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An Interview with Brianna Harlan

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BRIANNA HARLAN, the winner of the 2021 SECAC Artist's Fellowship, is a multi-disciplinary artist and organizer. Deeply involved in community work, she describes her practice as a re-contextualization of objects that inspire reflections on sociopolitical identity and how it affects "health, selfhood, and community." She has had solo exhibitions in New York (Field Projects Gallery), Oklahoma (Oklahoma State University), and Kentucky (Eastern Kentucky University). She has also held several artist residencies; in 2020, Harlan collaborated with Louisville-based 21c museum hotels and artist Nancy Baker Cahill on an "augmented reality memorial monument" dedicated to Breonna Taylor. Harlan completed an MFA in Art and Social Action at Queens College (New York). She was named Young Distinguished Alumni by her alma mater Hanover College (Hanover, Indiana). She is currently working at a diversity, equity, and inclusion training and organizing program at the City University of New York, and she holds a joint fellowship at the Museum of Modern Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem's public programs. This interview emerged out of an exchange over email in spring and summer 2023.

First, congratulations on receiving the Artist's Fellowship from SECAC in 2021, which was announced in October 2021, despite the cancellation of the annual conference in Lexington, Kentucky due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How did you find out you won?

I think I found out through email but there was also a Zoom event for the SECAC community. I was introduced and able to say a few words. I was met with a lot of support and congratulations.

Do you currently live in Louisville, Kentucky, or Lexington (where the SECAC conference would have met in 2021)? Do you also live in New York City, and are you from there? If so, how did you get to Kentucky? I'm especially curious about where you grew up.

I am from Louisville, Kentucky. I lived there most of my life. I was just there for a long visit [at the time interview was conducted]—but I do live in New York now. Louisville is home. I grew up in the West End and I go back there when I need to recenter. Ask me anything about it!

For people unfamiliar with Louisville, would you mind saying more about your West End neighborhood? What childhood memories do you call up when you think of Louisville? What formative experiences would you say stuck with you and/or shaped the person you became?

Black people live all over the city but there's a concentration of us in West Louisville. To be honest, the city doesn't invest in us the way they should, and gentrification is creeping in...but, when I was little, I just remember being outside all the time, surrounded by such a lively neighborhood: music, food, gatherings, people supporting each other and getting on each other's nerves, porch sitting, storytelling, games. A very collective energy.

What beautiful memories, Brianna, and I'm happy for you that you get time back home. How do you think those West End experiences shaped your current understandings of community?

My nana is very active in the community. I think she shaped a lot for me. She's in the Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame and people look to her a lot. We have a huge family,

