CAL—ACT—IVISM

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Dionna Daniel
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Defining the role of Citizen Artist

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In his 2017 inaugural address, incoming CalArts president Ravi S. Rajan called on CalArtians everywhere to cherish their role as "Citizen Artists" who, in the words of the Institute's founding provost Herbert Blau, are in a unique position to help "put the whole cracked world back together." Beginning with this issue, *The Pool* will bring you the stories of alumnx who exemplify this vision of Citizen Artists—graduates who have found a unique way to, as Rajan put it, "steer us toward a better future."

In this edition, meet Deborah Wasserman MFA '92 Art, Donna Michelle Daniel BFA '17 Theater, and Roger Holzberg BFA '78 Film/Video, who are using their training as artists and their life experiences to make this "cracked world" a better place.

DEBORAH WASSERMAN

In the heart of one of the most diverse neighborhoods in America, amidst the vibrant whirl of immigrants from India, Pakistan, South America, and Mexico, artist —who is fluent in four languages and proudly calls herself a "multicultural hybrid"—brings an extra layer of diversity all her own.

Over the last decade, countless residents of Jackson Heights in Queens have bumped into an unusual new visitor on their sidewalks or in their neighborhood park. One day, it was Mother Earth/Queen of Trash, a figure with glowing-green skin and ripped-rag clothing, pulling a regal train of stitched-together garbage and handing out small cloth bags of earth and seeds, pausing to speak gently to rapt young children about the importance of recycling and caring for the planet. Another day, it was Morphing Woman, appearing down the road in Socrates Sculpture Park, a strange bodysuit-wearing figure seemingly trapped inside mesh fabric, crawling, stretching, and sometimes striking poses in juxtaposition to the park's sculptures.

Another time in the same park, it was a friendly but determined woman in a white kerchief and an apron tied over a simple dress evoking an image of immigrants of a century ago; as you strolled through the park, you would see her engaging in a four-hour ritual of hand-washing clothes and lying them out to dry, as women have done for generations before. People stopped by to look, take selfies, and even help out.

Then there was the day a startling figure walked down the sidewalks of bustling Roosevelt Avenue in a frizzy blond wig and a bright pink-and-white mask covered with glued-on images of women's faces and body parts—only her eyes and mouth visible. She wore a skimpy, shimmery dress, fishnet hose, and spangled boots, one of which trailed a heavy padlocked chain attached to a small blanket. People stared; some men, angry, shouted. A handful of police officers gathered. Was it someone out of their mind on drugs?

No, it was Deborah Wasserman, in character, handing out her version of what are known in the area as "chica cards"—thinly disguised advertisements for a sexual encounter, usually with a young immigrant woman trapped into being a sex worker by traffickers. But when someone called the phone number on these cards—which read *No longer your chica*—instead of being connected with a prostitute they would hear an expressive monologue, written and performed by Wasserman, about a woman trapped into sex work. During the four-minute voicemail, which was also translated into Spanish and Chinese, information was given about how to seek legal help for those caught sex trafficking, and the character's voice declared: "I'm your sister, your daughter, your next-door neighbor. I'm a woman."

All of these personae emerged from Wasserman's response to, and interactions with, the neighborhood that she and her musician husband, along with their two children, moved into a decade ago from Brooklyn. The relocation to Jackson Heights, a working-class melting pot, was transformative.

"This is when I started doing artwork that was outside of my comfort zone and took the shape of public interventions, or performance, or social practice, because that was the only thing that was available and made sense to me at that time," Wasserman recalls. "Since I was kind of alone as an artist in this community, I decided not to wait until I got permission to go to a nonprofit place, or get a gallery show. I did my art on the street, just interacting with the people in my community. It was important that I make it relevant to them."

It was uncomfortable at times to be taking on a new persona in public, unsettling even, but she discovered it was a direct way of making something happen.

