“UNDO RESPECTABILITY, AID MUTUALLY”

Evaporate into Happiness mural, 2020. Public Assistants led a paid youth mural residency to empower and employ young community members through public art. Under our mentorship and guidance, 12 youths from the surrounding Crown Heights community researched, envisioned, designed, and painted a mural on the exterior walls of the previous PA headquarters. Photo courtesy of Akua Murray-Adoboe.

Simon Wu in conversation with Morgan Bobrow-Williams, Don Christian Jones, Mercy Kelly, Akua Murray-Adoboe, Jake Robbins, Amani Sampson, Bryan Villalobos, and Caroline Wineburg
On the corner of Franklin Ave and Park Place in the heart of Crown Heights, across the street from the bodega where my roommate buys her cigarettes, members of Public Assistants are hanging out, huddled around space heaters, chatting. Since June 6, 2020, artist Don Christian Jones and his friends and collaborators have worked closely with the surrounding community to turn a vacant laundromat, methadone clinic, and pawn shop into a space for local LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC artists.

Public Assistants (PA) was born in the middle of the pandemic. Jones happened to know the empty lot’s property managers, and they initially leased him the space as a place to organize and make banners during last summer’s Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. Since then, the project has expanded to include a mural program, a bike-refurbishing initiative, a community fridge, a radio station, an art collection, and functional workspaces for photo shoots, video-editing, and screen printing. On January 20, 2021, the current property owners of the lot notified Public Assistants that they would not be renewing the lease and that they had thirty days to vacate the premises, forcing them to move and find a new headquarters. At the time of publication, Public Assistants are still searching for a new location while their former Crown Heights home remains unoccupied.

Public Assistants operates on the logic of mutual aid. By definition, this means that the people giving help are also the ones who need help. Their slogan is: “Undo respectability, aid mutually.” What does that mean in practice? A few things. PA is entirely volunteer-run. They are a non-hierarchal organization, partly because they’re more like a group of friends than an organization, relying on each other’s strengths and skills to get things done. PA draws most of its funds from crowdsourcing, often from benevolent social media onlookers who respond to their Instagram stories with spontaneous financial, technical, or legal support through Venmo and direct messages.

While mutual aid initiatives have sprung up all over the city over the course of the pandemic, it is still a relatively novel way of organizing an “arts institution,” most of which, in the non-profit category, are 501(c)(3) charitable organizations with respective board and funding structures. Public Assistants is a rare example of a mutual aid initiative centered on the arts, run by artists. To that end, they are a formidable foil to the reopening strategies of most other arts organizations in the city. If museums, as charitable organizations, try to address the effects of inequality, Public Assistants, as a mutual aid initiative, seeks to address its root causes. Indeed, one of the most crucial disparities that Public Assistants considers is the disparity between the expressed politics of an organization (curatorial programming, marketing advertising, performative social media allyship) and its internal politics (hiring practices, pension, benefits, upward mobility). Public Assistants is novel in its congruency in that regard. As Mercy Kelly says in the interview that follows:

Many of us have community-based organization backgrounds and we've seen the ills of a not-for-profit, how they can be like a business, and we've seen the worst of what they can be. Because a lot of the work that we do is based on social justice, we didn't want that same framework to be here. We could see that from the door and were just like, “nah.” But this is not without its difficulties. For one, the long-term sustainability of volunteer labor and sporadic crowd-sourced donations is tenuous, particularly as the public fervor and white guilt from the BLM protests fade. This will make the temptation to adopt more established or “stable” institutional models harder to resist. Another question concerns scale. Mutual aid is by definition small and hyper-local. Public Assistants works so well right now because it’s essentially a group of friends. However, in order to produce programming that can extend beyond their immediate social bubble and that is reliable in a monthly or recurring manner for people outside of their immediate social circle, they will need to build paid staff, resources, and at least the perception of stability. And many of the members of Public Assistants are already having to put together new skills in order to help the organization survive: grant-writing, finding real estate, etc.

Public Assistants is an experiment. While it may be a short lived one in its current form, the energy generated in its temporary dwelling will transfer to wherever it is most needed in the community. And Public Assistants is a philosophy more than anything else—an ethos of creation that centers on the flourishing of LGBTQIA+ BIPOC creators and thinkers. Mutual aid is defined by a social dynamic where the “people giving” are also the “people taking,” and that is a novel relation to introduce to the space of art institutions. But PA does not seek to pursue that dynamic with orthodoxy. Not all aid has to operate that way. Sometimes people should give more than they take, and some should take more than they are expected to give, if we are to account for historical imbalances and reparations. Photographer Jake Robbins characterizes Public Assistant’s activities as “aesthetics of urgency,” one that places experimentation and flexibility at its core. And this agility in the face of precarity is what they will carry with them as they move into continually uncharted waters.

