in a muscle or an organ. Perhaps your faith in your community allows you to relax, or some mistrust you feel tightens you up. Let's use this understanding to visualize different parts of our bodies, where we might actually begin to think about our bodies as a kind of politics.*

*Maybe your back hurts from lifting things at a job, or from bending over a computer; or maybe your feet hurt from standing at a cash register, or rushing from table to table in a restaurant. Maybe your wrists hurt from typing, or your hands are cramped from digging in the*

*earth or grasping the things that grow out of it; or from sorting things — fabric, paper, mail or products that you stock on shelves and racks.*

*Each of these things that the world requires of us makes some part of our body feel something, and if you've been doing that thing long enough, they may have formed a pattern in your body, composing you into a certain shape, even changing your posture or your appearance in ways you don't think about.*

*In this project that we're introducing here, we like to 'de-compose' movement. This is to say that the simplest of things — walking, a simple jump, or merely standing still, balanced like we all are right now — require a careful composition of many smaller movements that we had to learn one step at a time. In this same way, the de-composition of a movement offers us a history, a learning process, the unfolding of a pile-up of memories and know-how. It also offers us a process of forgetting that at some point had to replace all that complex composition with a singular concept, so that you could think one thing instead of one hundred and put a word to it: "walk," "jump," or simply, "stand still." Thinking through this can help us to see how the world is composed into our bodies, composed by our jobs and our work, and also by the mere labor of living — in our responses to the ways that the world calls out to us and says what it wants us to be.*

*If the world has made us afraid of being small or weak, we enlarge, trying to look bigger in our skin; if the world has made us feel that we have no value or importance, we shrink, we reduce, slouching down and hiding in our skin. In both of these cases, we compose our body into a response, one that shifts the balance in our architecture. These are shifts that we can feel for a long time, ones that might even limit or define what it is we can do with our bodies or think with our minds.*

*Whether this comes from the economic pressure of the work we do to survive, from the social pressures that shape the sense of "our place" in the world, or from the political pressures of having too little or too much power, these things shape us, and ultimately they compose us into hierarchies — race, gender, class, sexuality, student, worker, boss or subordinate, parent, child, pastor, leader or follower, greedy or needy, chosen or forsaken. These hierarchies divide us and — more often than we might like — conquer us. We may have trained ourselves to not feel any of this, having numbed ourselves to the pain of subordination or to the guilt of privilege, or to both, but it can be felt in our body and the social body around us at any given moment, if we just pay attention. And if we decide that this will be a starting point for changing something, then from this thought, we have already changed something in the world.*

*So now let's get close to one another — gather closer and closer. And as we get closer, let's lean side to side, again and again. And as you lean, you might bump into the people next to you. This is okay. Let yourself bump shoulders, bump arms, bump backs or legs; we're each here, and it's okay for that to be felt. Bump, bump, bump; bump soft and polite, bump a bit harder; play with this and keep on bumping, and maybe laugh.*

*Just as we can act to change what is inside of us, and as we can use this as a starting point for changing the world around us, we also bump into our neighbors, our co-workers, our family and friends, strangers and passersby all the time. How we bump into them might determine how they feel for a while, and how they bump into us might determine how we feel in return; and this isn't so different from how the world works, where, like atoms in the atmosphere, like waves in water or like the wind all around us, each bump affects the atom next to us and sets off a chain reaction that spreads throughout the atmosphere.*

*So the question is not whether we can change the world or not, but how we do change the world, and whether we do so in the way we want; whether we are conscious of the chain reactions we set off, transmit or disrupt. We change the world by agreeing to the ways it is already organized, which helps to keep it that way; or by disagreeing, going against it, refusing to comply and forging new ways; from the smallest to the largest impact; and each choice is a choice that reorganizes something and changes the world from what it was the moment before.*

### III.

The room has a playful energy now, and as we look to gauge people's responses, they seem relaxed and receptive. Our next step in the workshop is to extend this thinking-embodiment practice into a more concrete discussion about the issues of safety and theft.

We ask about the thefts that we've been hearing about, and ask if there is a need for devising creative responses. To our surprise, people say that they've already begun to do this. They tell us about parties they've started in the evenings — "porch parties" — collecting on one another's porches in ways that they already do, but in this case, with the intention of watching the block together. They tell us about a barbecue they threw at the corner gas station, where they suspect some of the trouble starts; they offered free food and a party to whoever came through so that they could meet, build connections, familiarity and trust, hoping it will spread throughout the neighborhood. One person says that they're planning to paint signs for the block as another interrupts, saying that people have really talked enough about all of this, they've talked it through for weeks and are tired of talking. "What's needed now," she adds, "are more things to do. So if we've got some things that we could do, then maybe they could try that."