"When you insert yourself into a day-to-day situation," Wasserman says, "and you do it very consciously, it puts the audience in a state of semi-shock—'What are you doing here, why am I coming across you today?' They collaborate with you in a way that you invite them to, and

the interaction is always heightened. Everyone gets more out of it."

"No Longer Your Chica" evolved out of her dawning awareness of the sexual exploitation of women just down the street on Roosevelt Avenue, where young men would hand out cards with images of scantily clad women and a phone number, mumbling, "Chica, chica."

"I wanted to express my rage and raise awareness," Wasserman says. "I wanted to reverse the power relations a bit.... It was a protest piece."

Jackson Heights has also sparked an entrepreneurial energy in Wasserman, leading her to create a neighborhood art education program for children. She also teaches free classes in local public schools and has led two grant-funded projects in area senior centers. She hopes to continue finding inventive ways to deepen her relationship with the neighborhood; her latest idea is to exhibit some of her studio work in one of the area's ubiquitous local beauty salons. For one of her pieces, she simply created a small space on a sidewalk out of cardboard and colorful fabric, put out a welcome mat, and invited passersby to sit and have tea with her as a way of exploring the concept of hospitality across cultures.

Born in Brazil, raised in Israel, Wasserman arrived at CalArts "like a country mouse come to the city," she recalls; she was self-conscious about her English and initially very quiet in classes. Through encountering so many new experiences with this "immigrant mentality," she developed an abiding compassion for people on the outside looking in.

"At CalArts, I played invisible for a long time," she reflects. "It was half true, half a play. Twenty years later, I'm trying to understand the voices of those who are on the outskirts of society, the margins of society—the mothers who have a lot of children and work in the basement doing laundry, the old people in the senior center, children, the women on Roosevelt Avenue. I'm trying to look at all these communities and groups that don't have a voice, like I didn't, and then find a way to give them a voice."

In June of 2015,

DIONNA MICHELLE DANIEL

had just finished her second year at CalArts and was back home with her parents for the summer in Winston-Salem, North Carolina when terrible news suddenly came: Nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina—a few hundred miles to the south—had been shot and killed by a white supremacist during a prayer service.

"It hit hard, because all of my family is from South Carolina," Daniel says.

The country, horrified and in shock, mourned and reflected on its legacy of racial hatred and violence. Then, during the raw aftermath of the massacre, Daniel began noticing Confederate flags in her hometown where she had never seen them before.

"It was a weird moment of grieving," she remembers. "That was when the whole debate about the Confederate flag came out. People in houses I had driven by my whole life were putting Confederate flags out on their porches. It became almost like a parade."

Out of that jarring and emotionally wrenching summer, an idea for a play began to take shape.

Two years later, just after Daniel's graduation in May of 2017 with a BFA in Acting and a minor in Creative Writing, *Gunshot Medley* made its debut at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, with its author playing the all-singing role of High Priestess of Souls, an incarnation of the Yoruban goddess Oya, who remains onstage the entire play like a Greek chorus, awakening the other characters to their reality through spirituals and Appalachian folk ballads. On opening day in Edinburgh's Venue 13, there were two people in the audience; by the end of the 20-performance run three weeks later, the 70-seat venue was sold out daily, and *Gunshot Medley* was one of the hottest tickets at the Fringe.

In September, the piece had its American premiere at Rogue Machine Theatre in Los Angeles with a new cast, and then moved to the Watts Village Theater in October. Los Angeles reviewers, echoing those in Edinburgh, took note of the arrival of a new theatrical voice: "This is a work of tragic majesty...This is what theater is for, it's why it matters," wrote a critic for the Stage and Cinema website. The *Los Angeles Times*

recommended Medley as a "best bet," saying, "Daniel's allegorical tale subtly addresses not only past racial atrocities but also the present-day scourge of police violence against African Americans."

The journey to having a critically-acclaimed play as a 23-year-old has been a thrilling ride for a young Los Angeles-based artist, who entered the arts at age five with one overriding passion.

