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# **The Phoenix And The Sankofa Bird**

Atlanta's Arts Institutions and Their Communities

Magdalena Gabriela Dumitrescu

Dr. Nicola Sharratt

## **ABSTRACT**

In the latter half of the 2010s gentrification and urban development contributed to the closure of many independent Atlanta art spaces and strained the resources of those that survived. In this environment, with fewer opportunities outside of academia and large institutions, local artists struggled to sustain their work and find community. However, recent increases in federal funding for public programming and arts that were part of the pandemic stimulus plan combined with a renewed interest in fostering the community resulted in a resurgence of public art and opportunities, both in Atlanta and nationwide.

This thesis reports my research on how art institutions are developing new structures to adapt, ensure longevity, and broaden their constituents. For centuries, museums and arts institutions functioned as exclusive spaces which only catered to the upper and upper-middle class. In 2022, inter-community networks, new organizations, programs, and spaces are questioning the status quo and creating new frameworks prioritizing sustainability and accessibility within the arts. Over a year and a half, I participated in public art projects and events, organized community art events, and interviewed creatives to understand the current state of Atlanta's independent art community and its needs. Drawing on my findings, I show how this resurgence is impacting the local economy for artists, and how it can change the community's future. Finally, I make a series of proposals, based on my research, for how arts institutions can support art communities in meaningful and supportive ways.

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**Dedicated in loving memory to Cecil Oneal and Sammie Nicely, who both always had my back and knew I would be an artist.**

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

I am interested in creating accessibility to art in practical and meaningful ways. Growing up in Atlanta and working in Atlanta's art community for several years, I have seen the disconnect between art institutions and the art community. Although this city is a hub for art and famed for its self-proclaimed tolerance, accessibility to art is still shaped by socioeconomic discrimination. This discrepancy in access is a complex issue and a result of both Atlanta's cultural history and the wider history of museums. Although arts institutions in Atlanta are adapting to a post-pandemic era and creating more community-centric models, many are not effective. It is necessary to understand the history behind socioeconomic discrimination in the Atlanta art community and how the art community functions in order to create access to art in a meaningful and lasting way.

In this thesis, I first contextualize the issues Atlanta art institutions are trying to create solutions for. Socioeconomic stratification, inequity, and exclusion are all major societal issues that have existed for centuries and they have participated in shaping the history of museum institutions (Chapter Two) and Atlanta (Chapter Three). These histories laid the groundwork for how I analyzed institutional structures because they showed the precedent for common practices and policies, especially around who gets funding and can attain prominence. While the ways institutions function within a

community has drastically changed in some respects over the past five decades, many of the issues around access and socioeconomic exclusion persists.

Then, in Chapter Four, I discuss my research methods and describe how I collected ethnographic data through interviews and participant observation over a two-year period. I contextualize this work by describing the history of the Atlanta art community over the past decade. As the majority of this history was underground art movements, there was not much literature published on it. My interviews with several established artists and arts administrators about their experience working in the art community represent some of the first research on this recent period in the Atlanta arts world.

In Chapter Five, I analyze the last ten years in the Atlanta art community, focusing on the DIY community. I gathered this history from interviews with participants who were active in the community at the time. This chapter explores how various arts institutions' adaptation to changes in the latter 2010s showed larger trends within the art community of gentrification and money. I argue that these adaptations went on to shape the current art community and deepen the fragmentation within the community.

In Chapter Six, I discuss my two years of fieldwork both as a working artist, teaching artist, and participant. In the first half of the chapter, I examine accessibility through data from my interviews and participant observation. I explore trends of discrimination in the art community and how these trends are perpetuated by different institutions. I draw on my interviews with a diverse range of participants, both in terms of background and years of experience in the Atlanta art community, to examine how these variables shape accessibility. I also discuss the culture of abuse in the



community, and how the vast majority of my participants had to (and, in some cases, still have to) face abusive practices with institutions in terms of not getting compensated for labor and unsafe work environments. In the second half of Chapter Six, I describe the applied methods I used while teaching to create accessibility through working as a teaching artist in three radically different classrooms, and how I was able to foster an inclusive environment.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I provide a list of suggestions for Atlanta art institutions to create lasting community-centric programming. These suggestions emphasize practical application over theoretical work and consider programs implemented in the art community in the past. Although my suggestions are not program-specific models, I do discuss impactful solutions that art institutions can use to create accessibility.

## Chapter Two

### It's Not All Dusty: A Brief History of Museums

#### Introduction

In order to understand how art institutions operate today, it is necessary to examine how art institutions and museums were established. Over the past few centuries, colonialism and social liberation movements have shaped what these institutions are. This section focuses on American museology and starts with the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution in 1846. Then, I describe the establishment of American museum practice and how colonial ideologies were cemented as precedents for curation and displays in American national museums. Next, I discuss how subversive art movements influenced museums after both the first and second world wars.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many American museums increased public programming, which ignited public outcries for representation and the decolonizing narratives presented by museums by activists in both art and academic spaces. Subsequently, I discuss several notable social equity movements in art and academics from the 1960s through the 1990s including the student strike at San Francisco State, AFRICOBRA, The Basement Workshop, Ad Hoc, and The Guerilla Girls, and ACT UP. I also review several notable indigenous artists' performance art protests in both Canadian and American museums.

Finally, I examine how museums in the 21st century are addressing accountability and accessibility. First, I examine repatriation movements in the early late 20th, and early 21st centuries, and how they impact museum policies. Second, I analyze national and international museum organizations' changing policies from 2015 to 2020, and how they, directly and indirectly, influence discussions around accessibility. Finally, I discuss museums' and art institutions' presence online, in terms of performative activism, public engagement, and new ways of creating accessibility.

### **Establishment of The Smithsonian Institution**

James Smithson (1765-1829) was a British aristocrat who was passionate about the democratic experiment in the United States (Carmicheal, 1965). While he never visited, he traveled the world extensively and amassed an enormous collection of antiquities, oddities, and artifacts. As Smithson was born out of wedlock and was not closely connected with his family, he bequeathed this fortune and his collection to the United States government for starting a museum. Six years after his death, the bequest arrived in congress and was presented by President James K. Polk. The president signed the Smithsonian Institutions, a group of museums in Washington DC, into existence in 1846 and started the tradition of American museology.

In many ways, the Smithsonian set the standard for American museums and institutes. As it included one of the first major American public museums, its structure, methodology, and the ongoing system would influence the course of institutions

thereafter. A governing body with three branches was established to maintain the museum and its functions.

The secretary is in the highest position and is elected by the board of regents. Joseph Henry was the first secretary and served from 1846 to 1878 (Oesher, 2019). He built a robust research program, with an emphasis on American innovation. He also established the publication *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, as well as publishing reports on scientific progress. These were all done in the effort to both make knowledge more accessible and to help expand opportunities for scientists and academics in the United States. Henry helped establish museums as a hub for education and research and was an ardent supporter of the advancement of our understanding of the world. Thus, museums became synonymous with learning and documenting knowledge (Oesher, 2019).

### **Early American Museology**

After the Civil War, the country was in disrepair. Many academics sought ways to move forward and nurture innovation and education as a unified force (Rawlins, 1978). In 1876, H.A. Hagen published an article in the journal *The American Naturalist* which analyzed the early stages of museology. Hagen discussed the importance of material knowledge of many types of institutions, drawing comparisons between religious sites and herbariums. Just as religious sites protect secular art and early artifacts to educate followers, herbariums preserve plant specimens and seeds to continue life and educate scientists. Additionally, Hagen discusses how new technologies shaped our intake of information and made ideas more accessible. On the other hand, Hagen criticized many

institutions for their adherence to maintaining the status quo. “Every kind of free thought seemed then, as at present, most pernicious to this infallible institution” (Hagen, 1876, p. 87). While the contemporary era of accountability seems new, the scrutiny of the intention of museums and similar institutions is a tradition that dates back centuries.

In 1850, the first house museum in the United States was established (Smith, 2002). The Hasbrouck House, a significant piece of American history as it served as George Washington’s headquarters during the American revolution, set several important precedents. First, it changed the conception of a museum by taking a formerly private residence public and humanizing history. Additionally, responsibility for the maintenance of the museum was equally split between the state government and local society. While the state government bought the property and funded facilities upkeep, the society formed a board of trustees to oversee collections and run daily operations (Smith, 2002).

### **American National Museums**

In the following years, more national museums were established, in an effort of maintaining national pride and power. The American Museum of Natural History was founded in 1869, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded in 1870 (Adams, 2007). Both located in New York City were immensely powerful in shaping the American conception of the rest of the world. As these museums were open to the public in one of the most populous cities in the country at the time, they were able to reach an enormous audience.

By 1872, the American Museum of Natural History had outgrown its original building. Its first series of exhibitions at the Central Park arsenal were so popular that expanding to a new building became necessary. So, the museum secured a plot of land across the street from Central Park between West 77th and 81st Streets to build a larger facility. Although there was only enough funding to support a modest structure initially, subsequent efforts secured what was needed to construct a monumental museum with five stories (Levey, 1951). From 1880 to 1930, the museum entered a golden age of research and exploration, sponsoring museum representatives working on every continent.

During this time, this museum's perspective on the cultures they exhibited was shaped by and reflected a colonial value system. Cultures that were deemed "non-Western" were displayed as arrays of oddities, like scientific evidence, while "western" culture was displayed proudly, in a way to assert the dominance of the west and corroborate colonialism as a whole. This bifurcated narrative corroborated the split between the world and the "west"- Western Europe, and its mostly white post-colonial powers (Trigger 1981). Through this narrative, white supremacy was understood to be a biologically supported result of evolution.

While white culture was seen as a part of the most technologically evolved and respected, "non-western" cultures were displayed according to the precedent established which was rooted in colonialism. Salvage Anthropology was rooted in the idea that "non-western" cultures were dying out due to social and economic pressures; so they must be preserved. By preserving culture rather than maintaining it, the original ideas and beliefs are decontextualized and oriented for western consumption (Turner,

2015). Thus, preservation freezes a culture in time, portraying it as static and rooted in the past, whereas maintaining a culture displays dynamic trends and honors living members of the culture. In 1895, the father of American Anthropology and a large proponent of Salvage Anthropology, Franz Boas, was hired as an assistant curator in the department of Ethnology at AMNH.

### **Boas' Influence**

Boas emphasized the importance of material culture, and of collecting and displaying items. He believed that material culture was one way to determine “authenticity”, in terms of how much contact a culture has had with the western world. If culture had traded or worked with the western world in some capacity, he deemed them to have been “adulterated” (Rodseth, 2018). In his quest to bring “authentic primitive” cultures into the western perspective, he headed several expeditions for AMNH and prior to that was an assistant to Fredric Putnam for the 1893 Columbian Exposition, a world’s fair, in Chicago. Boas’ displays of “non-western” people at the world’s fair, where villages were set up like a zoo on the fairgrounds, became very influential in curatorial styles for anthropological museums for decades (Bolotin, 2002). After serving as a curator at the AMNH for several years, he moved on to teaching anthropology at Columbia University where he mentored well-known anthropologists including Zora Neale Hurston and Margaret Mead (Hoefel, 2001).

Both Hurston and Mead were pioneers in anthropology and used their work to emphasize the importance of autonomy and ownership of narratives (Gordon, 1990). Both Hurston and Mead wrote about the importance of social relationships and

language, documenting how local language traditions worked rather than comparing them to academic English or displaying the culture they studied for entertainment. This was a continuation of cultural relativism championed by Boas, finding ways to understand another culture rather than measure it based on mainstream American values. While this turn was revolutionary in academic writing and thinking, it took a while before it was implemented in museums.

### **Museums' Public Roles after World War One**

After World War One, many museums both in Europe and the United States were shifting toward centering on public service (Bennett, 2003). Where museums were once regarded to be exclusive ivory towers, reserved for a few worthy academics and researchers, they began encouraging the public to come in. This included an emphasis on public programming and reformulating the curation so exhibits could be understood by a broader range of people. So, the museum became a site for public education (Lederer, 1995).

At its core, this public education was an effort to better citizens' lives and improve public education as well as increase national identity and patriotism. At this time, American culture valued decadent displays of strength and power, celebrating the end of the war (Amsterdam, 2009). The emphasis on American identity as independent and strong was prevalent throughout both academia and popular culture. Moreover, the jazz age was in full swing, rushing with innovations in technology, design, and policy. Prohibition and Women's suffrage were instituted within months of each other, causing



significant political upheaval and showing the divide between forward-thinking and adherence to tradition (Ogren, 1992).

### **Subversive Art Movements in the 1930s**

While public museums shifted to a more patriotic vision, several art movements questioned what it means to be an American. In 1933, the Smithsonian's Exhibition of Negro Artists featured contemporary Black artists both from New York and Washington DC, two hubs of the Harlem Renaissance (Powell, 1997). Instead of the established prescriptive way of curating art by non-white artists to appease the white gaze, this exhibit celebrated the art and made space to appreciate it (Brock, 2019).

While the Harlem Renaissance advanced many positive changes in art institutions, the Great Depression was simultaneously causing major cutbacks. Many museums were forced to cut back hours or close until the New Deal (Warner, 2018). President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's economic revitalization plan included cultural and artistic funding to stimulate local economies as well as support a more positive vision of what it means to be an American. This program created thousands of jobs and funded many public art projects. These projects celebrated the working class, created images of prosperous industries in America as well as supported the working class through improving infrastructure (Kieffer, 2000).

### **Post World War Two**

World War Two had many disastrous impacts, and museums suffered as well. Many were closed or had a limited capacity (Redman, 2020). In 1942, the American Alliance for Museums met to strategize. The Far East Curator of the University Museum

in Philadelphia, Horace H.F. Jaymes, set the intention for their work by stating, “even though some of us shall be called upon to carry on more immediate, more forthright tasks of war, let us never forget to hand on our charge to others so that all may ever enjoy the privilege of seeing these true proofs of man’s belief in liberty of the spirit [works of art]” (Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives 1940-1949). After World War Two, the public emphasis on nationalization was omnipresent and deeply impacted the ways museums functioned (Horace H.F. Jaymes Director’s Office Archives).

Museums continued to be a site of education and a public access point to arts and culture. After suffering through immense loss and grieving, America sought out optimism (Kimball, 1954); many museums expanded, including more programming in their daily work and having classes for a range of ages (Harris, 1999). The Philadelphia Museum of art started a campaign in 1948 to increase membership and emphasized the importance of community ownership and involvement in the museum. Each member was asked to solicit two or three additional members, thereby growing within the community rather than creating prescriptive programs for the community. Membership included invitations to openings, a subscription to the museum bulletin, and above all, a sense of pride for being an integral part of the museum (Philadelphia Museum of Art Archive 1950-1959).

### **Museums in the 1950s and 60s**

Focusing on the audience of the museum as a community became more prevalent throughout American museums into the 1950s and 1960s. Instead of situating themselves as objective centers of information, more and more museums began to

acknowledge their power and influence on people (Schuster, 1998). So, institutions began to question the traditional colonial practice of curation and display, and experiment with new ways of presenting and understanding information. While this was a step towards decolonizing these spaces, the intention was not met by the final product.

In 1968, the new African Hall opened in the American Natural History Museum. Colin Turnbull was the first curator of African Ethnology and presented post-colonial ideals in his books which detailed his fieldwork in the Congo (Schildkrout, 2017). While these books criticized western ideals and racism, they also perpetuated a romanticized view of Africans (Van den Berk, 2019). The hall gained significant attention in the press and was covered in many publications including in *Ebony* magazine. Although the hall was seen as regressive in many ways because it erased the contemporary African culture and nation-states, it also created visibility and representation for African and African American history and identity. The November 1968 issue's article said:

“The hall suggests an African village, and includes three life-like dioramas, and despite some criticism of its emphasis on small tribal life at the expense of ancient African empires and present-day nation-states, it is considered a significant contribution to the Afro-Americans' quest for identity and of educational value to the nation as a whole” (Schildkrout, 2017).

### **Decolonization Movements in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s**

Many grew dissatisfied with this prescriptive way of curating, which gave rise to more movements focusing on community access and demanding more from

educational institutions like museums and universities. In the fall of 1968, the longest student strike in US history began at San Francisco State. The Third World Liberation Front was a group of student unions of color lobbying for an ethnic studies department as well as more jobs for students of color (Umemoto, 1989). The strike lasted five months, and after repeated police brutality and silence from the university administration, a school of ethnic studies was established. This school inspired other institutions and curricula across the country and showed how history and culture can be taught in American schools from a postcolonial lens (Meraji, 2020).

In the early 1970s, several US cities were the home to a burgeoning civil rights movement for Asian American activism. In the Bay area of California, artists and activists banded together to create space for art and organize around affordable housing. Community centers and book stores, like Amerasia Bookstore in the Little Tokyo neighborhood in Los Angeles, provided space for the community to access things like art, plays, poetry, literature, and conversation which were otherwise ignored by mainstream white institutions. Subsequently, more movements advocating for marginalized artists began to gain traction throughout the country (Maeda, 2016).

In 1969, a group of students and activists gathered in a basement in New York's Chinatown to print publications centering on Asian American artists. Calling themselves The Basement Workshop, they organized community cultural programs as well as printed the Bridge magazine and the Yellow Pearl. They ran youth programs and were the starting point for many Asian American community-centric organizations in New York, and the American Asian Arts Center was founded in 1974. The center functioned

both as a venue for activity as well as a museum when it started its permanent collection in 1989 (Liu, 2010).

Around the same time, a group of Black artists in Chicago was interested in supporting and nurturing a Black aesthetic that did not pander to the white gaze (Wafaa, 2020). As this art form strayed from white galleries and institutions, they formally founded the artist collective, AFRICOBRA. As one of the longest-running art movements in the United States founded in 1968, these artists were responsible for creating positive images of Black identity as well as bringing more issues into mainstream consciousness.

AFRICOBRA was one of the many movements fighting for equity. While the antiquated value systems which disallowed any perspectives outside of the whitewashed canon were still significant; artists working in new spaces subverting the academic white gaze brought new ideas of what museums can be into the mainstream. As this art openly questioned power structures and celebrated community over appeasing critics or the established value system of high art, it made more space for new ideas of what art is, who it belongs to, and how it is experienced. Thus, the divide between the colonial view of a museum as a place to store artifacts for a chosen few and the progressive view of a museum as a public place to share ideas and support the community was illuminated (Phillips, 2000).

### **Feminist Art Activism of the 1970s**

During the same time, more activist movements around arts institutions and museums were gaining momentum. In 1970, the Ad Hoc Women's Artist Committee (Ad

Hoc) was organizing protests presenting clear demands about increasing equity in representation (Ault, 2002). The Whitney Museum had infamously homogenous biennials, where they presented almost solely white European male artists. Ad Hoc's four-month series of protests led to a movement demanding more support for femme artists of Black, Indigenous, and non-Anglo descent. While many academics and established individuals in the high art world at the time supported a slow integration of artists through tokenism, Ad Hoc insisted on the importance of immediate action through performance pieces showing a discrepancy between the contemporary art being created and the elitist system and white supremacist values maintained by powerful art institutions and establishments (museums, auction houses) (Moravec, 2012). This way, they brought the public into the discussion about what art is and who makes it. While this discussion provides the institution the ability to directly engage with the community and hear needs, it also has the potential to publicly display the institution's shortcomings. For example, an institution which centers on diversity and inclusion in its branding and marketing might employ tokenism in order to maintain their image while they primarily focus on a white audience. Through tokenism, an institution can use one person on the staff who is marginalized as an example to show they are inclusive, rather than implement any inclusive policy. In a public discussion, constituents of the institution can discuss the role the institution has in the community, the impact of its policies, and their shortcomings past the branding.

Ad Hoc was the precursor to several other direct action movements that brought inequity in the art world to the forefront, most notably, the Guerrilla Girls. Founded in the early 1980s in New York, the members of the group assumed pseudonyms of dead

women artists as a way to highlight the erasure of women in art. This way, they highlighted many overlooked women artists and were able to conceal their identity so as to not be blacklisted by galleries and museums (Tepper, 2011). The Guerilla Girls pushed the boundaries of direct action, by publishing advertisements demanding equitable treatment in cultural publications, as well as creating graffiti on the facade of art institutions. As the movement grew, their actions became larger. They rented out billboards and eventually started exhibiting at international art festivals alongside the galleries they ridiculed (Kahlo and Kollwitz, 2010).

