

**Charleston’s conNECKtedTOO Project:
Art and Community Working to Make the Invisible Visible**

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“Art is where I have courage and each day is my masterpiece...”¹ This sentiment, printed on the sculptural assemblage, which is a major visual element of the *conNECKtedTOO* installation at the Cannon Street Arts Center, speaks of, or rather, “demonstrates” with eloquence, the importance of self-expression and the confidence that active creative participation may infuse within individual artists. The quote, provided by a young, local poet, Nyla Heyward, is integrated within the sculptural art installation at Cannon Street. Heyward’s succinct phrasing perfectly explains the intrinsic power of personal expressiveness as a means of supporting identity construction, the development of self-awareness, and a willingness to take risks that may transform private realities as well as public social interaction. This category of insight, and its association with the concept of “connection” seems to be an important component for the underlying motivation suffusing the entire collaborative enterprise of *conNECKtedTOO*.

The *conNECKtedTOO* project is an outgrowth of the Charleston Rhizome Collective, an organization of local collaborators who employ the arts as a means to examine, explore and cohere varying aspects of the area community, intending to combine artistic expression, social activism, and economic opportunity for both creative artists and for small businesses.² The group is intentionally “inter-racial, inter-generational, [and] multi-functional” with a somewhat unusual goal, as an arts-based organization, of stimulating “creative economic outcomes”.³ Oddly, precisely this goal is a significant part of what makes the group’s project exceptionally

¹ Nyla Heyward is the name of the young poet, an intern with the *conNECKtedTOO Project*, whose quote is included in the installation sculpture.

² Published materials from *conNECKtedTOO* indicate the group’s intention to explore how the arts and culture in communities can enhance the visibility of both artists and businesses as noted by Pamela Gibbs, & Gwylene Gallimard. On page 2 of the booklet, the group self-describes as a “collective of artists, educators, and engage economic development; see page 2, of the group’s questionnaire booklet 2.

³ The information on the intentionally diverse composition and social goals of *conNECKtedTOO* has been taken from Part 2 of the group’s questionnaire booklet, which lists original members, La’Sheia Oubre, Jean-Marie Maucllet, and Debra Holt as “activists”, in addition to Pamela Gibbs and Gwylene Gallimard. Gallimard notes in a personal correspondence to me that the purpose of the questions was to develop a communication, generate a dialogue to initiate a long term relationship. The use of questions as an “art-tool” is part of the means for encouraging community involvement. The inclusion of discourse precipitating questions stems from Gallimard and Maucllet experiences as business owners in Charleston, where often information seekers would venture into their café to engage them in surveys geared to advertisements and sales; the questions used in the *conNECKtedTOO* Project sought to avoid, from its inception, the type of vendor relationship or charity relationship often inherited within comparable surveys. The purpose of the questions here is simply to amplify the voices of TINY businesses. Evidently, team members would spend hours together to attempt to fill up a question booklet. The members of the Rhizome Collective, who believed in and understood the process, found it to be very rewarding.

effective in terms of providing a non-traditional visibility for the constituent members. For the Rhizome/*conNECKtedTOO* participants, the collaboration between art and business makes them innovators of the first order, combining the expressive importance of the humanities with the “nuts-n-bolts” realities of economic impact, real-world action, significant social transformation, and enhanced public awareness.

Using the Gullah idiom as a tribute to unique, local, low-country culture, the *conNECKtedTOO* motto of “you bet’n me, ‘n me ‘n you” translates loosely as “ [If] you will believe in me then I will believe in you” which is understandable as a more syntactically sophisticated “[If] you will invest in and believe in me, then I will invest in and believe in you”; a statement of communal interdependencies. The motto articulates with clarity the aim of the Charleston Rhizome project of *conNECKtedTOO*, which is to integrate the creative interests of individual artists and area small businesses in a mutually beneficial community-building program, that also automatically involves rendering both the artists and the small business owners an improved network of greater visibility. The project’s philosophical infrastructure seems grounded in both the assumption of personal responsibility appropriate to an existentialist-based philosophical motivational structure and in the deconstructive analysis of power distribution.