— Simon Wu
Simon Wu: You’re going through a transitional period right now, with the eviction and the move and all. I wondered if you wanted to reflect on what you have all been working on. What sort of things have you learned? What feels sustainable, or not?

Morgan Bobrow-Williams: One thing Don, Bryan and I talked about the other day is that we want to keep being reactive, keep listening to the desires of the community and what we as artists and individuals need, so it’s always evolving.

Akua Murray-Adoboe: It’s funny, because most of our existence has been what I would describe as responsive or reactive. Now, to have this time is actually special. We have always been on the fly, on the go, and we’re being given this opportunity right now to actually have a say in our future. There’s a lot to think about. On top of planning to be flexible, we’re starting to figure out what we would actually want under new circumstances.

Don Christian Jones: In so many ways, we are here because we were thrown into this. We found each other. Some of us have known each other for ages. And then some of us found each other in the past year in this hyper-sensitive, hypercritical, hyper-urgent space of America.

As much of a gift as this was, and as grateful as I am for it, it’s also not what we asked for. This was not a request of ours, to inhabit a vacant, dilapidated laundromat and to assume responsibility for a corner lot that was basically left to die by developers.

It was a lot of work to enliven this corner. What Akua was saying about having this time is definitely special. This winter, it’s freezing in here and because we don’t have hot water or heat, we can’t invite people off the street as much. One, because of Covid-19, but also because these are not hospitable conditions to work in, even for ourselves. There has also been a sort of lull in activations and street actions with the weather and we’re less visible in that way. So we’ve had the time to focus more inward and now with this pending eviction really consider options and choices for our future.

Murray-Adoboe: What does that look like for us? What components of an art space, a community space, or a design studio do we bring with us? I think it’s hard for us to reconcile leaving, or moving, because so much of our work is based in our relationship to our surroundings, our neighbors, and other businesses in the area. People who live here are at the core of what we do. We just relate on a hyper-local level. Thinking about starting that process over in a new place is hard to imagine. How can we transfer the community that we’ve grown into?

Caroline Wineburg: So much of that community-building happened on the block, by slowly activating every bit of the outside wall and then opening this storefront section up. I still think it’s crazy we did all of this during Covid-19. One of the things that we definitely want to build on is to be able to host workshops and have bigger programming initiatives. How do you rebuild a community even if it’s only two blocks away from here? We’re still looking for that ideal space.

Wu: And you want to stay in the Crown Heights neighborhood? Jones: That would be ideal.

Wu: It makes so much sense, obviously, that interfacing with the immediate community is the ethos of this organization. I wonder, do you have any stories that capture the nature and texture of your interactions with the neighborhood? I’ve only heard from Bryan about sewing those chair covers for someone in the neighborhood. But I’m sure you have so many other stories.

Bryan Villalobos: There was something magical about this space. And I’ve been coming back practically every single day since the end of June. I feel like I found family here. I don’t know. It’s... it’s a lot. But I love it.

Jake Robbins: There was something special about the youth mural program that happened over last summer. Young people from the neighborhood worked with Don, Akua, and Hugo Gyrl to conceptualize this mural. It is beautiful, but it also captures all the depth of what it means to grow up in Crown Heights. While we were painting, through the entire process—I think it was about three weeks—people would stop their cars and say things like, “I’ve lived here for twenty years, this corner has been abandoned for so long, thank you.” You know, shit like that, and in the moment that’s really nice. It just sticks with you that the art that’s being created by the community is staying here. It was really special, I think, to help with that. I also think it was a really good introduction for a lot of people to us. I took a lot of photos of the kids, and I gave some of them physical copies of these pictures at the end of the program, which made me feel really old. I was just like, “Here, here’s some pictures of you all working. These physical pictures are tangible objects you can take away.”

Murray-Adoboe: That project was something like the inner dialogue of the youth community of Crown Heights—specifically about the gentrification that is going on here. We’re on a corner that is part of that process.

Jones: This corner is really the apex of Crown Heights gentrification.

Murray-Adoboe: This is meant to be a giant luxury condo.

Jones: Yeah, exactly.