"From the beginning, as a child, I was obsessed with Alicia Keys, and I made my parents get me piano lessons," Daniel recalls, laughing. "I started playing when I was six. I wanted to *be* Alicia Keys—from the braids, to playing the piano, to singing."

Next came joining a choir, and competition singing, visual art, and writing. Then at age 15, Daniel discovered a local arts education program called Authoring Action that encourages young students to find their voice as writers as they work as a group to tackle issues of social justice in the local community.

"That was when it really became apparent to me that I was interested in work that was socially engaged," Daniel says. "We wrote poems for the North Carolina Bar Association on why pro bono cases mattered, on sexual abuse, domestic violence. I performed at a rally with Authoring Action because the NAACP was suing the state government about gerrymandering."

Daniel was accepted to the North Carolina School of the Arts High School and studied visual arts and acting, and began to dream of performing in musical theater. During college auditions her senior year, she met theater director Nataki Garrett, then on the CalArts faculty. Daniel had brought her visual art along and showed it to Garrett.

"She looked through it and said, 'CalArts is the perfect school for you,'" Daniel remembers. "And that was the biggest reason I came and was excited about the school. I wanted a place where I could flourish in all of my art forms."

A transformative moment came in her first semester, when she saw Garrett's production of *We Are Proud to Present A Presentation…* by Jackie Sibblies Drury, which tells the story of the Herero genocide in Namibia during the early 20th century at the hands of occupying German soldiers.

"I remember when I left that performance," Daniels recalls, "I saw Nataki after the show, and I told her, 'I've never felt this way after a piece of theater before, I'm so angry—I want to *do something*.' I knew then I wanted my work to have that same impact."

Daniel loved the interdisciplinary aspect of CalArts, and found her definition of theater expanded by the school's embrace of experimentation and invention. "I was introduced to work where people were pushing the boundaries of what form is," she says. "That's when I first read Suzan Lori-Parks. Having those influences made me change my idea of what art can do."

The setting and main characters of *Gunshot Medley* began to emerge for Daniel just weeks after the Charleston massacre. She and her friend and mentor from Authoring Action, Nathan Ross Freeman, were walking through the historic Salem Cemetery in Winston-Salem, strolling past the graves of Confederate veterans marked by yet more Confederate flags, when Freeman led her to an area she'd never seen before, hidden beyond a row of hedges—the segregated section of the cemetery where slaves had been buried more than 150 years earlier, before the Emancipation Proclamation. In one patch of earth, Daniel came across three small slabs of stone simply bearing death dates from 1859 and 1860 and three first names: Betty, Alvis, and George.

"I had been wanting to do a play for some time about the Trinity," Daniel recalls. "I realized then that I had found my trinity." Betty, Alvis, and George are given voice in Gunshot Medley, as they return to life to grapple with the violence they have witnessed and suffered, and to confront the painful and triumphant history of African-American life in America.

"At the play's end, there's often tears in the audience's eyes, but there's also hope," Daniel says. "And that's what I want them to leave with."

"When you look that beast in the face, and confront mortality, things change," says

ROGER HOLZBERG.

On a sunny Southern California day fourteen 14 years ago, Holzberg—then a Disney Imagineer with a gift for inventing joyful experiences for millions of people—found himself sitting in a lead-lined room deep inside a Glendale Memorial Hospital, awaiting the entrance of a hazmat-suit wearing Radiation Safety Officer, whose job it was to wheel in a lead canister, open it, retrieve a second canister within, open that, and then with lead tongs extract three radioactive pills and carefully hand them over to be swallowed with a pitcher of water.

It was like something out of a horror movie, Holzberg recalls, and his treatment experience for thyroid cancer—which included days in that room sweating and urinating the radiation out of his body as it worked to kill cancerous cells—was about as far from the famed "architecture of reassurance" of a Disney theme park as one could get.

"There was no question in my mind, going through that," he recalls, "that the patient experience—which I didn't even know was a thing – was something I needed to change."

