

# ART

## INTERSECTIONS

**The Public Art and Communities program is providing opportunities for artists and community residents to co-create art that reflects their experience of the pandemic's impact on personal and community challenges that existed before the global health crisis. By Jason Vrabel**

**“T**he Vanguard,” a photo mural on the side of the late playwright August Wilson’s childhood home in Pittsburgh, depicted Hill District family life — past and present — in a fictional living room setting as imagined by multimedia artist Njaimh Njie. Three more murals like it were installed throughout the neighborhood just a few years ago.

That all but one are now gone is not surprising. They were temporary. But a collection of oral histories, photographs and other historical materials that influenced Ms. Njie’s work remains online. Together the murals comprised “Homecoming: Hill District, USA,” created by Ms. Njie as part of Temporary Public Art and Placemaking, a 2016 pilot program run by Pittsburgh’s Office of Public Art, the community engagement nonprofit Neighborhood Allies and the Borough of Millvale. In total, the program supported six artists working with six neighborhoods.

Renamed Public Art and Communities (PAC), a new iteration of the program is now underway.



"The Vanguard" was one of four installations that were part of the Pittsburgh public art project "Homecoming: Hill District, USA" by multimedia artist Njaimen Njie. The project explored life in the Hill District, one of Pittsburgh's most historic neighborhoods, which became known as an influential center of Black American culture. "The Vanguard" photo art installation was placed on an exterior wall of the childhood home of late Pulitzer-winning playwright August Wilson.

Thematically, four artist–community teams are responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on preexisting crises like racism, mental health and food insecurity.

Selected through an open, public process, PAC’s four community partners are Frogang Foundation Inc., a self-empowerment nonprofit for Black women and girls; Steel Smiling, a mental health support organization focused on the African American community; Brashear Association Inc., a nonprofit providing social services to Pittsburgh’s southern neighborhoods; and a collaboration between Etna Community Organization and Sharpsburg Neighborhood Organization (ECO+SNO), which are groups based in municipalities north of Pittsburgh. The artists chosen by each group, respectively, are Rell Rushin, Nola Mims, Lindsey Peck Scherloun and Jason McKoy.

Tamara Emswiler, senior program manager for social impact design at Neighborhood Allies, noted that already-vulnerable populations were subject to multiple public health risks prior to the pandemic. PAC is examining “how collaborations with artists can enhance connection, coping and well-being within communities that are facing these challenges,” she said.

While responding to present day circumstances, the PAC initiative is intended to embody something longer-term: the evolution of what public art is, who it’s for, and how it can be created.

### How art makes a difference

**P**AC communities are not merely hosts for public art but co-creators of it, bringing neighborhood history and culture to bear on artists’ skill and creative expression. This approach is rooted in “Aesthetic Perspectives,” an arts-based framework developed by artists, educators and funders from across the country and explained in the 2017 report “Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes for Excellence in Arts for Change.” According to the report, the Aesthetic Perspectives framework begins with the premise that “building an equitable society is a creative act” and lies at the intersection of art, culture, social justice, civic engagement and community development.

Public artwork created in this way is meant to have impact.

“In our experience, artists, and arts and culture initiatives, play a powerful role in shaping our responses to these crises,” said Dr. Divya Rao Heffley, associate director of the Office of Public Art. “[The Public Art and Communities initiative] aims to both address short-term community needs and foster

long-term strategies for collaborations with artists that catalyze community-led change.”

The approximately \$500,000 PAC program is supported by the National Endowments for the Arts, The Heinz Endowments and the Henry L. Hillman Foundation.

“This project is emblematic of the greatly expanding definition of what arts and culture is at The Heinz Endowments,” said Janet Sarbaugh, the foundation’s Creativity vice president. “We know that we need to honor and recognize the fact that, in many ways, the city’s culture resides in its neighborhoods and its residents.”

Ms. Sarbaugh explained that the national Urban Institute’s Art and Cultures Indicators Project has measured the impact of the arts on communities and everyday life, dating back to the 1990s. The project’s 2006 report, for example, described “cultural vitality” as including arts and culture “that come out of communities rather than merely resources that are ‘brought to’ communities from the outside.”

The Public Art and Communities program began with the Placemaking Academy, a six-week training program. Broadly, “placemaking” is the integration of arts and culture into urban design practices.

The Placemaking Academy demonstrated how “placemaking isn’t any one thing,” Ms. Emswiler said. “It showed the breadth of what placemaking can be, and how to start building up community voices to anchor the project in the community.”

Emphasizing that the process of creating public art is as important as the artwork itself, Dr. Heffley said, “If the process isn’t right, the outcomes won’t be right.”