### **Indigenous Activism In Arts Institutions in the 1990s**

While the Guerilla Girls used anonymity to highlight a distinct lack of representation, many indigenous artists in the 1980s and 1990s centered their art on their identity to reach the same goal. This way, instead of seeing the absence of other perspectives, indigenous artists demanded the recognition of their identity and artistry outside of racist stereotypes. Rebecca Belmore was a significant proponent of this movement. Her performance in protest of “The Spirit Sings” show at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada forced the issue of autonomy and the ownership of a narrative into the forefront. While this show boasted a diverse array of artifacts and objects from many different first nations tribes, there were no indigenous curators (Robinson, 2019). Many objects were displayed improperly or without context, and their meanings were conflated or neglected altogether.

Three days before the show opened, Belmore displayed her piece *Artifact #617 B*, where she sat in a glass case on the steps of the museum, in negative 18-degree

celsius weather. This piece corresponded with several other protest actions from fellow Indigenous Canadian artists who sought meaningful representation and control rather than a facade of tokenism (Merson, 2014). The show “Revisions” was organized by eight Indigenous artists from both Canada and the United States as a way to present histories that subverted the white gaze. This show sought to directly challenge the academic, eurocentric gaze through appropriating damaging stereotypes and frameworks of museum practices and questioning their purpose (Rickard, 2005). For example, artists Jimmie Durham and Joan Cardinal-Schubert took the standard ethnographic display cases full of decontextualized objects and made display cases of contemporary life. While this show had an enormous impact, it had a limited audience, and the catalog was not released until 1992 (Cardinal-Schubert and Doxtator, 1992).

Later that year an interdisciplinary performance piece, *The Year of The White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit The West*, debuted at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Created by Guillermo Gomez Pena and Fusco, the piece was a contemporary reinterpretation of how indigenous people were presented at the World’s fair, and how the field of anthropology dehumanized all non- European cultures (Fusco and Peña, 1994). The artists performed within a cage, wearing costumes, face paint, and wigs with a menagerie of furniture and tools, including a television set and a radio with an experimental soundtrack. This performance traveled to many international venues and received praise, confusion, and criticism. It was instrumental in bringing the criticism of academia’s perpetuation of indigenous tropes into the mainstream discussion.

### **Critical Work on Museums in the 1990s**



Around this time, critical museology began gaining momentum as a way to more fully understand the function of museums, their place in society, and their potential (Dewdney, 2013). In the contemporary art world, considerable cultural upheaval bringing more attention to the AIDS crisis as well as support for feminist work lead to a larger questioning of museums. The prevalence of mass media allowed for the dissemination of more independent thought, displacing some traditional institutions' authority on art and how history should be understood and presented (Harrison, 1994). Cultural conservatives, like North Carolina Senator Jessie Helms, sought to obliterate funding for the arts and vilify artists who spoke out about the AIDS crisis as a way to bolster his base (Helms, 1994). In response, the art community widely created more provocative works, discussing discrimination, violence, governmental neglect, and exploring the representation and autonomy of identity (Meyer, 2003). For example, the Silence=Death project by agitprop was used widely in mainstream media to talk about the AIDS crisis and the censorship of life-saving information about treatment and prevention (Kroft, 2020).

### **Continued Repatriation Movements in the 2000s- 2010s**

As museums can be large institutions with unwieldy bureaucracies, it is possible that they would not be as reactive as some arts groups. In the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation act set a precedent for indigenous autonomy and ownership in museum spaces. In the early 2000s, calls for repatriation from some of the larger museums in the global North were gaining momentum (Simpson, 2009). In 2009, the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities legally forced the repatriation of many artifacts from the Louvre in Paris (Amineddoleh, 2009). This

was extraordinarily significant as the Louvre was one of the first “Universal Museums”, a place for representing and collecting cultures and histories from all over the world. As many of these artifacts were “collected” through French colonialism, they were presented through a French colonial lens (Gascoigne, 2009). So, artifacts from colonial states were presented as primitive, and French occupation as noble and civilizing. These artifacts were often displayed alongside human remains and skeletons, using phrenology to prove scientific racism. For centuries, these artifacts were displayed through damaging and decontextualized narratives and were inaccessible to many of the nations to which they belonged.

These movements reimagining indigenous ownership and poly narrative perspectives have made great strides in the past decade, and show there is great potential for museums and how they can serve the public. This has developed into two main directions - the museum as a community center and the museum as a tourist destination. While both are centered on experience, the community-centered model focuses on a continued experience and works with local communities while a tourist-centric model focuses on “signature”, one-time experiences. This way, interpretation, and public relations come to the forefront of the museum’s identity. Although this shifts the accountability and autonomy to the forefront, it has also shown the rigidity and bureaucracy of certain institutions and their resistance to change (Schorch, 2018).

### **Changing Policies from the Center for the Future of Museums**

In 2015, the Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) wrote a list of six issues that will shape how these institutions function in the coming decades. Three of these

issues examine how the museum experience is structured for viewers, how the space can be maintained, and the economic power structure within institutions (Trendswatch, 2015). Traditionally, museums organize displays chronologically, and group displays geographically, a display practice that was firmly established by the late 19th century (Chapman, 1985). This way, history is cleanly split and maintains the narrative of separate national identities. In reality, most of the history in these displays has significant overlaps and has great potential to be displayed together. This way, the colonial narrative of cultural evolution is bypassed in favor of a more holistic view of history, where trade and cultural exchange are acknowledged. This shift can also raise questions about what national identity means, human migration, and international economics (Edwards and Gosden, 2006).

Next, CFM discusses the impact of climate change on museums (Trendswatch, 2015). As increasing storms and natural disasters change how we understand our environment, we have to adapt to the way we live. Many older structures have to be retrofitted for rising tides of increasing storms, leading to economic strain on the institution itself. This raises questions of preservation, and what gets to be saved in a threatened environment. As climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, especially those living in areas threatened by climate change, this necessary shift is displaying which institutions are more established with more economic power. By extension, the ability to adapt with extra financial resources displays whose perspective on history and culture is more likely to be preserved for the future.

Finally, the authors discuss the economic power structure within museums and how they create pathways for some while creating numerous roadblocks for others. While higher museum positions in administrative areas are generally well paid, the vast majority of positions are not. Many starting positions have very low salaries, causing high turnover rates. As higher positions are usually selected based on seniority, these positions are usually dominated by white middle and upper-class professionals who can supplement their income through other means. Similarly, many entry-level positions at museums targeted at a more diverse array of candidates are low paying or have no salary, and have long hours. Thus, it can be incredibly difficult to supplement one's income (as many of these positions are targeted at students), and necessitate a safety net to fall back on. Moreover, these positions frequently have a tenuous track to a more financially stable post within the museum, further limiting their feasibility for any potential candidate without an established financial safety net.

While the CFM report mentioned racial and socioeconomic equity, they discussed it in the context of other issues and did not focus on it. However, in the 2021 TrendWatch report, these issues come to the forefront (Trendswatch: Navigating a Disrupted Future, 2021). While racial inequity has been relevant and important to discuss in cultural centers and institutions, the conversations online around these issues have circumvented the traditional bureaucracy keeping these issues away from the headlines. A myriad of social media responses by several contemporary art museums to the Black Lives Matter movement in the Summer of 2020 after the murders of Ahmaud Arbury, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd exposed how the museum's branding and image over practical ways of supporting the Black Lives Matter movement

(like programming or grants) supported the status quo while struggling to stay relevant (Leyh, 2020). As social media can be more of a democratic platform than traditional publications, many people hold these institutions accountable by bringing attention to unethical practices, tokenism, and economic inequity within their payroll. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) came under scrutiny for posting artworks by Glenn Ligon in their collection without contextualizing the work or making a statement in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, the museum deleted a comment from an SFMOMA union member who pointed out that posting a piece of art did not suffice as an institutional statement and using this piece as a token further perpetuated racism (Griffin, 2021).

The 2021 trends report asks three critical questions of museums: 1) who has your organization taken assets/power from, 2) whose assets/power have you reinforced, and 3) how do your operations support or challenge structural inequalities in society (Trendswatch: Navigating a Disrupted Future, 2021). This approach is centered on action rather than image and definition, characterizing the museum as a site for interaction and dialogue rather than a didactic one-way conversation. Thus, the recent trend of introspection in terms of how museums and institutes write their mission statements is brought into the public realm, and these institutions are held accountable for their mission statements. Mission statements are critical because they distill all of the museum's goals, purposes, and roles within the community and internationally into a few sentences.

### **Digital Engagement From Museums As An Adaptation to COVID**

One way many museums and institutions have made the shift to center accessibility and dialogue in the past year has been through *digital* accessibility as a response to COVID-19 closures. While the move toward digital platforms has been gaining momentum for the past few years, the shuttering of physical space provided a catalyst for many institutions to increase their online presence past their website. As many social media platforms are built for aggregating imagined communities, they have the potential to be more democratized than traditional institutional spaces. This way, museum “visitors” were able to interact with each other and the museum’s staff (Morse, 2022).

Over the Summer of 2020, the Atlanta Contemporary released a series of digital programs that targeted school-age children as well as discussion series designed for the working creatives as a way to continue engaging with and supporting the Atlanta art community (Atlanta Contemporary, 2020). This opened programming up to those who have had more difficulty going to the center in person before the pandemic, as there was no need to find transportation, and many programs were translated online into Spanish. The discussion-based programs allowed the community to connect to each other and critically discuss many issues in the art world, and the programs aimed at school children also had resources and lesson plans for art teachers rebuilding their curriculums for another semester online. With the pivot to online-centered programs over the physical exhibits, community engagement came to the forefront. While the center partnered with schools and other community organizations in the past, the online programs became a venue for resources and more direct involvement with those outside of schools in the art community.

The trend toward community centrality in museum digital spaces was widespread and motivated many more discussions around accessibility in museums. However, this also frequently puts the onus of retrofitting language and programming into a more socially aware lens on the staff of color. According to the Los Angeles Times, museum staff remains overwhelmingly white on average, and many have had to make drastic cuts and layoffs to cope with the pandemic (Miranda, 2020). These cuts have directly impacted labor unions, cutting many positions and limiting the union's power. Moreover, the guest services and front line staff positions have been most impacted, disproportionately impacted by Black, Indigenous, and employees of Color (Miranda, 2020).

At the current moment, museums and arts institutions are looking for ways to create equity and accessibility (Pressman and Schulz, 2021). As many of these institutions have a rigid policy and bureaucracy that may maintain the status quo and perpetuate issues including socioeconomic stratification, creating solutions requires time, money, and dedication. In Atlanta, many art institutions are seeking to support the local art community in meaningful and sustainable ways. Although some of the methods used by these Atlanta arts institutions are inherently problematic, ill-fitting, or ephemeral, there is now an open dialogue around what roles these institutions play in the Art community. Thus, there is a huge opportunity to create solutions and bolster the local art community in a way that will last.

## **Conclusion**

As accessibility centers on welcoming all of the community in, museums and arts institutions create models which are both tailored to their local community and reconcile with their past- both institutionally and locally. Thus, Atlanta art institutions must understand the history of the city and how racism has been maintained through urban planning and policy. In order to make Atlanta's art institutions, centers for knowledge, and culture, accessible, it is important to address the erasure and violence in this city's history.



## Chapter Three

### HOTLANTA (Nobody Says That): a brief history of Atlanta

#### Introduction

In order to understand the history of Atlanta's arts institutions and how they function, it is critical to have a firm grasp of the cultural history of the city. Atlanta's history of segregation, urban planning, culture, and economy dating back to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continues to shape the city. Atlanta is characterized by exponential growth and decay, displayed by the phoenix on the city's emblem. From a day-to-day perspective, this cycle of development looks like spurts of gentrification since the 2008 housing crisis. However, from a historical lens, it is evident this cycle of development (both in the physical (neighborhoods, housing) and cultural landscape (art institutions)) is a result of haphazard infrastructure and policy maintaining socioeconomic inequity and white supremacy.

I begin this chapter with the region's inhabitants before the European conquest. Atlanta is built on Muscogee and Cherokee land, so it is critical to include and understand their history rather than beginning Atlanta's history after the Indian Removal Act (Chavez, 2013). Although the vast majority of indigenous history has been erased from Georgia's cultural history textbooks (Mitchell, 2013), European settlers lived with Cherokee and Muscogee people for several decades. The Treaty of New Echota established the precedent for eminent domain over tribal lands and laid the groundwork for establishing the city of Atlanta. To be clear, these cultures are not solely in the past and there is a thriving community of Muscogee and Cherokee people living in Atlanta today.

Next, I discuss Atlanta's establishment in 1837, the Civil War, Sherman's march to the sea, and the reconstruction era. In the reconstruction era, I examine how white supremacy and Jim Crow laws shaped the city's urban planning, setting up the city's development and socioeconomic inequity. Then, I examine how these values of white supremacy continue to reflect in public policy in the early 1910s, in the Gradies (segregated hospitals later renamed Grady Memorial Hospital), the Atlanta Life Company, the Atlanta massacre, and the Ashley Ordinance. These trends of white supremacy within urban planning continue in the identities and nicknames for Atlanta's neighborhoods in the 1910s and 20s. Then, I analyze both national policies and the civil rights movement's impact on daily life in Atlanta. Although segregation was illegal, it was still a common practice in Atlanta's public schools and infrastructure, especially in Decatur's Beacon community.

Next, I consider changing attitudes and an increase of public art in the city in the late 1960s and 1970s with Atlanta's first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, and the establishment of the Woodruff Arts Center. Many independent art movements at that time worked to save city landmarks and stand up for queer art and queer liberation. Later, the development of the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) and the 1996 Olympics both clearly displayed racial tension and unequal infrastructure in the city.

Lastly, I use several vignettes to look at the state of the arts community in the city. OutKast has had a lasting impact and changed the world indefinitely with their music. Their work with the Dungeon Family made the city a hub for music. However, the state of the city's sewer system clearly shows inequity and municipal neglect. The

municipal neglect shown by the state of the sewer system depicts how many communities in Atlanta have to forge their own ways to create access to art and other public goods. As Atlanta is a complex and dynamic city, it is necessary to use multiple vantage points to understand inequity in order to create access.

### **Atlanta Pre-1800s**

Ah-Yeh-Li A-Lo-Hee, the center of the world marker (Bright, 2004), documents Cherokee inter-tribal traditions and communities centuries before European colonists arrived. This was the intersection of all Cherokee paths and held great importance. As the Cherokee were a decentralized society with several governing bodies, this place was integral for gathering and negotiating with the English colonizers. It was also used as a trading post for hides, furs, blankets, and other valuable objects. It was used until the Treaty of New Echota (Historical Marker Database).

Cherokee is an Iroquoian language that has some in common with other southeastern tribes. In the eighteenth century, it was a solely oral language until the early nineteenth century when Sequoyah invented the Cherokee Syllabary (Cushman, 2012), which allowed for a wealth of history to be recorded. While this invention initially faced backlash, it proved to be extraordinarily valuable as the colonists forced indigenous societies further and further Westward, eventually resulting in the Indian removal act.

### **The Antebellum Period**

In 1828, Chief Justice John Marshall sympathized with the Cherokee nation fighting against the oppression from the state in favor of Cherokee independence (Okison, 2022). As the original treaties made several years prior with the Cherokee nation recognized them as an independent state, the case over whether the state of Georgia could impose laws on them went to the Supreme Court. The third article of the constitution covers the judicial power of the Supreme Court; and the second article covers the enumeration of the cases under its jurisdiction, which covers cases that involve the state as a party. Although the law recognized the various Native American tribes as independent nations and characters of their own, the needs of the United States influenced a change in the interpretation of those treaties. Part of being recognized as an independent nation is controlling and regulating commerce.

As these tribes had formalized governments, economies, and international relations, the union determined them as foreign entities. However, the tribal lands were included within the geographic boundaries of the union, and the union sought to control them through many different methods. As the state of Georgia was working to expand its agricultural economy, its interest shifted from respecting Cherokee boundaries to regulating Cherokee trade and increasing agricultural commerce (Berutti, 1992). So, in 1831, Chief Justice Marshall ruled in favor of the state that the Cherokee nation was a domestic dependent rather than a foreign entity, meaning the state of Georgia could freely regulate commerce and create laws for the Cherokee nation as part of the state of Georgia (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. 5 Pet. 1 1 (1831) (Justia Law)).

### Treaty of New Echota

On December 29th, 1835, the State of Georgia signed a treaty with a group of leaders representing 16,000 Cherokees in New Echota, Georgia. The State of Georgia claimed eminent domain on the tribal lands, forcing the Cherokee to move West of the Mississippi River. For five million dollars, seven million acres of ancestral land were given to the State of Georgia. Subsequently, the Cherokees were forced onto land in present-day Oklahoma (Davis, 1973). The Principal Chief supported the majority of Cherokees who were opposed to the treaty by writing a letter to Congress protesting it, but it was still ratified by the United States Senate in 1836. As president Martin Van Buren understood the dwindling support for the treaty among the Cherokee nation, he allotted two additional years for voluntary departure.

In the Spring of 1838, the United States sent seven thousand soldiers to Georgia to evict the Cherokees from their tribal land. The Cherokees were held in six forts in North Carolina under inhumane conditions until the trail of tears was mapped out. The 1,200-mile trek began in October that year and lasted six months. An estimated quarter of the Cherokees died during this journey due to illness, starvation, and exhaustion. (North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, 2016).

### Atlanta Founded 1837

After Oglethorpe University (1835) and Emory University (1836) were constructed, the city of Atlanta was established in 1837. The city was a commerce hub and grew exponentially with the development of Infrastructure (Watts, 2015). The Western and Atlantic lines connected in Atlanta, facilitating trade from many parts of the country as well as exporting Southern agricultural goods. The numerous cotton

plantations around Georgia relied on the rail lines in Atlanta to sell their product. The city was so prosperous that it became the seat of Fulton County in 1853. By 1860, several other lines connected to Atlanta (National Park Service, Atlanta, [n.d.]).

### **Civil War and Reconstruction**

In January of 1860, Georgia formally seceded from the Union and joined the confederacy (Wooster, 1961). Although there was a strong contingent of unionist affinity groups in Atlanta, the State of Georgia voted to secede. The vast majority of the members of these groups chose to leave Atlanta, and the remaining few were forced to keep a low profile or go underground. These low profiles were necessary for survival because of the Committee on Public Safety, formed in 1861, and the Vigilance Committee, 1862, which sought to root out spies and abolitionists in Atlanta.

As Atlanta was a regional commerce center with the nexus of the railroad lines, it became central to the confederacy's strategy (Washnock, 2014). Lemuel Grant, a confederate railroad engineer, fortified the city and built the neighborhood now known as Grant Park. Existing factories were converted to manufacturing munitions and supplies for the war effort, and the railroads were used to transport these goods to the various fronts. The ability to transport goods from manufacturing centers to the Mississippi River was critical to the confederacy's battle strategy. Due to the influx of jobs and development, Atlanta's population surged from 9,000 in 1860 to 22,000 in 1864 (Venet, 2014).

## Sherman's March to the Sea

Union General William Tecumseh Sherman led the effort to end the confederacy at the beginning of 1864 with his march to the sea. Union troops began marching in Chattanooga and worked their way to the coast. Sherman planned to raze buildings and make roads impassable. One of his most famous methods was 'Sherman's neckties', where troops would heat beams on the railroad, lift them from the wooden planks, and twist them into a knot so the train traveling on that railroad would collide with the necktie and crash. While he planned to move in a swift and destructive path, many troops did otherwise. There are numerous documented cases of union troops burning buildings and farms, killing and raping civilians, and pillaging homes (Glatthaar, 1995).

On July 20th, Sherman's troops arrived in Atlanta. They systematically disassembled the city by destroying the railroads, razing factories, and destroying infrastructure. On August 25th, a contingent of the army continued down toward Savannah. On November 15th, a group of Union troops set a fire that quickly spread over Atlanta. This fire was the last straw for the ragged Atlanta and secured Lincoln's presidential election. By December, Sherman captured Savannah, and the union won the war for several long months thereafter (Rhodes, 1901).

## Reconstruction

After the war was officially over in 1865, Atlanta became the center of federal operations for the reconstruction era. Through federal funding, the railroads were repaired and became operational again. This made Atlanta viable for business and

contributed to an influx of new residents. The same year, Atlanta University (later Clark Atlanta), a Black university that helped bolster a thriving Black middle class, was founded (Reed 1973).

The city was rebuilt to be economically successful and deeply segregated. The main thoroughfares bisected Atlanta into two cities, Black and White. Secondary roads further split the two economically. This fact is made blatant by the roads' nomenclature. Ponce De Leon Avenue, named for the Spanish colonizer seeking a fountain of youth in the 15th century, is one of these dividing lines. Situated in the center of the city, it was a center for commerce. The wealthier, white neighborhoods were on the northern side of Ponce, and on the southern side were Black, mixed-income neighborhoods (Jones, 2012). This way, segregation permeated both the physical and cultural landscape, so the white society could differentiate itself completely. Moving across these boundaries from north to south, Juniper became Courtland, Charles Allen became Parkway, Briarcliff became Moreland, and Monroe became Boulevard (Thomson, 1915).