The outcome of the collaboration is the generation of works of art as the consequent-outcomes of a series of social performances and interactions. The works actualize, visually, a range of impacts upon their communities of small entrepreneurial ventures (or in the language of the Rhizome Collective, of “TINY businesses”). The gist of this approach is that in the collective the “tiny” businesses are not “tiny” in the least, rather they constitute the culture of the neighborhoods and regions of the city that give the city of Charleston those exceptional properties creating its *cachet*. The unique properties and local influences that are lost when individual entrepreneurial ventures fall into decline and are removed from their communities, is foregrounded in this installation and its related projects, offering an oblique critique of the corporate homogenization of franchises that provide a numbing uniformity where highly individual, “TINY” businesses offer communities an enriching originality and generate interesting complexities of communal character.

Interesting features within the installation, such as *The Register of Memories*, which offers anecdotal recreations of past experiences with local businesses, written by community members and collected by the Rhizome Collective, provide a reflective nexus for audience awareness. This idea appears to stem, in part from an earlier iteration of the *conNECKted* Project held in the City Gallery at Waterfront Park in 2017, discussed more extensively below, in which Rhizome member, LaTonnya Wallace created a *Room of Remembrance* for victims of violence from the Charleston area. In the 2019 iteration of the project, the concept moves beyond individuals to the metaphorical cultural violence of shifting local political and economic trends that may prove to be as destructive as guns, hatred, and systemic discrimination.

The *Register of Memories* represents entities that are now physically “absent”; that is, memories of businesses which are no longer present in the neighborhoods, but which are made both “present” and “visible” once again by means of memory, transcription, and articulation into a readable text. This simultaneously renders the *conNECKtedTOO* installation into a kind of monument to local memory and to the importance of memorialization in creating “identity,” offering a commentary on the fundamental cultural values of the city of Charleston. Such a reminder is poignant for this urban community, which has become increasingly dependent upon its past as a lure for tourist dollars, and one dependent upon the significance of memory for both its economic (commercially-based) and historical (humanities-based) significance. Monuments and public memory are Charleston’s stock-in-trade; its self-generated image as the “holy city” (alluding both to its historic churches and its own “sacred cow” cultural status within its native South Carolina, and the entire Southeastern region for its powerful antebellum associations, which form such an important part of the city’s official identity and pervasive cultural importance. However, in the creation of an official city narrative, the loss of many of the cultural contributors who facilitated development of its unique character has been a disturbing aspect of its evolution and transformation. Examination of an extremely complicated and racialized local history, pertaining to official choices regarding who or what has been memorialized within and around the city, and how such memories are publically interpreted, recorded, and disseminated, indicates how some aspects of public memory have been intentionally marginalized and rendered “invisible”. The making “visible” of the “invisible” is one of the aims of the Charleston Rhizome, offering voice, presence, reclaimed-power, and expressive self-actualization to its participants.

One of the most interesting aspects of the *conNECKtedTOO* project is its approach to shifting away from the 20th century understanding of what “Art” “is” and of how “Art” is created. The conventional conception of the lone artist in “his” (or her!) studio garret, working in silent, desperate anguish, making one-of-a-kind objects for an audience incapable of appreciating his/her unique insights into experience until after a misery-filled life terminates in an obscure, uncelebrated death, which yet serves to reveal his/her works of genius... is a tedious Western cultural cliché that has become identified with the strivings of the *avant garde* arts practitioner. The romantic notion of the isolated artist, struggling to bring new ideas to the fore, is the old narrative which is interrogated and often brushed aside by the 21st century reality of these communal works, created by collaborative groups, who rather than starving in garrets alone, seek out the support of communities of shared interest. The Charleston Rhizome destroys the time-honored illusion of the isolated artist, and displaces this idea with the generation of communal creativity in which “process” is often privileged over “products”. By this, I intend to suggest that while the outcome that may result in the creation of objects stemming from the collaborative efforts of the group is important, the participation of the group members is of greater importance than any particular vision of how the works that result ought to appear. I was recently reminded by Gallimard that she and Mauclet have continually sought to avoid the creation of false or conventional dichotomies