The discussion takes up this question: Community. People say that the Third Ward has always been a place of special pride and cultural richness. It is place that is central to the identity of Black history in Houston, and there is a great deal of solidarity around that. At the same time, there are lines that continue to be drawn

*We respond that we're happy to help in whatever way we can. But it's not our place to tell anyone how to respond, since we haven't been involved directly. What we bring is a way to frame a conversation, with a process and a set of tools for arriving at 'things to do' that come from the community itself. But it sounds like this may be what you all have begun. So perhaps we can approach this conversation in a different way; perhaps we can talk about the community. Instead of just talking about the thefts, can we talk about what kind of community it is that you all want to have here?*

and which, therefore, continue to be transgressed. Although the community has many ways of coming together, things that are new — new neighbors, new generations, new stresses and pressures — continue to make people strangers as well.

As our time winds down, we realize that the workshop ideas we had developed on our road trip are not going to work as we had envisioned them. The process we'd thought we could help to initiate is already underway, and the tools that we have brought seem either too late, superfluous or misplaced. At the same time, something does feel valuable here — a connection, a spark of something that has resonated between some or maybe all of us, a pleasure in our shared presence. While on the surface what we brought appears to be failing, something feels right in another way — the chance to pursue this sense of connection, and the possibility of learning further from one another. Perhaps what we have to offer is further context for this possibility. And so:

*“What we'd like to do then is offer a morning yoga practice for the rest of the week, open to everyone here, as well as the larger community, starting tomorrow morning at 8am in the Peace Park.”*

*Now we are thinking that there's something about the expectations that artists build up, or are thrown into, or perhaps both. Here we are, coming to engage a social process through the tools and resources of art. We believe in this.*

*At the same time, there are the expectations that follow behind art — in particular, 'Community-Based Art,' a particular genre of art production. Genres are not neutral, they have conventions: presumptions, objectives and roles, divisions of labor set in place: “There's the community, they bring the social; and here are the artists, they bring the art”; we feel a tension around this that is unspoken.*

*Under this model, you work together to turn a living social process into an object of art — something to be looked at, contemplated, analyzed. Fair enough, we recognize a value to freezing an ongoing process into a temporary object in order to study it or look at it through fresh eyes. But should that be the goal? To be an art object? Is that where it finds its value? Or is the value in what it brings to the community? Isn't the goal to find the next step in a process, where the tools and resources of art can offer powerful ways of thinking; where art locates its value in the relations of a community and its organization?*

*To ask this differently, are we to bring the art world's capital in order to 'legitimize' the conversation of 'the community,' which won't be considered valuable or a proper subject for art until the Community-Based Artist puts their stamp on it, or until it is formed recognizably into an art object? If so, then the 'we' of this work would seem to remain the two of us, as we become the authors, while a 'they' remains firmly in place, as 'the community' — becoming a pacified audience to their own lives, as someone else builds their own professional capital from them.*

*But aren't these community members already authors? Many of the residents are amazing artists in their own right, set within a larger community that is building their world actively, engaged in practices of creativity, with or without the gaze of “the art world” upon them.*

*They are already an art world.*

#### IV.

The next day, we rose early to meet seven people in a park that is built in the shape of a peace sign. Old big trees poured a breeze over us and sheltered us from the sun that would, in a few hours, make the air thick, heavy and Texas-hot. Third Ward mornings are quiet and soft, a light traffic of cars and feet circulating around us — walking the block to wake up, in and out of the corner gas station, or headed for the bus.

Taisha led us through the structure of a yoga class, but with a broader repetition of body uses, body thoughts, wringing ourselves like rags and expanding ourselves like a bellows. She propped our bodies onto an array of makeshift supports for those who needed the assistance — cardboard boxes, belts and bath towels gathered from apartments. The youngest among us, three years old, puts a box on her head, she asks if she can keep it.

As the week went on, the morning practice drew different levels of participation — choreographed one morning to a recording of Malcolm X speeches that one neighbor blasts down the block; another morning to the unending sound of sirens that spiraled in and out of the distance. Each session became a way to gather, to meet new people who'd heard about the free morning yoga, and who'd tell us why they needed it and how the bad economy is, drying up any extra income, especially for yoga classes.