When communities build agency around shared values and a common purpose, that is part of what Neighborhood Allies President and CEO Presley L. Gillespie calls “transformative community change,” a focal point of all of the organization’s work.

“Partnerships like [Public Art and Communities] are about bringing people together with tools and financial resources to make transformative change,” Mr. Gillespie said, which

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Four local Pittsburgh organizations are partnering with the four artists in the Public Art and Communities program:

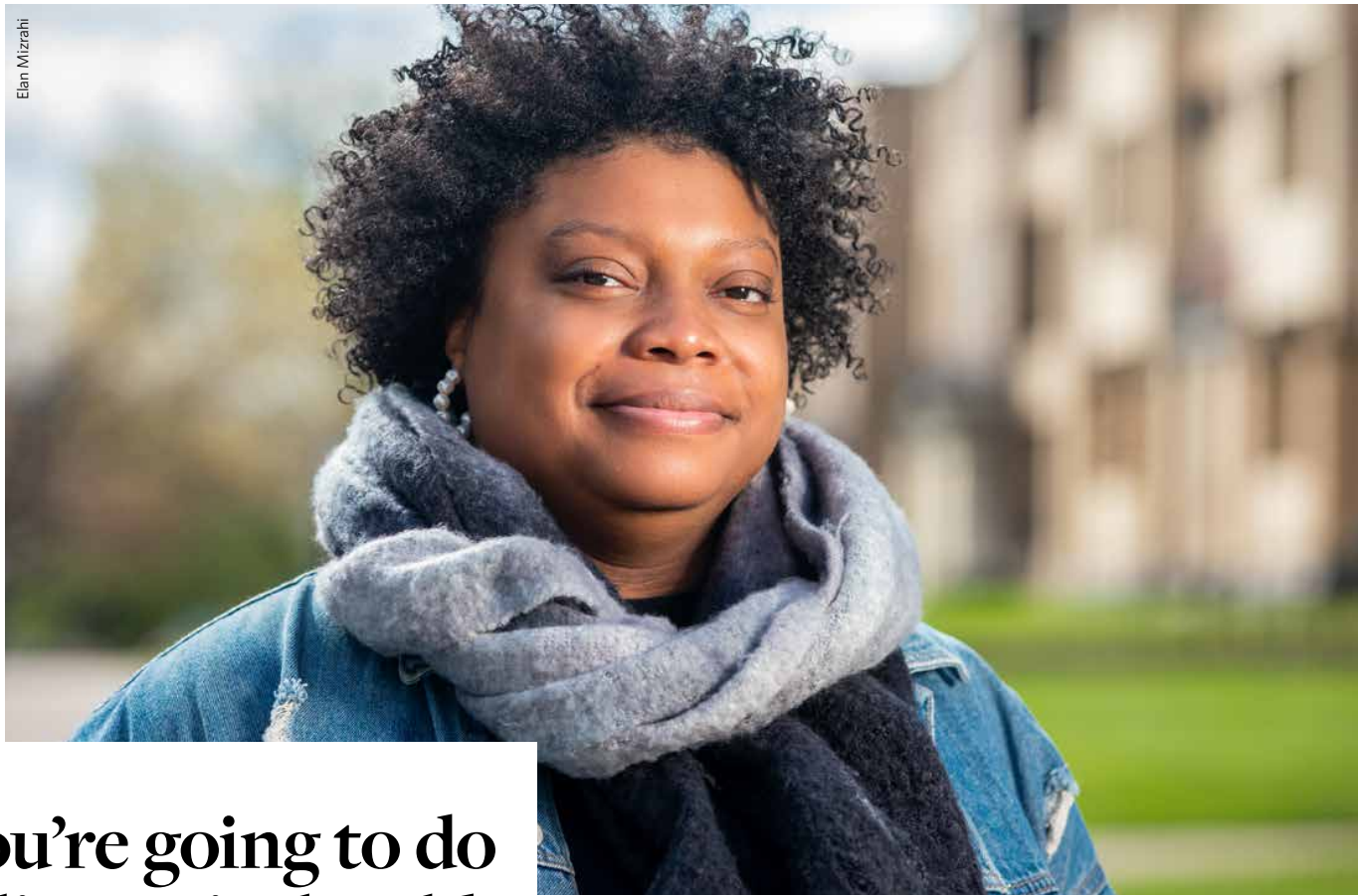
**Frogang Foundation,** a self-empowerment nonprofit for Black women and girls

**Steel Smiling,** a mental health support organization focused on the African American community

**Brashear Association,** a nonprofit providing social services to Pittsburgh’s southern neighborhoods

**Etna Community Organization and Sharpsburg Neighborhood Organization (ECO+SNO),** two groups based in municipalities north of Pittsburgh





**“If you’re going to do public art, it should be something that the community is comfortable with, that reflects them, celebrates them, and is something they can take part of.”**

**Rell Rushin**, mixed-media artist collaborating with Frogang Foundation, on the issues of mental health, racism, social isolation and exclusion for Black women and girls

includes “maintaining and respecting cultural identity and the cultural assets of a neighborhood.”