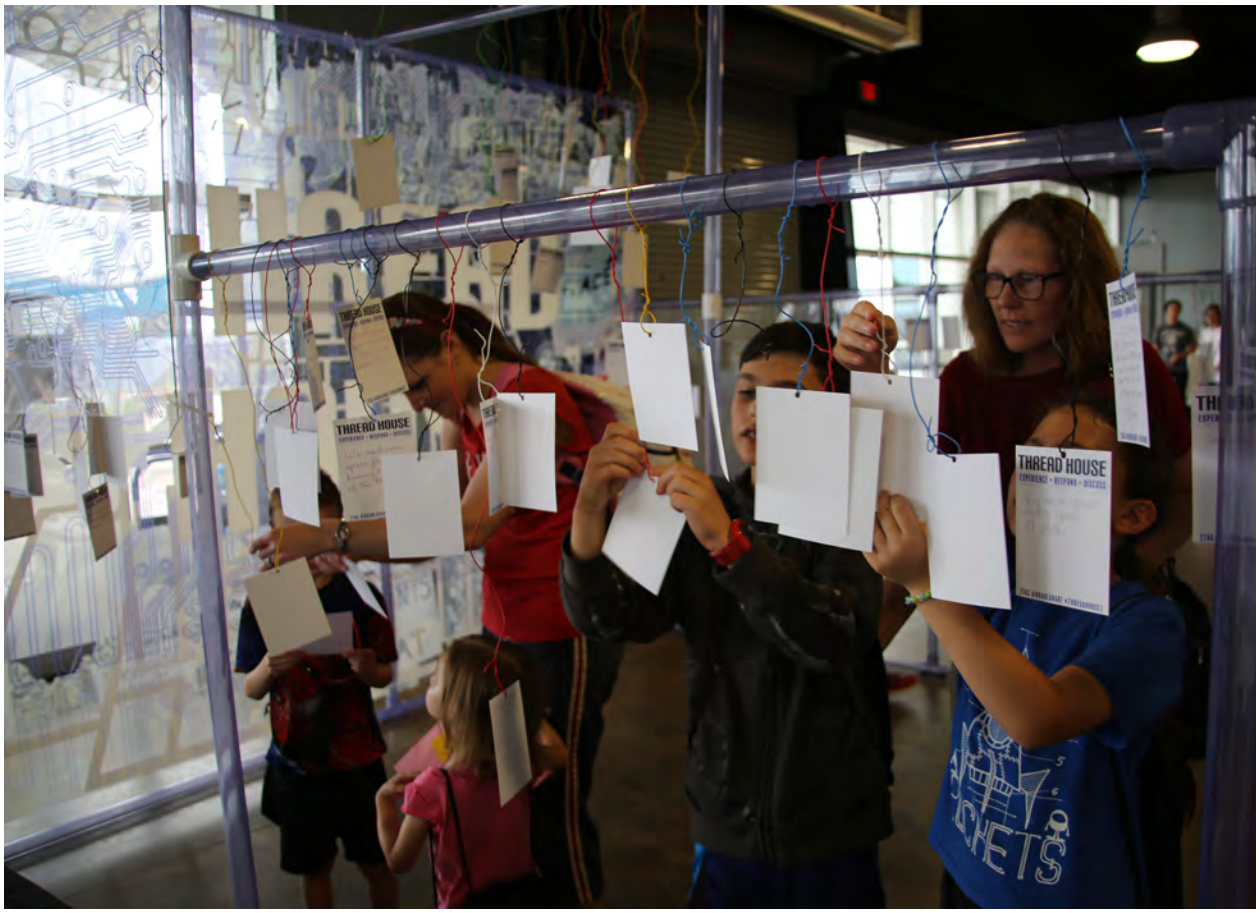

Figure 1. Brianna Harlan, Installation view of *Thread House*, 2019, Bowling Green, Kentucky; guests view and participate in the installation.

and there were foster kids, and the neighborhood, etc. I was always seeing people being together, figuring it out. But, also, I'm a very collectively minded person. My mama told me that I was good at team sports but never shined because I was prioritizing being nice and sharing. I know now that those things don't have to be mutually exclusive. I've learned a lot.

So many of your projects bring people together in community, facilitating discussion perhaps among familiars, but also among strangers. Would that be accurate to say, and do you also have a robust body of object-based production?

That's a very accurate way to explain my community practice. I even got my master's degree in the art of social practice, so that kind of engagement is very important to me. I am really into intimacy. That can be in so many forms and experienced on so many levels. True engagement is so beautiful, especially in a national culture of being inundated with social media and being overworked and undervalued as whole beings. We have so much to unpack together.

I try not to outright critique where we are, but to subvert. For example, in my work *Thread House* (2019), I created an installation that was like being inside of an internet thread (fig. 1). It made it physical, and participants had to process and respond to comments that were hanging in the space on paper while in physical space with others, and while being active in their bodies (fig. 2). That changes the dynamics. Who we are alone is important, but how does what we allow ourselves to think, and how does who we allow ourselves to be, change when we're out in the world with others? That's crucial information. It tells us so much about our norms and conditioning, for better and for worse. A society should be self-aware.

How amazing that would be! So, part of your social practice work is to help increase your audience's understanding of—and maybe their reflection about—the ways that societal norms manipulate or condition individual behavior?