We invited people into the way we take care of ourselves, and people shared their ways with us. This didn't feel like our 'artwork' in the way we are used to, but it was a part of what we were doing 'as' artists, as artists positioned within a community of this particular moment, finding collaborators and building some temporary public.

This schedule left the rest of our days open for meeting other publics that exist in the neighborhood. It gave us time to walk, to meet for meals, to talk about what we all are trying to preserve or change in our worlds. Taisha was grabbed to teach a kids' dance class on the fly, Ashley was recruited for a basketball game, and we used our residence home to cook dinner for artists we'd met.

V.

In relation to the thefts, we got the chance to observe what people were doing already. We saw a process of community action that was personal and rooted in each others' social lives, while their refusal of society's model for achieving safety was political, a boycott. They had devised excellent strategies, one's that we'd be able to share with other communities we know who are trying to formulate ways to address harm without going to the police.

Three strategies to confront theft on your block:

1. **Porch Parties:** When you get home from work, see who's out on their porch. Resist the lure of the TV, grab a beer from the fridge and join them on their porch. A few people do this and you have a "porch party," where, through the structure of a basic hang out, residents (A) watch over the street where some of the thefts had been happening, which in turn keeps things from happening; and (B) residents build up the social fabric that otherwise gets eaten away by multiple jobs, hours of overwork, family, and a larger culture that forgets how to be present;
2. **Gas Station Barbecue:** On Friday night, call a DJ, round up other residents, and set up a barbecue at the corner gas station. Friday nights are when things heat up, and the gas station is where a lot of mischief seems to brew, so meeting the people who hang around there, offering up free food, music and dominoes, learning one another's names and stories and extending respect might just build a mutual sense of community along that block, with the trust and familiarity that helps to keep each other from violating one another;
3. The simple presence of an ongoing conversation, continuing to evaluate and think up more strategies, is itself a strategy; it is theory and practice alike, and it encourages thinking collectively and creatively about one another's benefit; looking out for each other and sharing responsibility for the neighborhood's health; this in itself is an action toward a strong community, rebuilding social fabric rather than merely policing people's responses to tears in the fabric.

## VI.

During these same days, a nagging feeling would sneak up on us, saying that we weren't making the art that we had set out to make. We felt we had obligated ourselves to make something here, and this sense of obligation, along with a quiet pressure of what it means to "make something," hovered over us.

But across our morning practices, in all of our conversations and what we had stumbled upon, we began to suspect that our art here was not "making something" in any conventional sense; nor was it about directing 'the community' toward art that only 'we' knew how to make. What felt real was a practice of presence — finding our selves in the midst of an ongoing cultural process, and, within that, finding a way to bear witness, to offer solidarity, and to be able to say, "We saw that, we can testify to the realness of this thing." It was a practice based in a temporary relationship to a collective world and the creative practices that compose it; something as subtle as meeting people and leaving an impression in one another's skin, and as deep as exchanging the knowledge and forms that structure our imaginations; both of which might ripple out into other parts of the world.

If this was the case, then much of the thinking we had built on our road trip — the tracking of borders, the recording of our perceptions, challenging the anti-social distances built by concerns for safety — seemed less for the development of our workshop and more for our own personal preparation; preparing us to be here, to perform in this way: be present, to listen, observe, and to be able to learn. Rather than find the border between two places or two ideologies of safety, we found other borders, those of our own expectations and those alive in the conventions surrounding community-based art making: borders that separate "artists" from "the community," and borders that structure hierarchies of art — what it can be, who can make it, and what its value and purpose should be.

The art of the community wasn't what we came and enabled a community to do, it was what the community was doing already — a practice that was confronting difficult problems with creativity and urgency, finding within the haze of the moment a clarity that could be pursued; something that could disrupt the relations in place and the ways those relations make sense. Our task was to witness, to relate, to consider, and to negotiate our ideas with those of a new space, in a choreography that is not unlike finding a place for yourself at a party. In all, we saw ethics and gesture, new forms of collectivity, aesthetics, form and transformation.

