

When Government Fails, Mutual Aid Speaks— On Creating the Reciprocal Utopias Through Artist-Activists' Tactical Strategies

by Gordon Fung



A Roundtable on Art & Mutual Aid

Tuesday, March 23, 2021

How can we respond to community crises when the government response is seen to be insufficient, absent, or even adversarial? A Roundtable on Art & Mutual Aid is a forum that brings the audience into dialog with four artists whose creative, socially-engaged practices actively support a range of community-driven mutual-aid efforts such as food banks, housing rights, pandemic response, and supply runs to indigenous communities. The event will feature short presentations by Kristina Wong and Badly Licked Bear of the Auntie Sewing Squad (A.S.S.), tactical art organizer and housing rights advocate Leslie Dreyer, and radical artist, activist and pedagogue, Amy Koshbin. An open public discussion will be moderated by Aaron Gach of CCA's Critical Ethnic Studies program and the Sculpture, Individualized, and Community Arts (SICA) program.

The concept of mutual aid, a support system of reciprocal and beneficial exchange between people, was first popularized by Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin in the book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902). The collection of essays addressed anarchist communism through the counteraction of social Darwinism. Though dominating globally, capitalism often fails to maintain social equities; income injustice and inequitable resource distributions haunt the working class. Moderator Aaron Gach, a professor in the Critical Ethnic Studies, and Sculpture, Individualized, and Community Arts programs at CCA, pointed out that society persistently divides communities regarding differences in race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion, among other factors. With insufficient government response to crises, or when the government introduces adversarial policies, the community relies on mutual aid to restore its well-being. On March 23rd, artist-activists Leslie Dreyer, Kristina Wong, Badly Licked Bear (hereafter "Bear"), and Amy Khoshbin discussed how their creative practices empower local communities in the face of failing government through mutual aid.

Dreyer, a Bay Area tactical artist, focuses on local housing security and social injustice through participatory performances and interventions. Local and federal governments often allow tech companies in their jurisdiction to bypass taxes while cutting subsidies for less privileged communities. Worsening the inequality, tech companies' privatized employee buses have been consistently occupying the public street. Governments tolerate such occupations while displacing people who lack housing security. Witnessing this injustice, Dreyer called for participatory blockades and protests around these private morning commute vehicles to reclaim the right of sharing public space.

But in the Bay, social injustice sparked and tolerated by the government, unfortunately, does not end there. Alongside many other app-developers, Airbnb looted the term "sharing economy" to describe its capitalist and exploitative practices. An actual sharing economy promotes reciprocity and resource reallocation. The structure of sharing-apps, however, is inherently capitalistic, oppressing the freelance contractors who actually maintain the service. Favored by the local legislation, Airbnb lacks relevant rent control measures, worsening the potential

for local affordable housing. To bring attention to this injustice, Dreyer initiated a participatory intervention titled *Evictions, Deregulation, Entitlement, ... Love, Airbnb* in 2015. In it, Dreyer occupied Airbnb's headquarters to provide free food and music, advertising various advocate services to anyone identifying as a tenant or someone without housing.

Since December 2018, Dreyer has directed the *Stolen Belonging* project, an arts initiative that helps reclaim and document San Francisco's houseless and precariously housed residents' belongings, dignities, and beyond. The city department responsible for maintaining the city's streets, San Francisco Department of Public Works (DPW), ceaselessly displaces encamped persons from neighborhood to neighborhood. What disheartened Dreyer was that DPW workers confiscated

not only survival gear and tools from vulnerable persons, but also ripped away treasures like parents' ashes, an altar for a passed ex-husband, rings gifted by a child: all items that represent love, memories, and personhood. Leading the protest-project against DPW, Dreyer also designed banners to highlight the injustice tearing the homeless community apart. After all, tech companies' overdevelopment has caused rent hikes in the Bay, amplifying the severity of housing insecurity.