Patient experience is indeed changing today, one hospital room at a time, thanks in part to Holzberg and his partner, Dr. Leonard Sender, who in 2008 formed Reimagine Well, dedicated to "evolving the patient journey" and using cutting-edge technology with an Imagineering artistic sensibility to create immersive experiences that support patients, caregivers and health providers.

"We've been adapting Disney's 'architecture of reassurance' into an 'architecture of healing,'" Holzberg explains.

Reimagine Well's Infusionarium transforms the dreaded experience of chemotherapy for young and adolescent patients. While receiving chemotherapy, patients can take a virtual journey to a special "healing place" of their choice or connect to inspiring places alongside other patients around the country.

"Our approach is to never tell a patient what we think would be healing for them," Holzberg says. "We believe our job is to listen to patients about what they believe would be healing, and then give them that experience to the best degree we can."

The company has built and installed 36 "dimensional" Infusionariums in hospitals; another 6,000-plus patients and families are using the platform for post-treatment

support on phones and tablets, and it is also accessible in 300 hospital rooms via smart television screens. Patients using the Infusionarium experience fewer side effects, health providers report, and feel empowered by a sense of ownership during their treatment.

Holzberg's journey into passionate advocacy for patients came with a jolt one day in 2004 as he approached his 50th birthday. He was a successful Vice President/ Creative Director for Imagineering, where he led such projects as Virtual Magic Kingdom—in which five million children online could connect in real time with other kids in Disney theme parks—as well as directing Imagineering teams on the "100 Years of Magic" and "Millenium" celebrations at Walt Disney World. He also created the first free-swimming animatronic dolphin for Disney's Castaway Cay.

Then he heard those three words that one in two American men and one in three American women will hear in their lifetime: "You have cancer."

"Time stops…I think I was in shock for two weeks," Holzberg recalls.

Once a treatment plan was in place, Holzberg pulled together a team of trusted colleagues and fellow cancer survivors and caregivers at Disney to form a "cancer volunteer hit squad." They redesigned the lobby for Children's Hospital Los Angeles, created the "Living With" video series for Livestrong.com, built a version of one of Holzberg's Disney World attractions—Turtle Talk with Crush—or the Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC), and began a wellness network to provide patients information and support from diagnosis to well-being.

Holzberg eventually left Disney to become the first consulting Creative Director at the National Cancer Institute, revamping the cancer.gov website and leading the organization into the social media age. Along the way, he met Dr. Leonard Sender at CHOC and was challenged by Sender to help him confront a daunting problem: Young cancer patients were dealing with profound depression and isolation while in treatment—could an Imagineering approach make a difference?

A creative brainstorm session followed, and then that weekend Holzberg had his "aha" moment. He was leading an open-ocean swim off the coast of Malibu when he looked up and saw two dolphins and their pups surface just eight feet away.

"I thought—okay, this, for me, is the most healing place on the planet," Holzberg says. "I went, 'Boy, if I could have been here when I was in cancer treatment, this would have helped heal me for sure.' And then another light bulb went off and I thought, 'Wait, you used to make rides for Disney—you actually could have been here in every single way but physically.'"

Holzberg came back to Sender with the opening question they now ask every patient with whom they work: "If you could heal anywhere in the universe and there were no rules, what special place would best promote your healing?" After hearing responses, Reimagine Well works to create those healing places virtually, using patient direction throughout the process.

"There was no question in my mind that the patient experience was something I needed to change."

The next step in Holzberg's journey is to return to the place where, for him, so much of his career began—his alma mater. He currently directing a curriculum for a course of study for CalArts students focused on creating an "architecture of healing" in healthcare. Holzberg credits CalArts with giving him a foundation of "fearless creativity" for pursuing his work, so it's a perfect homecoming.

"My hope," he says, "is that there will be many, many more of me and Reimagine Wells out in the world. We can do a whole lot better with the patient experience than we do today."