The development of other economies influenced the infrastructure, and further segregated Atlantans by socioeconomic status. The development of the AUC, Atlanta University Collective, during the latter half of the 19th century, bolstered a thriving middle-class Black community. Atlanta's West End had Atlanta University (1865) and Clark College (1869), then Spelman College (1881). These schools created a platform for discussion and analysis of issues that impacted the Black community which was largely ignored by white mainstream media. Beginning in the late 19th century, the Atlanta University Studies, conducted by Howard Burnstead and W.E.B. Dubois, focused on urban Black mortality rates. This Study was seen as one of the



commencements of public consciousness and exposed the lack of access to healthcare and poor conditions in cotton mills (Bacote, 1955).

Reconstruction efforts resulted in numerous businesses, including the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill. The mill was constructed in the location of the former slave market house and employed mostly white women and children. While the mill was a significant part of Atlanta's success as a city and established the neighborhood now known as Cabbagetown, it had a number of negative impacts (Mitchell, 1921). The history of the owner and the mill's economic success is well documented (Mitchell, 1921); however, conditions inside the mill are not remembered quite as well. Workers at the mill were forbidden to unionize to fight worsening conditions, and it was fully segregated until 1897. A group of white mill workers held a strike, protesting the hitting of Black women; but soon the strike ended and the mill was integrated (Fink, 2019).

Even though the mill and village were somewhat integrated, Atlanta remained deeply segregated. Black workers faced much tougher living and working conditions and had significantly fewer rights and economic mobility. This structural violence was ensured through a set of policies colloquially known as the Jim Crow laws.

The Jim Crow laws were in use from 1880 to 1954, when they were struck down by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Hoffer, 2012). These laws included discriminatory practices such as segregation, and economic disenfranchisement of Black communities, limiting Black communities' access to quality education, healthcare, and infrastructure. In Atlanta, this was enforced through violent policing and discriminatory laws that targeted the Black community, as well as labor laws that sought to limit opportunity. Many

leaders worked to resist the Jim Crow laws in favor of racial equity, and one of the most notable in Atlanta's history was Booker T. Washington (Jewell, 2007).

### **“The New South”**

The Atlanta Compromise, a famous speech delivered by Washington at the 1895 Cotton States International Exhibition, emphasized the importance of economic security for Black communities before political or social equity with white society. The organizers of the exhibition thought presenting a Black speaker would impress Northern visitors, and present a liberal and forward-moving image of Atlanta. Washington presented a framework for progress, centered on segregation where each race works separately as a finger and can come together with the strength of a hand (Washington, 1895). He emphasized the importance of economic power as the ability to create social and political equity and access the rights one can afford with wealth (referencing former slaves buying their freedom); ensuring long-lasting progress rather than constructing facades of social justice. While Washington's trust in capitalism divided many, he fought for an equitable future for Black communities, both in Atlanta and throughout the world; which was not presented by most mainstream media at the time (Dill, 2016; Washington, 2013).

### Atlanta Gets A Hospital, 1892

Although Atlanta had Saint Joseph's infirmary, the city lacked a municipal hospital. Henry Woodfin Grady, a leader in Atlanta and advocate for “The New South”,

lobbied for one to serve Atlanta residents up until he died in 1889 (Lovasick, 2020). Following his death, Atlanta's city council sought land and funding to establish a hospital in his memory. Col. L. P. Grant, the founder of Grant Park, sold the city the four-acre plot of land in September of the following year. Two hospitals were built following the Jim Crow laws (Davore, 2008). The architectural plan of a series of connected buildings rather than multi-story buildings, first used for the construction of the Philadelphia Presbyterian hospital in 1860, was used for the main building with one-eighth of a mile of covered walkways to various outbuildings.

Characterized by the beauty of the Richardson Romanesque architecture style, the hospital was known for being top-class. It pioneered the use of many new technologies in the medical field, such as the x-ray machine, and new practices like diet therapy. Continual research and innovation at the hospital resulted in the establishment of a blood bank and safe transfusions of blood. While the progress of humanitarian medical treatment improved quickly, Jim Crow segregation was held firmly in place. Colloquially known as "the Gradies", the hospital's segregation was present throughout its wards and its school (Georgia State University Library Exhibits: Grady Memorial Hospital and Nursing School).

The Grady Memorial Hospital School of nursing opened its doors to white students in 1898, the first chartered nursing school in the state. The coursework was rigorous and thorough, with comprehensive coverage of medical treatment, from behavioral sciences to Biology. Additionally, students were required to complete several hours of patient care at the hospital. The school was renowned for its prowess and was quick to gain accolades, however, it was slow to integrate. Sixteen years after the

school opened, the Municipal Training School for Colored Nurses was added to Grady. While the school was technically segregated, Black students were required to take separate classes at Spelman, and complete their hours of applied training at Hughes Spalding or the Black ward of Grady. The school will not commence full integration until 1964 (Hill, 2015).

### 1906 Atlanta Massacre

On July 30th, a mob in Atlanta lynched a Black man for allegedly raping a woman. This was a part of a much larger movement by the Klu Klux Klan and sympathizers to portray Black men as hypersexual and violent, using slogans like “protect our women.”(Crowe, 1969) Newspapers like the Evening News perpetuated these ideas by portraying these mobs as victorious, and even going as far as referring to lynchings as lessons.

In September, several Atlanta publications wrote about purported violence against white women, used for a call to arms for white men to “protect their women.” These violent and racist descriptions of Black men raping white women incited a series of riots. White men from various parts of Atlanta came together in heinous acts like arson, extrajudicial public execution, looting, assaulting innocent civilians, and destroying the homes and businesses on Decatur street (Crowe, 1906).

### Ashley Ordinance, 1913

As the Black middle and working-class grew due to the thriving economy, wealthier, white Atlantans sought to create structures both to limit their economic

potential and segregate the Black community. While this was done through numerous extrajudicial methods, such as the Atlanta riots, white society wanted the policy to permanently segregate both the physical and economic landscape (Lands, 2004). The first set of policies seeking to codify segregation was the Ashley Ordinance, proposed by city councilman Claude L. Ashley in 1913.

Ashley was the representative of the Fourth Ward, a remnant of the first organizational system created by Atlanta's police department. The Fourth ward was home to both wealthy, upper-middle-class white communities as well as working-class Black communities. As the working-class Black community grew and began moving into white-dominated spaces, the white community sought legal action. Several groups, including clergy from Our Lady of Lourdes (Catholic) and Saint Luke's (Episcopalian), fought this policy and resisted segregation, in part, because it would limit their parishioners' ability to attend (Lemos, 2020). Both Saint Luke's and Our Lady of Lourdes were located in racially diverse areas which would be designated as white or Black, meaning a portion of their parishioners would be physically unable to attend. This ordinance was contested several times and was eventually struck down.

### Atlanta Life Company

In 1905, Alanzo Herndon, a prosperous Atlanta barber, purchased the Atlanta Benevolent Protective Association, and renamed it the Atlanta Mutual Insurance Company (in 1922 he later again renamed it, this time as the Atlanta Mutual Insurance Company), creating a Black insurance company. While most benevolent societies from the antebellum period were rebuilding as white insurance companies, Herndon sought

to bolster the Black economy in Atlanta. His notorious barbershop on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta was known for its baroque gleaming chandeliers and gold mirrors (Richards, 2017). As this was in the middle of the Jim Crow era, the patronage was entirely white.

In his insurance work, Herndon's focus was on the Black community and nurturing economic growth. The Atlanta Life building on Auburn Avenue was a center for business and provided a platform for entrepreneurship; as Herndon was a strong believer in Booker T. Washington's emphasis on the importance of economic equity. The company worked throughout Georgia and Alabama and expanded in 1924 to Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, and Texas. Although it was close to being done in by competing with the white-owned Southern Life Company, it remained resolute in its unending advocacy for Black-owned businesses (Pickens, 1993).

#### Establishment of Cabbagetown and Atlanta neighborhoods

As the mill expanded and created more jobs, the community around the mill grew. While the mill had employee housing, it soon became overcrowded with new employees moving in. The vast majority of these employees were poorer, white folks from Southern Appalachia who built their own homes near the mill. Over several decades, this grew from a collection of small shacks around the mill to a tight-knit community (Hanchett, 1997). Small, A-frame houses replaced the shacks as more families moved in.

These houses were built within feet of each other in order to economize on space and were very simple to construct. A central hallway connecting a few rooms meant that

one could walk directly through the house. This led to the notorious nickname “shotgun house”, as one could shoot a gun through the front door of the house without puncturing a wall (Kuhn, 1993).

The most prevalent origin story for the moniker Cabbagetown dates to the mid-1930s. In order to survive financial hardship, many families planted root vegetables in the small plots in front of their houses. The victory garden provided a way for poorer families to have access to fresh food they could not otherwise afford and was later popularized in World War Two as a way for more Americans to cut back on the consumption of crops in order to feed troops overseas. The most popular crop to plant in these gardens was cabbages, as they were hardy, cheap, and plentiful (Booker, 2019). It was said that the entire neighborhood smelled of cooking cabbage in the evening.

So, cabbages became shorthand for poverty and working-class culture in Atlanta. Soon after, Cabbagetown became a disparaging nickname wealthier Atlantans used to highlight the poverty in the neighborhood. While the nickname started as an insult, the residents used it with pride. The name Cabbagetown came to stand for the self-sufficient, working-class pride of the community (Jasud, 1989). This nickname was one of the many signifiers which clearly displayed the split between working-class and upper-class individuals in Atlanta. This split was also clear in how working-class neighborhoods were frequently passed over for funding and urban development projects, thus limiting their infrastructure and access to the city. Moreover, neighborhoods like Cabbagetown rarely got municipal funding for public art or arts institutions.

## White Flight

After World War Two, thousands of veterans returned to the United States, seeking jobs, housing, and the rewards the government promised them. The early propaganda of the Cold War created the image of the American dream, where anyone can work hard to gain an economic footing and standard of living. This ideal was depicted in propaganda as a Rockwellian image of the nuclear family, mother, and father with two and a half children, a dog, and a white picket fence. As this image was deeply influential in pop culture, it perpetuated the ideals of individualism and shaped American infrastructure for many decades to come (Kruse, 2013).

Relatively cheap, mid-sized clapboard houses were built in clusters outside of city centers (Kruse, 2000) where respectable middle-class workers could avoid the purported dangers of city life and settle in the privacy of their own homes. Suburbia also supported white flight, a phenomenon common throughout American cities from the 1940s to the 1960s, where white residents resisted integration by moving into new suburban developments. In Atlanta, the violent and jealous refusal of integration by members of the Ku Klux Klan and their affiliates was replaced by more “polite”, pernicious support for development and investment in white suburban neighborhoods. This resulted in new roadways facilitating a white commuter’s path to and from the city center, without having to go through neighborhoods. In the 1950s, the demolition of predominantly Black neighborhoods in South Atlanta began for the construction of Interstate 75-85 (Givens, 2018). As a result, poorer, Black neighborhoods were forced to suffer adverse health consequences of environmental racism and governmental



infrastructure neglect, while wealthier white suburbanites were able to commute with ease.

## **1960 to 2000**

As oppressive segregation was illegally enforced in urban planning, it was also enforced in public schools. In 1958, Vivian Calhoun filed a lawsuit against the Atlanta Public School system for refusing to integrate. The school system failed to comply with the 1954 supreme court decision on Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas; an emblematic move to resist integration and racial equity (Campanella, 1964). Defying civil rights through refusing to comply with national policies was a prevalent movement in the Southeast. Thus, many states instituted anti-integration policies in every aspect of life, from schools to urban planning to banking. Even though many of these anti-integration policies were not constitutional, they were very difficult to strike down (Mays, 1973).

It took years of battling in court to implement integration policies in the Atlanta public schools system, where several schools were named for white supremacists (Henry Woodfin Grady High School). In other Southern cities, the battle over integration in public schools resulted in violent riots and protests. So, Atlanta's city council worked with the school board to slowly integrate three high schools, then fully integrate the rest of the school system over the next few years (NAACP and School Desegregation, 2011). While this act was later editorialized as a radical push for racial equity, it was more focused on saving face and making sure Atlanta was still attractive to tourists and businesses.

## Homes of Decatur

Decatur, the city just Northeast of Atlanta, was the center of the working-class Black community from the 1940s through the 1970s. Although segregation was technically illegal, both Atlanta and Decatur were harshly segregated, and the Northwest quadrant of Decatur was reserved for the Black community. The neighborhood was mostly wooden shotgun houses (similar to Cabbagetown), duplexes, and apartments. The municipal trash incinerator was near the center of the neighborhood, behind “the City of Decatur Colored School.” This trash incinerator created significant pollution, through particulate debris, air contamination, soil contamination, and noise pollution. It was deliberately put there as a symbol to insult the Black community, and as a way to harm the residents. This is one of the many examples of environmental racism implemented in Atlanta communities during the post-World War Two urban renewal (Rotenstein, 2019).

The racial divide in Decatur, or “Color Line” was clearly stated by a change in street names, and Herring Street became Trinity Place. The area was known as the Beacon Community or the Bottom community, as it was pejoratively depicted in the media as the bottom of Decatur. The Allen Wilson Terrace Homes were some of the earliest public housing projects in the country, built in the early 1940s. The projects had federally mandated standards for health and safety, like indoor hot and cold water. Surrounding the projects, however, many homes did not have indoor water. After the Terrace Homes were constructed, the surrounding community was officially demarcated as a slum by the City of Decatur. Instead of creating programs to help those residents,

many white residents in Decatur organized to raze the slum and “beautify Decatur.” In a pamphlet promoting urban renewal distributed by the city, the homes were described as substandard, and a sink for public resources like police and fire protection. This justified neglecting the community further and refusing them access to basic public health and safety.

This racist propaganda was paired with sympathetic language, imploring white residents to advocate for higher standards for those who take care of their children (many residents in the Beacon were caretakers). Subsequently, this push for urban renewal resulted in the scattering of the Black community, which led to a significant commercial loss for the businesses located in the Beacon community. Several decades later, David Rubenstein wrote an ethnography documenting the Beacon community as a way to combat the erasure and neglect they faced.

*“You never had the experience of taking a bath in a number three tin tub where you had to boil your water. You never had that experience. That was the only way you could bathe. That was the only way you could bathe.*

*“What about washing your clothes in a number three tin tub with a rub board? You know what a rub board is? Cook the clothes, yeah. Hang them up. You never had that experience.”* (Rotenstein, 2012, page 445)

### 1968 Woodruff Arts Center

Near Downtown Atlanta, more investment was going into the arts and creating an identity for the city. As the infrastructure modernized (destroying Black neighborhoods

for updated highways and homes) and the population grew, several wealthier Atlantans sought to create more of an identity for the city. While Atlanta's economy was prosperous, it lacked the fineries other equivalent cities had in terms of the fine arts. Although there was a large scene of galleries (Smethhurst, 2010), there were not many larger museums or arts institutions. Originally named the Memorial Arts Center, the project was dedicated to the memory of the 106 Atlantans who died in a plane crash over Orly field near Paris, France, in 1962. These Atlantans were a group of dedicated arts patrons on a tour of European cultural capitals organized by the Atlanta Art Alliance. A board of trustees came together to create a fitting memorial, which was then funded by Robert Woodruff. The memorial was an alliance of three arts institutions - a theater, a symphony, and a museum (Hagy, 2012).

The first decade of the alliance proved to be tumultuous and fruitful. Each organization worked independently, pushing the boundaries of traditional conceptions of the arts. In 1976, Conductor Robert Shaw presented the orchestra to the community in a free concert in Piedmont Park. Then in 1978, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra was the first American orchestra to record digitally for commercial release. Their recording of Stravinsky's Firebird Suite was made in partnership with Telarc Records ("Atlanta Symphony Orchestra").

The High Museum struggled to display its collection in a limited space and faced many issues growing in terms of acquiring more art and having the space to store the new art. It soon became evident that the memorial arts center was not large enough for the museum. After significant fundraising efforts, the museum was able to open a new

space in 1983. This iconic building was designed by famed architect Richard Meier (Clark, 1992).

### 1970, Atlanta Pride Established

A 1969 police raid on a film screening of Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (a satirical take on the Western genre which followed the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, and featured several gay characters) contributed to the rising tensions in Atlanta (Gillespie, 2008). Across the country, LGBTQIA+ people were organizing and demonstrating against discriminatory police raids. Several months after the *Lonesome Cowboys* raid, the first Atlanta pride parade was held on the first anniversary of the Stonewall uprising. This parade was small, consisting of approximately 100 mostly white gay men marching through Midtown. The parade ended in a rally in Piedmont park. While there are no known images of the first parade, subsequent years of the parade exponentially grew in size, fanfare, and documentation (Atlanta History Center, 2020; Beasley, 2014). This parade became a catalyst for a queer art community and a significant amount of queer public art in the city in years to come.

### 1973 Atlanta First City To Elect Black Mayor, Maynard Jackson

In 1969, Maynard Jackson was elected as the Vice Mayor of Atlanta. Jackson, great-grandson of Slaves, ran on a populist agenda, challenging the staunch segregationist incumbents. Under Mayor Massler, Atlanta's first Jewish mayor, Jackson established himself in Atlanta's political scene. After running for mayor in several subsequent terms, Jackson won the 1973 race with 59% of the vote and became the first

Black mayor of a major American city. He ran a progressive platform and angered many conservatives by promoting institutional racial equity (Abney, 1981).

Over his career, Jackson oversaw the construction of Atlanta's first rapid public transit system, challenging the fortified segregationist infrastructure of the city. Additionally, Jackson replaced the public safety commissioner, who was known for permitting police brutality. His dedication to racial equity and implementing progressive policies maintained the city's identity as a liberal bastion and set the course for Atlanta's politics for the following decades. Jackson is also credited with bolstering the Black middle and upper classes through affirmative action and economic opportunities. One of his major challenges was mitigating the damages from the Atlanta child murders in the 1980s (Gillespie, 2015). This was a series of murders that preyed on children in Atlanta's poorer Black communities. This resulted in citywide curfews for everyone under 18, an increase in policing of Black neighborhoods, and a rise in organizing to advocate for Black children's welfare. While these children were never brought justice, several memorials were made in their honor (Turner, 1996).

### Save the Fox Movement

"The legend lives on" was a series of benefit concerts in 1974, with headlining acts ranging from Liberace to Lynyrd Skynyrd (Mcall, 1974). This series was all organized by citizens in an effort to fundraise to buy the iconic Fox Theatre. Although the city's economy was thriving in the 1970s, many older arts institutions and historical sites were neglected and run down. This movement fortified support for Atlanta's

historical buildings and created more municipal support for cultural landmarks. The telephone company, Southern Bell (now AT&T) sought to buy the land the Fox was on, as it saw the theater as decrepit and past its prime. While the Fabulous Fox was once a glamorous venue, it had fallen into disrepair. Students at Georgia Tech began organizing alongside young art activists to save the building and restore it to its former charm. Several fraternities and sororities hosted galas at the fox, while young art activists organized benefit concerts (Saporta, 2014). Eventually, enough money was raised to purchase the land the Fox is on, and Southern Bell was persuaded to buy adjacent property to build their skyscraper. This resounding success served as a catalyst for the community preservation of historic Atlanta landmarks (“Save The Fox Movement”).

### Atlanta Jazz Festival

Mayor Maynard Jackson established the Jazz festival in 1978 as a way to support the arts and generate revenue for local businesses by increasing tourism. The festival was star-studded, featuring acts like D Gillespie, Nina Simone, Lionel Hampton, Herbie Hancock, and Miles Davis. Originally called the Atlanta Free Jazz festival, attendance has always been complimentary. In order to continue Jackson’s commitment to racial equity, the festival was created to celebrate and increase Atlanta residents’ access to cultural experience. Jackson wanted to spotlight jazz in Atlanta because he was deeply passionate about supporting Atlanta’s cultural growth. When asked about it, Jackson said, “Jazz music is America’s only original art form, and...Atlanta, with its growing reputation as an international center of the arts and education, has both the

opportunity and the responsibility to promote an art form whose roots are indigenous to the South” (Leathers, 2019).