This thinking is evident in Ms. Njie’s “Homecoming.” She didn’t set out to capture 100 years of neighborhood history. But after working with the Hill District community — especially Terri Baltimore, who at the time managed community engagement for the now-defunct Hill House Association — that’s what happened.

Ms. Njie told PAC participants during a training session last year that working with community institutions paved the way into a neighborhood she knew but didn’t live in. Ms. Njie recalled how Ms. Baltimore told her “about all these places, all these people that the history books might not necessarily acknowledge, but clearly made their imprint on the neighborhood.”

Ms. Njie said that what residents wanted most was to have their stories told, and the resulting project was “grassroots, from the ground up, from a very people-centered point of view.”

#### **Promoting positive self-image**

**F**rogang begins with natural Black hair. As an “organization and a movement that teaches Black girls to love their natural selves, Frogang’s mission is to promote positive self-images for Black girls so they recognize their self-worth and see beauty when they look in the mirror,” founder Kelli Shakur said.



Mixed-media artist Rell Rushin has been participating in Frogang’s “Successful Sister Sessions,” weekend gatherings with girls ages 4 to 16 that include affirmations, storytelling and conversations about leadership and self-care.

Ms. Shakur and Ms. Rushin both noted that they are already “in community” with one another, but Ms. Rushin understands that the final artwork will belong to a physical community where she doesn’t reside.

“They’re constantly reminding us that community comes first,” she said of the Office of Public Art and Neighborhood Allies. “If you’re going to do public art, it should be something that the community is comfortable with, that reflects them, celebrates them and is something they can take part of.”

“Not many Black artists get this opportunity to be in the forefront in this way,” Ms. Rushin added.

The team’s design concept — a mural — will be an act of placemaking. Facing a vacant lot that Ms. Shakur envisions using for Frogang events, the artwork and the space together will expand the organization’s presence in Pittsburgh’s Beltzhoover neighborhood.

Whatever form the mural takes, it will be co-created with the girls. The most important thing is that “it will look like them,” Ms. Shakur said, adding, “Rell is an awesome artist, and my girls have amazing visions. When you put the two together, we’ll make magic.”

**“The intention and goal is for people to take away new creative strategies to add to their coping skills.”**

**Nola Mims**, multimedia studio artist working with Steel Smiling on the topic of Black mental health

### Encouraging mental health

**B**ridging the gap between the region's Black community and mental wellness, Steel Smiling is both a mental health and a workforce development organization, said Julius Boatwright, the organization's founder and CEO.

Since December of 2015, Steel Smiling has been coordinating mental health support, training, and treatment for Black community members. As part of its Beams to Bridges (B2B) program, lay participants become nationally certified as mental health advocates in their day-to-day lives and workplaces, Mr. Boatwright said. Recent B2B graduates have returned to participate in PAC.

Mr. Boatwright has seen how art can address increased social isolation worsened by the pandemic by helping B2B members tap into something they "couldn't get to before" with talk therapy alone.

"It's getting them excited to do something different," Mr. Boatwright said.

With a background in studio arts and psychology, Nola Mims is putting all their training and skills to work for Steel Smiling. Instead of producing a single work of art, Mx. Mims is creating a series of nine workshops that will enable B2B members to explore a variety of artistic pursuits, such as West African dance, deejaying and creative writing, and to find a practice that they're passionate about.

"The intention and goal is for people to take away new creative strategies to add to their coping skills," Mx. Mims said. "Second to that is finding something special in what they're doing, and that they'll want to continue."

Finding appropriate venues to accommodate creative healing activities for a Black mental health organization has been difficult. "There are not a lot of Black-run spaces in a city like Pittsburgh to do a lot of the things that we're setting out to do," said Mx. Mims.

Steel Smiling represents an evolving definition of "community," one not always bound by geography, yet Mr. Boatwright

Elan Mizrahi

**“But what about [celebrating food] is art? It’s a cool idea and could not be art, but we’re going to make it art.”**

**Lindsey Peck Scherloun**, multimedia artist partnering with the Brashear Association on the issues of food insecurity and social isolation





“I want people to experience it, and live it, and interact with it, and become part of it.”