Through humor, satire, and parody, Kristina Wong's work centers around politics, Asian stereotypes, and white privilege. Wong's *Radical Cram School* (2018–ongoing) is an unscripted anti-oppression web series that features short clips, ranging from 2–5 minutes in length, on various social justice topics. Through a Socratic dialogue in a playgroup setting, the program educates the group of "Young Rebels" in the show and the viewers on social justice, and gender and racial equality. Her outspoken persona and radical humor attracted harsh criticism by right-winger radio personality Alex Jones, who accused her of brainwashing viewers with communist indoctrination. Wong presented the audience with her solo theatre work *Wong Street Journal* (2015),

inspired by her 2013 trip to Uganda. As a "not-so-white" American "savior" in Uganda, she confronted herself to reflect on the privileges enjoyed by a First World person. Through her travelogue and TED-talk parody, Wong discussed the complexity of global poverty, white privilege, and America's influence on the global world. Her hands-on encounters with local Ugandans demystified the common patronizing perception of Africans depicted by the West: Africans are not passive and helpless people who await Western saviors' donations and assistance.

Wong's travel experience enabled her to listen, and identify and address the community's needs, helping in a way more effective than charity that projects the organization's perceptions of what the community needs. Her awareness, alongside her enthusiasm in community and public arts, encouraged her to include mutual aid in later projects. Wong founded the mask-sewing project Auntie Sewing Squad in March 2020. The pandemic's onset struck society completely off-guard, as governments worldwide failed to regulate solid measures to prevent the virus's spread nor to ensure a reliable supply of masks. In the face of the U.S. government's inefficiency, the ongoing project gathers over 800 participants nationwide. By transforming living rooms into independent garment shops, the Squad



Top to Bottom: Leslie Dreyer; Kristina Wong



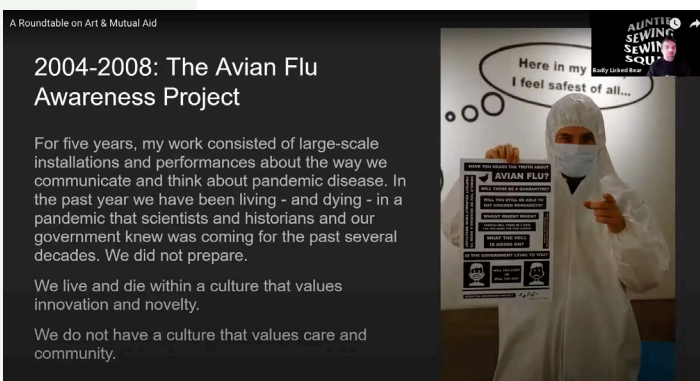
Amy Khoshbin

has delivered over 30,000 masks to vulnerable groups like migrants at the border, Indigenous people, asylum seekers, low-income communities of color, and other community members in need.

Khoshbin is a Brooklyn-based Iranian-American artist-activist and educator. She promotes social justice through performances and social practice. Her *Workshop on the Street* (2017–ongoing) is a large-scale occupation and intervention where the public can freely join the workshop directed by the artist. The utopian space provides free materials for participants to craft banners, sashes, capes, and other items that spread supportive messages of love and equality. In this project, the artist placed a red felt carpet on the street to welcome every participant. The project embraces persons of all ages, races, genders, and creeds of life, inviting the community to work on common goals and creating generative dialogues about gathering together. Another public art work *Word on the Street* (2017–ongoing) commenced as an all-female and text-based initiative that crafts political and poetic banners commissioned by Times Square Arts. The project invited female international artists, writers, and Texas-based refugee fabricators

to create anti-oppression expressions. One of the banners featured a line from ancient Greek playwright Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*: "I was born to share love, not hate." Khoshbin expressed that mankind has yet to learn this moral virtue circulated since 441 BC. The banners fabricated during this one iteration of the event flourished all over Times Square. The project's success drew the media's attention and further commissions were granted to this initiative. The revenue allowed Khoshbin to allocate these new grants to communities in need, fulfilling the goals of mutual aid to allocate materials and resources to those who need it.