### Rapid Commuter system (MARTA)

In 1965, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) act was passed, laying the groundwork for a comprehensive public transit system in Atlanta. Almost seven years and a voter referendum later, MARTA was set into motion. In 1972, the city purchased the Atlanta Transit System to streamline the main bus system and saw a 20% increase in ridership within the first year. Operation on MARTA’s East rail line began in 1979. The combined bus and train system was expanded to include a North Line, Airport Line, and transit beyond the perimeter in time for the 1996 Olympics (Bollinger, 1997).

This transit system took decades to complete because of segregationist politics and racism. Lieutenant Governor Lester Maddox (a staunch segregationist) refused to allow the act to go to a vote unless its funding was cut. Only 50% of the transit system’s profits are allowed to go to operational costs, resulting in hikes in fares whenever there is an infrastructure issue. Additionally, the State of Georgia refused to put any funding towards Atlanta’s public transit, as Atlanta was seen as a political island (Monroe, 2019). Moreover, these decisions were being made at the height of the post-integration white flight in Georgia. According to *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, the city’s white population was cut in half from 1960 to 1980. This voter bloc sought to separate themselves from progressive racial equity not only by locale but



also by limiting the political and financial opportunities of urban communities (Monroe, 2019).

## ACT UP

On January 8th, 1990, national and local ACT up members lead a demonstration at the Georgia state capitol and Woodruff park, as part of a two-day demonstration. Activists also held a die-in at the CDC, bringing attention to the lack of information and research on the treatment for HIV and AIDS. At the time, the definition of AIDS was very limited and did not address T cell count or gynecological information, which limited many AIDS patients' access to government assistance (Darsey, 1991). The organizers staged a large die-in in front of the capitol after the march to call attention to how many people were dieing from AIDS-related complications. Many protestors attended in pajamas and were forcibly removed by police.

“We ended up with about 300-350 people. We started with a march where we had a brass bed that we took to the steps of the Capitol. We marched from Woodruff Park. We had signs, we had incredibly obscene chants that we chanted going down the street. It was the first time that I got arrested for committing civil disobedience. We were just dressed in pajamas, and lay down in the middle of the street to be dragged off by the cops.”<sup>[P]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

(Jeff Graham, September 25, 2014, GSU Gender and Sexuality Audio Archives, 1:30-2:00)

## 1996 Olympics

Mohammed Ali lit the Olympic torch on July 19, 1996, to begin the Summer Games of the XXVI Olympiad. More than one billion dollars had been poured into construction projects, from venues to athlete housing, in preparation for the games (French, 1997). The infrastructure brought to the city through tourist attractions, like the Georgia Aquarium and the Olympic Rings fountain to Atlanta on the map as a cultural hub to be taken seriously (Lohr, 2011).

Overall, the games brought around five billion dollars into the city. This resulted in a significant economic transformation, nearly doubling the population of metro Atlanta, and contributing to a declining housing market. This has led to the phenomenon called the Atlanta paradox, a clear display of continuing segregation and discriminatory infrastructure development. Neighborhoods like the Pittsburgh community on the city's near southwest side never received economic investment from the Olympic committee, despite being in close proximity to many of the main venues. Almost half of the structures in the neighborhood are vacant or abandoned, a harsh reminder of the neglect the neighborhood committee has fought hard against (Kasimati, 2003). This is due in part to the unequal distribution of the Olympic committee's investment in Atlanta areas. While some were without any investment, some were highly oversaturated. The massive overbuilding both before and after the Olympics caused several bank failures and had negative economic impacts throughout the city (Mihalik, 2000).

## Freaknic

While racial tension and discrimination were synonymous with Atlanta, so too was a celebration of Black collegiate youth. Freaknik began as a weeklong street party to celebrate Spring Break for attendees and alumni of HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Originally a picnic for DC-area students who could not make it home for spring break in the early 1980s, the organizers chose the theme “The Return of the Freak”, giving way to the name Freaknic. In the late 1980s after growing popularity and references to the celebration in pop culture (Spike Lee’s *School DAE* and *A different World*), attendance skyrocketed (Quiros, 2022).

In 1993, 100,000 visitors attended Freaknic (Stokus, 2012). In subsequent years, attendance continued to grow exponentially- some college students, and some not. Freaknic morphed from an exclusive collegiate gathering to an inclusive street party throughout Atlanta. While some events took place in various public parks, Freaknic was known for cruising. Roads would become congested with visitors unable to find parking, who would roll through slowly or just abandon their cars on the interstate. The event became about being seen and was deeply influential for music, fashion, and culture. And so, Atlanta became the capital of the “Dirty South”(an affectionate nickname for the Southeastern region of the United States, historically ignored as a cultural hub) (Stokus, 2012).

On the other hand, Atlanta was still the capital city of the *Deep South*, and racial tensions escalated. Local white Atlantans complained about traffic and litter, going out of their way to insinuate race negatively. As more attendees came every year, the vitriol increased, with some racist Atlantans calling attendees “Freaknikkers”, and picketing

the Atlanta Mayor's Inman Park home. Councilwoman Carolyn Long Banks compared the city's attempt to crack down on Freaknik to the South African Apartheid, highlighting the overt racism that white columnists at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution attempted to discuss covertly (Zaremba, 2015).

After Bill Campbell's 1994 mayoral election, a continuation of over two decades of Black leadership in Atlanta, Beverly Harvard became police chief (the only Black woman in the country with this position). There were several reported cases of rape and assault at Freaknik (and many went unreported until Oglesby's ethnography was published in 2021, due to the stigma around reporting rape) (Oglesby, 2021). So, Campbell and Harvard worked to appease both sides of the argument, and welcome the event while creating a stricter and more efficient traffic plan. After a handful of incidents of violence in 1995, the city responded with a spike in police officers and a policy on public safety and festivals. Attendance declined in 1996 and returned in 2000 and 2003 with a smaller group of attendees. While there are some reunion Freaknik events, there are still many laws and traffic codes which prevent the original form of the event-cruising is illegal in many neighborhoods in Atlanta (Stallings, 2013).

#### 1997 Atlanta Red Dogs division of the Police Department

Run Every Drug Dealer Out of Georgia, or Red Dogs, was the name given to the controversial and violent drug strike force police unit, active from the late 1990s to 2012. This unit was started in response to the crack-cocaine epidemic, which hit Atlanta particularly hard and was characterized by open-air drug markets and drive-by shootings (Grandage, 2017). The image of this epidemic was highly racialized and

depicted Black men as the cause of the problem. This was reinforced by the image of the super predator and the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (Clark and Biddle, 2002).

The Red Dogs would use covert tactics to sneak up on purported drug deals and were known for using violence. They were deeply unpopular in most of the communities they were active in and many argue they were ineffective (Geraghty and Velez, 2011).

In an article from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Makeda Johnson, Chair of the Neighborhood Planning Unit, said the Red Dog unit's impact made drug dealing go underground, rather than getting rid of it. She continued:

“I don't know if having Red Dog has been very productive. If we still have people walking up to sell drugs and we still have people coming from outside our community to purchase drugs, then clearly the police strategy has not worked. That is not rocket science.” (Visser, 2011)

In 2021, NPR's podcast Louder Than a Riot interviewed Atlanta visionary Micheal Render, a rapper, activist, and entrepreneur, on the impact the war on drugs had on both culture and everyday life. Mass incarceration and policy enabling police brutality radically changed both how racism was perpetuated in the media and how Atlanta communities functioned. Render, who is a vocal supporter of the police officers in his family and community, recalls the turning point in his relationship with the police in his neighborhood growing up:

“By the time you get to eighty eighty-nine ninety, the cops went from being not quite Mayberry, but still down homey enough that you could get a talking to and a ride home. It turned into units like the Red Dog Drug Unit in which they came dressed like paramilitary forces. The cops who were on these forces looked like extract stars, baseball and football players. And their game was to hunt the Red Dogs, the local Atlanta named for the drug task force units that were popping up all across the country at this time.”

Interviewer: Did you feel targeted?

Yes, absolutely. Because we were, OK. We were... we were hunted by police. We were literally physically hunted. You'd be standing on the corner drug squad to pull up everybody (Louder Than A Riot, 2021).

## **2000 to Current**

In 1992, Andre Benjamin and Antwan Patton formed OutKast, a dynamic duo that changed hip hop forever and helped cement Atlanta as a central place for culture in the South (Trapp, 2022). Before they were Andre 3000 and Big Boi, they were high school students in East Point, Georgia. They worked with Organized Noize in the studio known as the dungeon, which would later become known as the Dungeon Family, a consortium of artists and producers creating sounds unique from the East Coast versus West Coast debate, which was dominating the airwaves. Southerplaylisticaladillacmuik, released in 1994 was their debut album, which dealt with rites of passage in the South, coming of age, racism, and the culture of Atlanta (Sarig, 2007).

The album peaked at number 20 on the Billboard 200 chart and brought attention to OutKast, the Dungeon Family, and Atlanta. While it received positive reviews and was highly critically acclaimed, the duo faced significant backlash for not representing the East or West coast. One of the most iconic examples of this was The Source Magazine's 1995 award show in New York when OutKast was booed as they walked onto the stage to receive the artist of the year award. Andre calmly responded, "The South got somethin' to say." (Grem, 2006) .

The significance of their legacy can not be overstated. OutKast went on to create several iconic albums before splitting in the early 2000s. They created radical new aesthetics, challenged the music industry, celebrated multiplicity by criticizing racist stereotypes and subverting the white gaze, redefined fashion with numerous iconic looks, and made the best music you've ever heard ("Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik", *Genius*).

### Infrastructure Inequity in Atlanta, Shown By The Sewer System

Inequity in Atlanta persists in many ways, and is clearly demonstrated by infrastructure. This argument of infrastructure inequity is dismissed by some who argue that the rapid transit system does not have the money to expand routes in neighborhoods of Color and poorer communities, or that the city has built more parks and schools in the past few years. Although the city is improving, this development is disproportionately going to predominately white and gentrifying areas. This phenomenon is clearly displayed in the state of the city's sewer system. In the reconstruction era, the city of Atlanta built a two-pipe sewer system. This system is an

integrated network of pipes that transports sewage and overflow stormwater separately. However, when there is a heavy downpour or several days of rain, the system becomes overwhelmed, resulting in raw sewage getting dumped into the Chattahoochee River instead of a water treatment plant. As the population grew exponentially over the decades, the situation worsened and became a health problem. In the 1990s, Atlanta was sued by the Environmental Protection Agency for polluting the Chattahoochee river as well as other waterways with wastewater (Bullard, 1999). Finally, in 2001, the city of Atlanta finally agreed to federal and state demands to amend the problem by repairing the pipe system, and adding underground tunnels to hold overflow water and maintain separation. According to Clean Water Atlanta's website:

“Excessive overflows from the combined sewer system, coupled with sanitary sewer overflows and leaks in the separated area, have negatively impacted area water quality and resulted in a lawsuit against the City. The lawsuit resulted in two federal Consent Decrees that direct the City to make all improvements to its wastewater system necessary to comply with state and federal water quality requirements. To meet the requirements, the City must reduce combined sewer overflows to permitted levels and eliminate sanitary sewer overflows. Also included in the Consent Decrees was a mandate to provide improved wastewater conveyance and treatment at Atlanta's water reclamation centers (WRCs). The \$3 billion wastewater component of Clean Water Atlanta builds upon the 1993 CIP and was developed in response to the two Consent Decrees.” (Clean Water Atlanta “History of Atlanta's Watershed.”)



Atlantans have some of the nation's highest water and sewer bills because of the ongoing issues with the infrastructure. While the situation is bad inside the perimeter, the suburbs may face worse impacts because a significant portion of suburban wastewater treatment is the responsibility of private homeowners with septic tanks. While Atlanta has until 2027 to meet the demands of the consent decree, the city is struggling to keep up with ongoing problems. In 2017, there were 279 sanitary sewer overflows that spilled over 2 million gallons (Brown, 2003). This negligence in infrastructure clearly depicts the continued divide between the upper class and working and lower class neighborhoods in terms of access. Just as these neighborhoods get passed over for infrastructure reform and are forced to find ways to deal with constantly having issues with sewage and non-potable tap water, they are also forced to create ways to get access to art outside of the municipal structure. Although the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs has been making strides in the past five years bringing more public art into neighborhoods with Artbound, MARTA station public art programs, there is still a long way to go (City of Atlanta, 2020).

### Murder Kroger

While Atlanta has several major grocery chains, only one is known for its unique nicknames. Kroger has been a staple in Atlanta for many years and serves a diverse array of communities. Instead of following the traditional box store method where each store is as similar as possible, Kroger caters its products to the needs of the community in which it is located. As some goods were only available at certain Krogers, each

grocery store got a nickname. These nicknames were necessary, as Atlanta has over fifteen different Peachtree Streets. Some nicknames are pejorative and highlight tensions in the community dealing with ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation; as food is central to identity (Li, 2016).

Disco Kroger was the first 24-hour grocery store open in Atlanta, next door to the famous Limelight nightclub; and became known for late-night dancing down the isles. Krosher or Kosher Kroger, down the street from Congregation Beth Jacob has a large supply of Kosher foods for the Orthodox Jewish community. Krogay, in the Ansley shopping center, was a hot spot for cruising (subtle flirting with potential partners) for the LGBTQIA+ community when it was less safe to be out in public. Fiesta Kroger is an opaquely racist moniker for the store in the Buford Highway community which specializes in Latin American foods. Kro-jack, just South of East Atlanta Village, is known for a rash of carjackings (car break-ins) right after it opened. Crash Kroger on Ralph David Abernathy is known for a car driving directly into the facade of the store a few months after it opened. Krogerdishu, just outside of Atlanta, was known for an open-air market in the parking lot in front of the store and shoppers in full military uniform coming from the nearby Fort McPherson. Baby Korger is a decidedly small Kroger in Decatur, which is jokingly used as a metric to measure the size of other Atlanta Krogers. Fu-Q Kroger, in the Lindbergh, was originally proposed as an 80,000 square foot development. The neighborhood board was overwhelmingly against it, and sent the design team back to the drawing board several times. Now, the development is known by the designer, Jeff Fuqua, as Fuq-u Kroger (Green, 2016).

By far, the most well-known moniker for an Atlanta Kroger is Murder Kroger. Located on Ponce De Leon, one of the central streets of Atlanta, the store has a reputation for crime, usually petty theft and vandalism in the parking lot. The controversial moniker comes from three tragedies, in 1991, 2002, and 2015 (Reed, 2016). As the first two tragedies had occurred more than a decade prior, many Atlantans had been desensitized to the moniker and did not question its cruelty. The gentrification of Ponce De Leon, including the reconstruction and rebranding of the Kroger, distanced many from the loss. This distancing changed the ownership of the name, from a tongue-in-cheek shorthand for pride in grit to a dismissive slight. So, when this Kroger was razed and rebuilt as a huge, multi-use development with offices atop the largest Kroger in Atlanta shortly after the 2015 murder; the same cultural divide became apparent. Those who were unaware of the realities of this Kroger's past called it mega murder Kroger, while those who originally shopped there moved on to another Kroger (Ross, 2018).

While the monicker for the store is a city-wide joke, it displays a disregard for violence and supporting Black communities. There are many food deserts in Atlanta, where one has to drive a considerable distance in order to buy fresh produce and staple foods (Li, 2016). In these neighborhoods, fast food chains are the closest and easiest option, thus contributing to long term health conditions in the community like heart disease and type two diabetes from high levels of sodium and sugar (Berkowitz, 2018). While there are a few community efforts to create more access to groceries in food deserts (Free99 Fridge, Food4LivesATL), there was a significantly larger group making memes about the murder in the parking lot of the Kroger when it was reopened (Tate,

2018). The 20- year old young man who was killed in the parking lot in 2015 was meme-ified, his death a joke online without any memorial to him.

### Renaming Grady

Henry W. Grady High school is a public high school in the center of Atlanta across the street from Piedmont Park. Known for its arts program, it used to be a magnet school for journalism, and its teachers and students are very involved in activism and the arts community. The school is named for Henry Grady, a prominent philanthropist who promoted the “New South” after the civil war. As Grady was a vocal white supremacist, many community members have tried to change the school name to something which fits an inclusive and equitable vision of Atlanta rather than cementing the violent boundaries of Atlanta’s past. The school has been renamed to MidtownHighschool, but still uses the previous colors and mascot (NewsBreak, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

As Atlanta is a deeply complex and inequitable city, band aid solutions to promote diversity and inclusion in space really only create better branding and serve the art institution rather than supporting the community. Creating access in Atlanta is very complex as the way the city is built divides socioeconomic classes, and limits the quality infrastructure (public parks, plumbing, public art, transit, etc) for those living in historically wealthier areas. Although efforts to bring more public art into disenfranchised neighborhoods have been effective, these frequently help gentrification in the long run rather than bring art to the neighborhood in a meaningful way.

## Chapter Four

### Research Design

#### Introduction

I became interested in conducting this thesis because I have been a working artist in Atlanta since I was around 15 (almost seven years now). I started out making gig posters for bands (even though I could not go to the shows because I had a baby face and no fake ID), volunteered, and went to as many events as I could. I managed to rack up quite a bill on Lyft (a ride-sharing app, because I could not drive until I was twenty-one) and I learned to dress, walk, and act in a specific way to get respect in art spaces. After a few years, I started showing work in some galleries, working at some house music raves, and interning.

While I worked for these arts institutions (who did not consent to have their identities mentioned in this thesis), I noticed many of the artists involved were struggling and constantly making compromises in their art in order to make ends meet. Talking with artists I was showing with and new friends I met, I realized it is difficult to make a career as an artist in Atlanta.

In my work in art programming and education, I also saw the fragmentation of the community and the disconnect between arts institutions and the art community. As I was able to implement some changes and create accessibility in the classes I taught, I started to research how art accessibility can be created on a much larger scale. I decided to research practical methods which can be implemented by art institutions in

Atlanta. This thesis analyzes how art institutions are developing new structures to create accessibility and become more supportive of the art community.

During the process of conducting my research, I remained an active member of the Atlanta art community. As I applied to calls, participated in shows, attended events, and talked to fellow artists, I took note of what I was able to gain access to and what subgroups of the community I worked in. As I was still taking five courses a semester, taking a few jobs, and working at the front desk at the college of art, I was unable to be as involved as I wanted to be to get a holistic view of the community. So, I chose to conduct my ethnographic research over two years, including the teaching and organizing work I did alongside interviews and participant observations from events, and autoethnography.

## **Methods**

For this ethnography, my research consisted of long-form interviews, short-form interviews, participant observation, program analysis, and auto-ethnography. After obtaining approval from the GSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) , I created a thorough interview protocol. I intended on interviewing a diverse range of people in the art community, from artists just starting out to artists who have been established for decades along with curators, organizers, and art administrators. As one's accessibility is shaped by one's socioeconomic class, it was critical to include participants representing a range of backgrounds in order to have a holistic understanding. Thus, I needed to create a list of questions about accessibility and art institutions that could be specific to

certain subgroups in the community, and be able to show larger trends around socioeconomic stratification and access overall.

So, I constructed my interview in a tiered system, discussing first one's relationship to the community and institutions within the community (included in Appendix) . Then, I asked the participant about accessibility within the community in terms of institutional exclusivity and disability, and how they have seen access change. Finally, I asked them about changes within the community due to gentrification and an influx of funding for art, and how they hope to see the community change. The interview protocol is in the appendix.

I was able to conduct two audio-recorded interviews with arts administrators Miranda Kyle and Chris Yonker, and the rest of the interviews either had written responses or were not recorded. In these interviews, I spoke to attendees at gallery openings and art events, coworkers and former coworkers at arts institutions, and fellow artists over coffee. I sought a representative group of members of the Art Community, so I interviewed at least five people from each category I analyze (defined in the Parameters section). I took careful notes during or after each interview and stored all notes in a secure place. After an interview, I coded the notes, noting the disparities between how artists are able to gain access to the community. I also explored how artists relate to and work with different types of institutions within the community (DIY galleries, commercial galleries, museums/arts centers), and how issues around access and financial burdens persist throughout their careers.

The vast majority of the people I interviewed chose to have their identities concealed from the record. Initially, I thought artists would want to have their names in

the thesis so they could highlight the work they had done in the community. As I interviewed more artists, I understood that these artists chose to be completely honest with me about their experiences rather than use the thesis for exposure. In my analysis, I discuss how artists and organizers have to censor themselves and engage in institutional critique very carefully to not alienate themselves. As social media and digital publication now play an integral role in the art world, speaking critically about an institution can be taken as an attack. Thus, smaller and independent artists who seek to create accessibility and change within the institution tend to avoid openly criticizing institutions in favor of concealing their identity or speaking abstractly. As I encouraged participants to give as much detail as possible, most chose to omit their identity.