Murray-Adoboe: The concept for the actual mural was: this is what it feels like to go into a new coffee shop and realize that this coffee shop is not for me; this is what it feels like to see my community beautified, but realize it is not for me and not for the people who live here. So, to be on this corner, engaging in that dialogue, publicly, while people who live here and have lived here for decades, generations, are excited that the kids that they know, their nephews, and nieces, are working on this and then also to be caught in this crossfire of people who are new to the neighborhood, it’s all of that. You have the neighbors playing music out of their trunks, buying water for the youth.

Jones: The whole thing was very meta. This whole thing is very meta. They painted the mural but were also experiencing everything that they were painting as they were doing it. One of our fifteen-year-old youths was accosted by five undercover officers, all white, none of whom are from this neighborhood, the week before the mural unveiling. Thrown up against that wall. Thrown up against the wall as he’s painting about police brutality. Searched, you know, patted down, accused of having drugs or guns on him, and they find nothing on him because he’s fifteen. And he’s not up to no good. Then they proceed to harass him about how expensive his shoes are, how could he possibly have afforded those, etc.
PA Bike Repair and Refurbish Initiative. Prompted by a surge in the demand for bikes and a withdrawal of public transportation use due to the pandemic, PA sought to mobilize the BIPOC community in NYC through a free bike initiative. Mechanics worked on-site three days a week to provide bike repairs and distribute refurbished bikes to our growing waitlist of community members in need. Funded by donations of money and bike parts, we were able to get 60 bikes on the road and service over 100 riders. Photo courtesy of Jake Robbins.

"Uprising: A March for Black Womxn," June 2020. Featuring Who Protects Black Womxn, Your Liberation is Bound in My Liberation, the Atlantic Ocean and protest set with eight portraits as well as twenty hand-held signs, 2020. Public Assistants was the organizing hub for a day of direct action empowering Black women and femmes. We painted banners and portraits memorializing Black women martyrs of the movement, setting the stage for a celebration of Black women at the vanguard of Black liberation and abolitionist organizing. Photo courtesy of Jake Pearce.
QUEERS FOR TRANS LIVES
And the nonchalant way that these youths told us about that happening when we got here the next morning...They told us so casually because they are so used to it. That blew my mind. That was another nail in the coffin, like, “Y'all are supposed to be here right now like this, this was fated.” And that’s not even mentioning the huge condo high-rise that’s in the mural, which is representative of this lot and how it’s about to become a condo. It was crazy.

This is also the first mural I’ve ever worked on where we don’t have to leave after it’s completed. You don’t have to leave the school, you don’t have to leave the jail, you don’t have to leave the community center. We’re just still here. So now we get to still see all those kids daily. They come by and we can still employ them and give them apprenticeship opportunities. That, to me, is really amazing, because I’ve never had that luxury of proximity to the work.

Mercy Kelly: The kids were the best part. They would clown me for my music... but they knew they like what I was playing on the speakers. I don’t know why they were lyin’! [laughter] Maybe some of these young people from the neighborhood would have never spoken to each other without this program. And just hearing some of the really brilliant conversations that these thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds were having about race and class that my generation was not having at thirteen.

Wu: I think it’s a particularly amazing thing that your work is so casually intergenerational, not in a performative way. It’s just like, well, it has to be intergenerational if we’re going to do this right. Jake, when you spoke about physical photographs, it made me think of how gentrification is a displacement of people, but it’s also a kind of taking away of an archive. How do you all think about PA’s archive? Also, with the real estate pressure, have you ever felt the need for PA to be a certain way, adopt a certain non-profit structure, in order to survive?

Kelly: Many of us have community-based organization backgrounds and we’ve seen the ills of a not-for-profit, how they can be like a business, and we’ve seen the worst of what they can be. Because a lot of the work that we do is based on social justice, we didn’t want that same framework to be here. We could see that from the door and were just like, “nah.”

Jones: I think that the goal is to not mirror any of those institutional, clinical, educational spaces that we may have come from, and really imagine, and strive, to create something we’ve never seen before. It also helps to not put so much pressure on ourselves, both as individuals and as an organization or a collective, to be something. Our ethos was just to see what this can be, what we can do, and be as modular or versatile or fluid as possible without breaking, really.

Kelly: In most organizations that claim to serve a “community,” their leadership, or whoever is making decisions, look nothing like that community. That’s what is very unique about Public Assistants. We look like everyone who’s walking in those doors.