Yes! Or, further, to even interrupt that process, to make space to behave differently than how we've been conditioned and see what that brings up for us.

To come back to your multiple approaches as an artist, would you tell us more about your studio production?

Simultaneous with social practice, I have a robust object-based practice. The two paths of making inform each other and balance each other out, for me. They're both methods of opening something up and hopefully supporting people in finding something worthwhile. My studio production is conceptually based so it's not medium specific. Some people say one work is so different from the next. Some say they can see me in each of them. I think both can be true.

Please elaborate further on the dynamics of how these two paths inform and balance each other out. What would be an example of a time when such an interface seemed to be especially effective at opening things up and supporting people? How do you know when it succeeds?

The two paths support each other in how I make things. So maybe doing both supports me more than anyone else, which hopefully leads to supporting the experiences I give others. Each process takes a very different energy. I like to think that they both build space for discovery, but social practice, for me, is about building a space for and prompting the viewer or participant to begin collaborating and creating their moment within the piece. It's an interjection.

Figure 2. Brianna Harlan, Installation view of *Thread House*, 2019, Bowling Green, KY; two guests view and participate in the installation.

Objects are more to be witnessed and processed in the way of traditional art. You see something and hopefully it speaks in a way that it makes something shift for you, even if just for a moment. Moments build. My objects usually are something I want to share and I'm trying to communicate. Whereas social practice isn't about me really; it's about us. *It doesn't exist without other people*. I love that.

How relevant or successful am I being? I'll know because it can't work without the people at all—and usually not people that frequent art spaces. The participants often don't even realize it's an art piece. They only care about the experience in front of them. But I have my own world, as everyone does, with rich information so object-making is still so valuable.

A lot of my most recent objects involve lived experience more than a collaborative experience. I filled a gallery with paintings, sculptures, mixed media, installation, etc., essentially about mental health, and even though it was open to interpretation—which is always good—I had an authority over the work that I don't have with social practice. My sculpture *Lithium Dreams* (2020) was about the vivid dreams I had at night as a side effect of inconsistent medication. I'm presenting, and that's a different type of invitation (fig. 3).

I also have a piece that can be either, which is fun. *Eat My Heart Out* (2022) is a dinner/cafe installation

with heart-inspired foods, either to be viewed or to be experienced as a vulnerable, social dinner—exploring the ways we relate to others, often consuming them to sate our own fears, shame, anxiety, desire, social expectation, but not authentically connecting (fig. 4). There's a literal pig heart in the installation (fig. 5).

Anyway, you can hear it in this answer, a back and forth between my art forms: a rambling of self and collective care with no clear line between the two really.

To return to social practice, and the kinds of communities with which you've engaged, do your methods of engagement necessarily vary, depending on community? What other variables play a role?

Figure 3. Brianna Harlan, Installation view of *Lithium Dreams*, 2021, Queens College Art Gallery, New York, NY; from Harlan's MFA Thesis Exhibition *Visiting Hours*.

They definitely vary. Some projects are much more specific to the communities that I am focused on for that project. Some are very open for everyone to come and feel very welcome to have voice. I am happy for everyone to always participate in the work, but sometimes that participation is to observe, learn, or support—not to take a role in shaping it.

For example, when I work with the Black community, or in mental health, folks that have that lived experience need to be centered. The way we behave in different spaces changes, depending on how we're part of them. That's natural. Sometimes I'm protective of a space, sometimes I'm more curious, and sometimes I'm vulnerable.

Each art project is shaped by its own conditions within and without me. Maybe pointing out the viewer's role in the work based on their own lived experience and knowledge is just as important as the "message." I think so. The art may not be about you: hold that, honor that, but you are the one receiving it...what does that mean? What could it mean?