As I have been a working artist and member of the community for several years, I was able to engage in participant observation without struggling to gain access to the community. I sought a representational group of participants to interview, speaking to both established community members who had been working for years and community members who were just starting out or only had a few years under their belt. Overall, I wanted to get several perspectives to understand the systems supporting artists and arts institutions. Over the two years of my participant observation I attended a wide variety of shows, events, and openings. I made sure to attend events hosted by DIY institutions, galleries, art organizations, and museums, and conducted informal, short-form interviews with attendees during and after the event.

Additionally, I analyzed my experiences as a working artist and teaching artist during this research period. I was able to work jobs for several organizations and implement my ideas around creating accessibility on a small scale within the classroom.



I used my analysis of interviews of my colleagues (artists at a similar place in their career to me) to explore discrepancies in opportunity (payment, jobs, achievement, etc) and accessibility due to socioeconomic discrimination.

After I finished conducting the research, I destroyed the written notes through composting and deleted the digital files. All images included in the thesis are selected to illustrate an image-centric community, and obscure the identity of everyone photographed other than the author.

## **Parameters**

In order to be able to compare these histories with the DIY arts community and the contemporary art community in Atlanta, it is necessary to define several terms. A community is a group of people bound together by traditions and common values. The **Art Community** in Atlanta is semi-formalized as it has an economic structure and defined pathways for entry. This economic structure is defined by gallery sales, patrons, and funding from private and municipal sources. While anyone can come into a gallery or venue to look at or experience art, it can be challenging to get involved as an artist. These challenges and rites of passage depend on which subgroup within the art community an artist tries to get involved in. **Accessibility**, in turn, is shaped by these challenges. Although accessibility is traditionally defined in institutions by stipulations from the Americans with Disabilities Act, accessibility is the quality of being able to be reached or entered. In a community, accessibility is defined as one's ability to enter and gain acceptance in the community. For the art community this can include the ability to get jobs, make connections with other artists, display work in gallery shows, etc.

although the specifics are defined by the artist's individual goals in their practice and what they seek from the community. In this thesis, I explore accessibility and exclusion broadly, in terms of race, socioeconomic class, age, and gender identity, in addition to the more limited definition provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

I primarily focus on four types of art institutions in this research. First, **DIY institutions** are smaller groups, usually predominantly organized online (sometimes with a physical location) that usually focus on younger and emerging artists. **Galleries** are more commercially focused groups (except for conceptual/experimental galleries) with physical locations, who predominantly focus on emerging and somewhat established artists. **Art Organizations** are intermediaries who advocate for arts through programs, festivals, or public art and focus on the community. **Museums** are more traditional institutions that focus on established artists and operate from a physical location (excepting digital museums).

The following chapters analyze the practical applications of creating access to art in Atlanta. In Chapter Five, I discuss how the community has dramatically changed in the past two decades, and discuss its last heyday in the early 2010s. In Chapter Six, I analyze the data I collected from interviews I conducted around several artists' experiences working and participating in the community. I also examine my work and methods of subverting some of the issues created by the status quo in my role as an art teacher. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I propose actionable strategies to create accessibility and center the community in arts institutions in Atlanta.

## Chapter Five

### **No, *You* Smell Like an Ashtray: A Recent History of DIY Art in Atlanta**

In the past two decades, the art community in Atlanta has undergone several evolutions and became what it is today. The 2008 financial crisis and the COVID pandemic (2020-ongoing) have both forced Atlanta art institutions to adapt in radical ways both in terms of location and framework. In this chapter, I explore these two decades in terms of how various institutions adapted, survived, and shaped the community- some resisting gentrification and some actively contributing to it. Many artists I spoke with grew very nostalgic when I asked about the mid to late 2010s in the Atlanta Art Community. After the housing bubble burst in 2008, there were many abandoned spaces and buildings. A few years after those spaces remained vacant, it was easy to find cheap rent and create a DIY gallery. At the time, the Atlanta art community was huge, and several artists I spoke with described multiple openings every weekend, with new spaces constantly opening.

Thus, many iconic spaces, like Office Space and Mammal Gallery supported a culture of experimental and boundary-pushing art. Atlanta became a hub for

underground and fringe creatives, with a thriving Punk music scene. As property prices started to rise and gentrification increased in the late 2010s (Corrigan, 2021), spaces started shutting down or having to find ways to adapt. I started working in the art community in the last few years of the 2010s and was only able to participate in this community as it declined.

Many of the cornerstone art institutions of this era tried different methods of adapting, some with success. The organizations, like Wonderroot, which tried to corporatize, ended up alienating their founding community and struggling to connect. Others, like The Bakery, relied on community effort through donations and large volunteer days- but still had to relocate when they were bought out (still mainly run by community/volunteer efforts). Thus, the way an institution chose to adapt to gentrification and changing aspects of the city characterized its operations for the following years.

Now, art institutions are looking for ways to adapt to the pandemic and become more community-centric. As creating accessibility is complex and is tailored around community needs rather than general prescriptive models, some institutions have run into trouble. The artists I spoke with described some of the shortcomings they see today in the art community, and the improvements they hope to see in the future.

## **The 2010s- DIY Era**

The 2010s were the golden era of Atlanta's Do-It-Yourself/Do-It-Together independent art community. Eyedrum, an arts center, is seen as the Grandmother of

this movement by many experimental artists and musicians working on the fringe. Founded in 1998, Eyedrum was begun in a loft apartment in South Downtown Atlanta. Since, this art center has been housed in several locations, hosting numerous events and programs and growing into a tight-knit community. In the 2010s, Eyedrum began focusing on working with the arts community and in May of 2013, became a part of C4 Atlanta's FUSE art program, hosting more than fifty film, music, performance, and literary events as well as a range of gallery shows. For seven more years, they were a central hub for the art community until they had to close the venue due to circumstances outside of their control including difficulties with rent agreements and rising prices due to gentrification ("History of Eyedrum").

This constant need for adaptation and nimble movement between spaces is a prevalent trend among Atlanta arts organizations. While many art institutions preach sustainability and access, the reality is much less stable. Although Atlanta is known in the South as a hub for arts and culture, municipal funding and infrastructure for this sector have been insufficient for the past decades (Scott, 2022). Thus, arts organizations have had to create their own ways of staying afloat. While each organization has its own unique history, they all have struggled to survive due to the volatility of gentrification and the crab-bucket economy it creates (Rosa-Martinez, 2015). A crab-bucket mentality refers to crabs in a bucket trying to escape. It feels necessary to pull down anyone who is achieving or is about to achieve success greater than yours, just like a crab will pull another down and climb on top of other crabs to try to escape. In this way, everyone is constantly struggling and will only help each other with an ulterior motive.

As there is not a lot of literature on DIY arts in Atlanta (especially in recent years), I built a picture of this history through interviews and my experience. The independent arts community in Atlanta (separate from the institutional community- high art galleries, museums, universities) has developed in “clumps” or hubs, similar to how a coral reef is established. When one venue or gallery finds a good space and begins to thrive, others move in around it. After the housing market bust in 2008, property values were down and there were many vacant storefronts and buildings around the city. The established art community in Castleberry Hill started growing outward, and many emerging artists started pop-up events and galleries in vacant spaces in South downtown and throughout the city. At this time, many artists, creatives, and performers were able to support each other and find larger audiences, albeit underground. This support took many forms, through collaborating on creating pieces and events, redistribution of resources and money, and even helping each other find housing. So, it was viable to work as an experimental artist and produce innovative events, even in the absence of a supporting patron class.

One of the largest of these office-run spaces was Office Space, a multi-level gallery and venue established in a vacant office building. The gallery was never officially established, as it was in a residential area. As an underground venue, funding mainly came through community support and an unofficial bar during events. Although the organizers faced a good deal of noise complaints, frustration from some of their neighbors, and legal trouble, Office Space became a cornerstone of the Atlanta DIY arts community and bolstered many emerging artists through hosting events and providing a space for creatives to connect.

Office Space was founded by three Atlanta artists who were recent graduates of Georgia State University, including Chris Yonker and Brian Egan. They each invested around \$3000 to rent the building and used their own equipment to outfit the space. Office Space was centered on creating accessibility but did not have a formalized hierarchy or governing body which ultimately led to longer-term issues. Although the freedom this created initially facilitated incredible art, the organization was unable to make the formal policy changes needed to connect with the community living around the venue and create long-lasting solutions.

As the building was located in a residential area, it was not cleared for commercial use as a venue nor as an apartment building. While the organizers were renting the building legally, their commercial use as a gallery and bar was challenged by the neighborhood organization, and they were eventually forced to close the doors of Office Space after about three years of operation.

### **Broad Street Community**

After several weeks of searching, Yonker made a connection with a landlord interested in renting a storefront on Broad Street in South Downtown. In an interview with me, Chris Yonker detailed the weeks of convincing it took for the landlord to rent to the former organizers of Office Space. Broad Street was a small community full of vacant storefronts, traditionally seen as a perfect fit for public art integration. However, many community leaders and residents I interviewed are hesitant about bringing art in as it is frequently the first wave of gentrification. Art brings in new communities and increases property value, thus displacing original community members.

Eventually, the landlord leased the space to the organizers as Mammal Gallery in 2013, an arts and music venue which also functioned as a community organizing space. In my interview with him, Yonker emphasized how much he focused on working in tandem with the community after running Office Space. The organizers wanted to collaborate and work within the community rather than be on the fringe and constantly embroiled in conflict, so they hosted neighborhood board meetings and political debates. They sought to ensure that the neighbors felt empowered rather than excluded by working with neighborhood organizations and seeking input from their neighbors.

Although Office Space was a great loss to many independent fringe artists, Mammal Gallery took its place and hosted a diverse range of shows and events. It became a home for fringe artists and neighbors alike, creating a more holistic community. The gallery collaborated with larger organizations like the Dashboard Collective, Atlanta Streets Alive, the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, and many others. They hosted workshops and shows and watched the street blossom with public art and more galleries.

Although the Mammal Gallery was popular, it frequently operated at a loss. Yonker described how difficult it was to manage events and keep events organized, as the space was still centered around accessibility and bringing people into the community with low barriers without a large staff and with a modest budget. Yonker defined accessibility as making the gallery as open as possible, so anyone who came in felt welcome. Many of the shows they hosted were for small musicians and bands who were just starting out and barely made enough to pay the sound and light technician. At



times, Yonker and the other organizers had to go into their own paychecks in order to maintain the space and keep their employees paid.

Many artists and community members also volunteered for the gallery, and the surrounding arts spaces supported each other. Broad Street was a center for experimental art, with many pop-up spaces, temporary galleries, and events every week. The shows ranged from Acid House to Folk to Grunge Punk to Noise, with something for almost everyone to enjoy. While the range of shows was diverse, the gallery still struggled with sustainability (Patton, 2020). This problem of short-term solutions struggling to reach long-term growth presented itself both in staff burnout and with limitations in the budget.

Yonker described managing the music venue side of the gallery as an ongoing adventure, helping new acts unfamiliar with the ins and outs of performance and constantly mediating disputes. This was the start of the #metoo movement, and many organizations had to question their role in sexual harassment and what it means to maintain a safe space. Yonker had many concerns about the term, arguing that people define it in many different ways and it is more important to run a community-centric space. For Yonker, focusing on the optics and branding of the changing definition of a “safe space” diverts needed attention from collaborating with the community. He regularly had to deal with allegations and rumors against musicians and artists, usually having to resolve them himself and make the call on who to welcome in versus who to refuse. While this was important, the constant pressure and grind of producing shows and filling in all of the gaps were exhausting, leaving Yonker and his fellow organizers feeling constantly drained.

Additionally, the influx of art in the Broad Street community drove up property values and prices, making it harder to produce low-cost shows and operate with a small and sometimes unpredictable budget. Although an incredible art community was connecting and thriving, the opportunities for emerging and fringe artists began to shrink. Similar independent arts organizations that centered on accessibility like Wonderroot and The Bakery, sought other ways to make ends meet and continue being a beacon for the community. Creating accessibility by making art available for everyone to view and participate in can be an incredibly challenging task as it goes against the status quo of traditional art institutions, and it can be difficult to secure funding.

### **Survival Strategies for Independent Arts Organizations**

Wonderroot, founded in 2004 by Chris Appleton, worked to expand its operations by moving into the corporate sector, collaborating with commercial groups to install large-scale murals and public art while still trying to continue its original programming. For example, Wonderroot partnered with the Superbowl to create a series of murals in Atlanta, driving up property values in small, low-income neighborhoods around the stadium, part of a much longer tradition of gentrification through public art (Klepach, 2008). Although the organization's branding and visibility were great, internally it was fracturing. I spoke to several former interns in my interviews who discussed the internal dissonance at Wonderroot in its last years as it strived toward a corporate ideal. In the 2000s and 2010s, working for the organization was somewhat of a rite of passage for many Atlanta artists. While it was founded to be based in the community, its corporate

focus pulled it further from the community's needs, leading to the closure of classes, workshops, and markets that local artists depended on for income. This shift proved to be its downfall, as many artists left the organization in frustration.

I worked at Wonderroot for around a year, and my internship ended a month before the organization closed its doors. In years prior, it was similar to Mammal Gallery, hosting a diverse array of events and programs, focusing on the changing needs of the community, especially working-class artists. As the old community center which housed workshops, classes, and events on Moreland Avenue closed and their classes dwindled, Wonderroot hosted a number of one-off public-facing events to maintain a community-centric image. Meanwhile, the organization's email inbox was flooded with questions from concerned community members asking about changing operating times, and artists about when they would be paid, what happened to their programs, and why they were not hearing back about upcoming work. Instead of listening, the leaders at Wonderroot continued putting focus and funding into corporate-sponsored large murals and public art in developments. Frequently, these developments were upscale housing and multi-use buildings, and the art was used to "preserve/promote" the culture of the neighborhood while displacing the neighbors themselves. In this way, the organization moved from supporting the community to supporting gentrification in an effort to create more public art and survive the rising cost of operation.

The Bakery, a large warehouse turned venue and arts space, used a completely different method for maintaining operations. They kept their venue open through diversifying programs, welcoming in new partners, and making space for community

members and artists to create programs and events. To cover increasing costs, they held volunteer days and had community fundraisers. In doing so, The Bakery became a resource center and was a place for civic engagement classes, plays, DJ sets, art shows, self-defense training, urban farming, and studio space.

While The Bakery was a great space for ‘the’ community, it served a *particular* community, namely the white LGBTQIA+ community. Although the organization championed collaboration and access, it did not make any meaningful ties to the neighborhood it was located in. Historically, the Adair Park neighborhood (right near the Pittsburgh neighborhood) has been a strong community of Black working-class people, many of the houses are single-story bungalows near parks with playgrounds and fields with tennis courts and running tracks. Most housing was affordable, and the neighborhood was diverse with some white and Latinx folks. The Bakery brought in much larger white patronage who started buying and moving into adjacent homes. While the regular patronage grew, the relationship with the community that pre-existed The Bakery did not.

Moreover, the staff and interns were overwhelmingly white, and many of the events were put on by white artists. I worked with The Bakery several times, designing and hosting programs, running a show, and volunteering. While they were always inviting and supportive, they did not frequently have paid opportunities and expected artists to be able to plan and execute programs without much support. This excludes many artists of color and artists who do not have alternate means of income as it necessitates time, experience, and the ability to work in a predominately white institution that does not fully acknowledge its white privilege or make the time for meaningful

partnerships. Moreover, it dictates whose culture is valuable by creating a platform and bringing art in rather than acknowledging privilege and elevating the preexisting culture and artists in the neighborhood. In this way, The Bakery was both a hub and an island.

This segregation is a larger trend throughout Atlanta arts institutions. While many institutions champion diversity, equity, and accessibility in their marketing and mission statements, the actual outreach and impact tend to fall short. Thus, the art community has developed in loosely connected pockets. Miranda Kyle, the Arts and Program Manager at The Beltline, described the difficulty of organizing city-wide art with the fractured nature of the community.

“The art world in Atlanta, in particular, is very clavicle. For example, if you were to go to an art show in the West End, you would not see the same folks at that show as you would see at a DIY show in southeast Atlanta. The same thing happens in the art world. You have entire galleries and spaces that house Black folks, Brown folks, Indigenous Folks, then you have other galleries with white and queer folks. There's not a lot of intersectionality in that, which is unfortunate because you need that intersectionality to have a thriving arts ecosystem. Which means a lot of me going into spaces and saying, ‘hey, what you're doing here is really cool, have you thought about public art?’ and them saying, ‘ what the fuck is this white girl here doing talking to us about public art?’... Which makes sense, because there is a lot of good reason to distrust white people coming into communities they aren't from, especially with the way gentrification happens in Atlanta. It takes time to build up trust and show that you want to build a meaningful relationship rather than just profit off of their work”.

This commentary shows the importance and need for inter-organizational collaboration-in terms of finance and desegregation. As the community is fragmented into different sections, it can be hard to collaborate with other artists and work on larger-scale projects. Thus, the isolation contributes to a crab bucket mentality where survival is based on competition for a few funding opportunities. As many organizations closed their doors and funding for arts dwindled from around 2016 to 2020, artists were forced to become multi-hyphenates (“artist/graphic designer/social media consultant/branding specialist/video editor/ grant writer/ strategic program manager” for one’s job title), working in many different fields and media to cobble together a livable income.

### **Rebuilding The Community**

In the midst of the pandemic (2020-Ongoing), many mutual aid efforts in Atlanta sprung up as a way to support those who lost their income or were deeply impacted. In my interview with Miranda Kyle, she discussed how informal networks of artists were highly effective in both supporting artists and starting public dialogues to question who art is for. Some of these networks focused on collaboration between artists in order to bolster those who lost jobs and gigs due to the pandemic. This led many artists to work more closely together and support each other's businesses through the framework of mutual aid, where each member is equally supported. Online Zoom meetings on community art and organization broke down some of the socioeconomic and geographic barriers, allowing more creatives and community members to have voices in the conversation.

These meetings highlighted how predominantly white institutions (PWIs) receive a disproportionate amount of funding for arts (Faulkner, 2021), and how many organizations tokenize a handful of BIPOC artists in order to seem intersectional. Thus, many organizations worked to divert funding and collaborate in order to work towards equity. At The Atlanta Contemporary, Nisa Floyd, the program director, partnered with the Urban Catalyst Lab to host a series of discussions on Art as a Solution in terms of how art plays a role in the community and socio-economic equity (Atlanta Contemporary Update). Floyd left a few months later due to a lack of meaningful growth in the museum's inclusion efforts. In an interview with one of the former employees of the institution, they elaborated on these shortcomings,

“Though Atlanta Contemporary is a free admission museum, the lack of diversity contributed greatly to the demographics that visited despite it being more economically accessible. In addition, the studio artist program was perceived as being highly elitist in ways that prevented emerging artists from even applying to the program (not to be confused with residency due to lack of support for artists in the ways that traditional residencies provide). It wasn't until the pandemic that I realized how being tokenized and feeling responsible for increasing diversity, equity and inclusion played a large part in what DEIA professionals refer to as identity theft and which in turn leads to continued lack of psychological safety. I am a dimension of diversity that involves people experiencing the freedom and safety to engage rather than being focused on protecting themselves. “

While partnerships (between the Atlanta Contemporary and Black Women in Visual Art, for example) have been a great step forward, there is still significant work to be done in terms of inter-organizational collaboration.

Organizations are critical to providing accessibility to the arts community and promoting sustainability and support between artists. Although the Atlanta art community is relatively small, it is still difficult to gain access to and is very much based on who you know. Therefore, getting in on your own is nearly impossible. Without organizations, artists are forced to compete for spots and constantly be on the hunt for any opportunity. Organizations provide frameworks for building and maintaining an artistic career, connections to patrons and funding institutions, and opportunities for growth and collaboration with other creatives. This way, artists are encouraged to work together and build a sustainable model rather than constantly competing for survival.

For example, artist Neka King described how her undergraduate education at Georgia State was her stepping stool into the Atlanta arts community.

“So I completed my undergrad at GSU between 2013 - 2016 and before that GA Perimeter 2011-2012. With that said my first introduction to Atlanta's art scene came through my time in school, specifically my time at GSU. If I had to describe the trend I would say DIY spaces/ Artist-run spaces were my experiences of the scene. The LOW Museum, Murmur, Broad Street in general, The Bakery, Mint, Wonderroot were the places I remember the most. Then there were Black-owned spaces like Notch 8 and a few other pop-up events like zinefest and some others I can't remember at the moment...To sum it up the art



scene was a big little family. Everyone was connected in some way which like anything that is close-knit has its pros and cons...Then there were always a lot of issues like racism, classism, sexism, and all the other isms that were subtle, institutional, or direct.”