pertaining to quality considerations when offering a discourse on creative works. Both note that such limitations have been used detrimentally in many conversations on creative work, especially with regard to assessments of collective or collaborative efforts in the generation of works of art. However, art generated from any ideological position where inclusion supervenes over aesthetic and structural considerations is likely to offer cause to face precisely such a discourse. A comparable issue emerged in some of the manifestations of the globally motivated Gallimard/Mauclet project, *The Future is on the Table*, which in its third iteration at the City Gallery some years ago was based on proposing the opposite: wherein the artists created 56 stools from a map of the world to create a process where by the products were distributed and used by their audience, forming a “community”. That process created other art products, and a part of that project’s mandate (from Gallimard and Mauclet) was to undermine, Eurocentrist preoccupations of assessments regarding “quality”; and indeed, the issue as they have conceived it is complex and significant, and merits further discourse. However, in Western culture, while creative artists may militate against any singular means of devising a straight forward direction concerning art praxis, the realities of the audience may be disparate from the intentions of the artists, and that is a meaningful, and important tension to present for discourse, which indeed the current *conNECKtedTOO Project* does help the participants to do. The complexity of the current project and its community impact is an excellent catalyst which is capable of serving to enlarge our local, regional, national, and more extended conversation regarding “aesthetics”.

The concept of a socialized art is not at all entirely new; process-oriented conceptual artworks are an outgrowth of early 20th-century modernism and the advent approximately 100 years ago of Dadaist performances, which realized their logical extensions in the event-based “Happenings” of the spontaneous, unconventional, and often, to some “outrageous” productions of 1950s and 60s.⁴ This most recent, Charleston-specific collaborative, interactive, multi-leveled, and, perhaps more socially-conscious iteration, is grounded in a Foucault-inspired distribution of authority and “power”, a commitment to unpredictability and an inclusive, interdisciplinary predisposition, coupled with an awareness of how art and commerce may compliment and contribute one to the other; an idea that would have been antithetical to anti-commercial, anti-community art of the past.⁵

⁴ The anti-art goals of Dadaism, which intentionally served as a critique of bourgeois convention and assumptions at the beginning of the 20th century extended into the experimentation, spontaneity, and rejection of *status quo* morality that the unpredictable Performance Art and Pop Art, which began to emerge after WWII in the 1950s with the conception of art as an “event” rather than a single, tangible product. Such conceptions led to the offering of “Happenings” by artists such as Allan Kaprow, musician, John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham, and visual artists such as Andy Warhol and later individuals such as Bill Jones, Cindy Sherman, Jean-Michel Basquiat, or Nam June Paik, and Charlotte Mormon, as examples of what often evolved in the practice of collectivist artistic praxis. See Tracy diTolla, “The Art Story: Modern Art Insight” online for more information at: <https://www.theartstory.org/movement-happenings.htm>.

⁵ A brief note on philosopher Michel Foucault and his ideas regarding distributive power may be helpful at this juncture. For Foucault, power was not merely a coercive force applied by an active agent, but was a knowledge and discourse-based conception distributed in its effectiveness, everywhere. Foucault uses the terms

Even the forms of the artifacts being collectively generated by members of the Rhizome group, working with apprentices, and community members to provide documentation of the highlighted “TINY businesses”, offer a collaborative, inclusive, participatory aesthetic. Gallimard is careful to explain that the participants are not “volunteers”, explaining:

“We have no volunteers. By design and by lack of possibilities. We sometimes worked with people who were not paid, based on fair exchange procedures. This project though because of the “status” imposed on us by our success in getting the ArtPlace funding did not allow us to think and plan that way, unless someone from the group would have been interested in developing that way of collaborating.”