*But why should we even try to put the frame of art onto any of this? The easiest answer is that it was art. Though perhaps it's because we still can't figure out how not to. Or, perhaps it's because what the Project Row Houses residents were doing had more importance than much of what we've seen in museums or theaters or academies in many years. Or perhaps maintaining a frame of "art" allows us to cast the reflective light of a new perspective onto what the community members were doing, or perhaps it becomes a way to transmit their inventions to other communities confronting the same questions. Perhaps, without the context of art, we never would have gone to Houston; which is to say that this is art because it was an outcome of art processes, art institutions, art training, discourse and economies. Or perhaps it is more selfish, to smuggle models of contemporary art out of itself as a way to demand recognition for practices we value — to advocate for the activities, spaces, and forms of alliance that art markets deny, but which social movements (set within "art" or not) require. Maybe it is all of these things, or perhaps it is an artwork in search of a reason, a movement; an enactment yet to come, or a way to explain failure.*

## VII.

It's the end of our week in Houston, and we decide to hold one last event. We open up the main resource that Project Row Houses has provided to us — the house we have stayed in. Many people we've met said that they've never seen inside of this house, so we take the lock off the gate and open the door to the street.

People from our daily practice, from our initial workshop, and people we've met from roaming around all join us. Some guests continue the conversation about the theft issues, others don't. It's all connected of course, and we have a house full of laughter, connection, and unlimited strawberry shortcake for the kids. When we did talk about responses to the thefts, people elaborated on the creative inventions we'd heard about already; but the concern now was how they would keep the momentum going.

But that Friday night, another gas station barbecue was held at the Mobil station. A DJ blasted music from the back of a pick-up, the dominoes players got serious, the resident chef got the barbecue flames going, and a number of residents circled around, grabbing mystified onlookers and too-cool teenagers and brought them to the food — have a burger and tell me your story. Dancing kicked up and foot races dashed down the street. For the night, this corner that many in the neighborhood said they always avoided was transformed into a community everybody seemed to want. This was the opposite of stigmatizing people and segregating them out of the community; it was the opening of one's self, an embrace, the care for one another; it was the forgiveness that binds community, that holds imperfection together rather than drawing up bands of strangers to fight each other — an audience for one another and a public together.

This was the opposite of policing, the opposite of prison.

*Where does the border exist, between bodies, between communities? How do we act at that border? Do we perform it ourselves? Do we pretend it doesn't exist? Do we reach across the line and invite our neighbors across? Ownership as a right, survival as an imperative; redistribution; decomposition-recomposition.*

*What can we share?*

*What can we choose to not share?*

*What can we not not share?*

*What cannot be taken away from us?*



## EPILOGUE

This document is a half-truth, a biased perspective, an accident report that could be a diagram; a glimpse, a blip, a collision, a pleasure, a challenge, hard work and good company.

Our role here has been one of witnessing, and in the case of this document, it is to journal, to attest to the value of what we've seen, offering our perception and the process it took us to prepare that perception.

Since this trip, we have been told by residents that the problems with the thefts have all but stopped. It appears that their efforts have been working, at least in terms of moving thefts from their block. This doesn't mean the thefts haven't found other blocks, for the issues that drive theft in the community run deeper than a block's decision on how to relate. The USA has the highest incarceration rates in world history, with a system of punishment and segregation that leaps in wherever the support systems of family, neighborhood, belief, school and the basics of regular and humane employment break down — and they do so with particular ferocity in communities of color. At one community discussion that followed our residency, we discussed the effects of mass incarceration, where people remarked that the rate of young people — particularly men — coming off prison and jail sentences each day is overwhelming; most are greeted with close to nothing, where one's only option for survival is something that will quickly land them back inside. Our discussion shifted to how community members can offer greater support to those coming out, to honor them as community — a line of thinking that could extend the genius of the community's initial creative inventions further. We have also heard discussions of legal clinics for people coming out to help them clear their records so they can be eligible for more jobs. Most important now is the underlying confidence that things can change, as evidenced by the real community changes thus far, showing that things can be imagined differently, without relying upon state violence; that patterns can be redrawn.

Military  
Security  
Closed  
Segregate  
Police  
Armed  
Arrest  
Protection  
War  
Weapon  
Camouflage  
Battle-line  
Detention  
Perimeter  
Shield  
Blanket  
Border  
Fence  
Wall  
Ground  
Bury  
Pain  
Offense  
Defense  
Repress  
Careful  
You  
Them

## **SAFETY WORDS**

Community  
Shared interest  
Open  
Interdependent  
Bond  
Trust  
Cooperative  
Well-being  
Patience  
Mutuality  
Construction  
Communication  
Assemblage  
Collage  
Transparent  
Share  
Care  
Presence  
Support  
Listen  
Alleviate  
Free  
Create  
Mutuality  
Stability  
Home  
Us  
We