Thus, the art community in Atlanta is at a turning point, with many new galleries and programs opening in the “post-pandemic” period. As issues like gatekeeping, systemic racism and classism, and gentrification are more openly discussed in the art community, art institutions are held accountable and expected to support the art community through dealing with these issues rather than being able to sweep them under the rug in prior years. Now, many institutions are finding ways to create community centric models and create solutions.

## Chapter Six

# Hey Everybody! An Analysis of Fieldwork

In this chapter, I discuss the two years of fieldwork I conducted through participant observation, short and long-form interviews, working as an artist, and teaching. Through this fieldwork, I observed the roles several art institutions play in the Atlanta art community. While the **art community** in Atlanta is a semi-formal group of people bound by the common value of creating and participating in art with an economic structure- the commerce from selling and buying art and larger public and private grants to fund art projects, **arts institutions** are formalized entities (usually with a fixed location) with clearly defined goals and activities (gallery, venue, museum).

Within the art community, there are many subgroups each with its own culture, commerce (careers and ways to get funding for projects), and institutions. Examples include the tattoo artist subgroup, the high art sculpture subgroup; these subgroups usually stay separated but many artists are members of several subgroups, and divide their time and work accordingly.

There are several types of arts institutions in Atlanta. I primarily focus on four types of institutions: **DIY Institutions** (smaller groups that focus on emerging artists, sometimes primarily through digital spaces and pop-up events), **Galleries** (more commercial spaces that focus on selling art), **Arts Organizations** (intermediaries which host programs and festivals and usually focus on arts accessibility and/or public art) and **Museums** (more traditional spaces, usually non-acquiring institutions that showcase solely established artists). I begin this chapter by examining the changing organization

of arts institutions over the past three years, and how these changes impact accessibility in the art community. Then, I explore practical ways of creating accessibility, focusing on the classroom. I discuss aspects of accessibility, in terms of gentrification, socioeconomic discrimination, and infrastructure access for those who are differently abled. Finally, I review the continued fragmentation in the art community and how it impacts accessibility in the art community overall.



### 6.1 One-Line performance for Elevate Atlanta 2021

This performance took place on top of the exterior facade of Underground Atlanta, a revitalized arts venue. During the performance, a live band played. The band included Henry White on Sax, Clark Hamilton on Guitar, Ryder Siegele on Drums, Anthony Doud on Drums, and Noah Estrella on Bass. I drew each participant in one line, moving over slightly from one portrait to the next. There were a few technical difficulties setting up, and the paper was hung several inches too high. So, I was on my toes for the duration of the event.

## Changing Structures of Arts Institutions and Accessibility

It can be incredibly difficult to get into the art community in Atlanta. As many spaces compete for attention to be able to pay their bills and survive, exclusivity becomes part of their identity. To “get into” (become involved in a working capacity) a space, it is necessary to know others who show work there. Consequently, the system is effectively gatekept, limiting entry to individual relationships and one’s access to the arts, rather than the arts coming to the individual.

Many of my interlocutors discussed the difficulty they experienced in Atlanta. Several described how long it took to be taken seriously, persistently coming to events, talking to other artists and organizers, and trying to network. This combination of survival, exclusivity, and competition has created a culture of scamming and abusive practices. Because artists trying to get into the community are desperate for opportunities, and many artists already in the community are competing for jobs, it is common for young artists seeking access to work for free.

Moreover, it is challenging to know when you are a part of the art community. As this is such a gradual process and dependent on one’s ability to work and make connections, it takes some months while it takes others years. Many of the artists I interviewed could not exactly put their finger on when they became part of the art community. While everyone had their own determining factor (an achievement, showing work or performing at a certain venue, being able to quit a day job), they all centered around an economic milestone (getting funding for a large body of work or being able to rent a large studio space). Thus, the intrinsic uncertainty in becoming a member of the

community makes it easy to take advantage of those trying to join.

This culture of abuse has continued for decades and does not frequently result in well-paying opportunities or jobs for many. On the contrary, one either learns to choose gigs and opportunities carefully or gives up. So, it is important to have access to mentorship from more experienced artists who know how to navigate choosing opportunities. As this requires significant time and effort for little pay, those who can supplement their income with other work or support from family can make progress much more quickly than those who cannot afford to take so many low paying jobs, or might not have the free time due to outside obligations (taking care of family, children, working multiple jobs, school). Thus, those with money, access to art, connections, and time can rise in the ranks much faster and facilitate access to their opportunities.

This system values overextending oneself and taking significant risks. As the only way to gain notoriety and get established in the community is through constantly working and attending events, one is encouraged to “stay hungry” and “take every opportunity. Several artists and community members I spoke to, who chose to conceal their identities, discussed how this mindset supports sexual harassment and abuse. Young artists are encouraged to make connections with as many people as possible and to take advantage of any opportunity. As a significant amount of the opportunities starting are helping other artists or volunteering in places without formal supervision or oversight, many young artists are assaulted and told that if they go public with the information they will destroy their prospect of a career in the art community. Thus, there is an informal network of emerging and established artists who look out for each other and warn each other about who to avoid working with or being around.

In short, the rite of passage to enter the art community is characterized by desperation. It is an unspoken rule that artists are expected to continue working for almost no pay or doing favors for other established members of the community until they earn enough notoriety to be established. As there is little institutional infrastructure for artists' careers, this culture persists. Several of the established artists I interviewed described that the constant underpaying and backstabbing they experienced while trying to get into the art community endures; many established artists constantly have to fight to get paid properly for their labor.

As the art community in Atlanta is an amorphous and informal entity, it is an open system. While there are some formal governing structures, for example in the ways in which institutions determine where some funding goes, a significant portion of Atlanta's art community functions outside of these institutions. Moreover, increasing economic stratification, gentrification, and a disconnect between communities lead to a constant flux in who gets attention (both through financial attention- grants, commercial success, and through press and fame). As a neighborhood or area gets gentrified, more funding goes in to the area for public art and grants to "revitalize" while the original community living there gets displaced.

In this way, it is easier to see the impact of the ongoing changes on creatives' lives and ability to work. While organizations in the past three years have radically changed and the hierarchy of the art community has shifted, the same issues of a lack of infrastructure, gatekeeping, and fragmentation are coming to the forefront. As many smaller arts institutions do not have stable funding, they are forced to either exist in uncertainty or focus more on funding than supporting artists in order to create stability.

For example, three small galleries I used to attend frequently before the pandemic were forced to close as they relied mostly on foot traffic, donations, and sliding scale ticketed events (where anyone can come in, and the ticket costs what one can afford, usually from five to fifteen dollars). Out of those three, one was able to rebuild and start presenting art again through creating “pop up” events, where the gallery would install a show in a house or host an event in a park. While this gallery is active, it is still looking for a permanent space.

In the past three years, openings of new galleries, organizations, and programs give space to address these issues directly and grow a strong art community rather than constantly having to rebuild every few years. There is still little infrastructure for arts organizations, most organizations are still isolated and fragmented, and many artists lack security and constantly have to compromise.

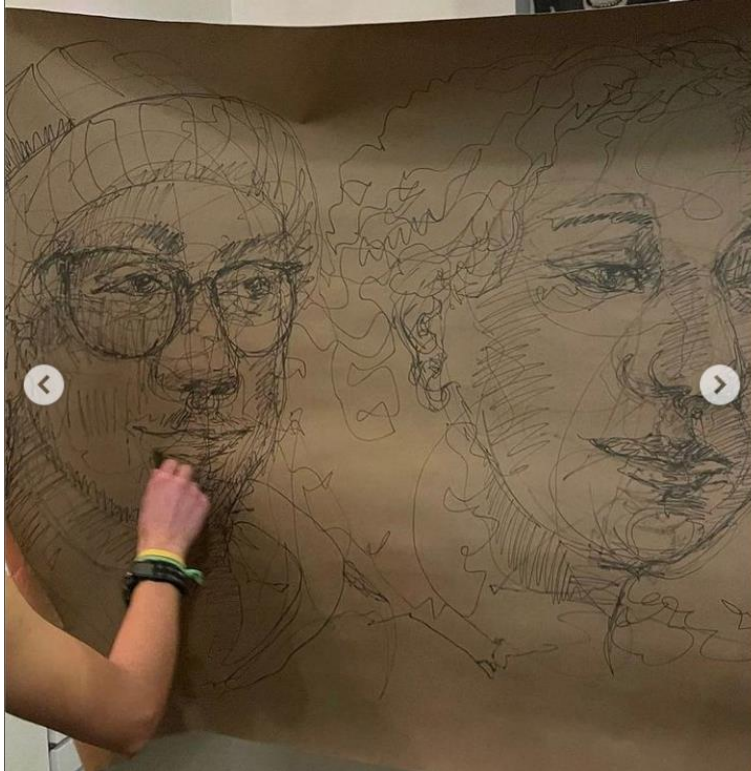
First, a lack of infrastructure in a community with so many institutions may seem hypocritical. There are many arts organizations in Atlanta, ranging from basements and house galleries to multi-million dollar museums. The city is known as a cultural hub for the South and is the starting place for many well-known musicians and artists like Mr. Totem, an internationally known graffiti artist, and musicians like Andre 3000 and Big Boi. Moreover, the city’s growing economy in creative industries (especially film and TV) is bringing in more people every year.

However, everything is not as supportive and equitable as it may seem. Due to increasing property values and urban renewal efforts (development of upscale condo/apartments in place of affordable housing), many arts organizations closed. The vast majority of the artists I spoke to over this two-year period discussed how difficult it

was to adapt their practice to not being able to show art in the spaces they used to work with. While more money is coming into the local economy, there are few support structures built to ensure residents will not get pushed out in favor of high-dollar real estate (Kanell, 2022). This way, community ties are strained by displacement, and artists have to rely on jobs from those who pushed their community out. Thus, these development groups are seen as contributing to the cultural sector and receive recognition and funding, rather than having ways to directly support artists and communities.

Smaller, arts-centric independent organizations, such as galleries, are in a precarious situation. Generally, these organizations operate on smaller budgets which are composed mostly of the financial and volunteer support of the community they serve. While the city of Atlanta has grants and programs to support individual artists, the grants for arts organizations are highly competitive and limited (City of Atlanta Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs Grants for Art). So, small institutions have to find their own location. As I explain below, although this meant that organizations would bring art into low-cost and vacant spaces, it does not foster collaboration or growth within communities.





6.2 Photo from a one-line performance in 2022

A one-line performance at a small bookstore in 2022, several organizations have started collaborating with smaller venues, like coffee shops and bookstores, for one-night-only events. As they cannot afford to rent out a traditional venue and do not have the money to have a physical location, pop-up shows are the main way they can host events and support the community.

Although the model many galleries have used in the past of moving every few months into a different low-cost space (usually renting a house in a neighborhood) is hyper-local, it prioritizes competition over collaboration and contributes to the cycle of gentrification rather than creating a lasting center for art. As arts institutions with physical locations (rather than a mostly digital presence with pop-up shows) move into new, low-cost locations, they are more focused on surviving and bringing in art. One of the clearest examples of the disconnect between the art institution and the community

they are residing in I have seen has been weeknight late art openings. Art openings (the night a new show starts) are usually somewhat raucous (depending on the crowd), with drinking and loud music. In order to gather a large crowd and not conflict with larger openings happening through the weekend, smaller openings are traditionally held on Thursdays. While a weeknight party that goes until 3 AM is fun, it can be frustrating to all of the neighbors who did not choose to attend the event yet cannot escape from the noise. Neighbors with children or with early morning jobs are forced to tolerate the disturbance in their space while opening attendees can go about as they please without regard to the neighbors.

This way, institutions can continue to present and sell the work of a small group of artists, and maintain their reputation. While some galleries, like Mammal, work to collaborate with the community they move into, many only work with existing art community members rather than creating new pathways.

## **Get What You're Worth: How Artists Make It Work**

One artist I spoke to described how companies commissioning her for murals routinely tried to undervalue her work or pay her in "exposure" over proper payment. Although she had worked as a professional muralist for years and had specific pay rates, these companies still operated on the expectation that the artist is desperate for work and therefore the artist will do a significant amount of uncompensated work. When an Atlanta art institution worked as a middle man for artists, negotiating contracts and pay with companies, the artists were able to get fair and equitable pay for their labor. In this way, institutions can protect artists and broker fair and equitable deals to

ensure the artist's work is valued.

One of the main reasons this culture of under compensating artists' work has been able to endure for so long is due to the fragmentation of the art community. Rather than one unified community, there are many subgroups and communities, separated both by neighborhood/ geographic location and by socioeconomic group. While this is common in art communities, these separations in Atlanta keep artists in unstable competition. Rather than work in unity to facilitate growth and larger projects, each subgroup works in isolation. As there is little formal infrastructure to support artists, many find ways to keep working within broken systems or struggle to stay afloat.

Several established mural artists I interviewed described how ambivalent they felt about taking many of their recent jobs. While they chose to take these jobs to pay the bills as an artist and further their careers, they knew they would be contributing to gentrification. As there are few municipally funded large public art projects, most jobs are from corporate developments moving into Atlanta. The company commissioning the mural usually uses the commission to prove that they are working with the community (thus tokenizing the artist), then increases property values through high rent for the spaces in their building. Thus, mural artists end up hurting the community they represent for one-off (non-recurring) jobs. Long term, this kind of work is unsustainable for artists.

While this is an issue that many artists are frustrated about and spoke about in my interviews, publishing negative opinions toward this system is dangerous and potentially damaging. As these are usually the best paying jobs for mural artists in Atlanta, artists recognize the precariousness of their situation and are bound to speak and

present themselves on social media in a way that does not combat these corporate entities openly. A well paying mural job supplies a budget of \$25,000-10,000 (depending on the size, including all supplies and payment for assistants- it is nearly impossible to paint 2500 square feet alone in a timely fashion), an underpaying job supplies a budget of \$7,000-2,000 (including supplies and payment for assistants), so the artist has to scrounge for materials and usually pay the assistants in “exposure” or find fellow mural artists and assist each other on murals (a common way to avoid exploiting emerging artists and supporting each other). As these murals are oftentimes presented as community public art or a connection to the community to “combat erasure” or “represent the community” (save face). Artists can speak openly against gentrification generally, with caution. The way they speak is determined by how established the artist is and how much privilege they have- a white artist may be lauded for being progressive for speaking against gentrification while a Black artist may be labeled as “angry” or “against development/public art”.

This issue similarly impacts independent organizers and artists who work with various public art organizations in the community. While some choose to openly criticize institutions for being solely performative in their activism, many choose to speak/post (on social media/publications) openly about ideas and criticize larger societal structures rather than speak about specific problematic practices of Atlanta art institutions. While the latter strategy is more convoluted, it is more effective in the long term. Frequently, artists who speak openly against organizations perpetuating gentrification or engaging in performative activism are silenced and alienated through getting informally blacklisted from publication and jobs. As many institutions are bureaucratic and make changes

over long periods of time, demands for reform are often received as attacks rather than an opportunity to listen and collaborate. Thus, institutions will cease working with the artist, damaging the artist's reputation and limiting their ability to work.

This way, organizers can work within institutions to change them and continue to create change within the community. Although openly criticizing Atlanta art institutions, like the backlash to Atlanta Contemporary's bare minimum and completely lackluster Black Lives Matter open letter posted on Instagram is to the point, it can frequently lead to ostracization and challenges in getting jobs and getting into positions to effect change. While the comments on the post brought up good points about ways to increase diversity and support working Black artists, the comments were deleted by the institution and the post was subsequently followed by a selection of tokenized Black artists the institution had shown in the past. Although this issue is caused by white-centric arts institutions that refuse to adapt and maintain their prominence through performative efforts, it is currently up to artists to find ways to navigate through this and affect the change they wish to see. And so, it is critical for predominantly white, white-centric institutions to create ways to have a productive and open dialogue with the community rather than putting the onus of change and accessibility on artists and activists working within the organization.

## **Institutional Role In Creating Equity**

Building access requires strategy and foresight. As the socioeconomic stratification reflected in barriers to access impacts individuals in many different lasting ways, it is critical to creating solutions that address these issues in specific and dynamic

ways. Thus, institutions must examine the disparities in how artists are able to gain access to the art community based on socioeconomic discrimination. While some of the systems that grant access are racially and ethnically diverse, it is necessary to have disposable income in order to gain entry. Artists who have more privilege and have more experience showing their work in galleries and getting commissions have a much easier time getting jobs than those who have fewer connections and were not able to get established in the art community as quickly. While many DIY spaces support diversity, they commonly work in a network of predominantly white artists and give more opportunities to those who have connections to the people running the space. Consequently, many Afrolatinx, Asian, Black, Latinx, artists have a harder time getting established, making it harder to get hired for work. Although some DIY spaces have tried to create a solution for this disparity by having identity-specific shows, this frequently pigeonholes artists and does not give them the support that their white counterparts have.

Moreover, it is critical for institutions to create solutions through programs that are dynamic and adapt to changing circumstances over a static model. For example, a program that creates a standard contract for mural artists to get fair pay and provide some funding for art for the community they create a mural in, will become outdated and obsolete within a few years if it does not get enough funding to update the contracts and adapt to changing zoning laws. Even if such a specific program seems like it would barely make a dent in these larger issues, it is more effective to target specific problems. In the past three years, several public art institutions in Atlanta have created programs that focus on commissioning younger artists of Color for large murals. As

these artists might get passed over for lack of experience, the program provides funding, and support by providing the artist a mentor and training them on how to use equipment to paint a large-scale outdoor mural. Programs from art institutions that attempt to solve general issues tend to become performative and short-lived. In the Summer of 2020, many arts institutions sought to support Black Lives Matter but without clear goals or outcomes. Thus, these programs usually resulted in an outpouring of infographics on Instagram, with a subsequent return to the status quo. Although their initial intentions may be good, the lack of focus makes it difficult to generate practical and actionable solutions. So, these programs either peter out or become speaking points rather than meaningful support.

Thus, institutions need to work with communities to devise programs to bridge gaps and solve specific problems rather than create grandiose programs that fill out the goals of their mission statement but fizzle out quickly or solutions that are convenient to the institution but not meaningful to the community like large public art projects without the local community's input. Accordingly, institutions need to prioritize their role within the art community through focused programs that provide both support and funding. One of the most effective ways I have seen arts institutions in Atlanta do this has been through paid apprenticeship programs.

These programs include starting level positions under professionals at art institutions like The Atlanta Contemporary, MoCA GA, or the High Museum. As many careers in the arts require highly specialized education and training, they tend to be dominated by white men. Moreover, those who even get to be considered for the position are expected to have several years of experience in prestigious jobs which

usually are obtained through recommendations. Consequently, those without access to higher education and mentors with connections are left with almost no options to gain access. In the past, one could only get this training for curation, art handling, or art education through traditional post-secondary education, thus limiting those career options to those who have access to elite higher education. While many museums have unpaid internship programs to help people get involved in institutional work, this replicates the aforementioned framework which benefits those with privilege who are able to work for little to no pay in order to get established.

### **Creating Access First Instead Of Retrofitting For Access Last**

There are many ways of going about creating access within a bureaucracy. With a limited budget, a board, an overwhelmed staff, and the need for constant building repairs, all common in Atlanta arts institutions according to many of the community members I interviewed, it can be difficult to find new ways to create access. Although the institutions I consider in this thesis are diverse in size, budget, mission statement, community, and geographic locations, they share a number of challenges. This is in part due to the mentality that creating access means retrofitting old systems. In this way, tokenizing some people of Color who work for the institution, adding a wheelchair ramp, and translating some of the literature into Spanish are understood to take care of creating accessibility, and no further actions are taken. At one institution I worked for, the decision was made to add a binder at the front desk which had the exhibition wall text and labels printed larger, so a visitor who had difficulty reading could borrow the binder rather than simply printing the wall text and labels larger. This way, the visitor who had difficulty reading was shown that they were out of the ordinary and were given



an awkward solution, thus making them feel unwelcome in the space. Having made an effort to highlight exhibits that were wheelchair accessible and put information on the website about resources (from outside institutions) for visitors living with disabilities, the decision makers at the organization felt they had adequately done their job.

Obviously, this is an extraordinarily problematic way to understand access. While retrofitting can be efficient, it comes back to the troublesome nature of prescriptive models. In this way, creating access is shaped by what is convenient for the institution rather than what is meaningful for the community. Physical retrofitting of the space (adding more lighting, printing text larger, spacing displays out so a wheelchair, walker, or stroller can fit easily) are frequently less functional and more expensive. Similarly, retrofitting with programming (adding diversity initiative onto the end, adding an identity-specific show) tends to center what is convenient for the institution rather than what is needed for those who have limited access. Thus, solutions from this framework tend to be only somewhat effective and largely performative. This trend has been particularly prominent in high art museums, where many museums refuse to comply with ADA standards (Americans With Disabilities Act). While this is technically illegal, many are able to continue through claiming to strive to do more or covering up obvious lack of compliance (ie: emphasizing wheelchair accessible exhibits to avert attention from the fact that several exhibits are only accessible through narrow doorways or stairs).