**Jason McKoy**, artist, brand consultant and social innovator collaborating with the Etna Community Organization and Sharpsburg Neighborhood Organization on the topic of social isolation

stressed the importance of empowering those who are in a community location.

“How do we honor the expertise in a community?” he asked, noting that expertise can be found in those who aren’t mental health professionals, “but may be the grandma, the aunt or uncle that everyone loves and trusts.”

“The difference is ‘doing with’ versus ‘doing for,’” he said, which resembles Urban Institute’s definition of cultural vitality and the ways that art and culture can come out of communities, rather than being “brought to” them.

#### **Eliminating stigmas**

**S**ince 1917, the Brashear Association has been providing Pittsburgh’s southern neighborhoods with employment and housing support, youth services and food assistance. Margie Schill, communications and marketing manager for the organization, said that unease about food insecurity prevents many community members from accessing Brashear’s services.



Elan Mizrahi

“It’s an issue in our community that we recognize is sometimes hard for people to talk about,” Ms. Schill said. She’s hoping that the PAC initiative can make those conversations easier.

“We’ve been thinking about how to get them involved in this conversation, and maybe break down some of that stigma so that those who haven’t accessed our services before might feel more comfortable doing so.”

With prior experience conducting community outreach, multimedia artist Lindsey Peck Scherloun has focused on “getting residents more comfortable with having conversations about food.” Instead of holding face-to-face or Zoom meetings, Ms. Scherloun has collected residents’ food-related stories and memories via prepaid mailers.

“Sometimes that means something as simple as sharing an old family recipe,” she said.

Ms. Scherloun will continue to gather information that residents leave in uniquely designed “drop boxes” placed where people already go, such as corner stores, churches and the library. While the team’s final project hasn’t been decided, it will involve residents celebrating food — together.

“But what about that is art?” Ms. Scherloun asked, bringing up the likely question herself. “It’s a cool idea and could not be art, but we’re going to make it art.”

### Building community connections

**T**he towns of Sharpsburg, Etna and Millvale make up the Triboro Ecodistrict, a partnership created in 2017 to promote shared sustainable community development goals. Megan Tuñón, executive director of the Etna Community Organization (ECO), said her organization had only begun implementing its newly created Ecodistrict plan when the pandemic struck.

“We suddenly had to do food programs and help local businesses rather than the infrastructure plans we had laid out,” Ms. Tuñón said.

The Public Art and Communities program arrived at the right time for both the Etna Community Organization and the Sharpsburg Neighborhood Organization (SNO). “It’s what people wanted to talk about. People appreciated focusing on their basic needs, and not just streets and sewers,” Ms. Tuñón said.

Brittany Reno, SNO’s executive director, said that recent planning efforts revealed a community desire to see more public art. When PAC came along, “we knew some of the issues we were dealing with [concerning] some of our more

vulnerable community members, and we wanted to jump on the opportunity,” she explained.

Community-based art is not new for artist Jason McKoy. His work, often technology-based, is meant to be “disruptive to environments.”

“I want people to experience it, and live it, and interact with it, and become part of it,” he said.

The Etna and Sharpsburg sustainability plans available through the ECO+SNO collaboration offered many themes to explore through PAC, but when Mr. McKoy solicited residents’ input via postcards, what was “coming directly from the community was isolation, isolation, isolation,” he said.

Mr. McKoy’s concept involves two “digital windows” (think vertical, solar-powered TV screens) installed in each borough that will “look” from one into the other. Each screen will live-stream, but not record, everyday activities captured via cameras placed in respective communities.

Instead of creating two separate art pieces for each borough, Mr. McKoy said, “We’ll do something that threads the communities together.”

### Empowering local residents

**O**riginally brought together by the Endowments and the Henry L. Hillman Foundation, the Office of Public Art and Neighborhood Allies have united artists and communities to address critically important matters through a comprehensive approach to creating public art. The foundations recognized that as rapid-paced urban redevelopment and neighborhood change accelerates here and nationwide, the need for meaningful community engagement is paramount.

Putting residents at the center of interpreting their own neighborhoods for outside artists gives communities agency, Ms. Sarbaugh noted. Through co-created public art, she said, “PAC provides authentic access to cultural activity for residents that more passive theater or gallery experiences can’t do.”

“It’s really about restoring power in our communities,” Mr. Gillespie said of collaborations like PAC. “There’s no better way to address the legacy of the culture of our communities than the ability of communities to be meaningful partners in the revitalization of their neighborhoods.” **h**