As a project organizer and contributor, Gallimard notes that working with volunteers was never an option. The conNECKtedTOO Project is funded by a grant that was not evidently well understood in terms of its constraints and restrictions by the community involved in its outcomes, in that some misunderstanding of designated funding for specific uses within the community has been an on-going challenge for this project, the grant funds were not for general community support or to address the immediate requirements of individuals who might coincidentally be in need. While both Gallimard and Mauclet are fully aware that many in the community involved may be in financial need, addressing such needs outside of the parameters of the project as described was impossible. This reality has led to the predictable political discomfort that is often associated with working with a community of diverse awareness, understanding, education, and conceptual exposure. The complications of the conNECKtedTOO Project stem in part from the very diversity of its extensions into its community, as part of Gallimard and Mauclet’s effort to generate meaningful community art projects. This effort has had some personal toll on the principal conceptualists, but that is not unusual; Art and politics are rarely separable...particularly if funding is involved.

The Cannon Street Arts Center sculptural installation, replete with explanatory and contextualizing documentation, rises in the middle of the site display, clearly incorporating a series of aesthetic properties identifiable as the work of the Gwylene Gallimard/Jean-Marie Mauclet team, whose collaborative approach to the generation of art imagery has developed, over a number of years, and a combination of fascinating projects, into a finely honed, integral approach to community

'power/knowledge' to signify that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth': Truth is something determined by discourse and exchange, based in consensus and correspondence between phenomena and events within the shared realm of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint, inducing regular effects of its own manifestation. For Foucault; "Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it... We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart". See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, London, Penguin (1998), pp. 100-101. (from <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/>) This discursive approach to an understanding of distributed power is part of the process generated by the activities and discussions of *conNECKtedTOO*

integration within the processes of art production (the team has worked together in the Charleston area for more than 25 years).

Clear, crisp, modernist lines dominate in the craft-aware sculptural works of Jean-Marie Mauclet, who was clearly in charge of structuring the scaffolded, multileveled fretwork on which the decorated compartments representing local businesses are nested in an interlacing lattice-work of vector-like connective lines. The geometric simplicity is countered by individually decorated, organically conceived individual “rooms” and “structures”, many of which intentionally replicate the façades of the businesses they symbolize, “decorated” or in part creation of its final “design” often facilitated by the owners, or workers, or “recollectors” of the businesses in question. Gallimard notes an objection to the use of the word “decorated” in the context of collaboration on the appearance of the installation components. As Gallimard notes: “Everything done on these models actually had a function linked to a conversation.” The project’s appearance was achieved by the collaborative contributions of its co-creators / co-fabricators, who for the installation structure were sculptor Morgan Kinne, apprentices Markelle Evans (a recent college graduate), Timothy Hunter (a student at the College of Charleston studying both chemistry and painting) and Alexandria Mackey (a local high school student), all contributing their unique gifts and advancing the project in very different ways. In addition, Fresh Cuts Barber owner, Sammy Smalls, painted the simulation of his business with its checkered-chess-board floor. The process of much of the project is represented quite precisely by the relationships indicated by the interaction of the architectural and structural elements. The interlacing wooden extensions serve simultaneously as metaphorical “connectors”, visually punning on the name of the project; *“conNECKtedTOO”* (in which NECK refers to the common name of the Charleston peninsula itself as the Charleston “neck”) and “TOO”, alluding to “also connected”; that is, also being a part of the original *conNECKted Project* of 2017, as well as being its second iteration (pun on the homonyms, the adverb “too”, the noun “two” and the preposition “to”), signifying the idea of community extensions from being connected “to” something (use of the term “to” as a conjunctive preposition), being a second iteration of something and both being and not being another thing (an aspect of something or a continuation that is part of a whole but retains its own identity). The work is both aesthetically appealing and intellectually clever in also using the lattice of connectors as the support structure of the visual component showing the literal interdependent connections between the businesses represented as supporting each other in the sculpture-as-metaphor, which is a work of art connecting small businesses to their artist-advocates and vice/ versa .