Bear, a performance artist, curator, and educator, curated the *Avian Flu Awareness Project* (2004–09) more than 15 years ago. It was a prophetic project that consisted of large-scale installations and site-specific performances. The exhibition created a space for visitors to take a closer look at the barely discussed Avian flu outbreak at that time. Pandemics have never left humans, but most people are unwilling or too uncomfortable to prepare themselves for the next crisis. As a late generation X, Bear was traumatized by the nuclear arms race during the Cold War. They cannot stop visualizing the next apocalyptic event, as many of the disasters like nuclear war



Badly Licked Bear

and societal dystopia continue to be on the verge of outbursting. Most of Bear's performances and installation works are highly satirical, confronting society's lack of preparation for the upcoming catastrophe. The works are intimating the artist's deep concerns and cares for the community. Their devotion to care and preparedness led them onto the path of mutual aid in later endeavors, even joining Wong's Auntie Sewing Squad to moderate workflow logistics.

Commenting on formal fine arts training, Bear sees the massive deficiency of collaboration between disciplines leading to a lack of awareness on mutual aid

practices. Most fine arts students are trained to work alone, and are barely taught to engage with their own communities through art. This rigid and career-oriented training also makes artists view each other as competitors as they perceive the art world as limited in opportunities. Many art students would tussle for their place in the canonized circle instead of considering how their artistic expressions can create a better world. Dreyer, recounting her art school experience, recalled that the school failed to support her as an artist-activist, advising young artists to think outside the institutional box. All the guest artists agreed that mutual aid is a cultural obligation that artists should take up. Artists should view reciprocity as a responsibility to lead one's community instead of treating it as any opportunity to polish the resume.

Closing the discussion, Bear recommended San Francisco journalist Marilyn Chase's *The Barbary Plague: The Black Death in Victorian San Francisco* (2003) upon noticing the rising trend of anti-Asian racism. During the time of the Black Death in San Francisco the state's government was unresponsive, concealed the outbreak, and scapegoated Asian diasporas. Pathetically, these actions are uncannily reenacted not only in San Francisco but across America. Two days after this talk, a racist challenge in the Bay Area called "Slap an Asian" circulated among social media. This sickening challenge *may be the first of its kind, but it won't be the last*—as Vice President Kamala Harris might say—if the government and mass media continue to neglect the severity of anti-Asian racism. To read further, check out [Kristina Wong's gallows humor](#) on the theme of objectifying Asian females and the racially-motivated shootings in Atlanta, which claimed six innocent Asian Americans' lives among the eight victims.

We have been witnessing our government's persistent failure to dissolve social, financial, and racial injustice. Can mutual aid offer solutions to tackle the pandemic and hate crimes? How can we create a safe space where different voices can speak for justice and equality? How can our artworks empower the community in the face of unreliable government? We artist-activists are obligated to devise a practice that bolsters our communities' well-being. Reciprocity, generosity, and equity among mankind would be an attainable Utopia if planted through mutual aid.

This event was organized by **Aaron Gach**, Senior Adjunct Professor, Critical Ethnic Studies Program and SICA, and is part of the [Creative Citizens in Action](#) initiative at CCA (CCA@CCA), and is funded by an endowment gift to support The Deborah and Kenneth Novack Creative Citizens Series, an annual series of public programs focused on creative activism.

Gordon Fung is a composer, folk-instrumentalist, and cartomancer, pursuing a BFA in Individualized Studies to bridge the multi-disciplinary practices for creating installations, performance, and conceptual works.



Do you have questions or opinions about this response? Have you seen an event at CCA you'd like to report on? Please email exhibitions@cca.edu to contribute to our Letters to the Editor series, or to submit to *Review Rewind Respond*.