Well, your works have clearly provided viewers with multiple opportunities for growth. I wonder, was the 2022 installation in Baltimore—The Elders Project at BMore Art—an example of an open experience of social practice, or something more specific to a particular community? Would you say more about that exhibition? Could you

describe what you felt, in that space, especially that night that SECAC conference attendees came to see it by busloads? I could be wrong, but I think I sensed your protectiveness, while I was moving through the show—was that the case? Honestly, I was caught up in the rapid pace of the conference's competing events. I regretted not having spent more time with your exhibition. I wondered, though, about what other lives the show might have had, including other audiences and other receptions. How did the premise of this show fit in with what you described above?

Figure 4, right. Brianna Harlan, Installation view of *Eat My Heart Out*, 2021, Queens College Art Gallery, New York, NY; guest sits at installation from Harlan's MFA Thesis Exhibition *Visiting Hours*.

Figure 5, below. Brianna Harlan, Detail of *Eat My Heart Out*, 2021, installation, Queens College Art Gallery, New York, NY; from Harlan's MFA Thesis Exhibition *Visiting Hours*.

So, *The Elder's Story Project* (2022) was to share the stories of the Silent Generation. Most of our elder population now is part of this generation. When people talk about past decades of American history it's very White-washed. I wanted to document and share what Black and Brown people were doing. What was life like, for an everyday person? What do they think about all the changes that have happened? So much has developed in their lifetime; for example, James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud" was released right after the Civil Rights Act of 1968! What would that have felt like to live through?

Their wisdom...we have so much information now, but how are we being intentional about what gets passed down? That's still essential for a people. To quote one story: "Somewhere I read, you know how they always say, 'History repeats itself.' Well, I read somewhere that 'History rhymes,' and I sometimes feel that."

Everything is in response to what came before it in some way. We need to know what we're responding to. I love an informed choice.

If I'm being honest, that Baltimore exhibition didn't have the life in it that I wanted, and that's in large part due to COVID, because I wasn't able to be with the elders in the way I wanted throughout the process. So, figuring out how to share their stories, when I didn't get to experience them how I'd planned, led to some tension for me.

But I am grateful for the reception of it. People engaged with the stories and asked questions and made connections. I do believe it was successful in that regard. I just wanted the elders to take over that space through my work, so I was a little apprehensive about speaking on their behalf too much, to compensate for the ways that couldn't happen.

That's my main critique, but it was a good show! There were such genuine reactions to the stories and, at the end of it, that was the core intention. One of the interviewees, over 90 years old, has since passed. Her story is still here.

Congratulations on that exhibition, Brianna, it was a great show! This is wonderful and important work. Would it be fair to think of your projects as dedicated to shifting the terms of who speaks and who gets heard?

Yes, absolutely.

Please say more about this. Would you describe an example of work that achieved such a shift, and say more about who was involved as well as why you think the exchange was so effective?

I invite anyone to look at my work and open a discussion with me or someone else about that potential shift. There is so much to unpack here. I don't make work for a singular topic or community. Sometimes it's who speaks and who gets heard in our own internal battles; sometimes it's within society. Sometimes it's *political-stage* political and sometimes it's *deeply personal* political. Sometimes it's in the streets and sometimes it's in my shower. I'm dodging the question a little, but there's a difference between an artist statement on work and an explanation of work. I only explain work during artist talks when people have seen the work and can dialogue and challenge. Explaining it with no experience feels like the wrong order. I'm always here for a discussion though.

I will say that we internalize so much throughout our lives, and I'm very much interested in unpacking and examining that. We're not encouraged to, because an informed and connected member of society is dangerous to exploitative power structures. This condition seeps into every aspect of our lives including our relationship to ourselves and it's so divisive: it divides us on the inside and it divides us from each other. I carry that so deeply. And I work to heal and resist it.

I went to a small, private PWI for college that had a clear divide with race and class. There were lots of cliques and Greek houses. So, I went around at random, asking the first hundred people I saw what their biggest strength and weakness was, and documenting it. I took their photograph as they responded and I created an installation where students could unfold the photo, of someone they might have passed and ignored, and learn something important about them: their self-defined strength and weakness (fig. 6). That project, *Unfold* (2014), was my introduction into conceptual art (fig. 7). Sometimes I'm just pointing out how we see and hear each other, in the first place, within a given space or relationship. I don't have all the answers, but we explore that together.