Murray-Adoboe: We are them. Down to the community fridge. Some of us need help with groceries too. It’s not us and them. We are them.

Everyone: Completely.

Robbins: There’s a great sense of reciprocity with our neighbors. Everything that they bring in, we bring back to them. It’s an actual relationship and not a service.

Wineburg: We’ve referred to PA as something that’s amorphous. We try to be responsive and also reflect internally. We ebb and flow instead of trying to project five years ahead or make a traditional business model. Because we don’t really know what that looks like. I don’t think we have to create such hard boundaries for ourselves. That’s part of the beauty that we’ve created here.

All of the work that we do is part of a living archive, all the banners that we made and everyone we spoke to. All the kids who worked on that mural, how they’re going to remember this, that’s part of the legacy or the archives of PA. And hopefully that mural won’t be their last memory.

Jones: I’m fully obsessed with notions of archive, and how our programming can exist beyond physical space and time. That’s why I think so many of us are interested in making media works and working with publishing and radio to get this as far and as wide and as accessible and as timeless as possible.

Robbins: I feel that in a lot of our pieces, like in the mural... or we referenced some of the banners we made...

Jones: Your photography...

Robbins: Everything is kind of feeding into itself and reiterative of other pieces that we’ve created because it’s all part of the same message. The message is the same, but the media is amorphous, or, you know, it kind of allows for certain flexibility across everything we want to do.

Jones: It feels like there’s an ethos of PA and we can pull from that archive and then recycle that. It’s almost like each program or project is turning and unfurling into the next. Which is so pleasant. It’s just more organic.

Robbins: Like splitting an atom or something. In a lot of ways, PA feels like an organism. You know it’s just growing, constantly changing. I feel that’s something that comes along with us no matter what we want to do.

Bobrow-Williams: We all approach everything like artists. This is not like a business, not like an organization, not like a not-for-profit, and we have this artist’s approach to finding solutions.

Wu: All of you have your own practices, and they mesh with PA in some ways. Could you speak of a moment where your PA work intersected with your own practices?

Murray-Adoboe: I think that photoshoot was the first time all of our practices just ran into one another.

Kelly: Yeah, the Interview Magazine shoot. Normally they have a feature called the “Salad Pages” but we took it over as the “Black Pages.” We were given editorial freedom to produce whatever we wanted. I produced a shoot inspired by Lil Kim’s music video for “Crush on You.” I thought it was very important to recreate a cultural touchstone for so many of us with a Black trans cast. And everyone here was extremely involved. Akua completely art directed and we built the sets as we went along. Akua pulled the Versace for the pink picture. And the Versace. I would have loved to wear the Versace but I couldn’t fit in the Versace. [laughter]