For example, one institution I worked with was not interested in seeking museum accreditation as they were aware they were not ADA compliant in many different ways. Their solution to this was to push the branding of access to their social media, and have the discussions behind closed doors. Granted, the institution had a small budget and

could not afford some of the significant architectural changes needed to make the building wheelchair compliant. This mentality of budgetary limitations and accessibility as retrofitting applied to every other area of the institution as well, so they did not train their staff for anything outside of first aid (no inclusivity training for assisting visitors living with disabilities).

So, all of their programming and literature targeted an educated, neurotypical, wealthy white population with a scattering of other programs and events targeting other groups in the community. For example, all of the pamphlets provided to visitors were written in academic English in a very small font size. In this way, the explanation behind the art is limited to those who can read the pamphlets. This was one of the many ways they coded the space to be welcoming to their target audience. While the intention was more focused on maintaining brand image and consistency through everything, rather than directly excluding all visitors except for educated white young people in a certain tax bracket, their negligence about everyone outside of their target demographic reinforced exclusion.

Over time this institution did start adding events and materials to be more open to the community. However, they were only willing to go so far. I interviewed a handful of former interns and employees about the Diversity Equity Access and Inclusion initiatives at the institution and found that many faced pushback when they suggested new ways of operating that promoted access. Although the institution was willing to add more educational programming both for K-12 education and for adults, the executive director and board approved about half the budget the program needed in order to properly function. Additionally, they encouraged unpaid interns to design programs and materials

for the institution, but very rarely paid for any of the work implemented at the institution. They promoted diversity frequently on their social media but repeatedly hired white curators and organizers for programming.

While this model for creating accessibility through retrofitting meets mission statement goals on the surface, it further divides the institution from the art community. Their intentions promote equity, but the application perpetuates the same issues of exclusion. This shows that supporting the community means listening and adapting to needs is more important in successfully creating meaningful access rather than solely adding the elements/improvements (programs, changes to the literature, etc) which are convenient to the institution.

## **Creating Access In Classrooms**

Creating accessibility requires time and creativity. In my two years of fieldwork, I have been able to most effectively create this access through teaching art. I found that in teaching I had more power to make decisions and create accessibility, as opposed to when I worked as an assistant or intern. I worked in both traditional and non-traditional classrooms and found practical ways to make the lessons more inclusive in both.

Although teaching in traditional and non-traditional spaces can be very different, the main idea I kept coming back to when leading a class or designing lessons was finding a way to build the classroom around student conversation and collaboration over competition. In this way, students were encouraged to explore expression and poly narrative perspectives on what art is and what it can be. In this way, art is both a way to explore experiences and imagine new possibilities for everyone.

Each of the teaching jobs I worked had its challenges and opportunities, which gave me a more holistic understanding of how art education works in different settings. First, I taught a small class in an independent school slightly north of the city of Atlanta. Each student had unique skills and chose to take the class because they were interested in learning more about art, drawing, and portraiture. The class met once a week and was composed of students aged ten to twelve (this was an independent school with a non-traditional structure to grades).

When I started the class, I asked the students to describe the art history they were familiar with. Each excitedly described their favorite television shows, music, visual art, and books. When I pulled an art history book off the shelf and we started looking through it as a class, the light behind their eyes dimmed. Each page had a different painting or sculpture of an older white man, staring back at us contemptuously. Although the students started excited about learning more about art, they felt shut out as they were all Afro-Latinx and Black femme-identifying individuals. The students felt that they did not have a place in art because they saw none of themselves reflected in the classical art of the Renaissance cannon, the traditional method to introduce portraiture.

As I was discussing how the background of a painting can tell the story of the subject and provide context, one student interrupted and asked, “Are there any paintings of someone who looks like us?” I put the book down and explained how traditional academic art still uses Renaissance standards for portraiture. Most artists are trained to study the old masters to learn the technical aspects of portraiture. Then, we talked about how studying only these old masters can perpetuate racism in art through

centralizing Western European whiteness as the standard for beauty. After discussing how there are many kinds of beauty, each important and valid in their own right, the students had a renewed excitement around creating art. I promised them I would bring better books to look at the following week.

Indeed, every week from then on I brought in a diverse collection of books ranging from ancient art history volumes to contemporary art zines (independently published magazines). Instead of going with a traditional curriculum, I decided to focus on practicing new ways of seeing and drawing people. I shaped the course around postmodern theory and phenomenology by using art as a way to understand others and oneself. So, I taught them how to use color, pattern, and abstract shapes to express how they felt.

During class, I facilitated classroom discussions where students discussed how certain colors and shapes they used in their warm-up drawing reflected what they were feeling that day. Then, I led a variety of collaborative drawing games that helped students understand others' ideas and experiences through fictional character design and expressive portraiture. In these games, everyone's ideas were valued equally and art was used as a mode of communication. These group drawings inspired conversations on a variety of topics including self-expression, identity, family, future careers, solutions to the climate crisis, history, and imaginary worlds; these conversations, in turn, inspired more drawings.

At first, I received some pushback from school administrators and the students' parents. Rather than coming home with technical studies using the classical seven heads rule, the students went home with drawings full of explosive color and expressive

forms. Their self-portraits sometimes contained kitchen appliances, buildings, and alien life forms. So, I had a meeting with several parents and an administrator from the school.

They showed me some of the imaginative drawings I saw my students working on in class, replete with multiple sets of butterfly wings, spaceships, and rainbow lasers. Frustrated, they asked why I was so off course and why the students were not learning classical portraiture. I explained the extra arms making a grilled cheese feast in one self-portrait were inspired by the Hindu god Durga, who has eight arms in one of his forms. The technicolor swirling sunbeams with small characters surrounding the subject were inspired by a serigraph by Favianna Rodríguez. In the drawings, I pointed out the color theory they were using, and how they employed shapes and values to give the subject context and evoke a story. I discussed how limiting classical art can be, and how I was trying to give the students a more holistic and inclusive understanding of art.

Each class was planned around a different way of seeing, using art history, anthropology, philosophy, and drawing techniques. First, each student completed a small warm-up drawing expressing how they were feeling. Then, I presented two to three artists, and we would discuss their respective styles and how artistic choices in the portraits told a story. I showed the students a wide range of artists, including Firelei Báez, Wadsworth Jarell, Angel Otero, Nick Cave, Jori Minaya, Emory Douglass, Romare Bearden, Frida Khalo, and Artemisia Gentileschi. Next, we would work on collaborative drawings, referencing elements of the art history we discussed earlier. Finally, the students would choose a few words used the most in conversation during class as a prompt for the drawing they would all complete as homework.

While they did not have perfect copies of Durer or Rembrandt, they finished the class with significant technical skills and an understanding of color. Additionally, the students were able to discuss issues and engage in conflict resolution in productive ways as they were versed in phenomenology and practiced empathy through collaborative work. Their drawings showed artistic promise and pride. At the outset of the class, many students minimized their facial features and only used colors when drawing fictitious characters. At the end of the course, their self-portraits were recognizable and celebratory.



### 6.3 Collaborative Drawings from class

These collaborative drawings were from a fun day of class at the independent school. This exercise, Exquisite Corpse, was begun by the Surrealists in Paris in

the 1920s. The paper is folded into four sections, and a different person draws the head, torso, stomach, and legs of a figure. In the end, the paper is unfolded to reveal a new character. Students were asked to draw thoughts that brought them happiness when they felt overwhelmed or worried. This was one of the students' favorite games.

## **Class is Free! (And Outside)**

When The Bakery Atlanta reopened in 2021, the organizaers contacted a group of artists they worked with in the past to create a series of reopening events and programs. The Bakery is an arts institution, which used to operate in a large multi-use facility hosting classes, events, and shows. After closing in 2019 when their original location bought by another organization, they moved to an office in the West End for studio space, an event space (New Square), a gallery downtown near the MARTA station, and are working with Eyedrum to open a new space used as an event venue. They are known for large arts events, but are consistently criticized for being very white-centric. For their reopening program, they offered a bit of funding and supplies to artists, the only challenges were that the entire event had to be safely socially distanced, outside, educational, for all ages, accessible both in-person and online and help introduce people to the new space by having a social aspect. At first, when they contacted me, I was dubious that I could design an event that could satisfy all of those stipulations. After a few weeks of planning, I designed a program creating large pride flags out of bed sheets.





6.4 Flyer for workshop series



6.5 A page from one of the three zines

5.4 This flyer was used to advertise the Art as Queer Community care workshop series. I chose the deep magenta color as it has been used (varying hues, from magenta to hot neon pink) as a symbol of the queer liberation movement for several decades. Because I wanted to center the community and joy, I took a drawing I made of a protest dance party in the Summer of 2020 and added a pink version to the top.

5.5 I created three zines for the workshop series, focusing on art, history, and symbology. Two of these zines were posted on Instagram, and one was printed and distributed at the event. This is a page from a timeline focusing on public art and community events for the queer community in Atlanta.

Before the program, I put together a series of zines on the history of Queer activism in Atlanta and contemporary Queer art. Initially, I thought writing up a history of Queer activism and history would be very easy, and would only take a few days to finish. Once I started working, I realized how difficult it was to find comprehensive information and resources outside of Georgia State University Library's databases and archives. Although I could find images and records from Atlanta pride events in the last few years (2020-2015), I struggled to find almost any records from before 2005 from

popular media sources. Moreover, it was difficult finding a lot of information or records from Queer protests or political events, even from relatively recent years.

So, I talked to one of the GSU library area specialists on art history, and looked into our digital archives, including the Southern Labor Archives, Archives for Research on Women, LGBTQ Archives, and The Great Speckled Bird (political commentary publication), and Atlanta Civic and Neighborhood History. I conducted an incredibly wide search because I wanted to represent a holistic and diverse history of Queer activism in Atlanta. Frequently, activism history in mainstream media is limited to timelines of protest and policy changes, without records of daily life.

So, I focused on the aspects of the archives that were the hardest to find in mainstream media. I found a huge archive of T-shirts from protests, concerts, and events with slogans demanding LGBTQ rights and representation. These shirts caught my attention because they were celebratory and positive, as opposed to the vast majority of queer history, which is framed in tragedy. I put many of the symbols, slogans, and images into a printed zine handed out to participants at the events, and made stencils of several symbols.

I was inspired by some punk protest art I found while going through the archives, and decided to host a DIY pride flag event. I supplied bed sheets cut into approximately 12"x18" rectangles, spray paint, stencils, and markers. Participants were able to learn about queer history while participating in it. The rectangles were laid out on a large grass lawn, socially distanced. Some participants worked on their own personal flags, while others moved around and contributed to many community flags. Many expressed excitement about learning about history and art they had never heard of before and

getting to meet other members of the queer community. After spending so many months in isolation, it felt extraordinary to get to work together to create something positive.



6.6 Printed zines were given to workshop participants and distributed to community centers around Atlanta

6.6 The printed zine was distributed to participants and brought to several coffee shops and community centers around Atlanta. This zine featured a history of queer symbology, a history of queer protest and community organizing in Atlanta, and a playlist.

After the workshop, we displayed the community flags around Atlanta. We hung them on highway fences and telephone poles, aiming to catch the eye of pedestrians.

Their glitter and bright colors shone in the sun and provided positive messaging during very dark times.

## Building Access Online

In the Summer of 2020, The Atlanta Contemporary commissioned a group of artists to host a digital class, as a way to create engagement with art and to help art educators. While the classes were designed to be interesting for all ages, they centered on CORE standards of education so that teachers could use them in their classes the following school year. Each class had full lesson plans and curriculums and used minimal materials so an educator could use them without much difficulty. The class also had a video component, made to adapt the class to be enjoyed by the general public.



6.7 Screenshot from one lesson of Contemporary Classroom

This episode of Contemporary Classroom focused on creating space, both negative space in composition and creating emotional space. In the middle of the lockdown, the

administrator I worked with felt it was incredibly important to talk about healthy emotional coping strategies. This lesson also asked students to imagine new spaces to exist in, and create small installations of their ideas in their everyday surroundings.

I was commissioned to create a class centered on mindfulness and explorative drawing, aimed at students from third through seventh grade. The class needed to teach general observational drawing skills such as contour, light, shadow, proportion, line variation, storytelling, and composition. The Contemporary's coordinator for the program wanted me to explore mindfulness and meditative practices through art. As many people were struggling with their mental health during the pandemic, we both felt that creating art exercises that centered on meditative practice would be really beneficial for the community.

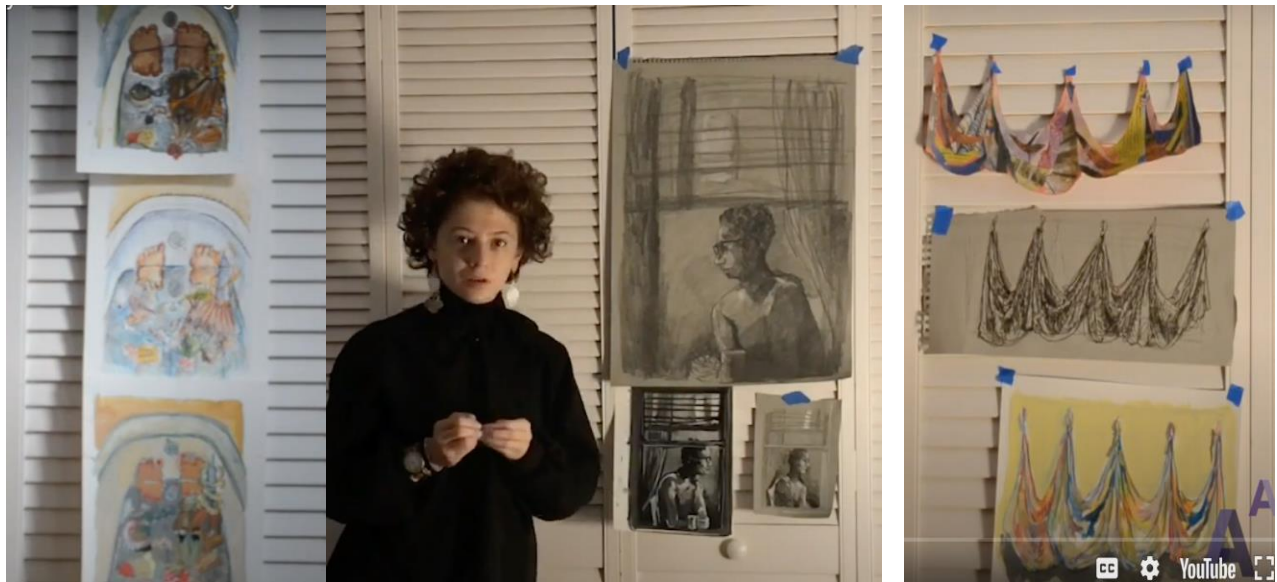
Each lesson was centered around exploratory practices which encouraged students to use different frameworks of art and philosophy to understand their surroundings in a new way. As the lockdown was still in effect, this centered on creating imaginary worlds by using household items and nearby settings (such as a backyard, alley, or kitchen). As the lockdown had a significant economic impact on many families, the lessons and art exercises could be completed with little to no materials and taken in many different directions.

These lessons came in five parts: 1) Art Historical context for the topic, 2) a warm-up exercise, 3) contemporary artists making work relevant to the lesson, 4) a tutorial on drawing techniques, and 5) a second exercise. The first exercise introduced the main concepts, and the second exercise was a larger project which reframed the main topic, and asked the student to put the skills they learned to use in an innovative

way. The second exercise was posed in a way that could be completed with any medium as it was more focused on bringing ideas from the lesson into one's everyday life.

As these videos were made with a very small budget, I had to be creative in how I made them. While I could suggest long materials lists and showcase art history in the lesson plans, the video classes were a bit different. In order to comply with intellectual copyright laws, I could not show images of artwork that I had not expressly gotten permission to show. So, for contemporary art, I highlighted working artists of color in Atlanta who I knew. This way, I was sure I could legally show the image on the Contemporary's YouTube page, and support the artist. However, this was slightly more tricky with the Art Historical context at the top of the video.

Thus, I created three drawings emphasizing different aspects of the piece of art I was discussing in the class. This way, I could discuss how the artist employed certain visual tools, such as composition, value, and line variation to create the image. I could show the students how to use drawing techniques in the replication of the image. This DIY strategy persisted throughout the class in several ways. I also animated the vocabulary words at the start of the episode, filmed the bulk of the videos with my phone, and did all of the voiceover work.



6.8 What The Water Gave Me, 1938, Frida Khalo was featured in the lesson about understanding dimensional shapes and creating indirect portraiture. In this lesson, students learned to find objects and use symbolism to express themselves.

6.9 The Man In The Window, 1978, Roy DeCarava was featured in a lesson about design elements and composition. In this lesson, students learned to structure and frame an image to tell a story.

6.10 Carousel State, 1968, Sam Gilliam was featured in a lesson about mixed media and reconceptualizing what space can be and how one can create joy. In this lesson, students learned to experiment with media and use the technical skills they learned to create work with processes outside of their comfort zone.

While the videos had a distinctly homemade feel, they were still very well received. Many participants in the class reached out to the Contemporary to share the work they created in the class. As the lessons were designed to be open-ended, the work spanned media, from sidewalk chalk drawings to iPhone photography to collages. Moreover, the participants who sent in this work were from a diverse range of ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities, proving that accessible art can transcend barriers and be beneficial to all, both in terms of creating a wider art community and encouraging more people to create art.

## Ongoing Fragmentation in the Arts Community

While several institutions have made significant changes in order to support equity and inclusion in the art community, fragmentation and socioeconomic stratification remain significant issues. Recently, I was a judge at a community art event highlighting High School-aged artists and creatives. Several students came up to one of my fellow judges and myself to ask for advice about becoming a working artist and getting more involved in the art community.

We both happily encouraged them and told them to start small and stay confident. We told them about the benefits of internships and assistantships and carefully described how to advocate for oneself in terms of being respected and getting paid. We complemented their hard work and persistence in art and told them they were well equipped to become working artists.

When we stepped away to do the judging, I asked my fellow judge, “Do you think they will be able to make it?”

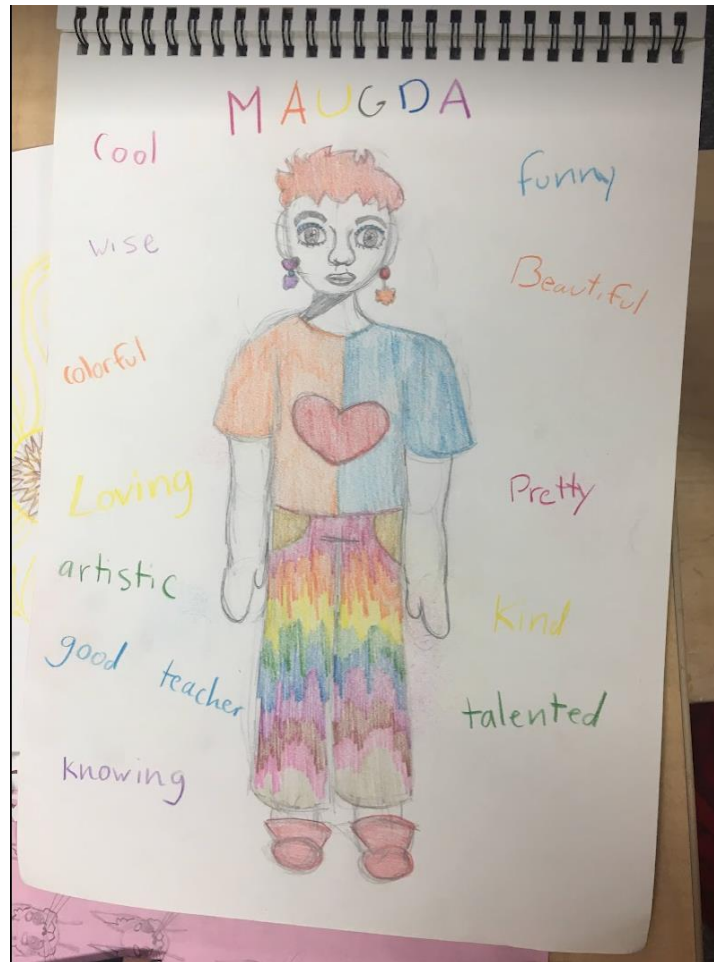
We stood in silence for a moment before they replied, “Ideally, yeah! A lot of those kids are talented and seem to be really hard workers. Realistically, the process of trying to get into the Atlanta art community will probably stop most of them from pursuing art at all.” I nodded my head and we both laughed and swapped our horror stories of starting out in the art community. Although it is a bit more inclusive now than it was around seven years ago when we were starting, it still is not easy. Creating ways for more people to get involved in art and meet fellow artists, through free classes, participatory work, and programs, helps foster a more healthy and collaborative



community.