When I'm talking about who speaks and who is heard, though, I'm usually uplifting the most vulnerable voices: BIPOC (most

frequently Black), disabled, queer, elderly, tiny humans, lower class. You know, that builds capacity for everyone when you sort out where it's hurting the most, who's being made to carry the most. Folks don't like to feel excluded sometimes but, like I said, you're never excluded. We're a society, you have a role in healing it even if not everything is for you. Find that role. Heal yourself and heal your spaces. Why are you so afraid to take care of someone? Cause it makes you feel guilty? Don't choose shame. Choose love. Taking care of your community can take care of you. Be nice! Choose love!

Such powerful words and such a powerful example to set for all of us! How much did your West End community, your upbringing, and your educational experiences help shape this position of clarity and conviction?

I had a very long answer and... I just held back a rant.

It's all so simple but so complex in experience. I don't want to be misunderstood because a lot goes into this. So. Thoughts on this coming someday. I will say, to be born into a world that doesn't want you to

Figure 6, above. Brianna Harlan, Installation view of *Unfold*, Greiner Art Gallery, Hanover College, Hanover, IN; guests view and participate in installation.

Figure 7, below. Brianna Harlan, Installation view of *Unfold*, Greiner Art Gallery, Hanover College, Hanover, IN.

know what safety feels like because you love, or you have melanin and coily hair, or you're sick, so many reasons are so heartbreakingly violent. People are beautiful. But, God, when they're safe? That'll save the world, I think. Ask yourself who your behavior protects.

Because I only ever experienced one version of your work in person, I keep wondering about your other projects and what else is happening during such experiences of social practice? I believe you have already indicated to a great degree what you hope to accomplish, but I guess I still wonder if you would like to say more about it and maybe talk about your goals?

That depends on the project, and each one is so unique to itself. To speak broadly, attention is being brought to, usually, some social dynamic, such that the health of that dynamic is being processed, or a marginalized story is being witnessed and considered.

Accomplish? Well, if I can do that, what I just said, sheesh! I'm good! Okay. Of course, I hope it's a moment that contributes to the series of moments that causes something to change for someone, but typically I can't know that. So...I hope, and I do my best. I try not to be too attached to outcomes. I'm offering something, and how it's received or even rejected is good information. Not always fun information but helpful. It's making something apparent and since I like to learn about the relationship people have to my topics, that's interesting. Hopefully their reaction brings some self-awareness to them as well.

So then, is that something you stay in the vicinity of the work to observe? Or do you interact with your audience members in ways that help you confirm that they experienced that kind of shift in perspective? Do you ever hear back from viewers and/or participants who take part in your installations?

If it's social practice, I'm generally there, supporting people's experience. Sometimes I watch and sometimes I directly engage with them. The feedback *is* the experience and the reaction. Social practice doesn't run on critical reviews for me. Either the people are feeling connected to what you're doing in the moment, or they're not and it dies. The participants generally let you know what's up. Nothing a curator says changes that.

I don't watch people with the object-based work. They're having a private moment unless they invite dialogue. That seems to be the culture around gallery work. I respect that. That's how I am when I go to shows. I'm not engaging in a practice—I'm engaging *with* a practice. People need some space for that.

I do still have people talk to me about both social practice and object-based work. I love that. Tell me what you think. What are your feelings? Where is it in your body? Let's get into it.

A lot of your work seems to revolve around conceptual exchange, whether in person or in the gallery, often in words written down or spoken aloud, and shared in public. Are the public sphere and conceptualism integral with, or even critical to, the kind of artistic practice you pursue?

That is true for my social practice work. Such work lives and dies with the people—in real time, in real life—and there's something very exciting about intervening in unplanned moments, to find something new and real.

What would be an example of such a project, and would you briefly describe it?