Murray-Adoboe: But this is what’s so special about PA. The timeline for this was basically like, okay, it’s Wednesday. I’m in the office. Don is talking about this Interview Magazine project. Mercy mentions that she’s putting
together stuff for a shoot in the lot. There aren’t really
details yet. The shoot was going to be Thursday? Friday?
Kelly: The shoot was going to be Friday, but then it rained.
Murray-Adoboe: Right. But she’s like, “Oh this is my idea,
I think I wanna recreate the ‘Crush on You’ video.”
And I’m like, “Say less. Can I help you with the set?”
And in one day...
Kelly: We went shopping.
Murray-Adoboe: We got props. We got set dressing.
Kelly: We got fabric. We got fake plants. We were given
these real plants from a Cardi B video.
Murray-Adoboe: And the day of, we all showed up. Caroline
was there. Christian was there. Everyone was there.
And everything was on the fly. Setting up and breaking
down. There was so much resourcefulness.
Jones: Well, that’s like the unfolding into itself we mentioned.
We have all these paint and art supplies to do murals.
But then some of this stuff gets used as sets for a photo
shoot, and then that becomes a music video, and then
the still from that goes to print. There’s four iterations
of one thing. The things that we achieve in such little
time when we’re together, with such high-end creativity,
it’s just mind blowing every time.
Robbins: When we first started coming here, you were
talking a lot about the aesthetics of urgency. And I feel
like that still has come into play with all of this, even
right now, while we’re getting ready to move.
Wineburg: Resourcefulness and flexibility and all the things
that we’ve been talking about live under that phrase.
Wu: Morgan and I were chatting before about how he thinks
about his practice in a trans-disciplinary way and that
feels relevant here.
Bobrow-Williams: I’ve been thinking about the term trans-
disciplinary, making things that combine or utilize all
available forms of knowledge from various disciplines,
and drawing from all of them. The thing that you make
in the end is beyond medium and beyond discipline. As
I’m trying to find words to describe what I do, I feel like
it’s embodied in PA. What does imagining together allow
us to achieve we could not have imagined individually?
Wu: Yeah, you could say PA is anti-disciplinary or post-
disciplinary as well. You’re making the platform for your
type of work as you’re making it. Institutions prime
you to expect a certain type of work so to receive deeply
anti-disciplinary work, you need new institutions.
Bobrow-Williams: Yes. This place has provided me with
so many necessary resources. I didn’t have a working
computer for months. And then there were the Macs
here that someone had donated. Also, as a mover/
dancer a big issue right now, mid-pandemic, is lack
of space. My apartment is a box. Having this room to
move in was a beautiful thing.
Wu: It’s a very different metric of re-opening. If you’re
thinking of an institution and what sort of success it’s
going to have, rather than it being a numbers game,
maybe it’s like, “Oh, we activated one community
to make art.” It’s a totally different framing of an audience
or of success.
Bobrow-Williams: With PA it feels like you can just try things
and not have to make a product. So many institutions
want something from you if they give you money.
Wineburg: Yeah. You don’t have to deliver here. It’s about
the process.
Robbins: Some days there’s just a video projecting in here
and you could stop in and it might be the inspiration
for your next project.
Jones: If on a day, any given day, one person comes, puts
on YouTube, and sits on the couch, then we’re in
operation. We want this to be a haven for any margin-
alized, disenfranchised creator in the area to come and
just find peace of mind for ten minutes... To have tea,
to talk to someone, to meet a friend, and not have to
jump through loopholes and do some intake form or
become quantifiable data for benefactors or donors for
some gala, where they buy your art that you’ll never
see again and take pictures of you.
Robbins: The outdoor lot was so good because people could
just stop in and ask, “What is this?” And you’d say,
“Oh, well, we’re Public Assistants...” And then people
would just come in and have lunch or just meet up. And,
you know, that’s completely okay. There aren’t a lot
of spaces like this in the neighborhood anymore. And
just to get this on the record, if you know of anyone
with space for us. Let us know! Please!
Jones: The idea of having to leave is very bittersweet. There’s
some poetry to leaving and doing this again. And
again, and again, and ideally some time we don’t have
to leave? But we’re always going to be carrying this
mindset and doing this again, and again in different
places, different times, remotely, whatever.
Wineburg: Another thing that we haven’t mentioned was
our goal to get land to try and have a satellite space to
hold retreats or residencies or a farm or just a space
for folks to get out of the city.
Jones: And it’s not even that far-fetched. I even imagined
something like us all dispersing and going to separate
parts of the world so we can carry on everywhere,
simultaneously.
Amani Sampson: When you come from a place of abundance,
you can transcend space, you can transcend discipline.
You can transcend all of these things, because you’re
not coming from a place of not enough. At PA it feels
like there’s more than enough to go around for all of us.

Morgan Bobrow-Williams is an
interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary
conceptual and performance artist
creating work at the intersection of
movement and dance, live performance,
music, film, photography, collage,
sculpture, and installation.

Don Christian Jones is a
Philadelphia-born, New
York-based interdisciplinary and
multimedia creator.

Mercy Kelly is a Brooklyn-based
Black trans visual artist and advocate
who isn’t here to be your teachable
moment. Mercy’s work focuses
on the beauty of fat, femme body
performance as liberation.

Akua Murray-Adoboe’s focus is
socially-driven cultural production
through film, visual art, and
community engagement as a means
of addressing inequities at the
intersections of climate justice,
race, and class.

Jake Robbins is a filmmaker and
photographer whose work focuses on
joy, raw energy, creativity, and passion
as expressions of collective liberation.

Amani Sampson is a research scientist
living in the Bedford-Stuyvesant
neighborhood of Brooklyn.

Bryan Villalobos is a singer-
songwriter with a background in art
direction and fashion styling and
design. Currently, Bryan is thoroughly
involved in Public Assistants serving
as an art director and stylist.

Caroline Wineburg is a New
York-based designer working in
architecture and interiors, with a
community-engaged practice
committed to an equitable, sustainable
approach founded in interdisciplinary
collaboration, community
development, and mutual aid.

Simon Wu is an artist and writer
based across Brooklyn and
Philadelphia.