The vast majority of the artists I interviewed during this thesis shared an ambivalent view of Atlanta's art community. Although many were hopeful about the strides they saw in inclusive public art, increased municipal funding and support for art, and more galleries popping up around the city as the pandemic draws to a close, many feel unsure about this progress. Overall, most art spaces are still white-owned and operated, and there are few programs that prioritize artists of Color.

Most spaces still operate in an isolated fashion, keeping their outreach and operations inside their respective subgroup in the community. Consequently, artists still struggle to make ends meet and get into the community. While the situation is dire in some ways, there is hope. DIY arts publications on social media are bridging some of these gaps by connecting artists and creatives from different subgroups by highlighting events, programs, and openings. Several artists have created informal networks of support through mutual aid, trading artworks, working for each other, and promoting each other's work on social media. As more in-person events and festivals come back, there is more investment and opportunity for public art. Thus, it is up to advocates, artists, and institutions to work together to create accessible art for and by the community.



6.11 Portrait of the author, collaboratively drawn by several students from the independent school. This drawing was made by the students in the independent school on our last day of class. We thought we would resume after Spring break, but the pandemic stopped in-person classes. The students world together to create the drawing, adding words and taking turns adding details. They wanted to highlight how much work they put into getting my outfit right, down to mismatched earrings, (and told me I should make rainbow pants for myself- which I did).

## Chapter Seven

### Well, What Do We Do Now? Conclusions

#### Overview

Arts institutions can be spaces to support culture and create access to it. While for many centuries only an exclusive class of people were granted access to art and asserted the dominance of knowledge and power, institutions are now looking to community-centric frameworks and programmatic structures. This change has largely been inspired both by recent movements such as Black Lives Matter, Climate Justice, #MeToo and also from ongoing movements started in past decades, Feminism, Queer liberation, Decolonization; voices within these movements have called for institutions to be accountable for their actions and impacts on communities. Thus, a number of institutions - locally, nationally, and globally - are adapting to new societal expectations.

In order to reckon with these barriers and create accessibility, museums and institutions are seeking new frameworks - with some radically challenging the idea of a museum and actively centering community but others merely tokenizing a few efforts to maintain their image, and many falling in between. These changes date back to the 1970s with New Museology; moreover a new wave of changes has been gaining momentum among institutions since 2019 when the International Council of Museums (ICOM) proposed significant changes to their definition of a museum. At the local level, the shift in ethos associated with these changes has created the opportunity to create new networks of support for the Atlanta art community and establish lasting support rather than following the community's history of short-term solutions. While this opportunity has great potential for making museum spaces more equitable, it also

requires a tremendous amount of work. It is necessary to understand current challenges in the Atlanta art community, how they impact both the community as a whole and also artists' lives individually, and how these challenges have been dealt with in the past. This understanding, informed by two years of fieldwork, research, and interviews, of the community dynamics provides a framework to analyze new solutions for institutions, and how they might fit in Atlanta.

Calls from artists and activists for accountability and for art institutions to center accessibility in Atlanta resulted in dialogues and community-centric programming. These conversations questioned the general roles art institutions played in the community, and how institutions have the opportunity to make space for the community rather than perpetuate the racist and classist exclusivity in the status quo. These conversations were much more accessible, as more people can attend events online rather than having to attend in person. Thus, many Atlanta arts institutions started new programs, partnered with organizations to support DEIA efforts, and posted profusely on social media.

While some of these changes were effective in increasing accessibility and supporting the Atlanta art community, like supporting young BIPOC artists getting experience with large public art through a murals program, many were performative and tokenized the movement to gain attention. In this era of resurgence, many arts institutions of every size in Atlanta are seeking new ways to grow. New galleries and venues are popping up, old venues are reopening in new locations, and the community is starting to come to life again. Even though this spring back to life is positive, many of the issues in the Atlanta art community that existed before the pandemic persist. The

community remains fragmented and many institutions work in small pockets of isolation. This way, there is constant competition for jobs and opportunities rather than collaboration. The general culture of constant competition leads to a trend of short-term solutions. Thus, there is a lack of stability and long-term growth in the art community, making it incredibly hard for artists to maintain a career. Institutions (like galleries, venues, and museums) hold the art community up and create access to the art. Consequently, it is critical for Atlanta's art institutions to foster the community through sustainable frameworks that prioritize collaboration over competition.

### **Time Is a Privilege- Creating Equity in New Membership**

Getting access to the Atlanta art community is a lengthy and challenging rite of passage. As it is a large and diverse community, every member's story of how they gained access is unique. There are many subgroups within the art community, each supported by different institutions. In this way, the community is fragmented, and each subgroup has its initiation practices and requirements to become a member.

Overall, getting well connected and having free time (disposable income and the ability to attend many events, work for little to no pay on top of other jobs/obligations) is important for gaining access. Here, the culture of constant competition shapes how many institutions function, especially smaller institutions. Even if your art has technical prowess and can hold its own in the cultural zeitgeist, it is hard to get anywhere without validation. To show your work in a gallery (get a spot in a show), you need to know the

people who regularly show there, the people who run the gallery, and some of the people who regularly attend the events.

Thus, it becomes necessary to make friends; this is where things get very difficult to navigate. Those who are already connected through friends or family get a leg up. Connections can be used as credentials, so it is almost more important to know people than to do excellent work. This informal gatekeeping makes it easier to maintain internal classism, racism, and sexism, as those with connections are overwhelmingly middle/upper-middle class, cisgender male, and white. Several of the community members I interviewed described how those in power positions in art institutions (gallery managers, curators, organizers) from large institutions to DIY spaces are still overwhelmingly white. As most people in the United States fraternize with people who are in the same socio-economic class and have similar racial identities as them (Sale, Meraji, 2020), this system continuously privileges and supports wealthier white artists. While there is discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation, those who are wealthier and white overwhelmingly get the upper hand.

Likewise, those who do not have connections in the community have to do much more to get on the same level as their equals. This disproportionately impacts artists from lower economic classes and Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. Anecdotally, the Afro-Latinx, Asian, Black, and Latinx participants in the interviews had to work much longer to get established in the community in comparison to their white counterparts. For example, I am white and grew up in an upper-middle-class family, and was able to start working in the community when I was around 14 and was relatively established at 19 (when I had a show with Jackson Markovic at The Bakery). While

people frequently did not take me seriously because of my age, I was still able to start establishing connections and get work as an artist.

There are several different ways of going about establishing connections and getting into the community, each with risks. I started attending events, butting into conversations, volunteering, and working for almost no pay. As I came from a stable household where I did not have to worry about putting food on the table or running out of money for art supplies, I did not have to worry about underpricing my work to start working relationships with clients and fellow artists. This way, I was able to get my work seen by more people relatively quickly and was taken more seriously as I had “worked” (mostly volunteered or worked for free) for many people and institutions. This process involved a lot of risks (I frequently was not paid for work or ended up paying to work through absorbing the cost of transportation to and from an event I was “working”). Those who are born into privilege have more security and can take more risks as they have a security net.

This system breeds nepotism and abusive practices, as many artists struggle to gain access to the art community for years. Moreover, the constant competition and general instability of the community incentivize established artists to take advantage of those who are desperate to gain access. There are numerous artists who take on “assistants” or “apprentices”, with little to no intention of paying them. Several participants in the study (who chose to remain anonymous) described the abuse they endured to gain access and get established in the art community. Some of this abuse included months of unpaid labor for artists and institutions alike, frequently told they would “gain exposure” instead of getting paid in order to get a reputation and get known

in the community. Similarly, several of the participants in the study chose to remain silent about sexual harassment from established community members in order to not ruin their chance at gaining access to the art community.

Although my conversations with community members suggest sexual harassment and abusive labor practices are rampant in the community and institutions alike, there are ways art institutions can resist this cycle by providing alternate means of accessing the community. Institutions can create more avenues to start careers in the art world through apprenticeships and meaningful internships/ starting level positions. This way, it is not necessary to rely on connections and clout to gain access and respect. Through paid apprenticeships, those who are interested in getting involved with the art community can start working; this makes access to the community more equitable as it gives those who cannot afford to work for free a viable option. As many careers in the art world require a specialized education (art handlers, curators, sound engineers, technicians, fabricators, etc), it is imperative to create pathways for those who otherwise do not have access to costly higher education.

Institutions (museums, galleries, governmental offices of cultural affairs, etc) shape and sustain the art community. Their funding and support shape a large portion of the art community's economy, thus contributing to the power structure. To create equity, it is necessary to address socioeconomic stratification in practical ways. Microgrants for emerging artists, paid internships, paid apprenticeships, and meaningful starting positions with internal upward mobility are all actionable ways institutions can create and support equity in the art community.



## **Access Is More Important Than The Status Quo**

On the surface level, prescriptive models are efficient, assess community issues objectively, use funds frugally, and usually fulfill their goals on time. Prescriptive models usually retrofit pre existing programs by adding a component to address diversity or accessibility, centering the institution's convenience over what is needed. This way, an institution decides how *they* want to solve a problem rather than going to the community and asking what is needed. They create great optics for branding, and overall, prescriptive models are optimized for institutions rather than centering on the community.

So, creating programs and policies that are community-centric takes creativity, effort, research, and collaboration. The status quo does not work for everyone. Using old standards for maintaining the institution (from choosing the font for art labels to creating the annual budget) with addendums for accessibility is a common model in most art institutions.

For example, the standard gallery rules for visitors apply, with separate events for those who have sensory sensitivity. When someone responds to the artwork "unconventionally" by talking about the colors in the piece or the way it makes them feel loudly during a normal event, they will usually be asked to confirm their behavior or to leave. This way, the institution can continue functioning as normal, still, comply with social standards of acceptance, and maintain exclusivity.

By thinking of accessibility as secondary to the status quo, the difficulties faced by marginalized people created by the institution are secondary to the institution's day-to-day operations. This way, the same structures that cause issues and maintain

colonial ideals in power structures and ownership and exclusion persist, and small programs and band-aid fixes are tokenized as solutions and “radical inclusion” (Voon, 2019).

In the same way, creating access to art through educational programming requires an entire reconceptualization of what a classroom can be. During my fieldwork, I worked several teaching jobs, both in traditional and non-traditional classroom settings. In a few of these positions, I was able to write my curriculum and shape the course. While many of my ideas did not go as planned, the students and I always ended up in interesting places. Asking fourth graders to explore postmodern theory and phenomenology through lines resulted in a lot more discussion than art, but helped them think about form and shape in new ways. The next week, we started working on drawing self-portraits, and they were able to discuss their experiences and relate to others’ experiences through understanding the basics of subjective realities. Thus, their self-portraits all came out extraordinarily expressive, using bombastic colors and shapes to express themselves rather than realistic renderings of their faces.

Instead of telling the students how to see themselves properly and replicate the light and shadow interacting with their faces perfectly illustrated through rigid drawing techniques on the paper, we discussed various ways one can understand oneself and one’s experience. While I was sure to explain the technical aspects of facial anatomy and art history, I did not use the standard set of Renaissance artists which reinforces the idea that thinness and whiteness are the pinnacles of beauty. I chose to show them examples of portraits from art history that celebrated Afrolatinx and Black identities so they could see themselves reflected in art.

Initially, I received some pushback from the students' parents, as the students were bringing home large squiggles and "caterpillar/rose bush/ fairy princess/ international spy/ sewage system/ crock pot" characters (one of my favorite creations) rather than studies of the classics. I was able to sit down with the parents and show them that their children were indeed learning classical methods for portraits and art history, but in a way that celebrated their imagination and identity instead of the standard methods which use white European beauty standards for creating a portrait (that include proportions of the face, the way color is used to portray light and skin pigment, the emphasis of feminine purity in posing and position in the piece). Although this way of seeing and understanding art through centering exploration and inclusion centers on accessibility, its highly theoretical nature can be a barrier for many to understand it.

As this way of teaching is highly theoretical and pulls inspiration from several disciplines like Anthropology, Philosophy, Psychology, and Art Theory, it is frequently dismissed as too abstract for use by institutions. Even the leadership at the independent school I taught at, which prided itself in progressive learning methods, was resistant to this way of teaching. Indeed, many of the applications of this method work outside of the traditional institutional model or change the way institutions interact with the community. Thus, it is critical to work with institutions to implement practical strategies to support accessibility and bolster the larger art community.

Creating practical applications of this method opens the possibilities for public artwork. As more digital paywalls go up, it is difficult to access information for research,

especially without an institutional login (Stroud, 2021). Thus, it is critical to find innovative ways to make information accessible to the community. While libraries and public service campaigns are helpful, they can be limited. Art can be used as a way to provide accessible public education and work as a public ethnographic project. This way, participants gain access to information and art and gain a sense of belonging within the community.

When I was working on the curriculum for the Art As Queer Community Care workshop series, I put together zines (small DIY magazines) about queer protest movements in Atlanta and art used for queer protest globally that were free for program participants to take home. I used many images from the Georgia State Act Up Digital Archive and spent some time gathering stories and speaking to people in the community about activism in the 1990s. Originally, the zines were supposed to be used as a jumping-off point for the art project (making flags on old bedsheets using queer symbols, and installing them in public places). During the workshops, many participants asked for more information and were learning about local queer history for the first time. The flag painting and public installation helped encourage pride in our local queer history, and also gave many participants a sense of ownership of the history.

As a result, participants were able to learn about queer history and bring that history into public spaces through the installation of the flags. This installation of art contextualized queer stories in pride and celebration rather than tragedy. Additionally, the workshop served as a place to meet fellow artists and collaborate on a large project. Building programs to meet community needs, even if they are small, like this workshop,

is an important way for institutions to start meaningfully engaging with and supporting communities.

## **Inter-organizational Collaboration To Make a Better Network For**

### **Artists**

Almost every single interlocutor I interviewed discussed how the fragmentation of the art community into individual subgroups that collaborate little has made their careers unnecessarily difficult. Artists who work in multiple media or styles are usually forced to split their time and work between groups. In some ways, this is great as it lets each subgroup have its internal power structure, economy, and set of values. Thus, informal requirements gatekeep entry into some subgroups, like being part of a graffiti crew for a DIY street art subgroup, or partying and drinking a lot for a DIY queer art subgroup, or having a large disposable income for a conceptual art gallery subgroup, or Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Fine Arts for a high art subgroup- are not universal. One can enter any number of other subgroups without formal institutional credentials, as long as they fulfill other requirements like having a certain social status or the ability to come to lots of events and work for free.

Accordingly, there is not a real hierarchy of subgroups. Each has its unique place in the community and does not interact very much. Thus, each subgroup is constantly competing for money and attention, as Atlanta does not have an established patron class or significant infrastructure for the arts. While each subgroup has its economic structure and ways of trying to cultivate a group of patrons and gaining attention, there are several common impacts of competition culture that include short-term solutions and instability.

At its core, a short-term solution is splashy and gains attention without needing extensive planning or budgeting. A short-term solution (like a one-off event supporting a cause) can help divert attention from negative press, like calls for accountability, and create an image that aligns with an institution's mission statement. Just as they can be immediate and reactive, short-term solutions divert attention from enduring issues and make it seem like these issues are intrinsic to the art community; that everyone should have to struggle to find jobs and get health insurance to be able to provide for their family, that it is normal for most established artists to be regularly underpaid and struggle to find gallery space or venues. Although these are all part of the "starving artist" trope, this does not have to be inevitable.

As a result of the prevalence of short-term solutions, there is significant instability in the community. Several established artists discussed in interviews how difficult it still is to maintain a regular income, even after working for several years. Programs, workshops, and small grants are very helpful, but, once they run out or end, the issue they were built to solve is still there and the cycle starts again. Moreover, the fragmentation of the community adds to this instability. While many short-term solutions posed by institutions are effective, they haphazardly support the community- these efforts are not coordinated, leading to a bust and boom cycle for the art community's economy.

While these issues are large and emblematic of larger socioeconomic inequity, there are practical ways that art institutions can implement solutions. One of the central causes of the issues in the Atlanta art community is the general lack of infrastructure. While the individuality of the subgroups of the community makes it so every artist can

have a subgroup to belong to no matter their chosen media or background, there is no significant collaboration between leading institutions in subgroups. Thus, many institutions are developing programs to help create equity in isolation, only for these programs to run out of money or end, with little lasting impact.

For that reason, inter-organizational collaboration is critical for institutions to fully support the community. Short-term solutions tend to seem like the only feasible option economically and programmatically for many institutions, so collaborating with other institutions can offset burdens and ensure more longevity for a program. While this does not replace long-term solutions to fund projects and programs that last for more than five years, it is a start towards ensuring stability through longevity. There is no one person or institution that can solve the issues in the Atlanta art community and make it more stable and equitable, thus, collaboration is the key to ensuring art is for everyone.

## **Conclusion**

Over two years, I was able to participate in the Atlanta Art Community in many different roles, as a teacher, working artist, and researcher. I went into this project seeking to understand how the art community is currently changing, and the shifting roles of art institutions in the community. Larger societal issues like socioeconomic inequity and gentrification are created by a myriad of factors, and deeply impact how the art community functions. In order to create a more equitable and accessible community, it is critical to understand the historical context, openly discuss issues like racism and classism, and work within communities to create solutions. Art institutions play a critical role in sustaining the art community, and employ community-centric solutions to

combat these issues and improve accessibility. As the Atlanta Art Community grows in this “post-pandemic” era, it is necessary to implement improvements in art institutions to ensure a more stable and collaborative community where artists can have a career without constantly compromising or competing. When accessibility is centered, conditions for everyone are improved.



# Appendix

## Interview and Participant Observation Protocol

### 1. Select the type/types of Art Institution you work with most frequently.

Larger institution

Smaller institution

Business

Collective (not location-based)

1. If you choose to be interviewed as an individual, which type of institution do you work with or participate in most frequently?
2. Which type of institution do you feel has the strongest impact on art and culture currently being made in Atlanta?

### 2. Relationship to Atlanta's art community

- a. How long have you lived in Atlanta?
- b. How would you define your relationship to the Atlanta art Community (options)
- c. How long have you been active in the community?
- d. Do you think of the community as unified or more independent and decentralized?
- e. Is there a hierarchy in the community, socially and/or economically?
- f. If so, what supports/reinforces this hierarchy?

### 3. How would you define accessibility?

- a. How were you first introduced to the art community?
- b. Have you experienced issues getting access to parts of the community or ongoing issues to access?

### 4. Improvements to accessibility?

- a. How do you think accessibility can be improved in your everyday life in the community?
- b. What are some limitations you see or have experienced in how accessibility is traditionally defined?
- c. How has access you have gotten (or not gotten) impacted your career in the arts community?
- d. How does economic inequality impact Atlanta's art community?

### 5. Changes in the Art Community

- a. How is it different now than when you were first introduced to this community, how is Atlanta different?
- b. How has your role in the art community changed if at all, and why?
- c. What are some forces you believe are a threat to the Atlanta art community?
- d. What are the forces that support it?

6. Gentrification in Atlanta

- a. How have you experienced gentrification, and do you think it has changed Atlanta's art community?
- b. How can art support or refute gentrification, how have you seen this done effectively?
- c. Have you seen or experienced any large power shift in the community?
- d. Is there a specific group that usually has leadership in this community?
- e. Has economic inequality changed, increased/decreased?

7. Creating a better future

- a. What groups, organizations, or institutions have made a huge impact on your relationship to the Atlanta art community or the art community in general
- b. Who has made the largest impact (past or present) on your relationship with the Atlanta art community?
- c. How do you see the Atlanta art community changing in 5 years?
- d. What is needed in Atlanta's art community to be sustainable?
- e. What is your wildest dream for the Atlanta art community?
- f. What is one piece of advice you would give to the Atlanta art community (or an institution/organization/person within it) for the future?

Participant Observation Protocol

Watch and observe events (gallery openings, open hours of museums and art institutions, performances)

Take note of proxemics

Do not take note of identifiable data or interview people without gaining their consent

Take note of interactions, how decisions are made, and how power is displayed.

Any photos taken must obscure the identities of the individuals in the photos (thorough editing software) unless the photo is of an active participant in the study.

Write up detailed field notes after the event

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