As a project of many parts involving many people, the artifacts stemming from the processes of *conNECKtedTOO*, while often conceptualized in their essentials by Gallimard and Mauclet, have quite a number of co-creators; so many in fact, that it would be difficult to adequately cite them all individually. A few names of contributors to and collaborators with the varying kinds of objects presented in the installations and performances of the on-going project, may be mentioned here (as in the young poet, still in high school, cited at the beginning of this discussion, who,

along with her sister, Aleksandra Mackey, an intern working with the Charleston Rhizome and the *conNECKtedTOO* project, have assisted in the project's overall complexity and varying levels of inclusiveness). However, the number of artists and businesses involved is so extensive, that no attempt to cite all of the participants, or even a majority of them, will be undertaken in this commentary. The best means for grasping the extension of this project into its communities is to simply visit its sites and witness its intricacies.

As a consequence of its extended list of participants, a plethora of complexities involving artists, businesses, community members of diverse types, and its very "distributed", even "diffuse" schedule of activities, *conNECKtedTOO* is perhaps incomprehensible as a unified "work" of art, and may be better understood, or rather, more sufficiently conceptualized by spectators exposed to its diverse components, as consideration of the on-going *processes* of varying social interactions. Perception of the generation of a series of art works as a form of social process is perhaps not the expected form through which a considerable segment of the *conNECKtedTOO* audience expects to engage with works of art. This engagement in a process, which often results in the generation of objects or/and images, causing individual and collective insights into human experience and the mutability of human character, is quite different from conceptions of works of art as products produced by a single-minded conceptualist, instructing his or her audience on individual insights into experience. Process-oriented art, while periodically creating fleeting glimpses into the character of variable applications of the term "community", also actually serves to help create the very community which generates its, often, secondary products. The team of participants who conceptualized, documented, planned, and contributed the core concepts of the project include, the aforementioned conceptualists, Gallimard and Mauclet, in tandem with early contributor, La'Sheia Oubré (now no longer associated with the collective following the spring of 2018); educators, Pamela Gibbs and Debra Holt (who serves as group historian); publicist and program facilitator, Victoria Rae Moore; contributors, Theron Snype, the TINY business co-ordinator; visual artist and art-book creator, Kit Loney, and The Gullah Lady, story-teller, Sharon Cooper, among many other contributors, including artist, Morgan Kinne, Kurtis Lamkin (musician), filmmaker Jason Gourdine, performer/poet Anastatia Ketchen, as well as apprentices Anna Brown (recent college graduate) who worked on the geographical/historical maps, Shanequa Rainey (currently a college student) who created the project's *Scavenger Hunt*, Aysha Bowens (local high school student) who is responsible for project's social media outreach; all in an on-going activity of multiple-moving parts.

In order to grasp the exceptional research, work ethic, and community engagement of this "art" project, the audience member would have to become aware of the extensive information the project represents, including a "map" which reproduces the peregrinations of "TINY businesses", some of which had moved location, changing streets, or others that may have left the neighborhood altogether, or which

may have closed over the passage of time, forced out by shifts in the local political and economic landscape. The Rhizome group has provided a site map from King Street to below Courtney Street, bordered by Spring Street and Cannon Street, which serves to document the economic shifts in the fortunes of area small businesses within their network and within the memory of the network members. Spectators and visitors to the installations may participate in scavenger hunts, guided tours led by local residents with long memories, or work with artisans to craft contributions to the group aesthetic of the project.

This participatory component, so crucial to the creation of a sense of community is an extension of the earlier *conNECKted Project* (thus the *conNECKtedTOO*, the *TOO* indicating the long-term involvement of the team over the years within the local community with roots in other local communal works of art, such as *The Future is On the Table*, another continuing Gallimard/Mauclet project. The current work and its predecessors are all self-consciously socially –activist artworks, intended to have an impact upon public consciousness, often by means of extended involvement of various communities in the processes leading up to and culminating in the installations. Because action and process *per se* constitute crucial components of the political messages of these art installations, which tend to be unresolved, on-going, and continually evolving during the course of their public presentation, action is as much a part of the exhibition as the objects associated with the presence of the work of art as a total entity in its own right, as well as in any of its individual, component parts. As noted above, this approach remains somewhat unusual for the generation of art works as composite, communal activities, instead of single products, created by an individual persons, intending to communicate some particular idea to an audience. Here, as is often the case in Gallimard/Mauclet projects, the audience is also often actively creating the very thing that it is being asked to assess and to respond to. This causes the installations to be about self-interrogation and self-critique, but an interrogation among multiple selves, not a single “self”.