My project *Black Love Blooms* (2019-ongoing) is a public counter-space set on loving Black people as they are (fig. 8). It has traveled to at least seven states, with a model that makes it replicable, whether I am there or not (fig. 9). The moments it creates challenge racial stereotypes and how they affect the daily lives of Black people and the communities that hold them through gentle and soft offerings: Black communities gift flowers and love notes to other Black people in public. Black people are gifted an interaction that challenges the aggressions that they face outside of their homes. Audiences are brought to awareness of their own role in the systemic negative impact of stereotypes and what it is like to reverse them with acts of love. But sometimes people are like, "No, not interested." They don't receive or want love that way, and that's okay. And sometimes they're over the moon! Am I just standing on the street with flowers, or will someone pause and have a moment with a stranger? Will they believe me when I say free? This is New York after all. What's going on in the news at the time? Will someone challenge my concept? It's all very unexpected (fig. 10).

How fundamental has the use of language been to your artistic practice, overall, and what have you learned about the ways in which language gets wielded?

I love language. I'd be a writer if I could really get words together. I don't think I fully understand the power of it in art, just yet, but I feel it. I do think that power is layered and offers something directly that I appreciate. When I've used language, it's been to bring a clear message, and to support people in voicing their own lived experiences, or because there's a blend with showing and telling, which I find beautiful. Tell me poetically and explicitly, yes. I love the way artist Chloë Bass uses language.

How do you mean? How would you describe Bass's approach to language and what you love about it? And why don't you think of yourself as both a writer and an artist? Is being a writer something you aspire to become?

Chloë's use of language is honest, clever, and intimate. Three of the best things you can be with people and with yourself. It uncovers but doesn't answer. It's art. She finds the heart of something, and it would be great to just present that, but the way she writes gives it layers without reintroducing the mess. But somehow the mess is still always there.

Figure 8, top right. Brianna Harlan, *Black Love Blooms*, 2020, New York, NY, public art project; flower recipient poses with artist who holds the project's sign.

Figure 9, right. Brianna Harlan, *Black Love Blooms*, 2020, Jackson, MS, public art project; a flower and love note is gifted from one Black person to another as part of a multi-city project during Juneteenth.

This is what poets do. Smart. She has been putting her work in public spaces as installations. To pull on people's thoughts in their everyday spaces is difficult and incredible. She knows how to frame things in a way that makes the touch just different enough that it reactivates, and familiar enough that it feels profound.

I'd love to be a writer, but I'd need a very patient teacher and editor.

Figure 10. Brianna Harlan, *Black Love Blooms*, 2020, multi-city public art project; "Black Love Blooms" in the street.

You've touched on this already, but could you expand about how the last few years of COVID lockdown affected your process (or schedule) for realizing your work, whether object-based or social practice-oriented? How were you affected? In what ways? Did your interests shift at all in relation to the pandemic?

The pandemic forced a pause and care that didn't always feel good but I'm hoping good might come out of it. I think I'm still processing this. I haven't been making art recently and I'm seriously rethinking the standards of my practice. The way I think about my work has changed because I have. More on this one day. My apprehension is beginning to turn into anticipation so I'm hopeful.

One last question—of all the projects you've conceived and initiatives with which you've had a role, are there any that you count as favorites or especially meaningful?

Favorites are very hard for me. So much goes into making a moment or a point or a feeling. I find myself connecting with some projects more than others or finding them more successful. But if the project is honest, and people feel that honesty and find something in it, that's it. I do love *Black Love Blooms* because it's so unconditional and simple: joy, vulnerability, love. But I also love the hard stuff—because who doesn't want to feel understood, or even further, achieve understanding?

I think my favorite is whatever is next. I want to keep up with myself and the past year without making work, figuring things out, I think it's going to show. I'm excited to see.

Since this interview, two of Brianna Harlan's works have been selected for inclusion in the fall 2023 New York-based art exhibition *Our Votes, Our Stories*, co-organized by SUNY Oneonta's Cooperstown Graduate Program and Golden Artist Colors for the Sam and Adele Golden Gallery in New Berlin.

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