As a component of the on-going, unresolved process of the installations, the audience’s aesthetic responses are often also moving “targets”, in that both the people involved and more passive audience members may have no good clear idea of the project’s overall appearance, impact, or motivational concepts. However, if we consider our aesthetic response to be the result of the constituent activities of consciousness, awareness and understanding that permit us to make judgments regarding visible and perceptible as well as intelligible phenomena, then many parts of the installations will seem to be making connections that we might not immediately “see” but which may be immediately “intuited” only to have a later, delayed impact, and these often seemed to be quite important. ⁶

⁶ The difference between a perceptible and an intelligible thing is simply that perceptible things can be directly engaged through our senses (seen, touched, tasted, smelled or heard) whereas, .intelligible things we may be aware of ..but we cannot perceive them directly with our senses, but only with our minds; in other words intelligible things are...-intuited things which we “see” only as the work or outcome of or as evidence of our own intelligence, but of course, one cannot *see* intelligence or curiosity or kindness etc. but we are able to see the actions that such inner

What was fascinating at the opening of the earlier iteration of the *conNECKted Project* at the City Gallery at Waterfront Park was how the exhibition was used by different individuals who formed the participating audience (which indeed, completed the installation's community impact intention) in order to inform those present regarding communal events that might be considered important. As an example, Charleston Mayor, John Tecklenburg, spoke at the opening of his excitement in seeing such a diverse audience present in the spaces of the City Gallery and he then commented further on 60 affordable housing units that were to be built by the city, as if addressing some of the concerns raised within the installation pertaining to inequity and housing that form an important part of the local reality regarding transitions in the concept of "community". Thus, art and politics met in a single space, but it is uncertain the extent to which the cross fertilization of intentions of either in terms both of messaging and interests, overlapped successfully between those diverse constituencies concerned with art-making, activism, or community action, and those concerned with ongoing and developing aspects of the local political, and economic agenda.

It was at the 2017 opening that I initially had occasion to speak with some of the earlier contributors to the overall installation of the first iteration of the process-oriented *conNECKted* exhibition, and I learned from LaTonnya Wallace (of the Rhizome Collective) about her contributions to the creation of a *Purple Room of Remembrance*; a memorial for local individuals lost to acts of violence. The collaborative work was an incredibly poignant installation, particularly when we realize that the focus in violent crime is often upon the perpetrators, with an inexcusable inattention to victims of crime in our nation as a whole. Another artist from the early version of the art installation, Kristi Ryba, happened to discuss her work pertaining to the intricate, hand-drawn and painted maps in a section of the gallery on the first floor in 2017; such maps indeed may have served as prototypes for the maps of the city in the current *conNECKtedTOO* installation.

In conclusion, what may we learn from the objects and processes of the *conNECKtedTOO Project* and its many components? Initially, we may discern that both creating and observing works of art hold a capacity for transforming individual perceptions and individual lives while simultaneously transforming whole communities (this insight may not be "new" however it remains highly significant). We may also observe that the activity of art-making is both a deeply personal, individual action, and yet may be an occasion for profound sharing and collaborative or collective creative action. Perhaps, most importantly, we may realize that the power of our connections and similarities may easily overcome our divisions and

awareness may lead to only; thus, many parts of the installation seemed to allow us as audience to make connections that we might not immediately "see" but which could be "intuited". For example the relationship between cause and effect may not be immediately obvious to the senses, as in the bombarding of electrons to irradiate a material, but our understanding of the performance of subatomic particles can be apprehended by the intellect.

separations, engendering empathetic interactions of considerable social significance, even if we fail to be fully conscious, at first, of such connections, and this profound human insight may be the most important gift the participants in *conNECKtedTOO* offer to their audience and to each other; that is acknowledgement of a shared humanity motivated by processes of engagement and personal transformations stemming from creating and seeing the particulars of the various aspects of this project.

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