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MUL
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BEND

PROTODINEMA

Taking its title from “Mulberry Bend”, a name historically used to describe the curved area surrounding Mulberry Street in Manhattan’s Chinatown, this exhibition explores the relationship between art’s autonomy, use value, and civic function by contending with contemporary social struggles facing the community. The existence of Mulberry Bend traces back to topological evidence from 1775, but its name has no attributable author. Mulberry Bend was bound by the streets now called Bayard, Worth, Baxter, and Mulberry, known for dense tenement housing which became reshaped by urban reform. The area was home to many immigrants, but faced recurring development, pollution, and general neglect by the city that remains relevant to what is now Manhattan’s Chinatown.¹ With this backdrop, the exhibition *Mulberry Bend* explores new forms of aesthetic action that embed artistic production within ongoing struggles in labor, real estate development, and collective space.

In *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, Grant H. Kester traces how artistic practices, informed by sociality and developed alongside forms of

political resistance, have explored aesthetic autonomy in emancipatory endeavors. Rather than positioning art as a detached sphere of contemplation outside the constraints of society, such practices “seek to reconcile the generative, prefigurative capacity of the Enlightenment aesthetic and the dissensus and criticality of the avant-garde,”² to meet the moment with its own uncertainties and potentialities. In doing so, Kester explores how art might participate in liberatory social processes without collapsing into instrumental political messaging. Expanding the use value of the exhibition beyond its conventional orientation and historical determination, *Mulberry Bend* considers artistic practice as a tactical and material engagement with public life.

Emerging from a need to reckon with the public conditions that shape life in the neighborhood, *Mulberry Bend* explores how artistic practices might generate new forms

1 Myles Zhang. “A Brief History of Mulberry Bend,” October 21, 2018. <https://www.myleszhang.org/2018/10/21/mulberry-bend-chinatown/>.

2 Grant H. Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Avant-Garde to Socially Engaged Art* (Duke University Press, 2023), 230.

of collective engagement without reverting to the didactic or extractive tendencies that have historically accompanied certain models of socially engaged art. Rather than mirroring struggle through representation, the commissioned works mobilize aesthetic strategies that open space for shared forms of gathering, dialogue, dissent, and intervention within the lived immediacy of the neighborhood and its publics.

The works assembled here operate not as solutions to structural problems—nor should they be prescribed the expectations of activist projects—but as provisional infrastructures that enable forms of shared inquiry and collective presence.

Informed by current events—including the erosion of the redemption economy, the privatization of property, neglect of caregiving and maintenance, and the proposed construction of a jail site—the exhibition situates art within the material conditions shaping

Manhattan’s Chinatown. The artworks are installed in an office devoted to ongoing research on ragpicking and recycling economies, with sculptural interventions extracted from hostile architecture, a temporary free hair salon for caregivers, and a growing list of educational resources alongside counter-surveillant footage of the jail’s construction site. Here, art’s potential to enable relationships between audiences and social contexts is made present, creating an active form of spectatorship. Together, the artists and their works identify an overlap between art and society, “lending support towards a political project,” rather than bearing the full weight of immediate enactment of change.³

3 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics*

of Spectatorship (Verso Books, 2012), 284.

Manhattan's Chinatown and the abutting Lower Manhattan neighborhoods stand as one of the last remaining frontiers against the rapid displacement and gentrification driven by the city's long-term affordability crisis. The neighborhood remains a site of contention shaped by ongoing, overlapping forces of political ideation, racial capital, and external development pressures. At the same time, Chinatown persists as a predominantly working-class ethnic enclave in Manhattan, with its labor force, small businesses, and residents often overlooked or exploited within broader systems of financial management and urban redevelopment.

Events of the past year have emphasized the neighborhood's position within the nation's broader political climate shaped by violence, modes of intimidation, carceral governance, and unlawful capture. Chinatown has also become a site of transnational intersection and coalition, through collective efforts and associations including the Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side, where networks of mutual aid and reflection emerge in response to the precarious conditions of urban life.

A stark, visible representation of the neighborhood's contested terrain can be identified in the proposed Borough-Based Jail on 124–125 Walker St. Announced as part of former Mayor Bill de Blasio's 2019 plan to close Rikers Island, the new facility—if constructed—would be the new tallest jail in the world. The demolition of the Manhattan Detention Complex and the proposed construction have been met with sustained opposition from local residents and organizations that cite displacement of local businesses, public health and environmental issues, and the acceleration of gentrification as major consequences. Despite these concerns, the city's previous administration framed the new jail as “the only possible way to effectuate criminal and racial justice reform,” a justification that ultimately pits the working-class and communities of color against one another.⁴

4 Kimberly Fong, “A Jailscaper Rises in New York City's Skyline and Casts a Shadow Over Manhattan's Chinatown: An Examination of Its Approval

Process,” *City University of New York Law Review* 26 CUNY L. Rev. F. 125 (Fall 2023), <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/clr/vol26/iss2/7/>, 161.

The city's proposed "megajail" would stand as a spatial punctuation within the neighborhood's tenement skyline, physically marking the disregard for the interests, health, and livelihoods of local residents and workers. It signals a broader struggle over the collective right to inhabit and shape urban space. Henri Lefebvre famously described this issue as the "right to the city," claiming that urban space should be collectively produced and governed by those who live and work within it rather than by distant economic or political authorities.

As all these converging pressures continue to encroach on the neighborhood, an urgent question remains within the contemporary art field. How might we imagine new forms of collective life and civic action through art and curating that is informed by local residents, stakeholders, communities, and passersby?

Since 2020, Canal Street Research Association (CSRA), founded by Shanzhai Lyric (Ming Lin and Alex Tatarsky), have used empty Chinatown offices and storefronts to center the legacies of gleaning in the neighborhood. In *Mulberry Bend*, they have created a research office that traces a lineage from the ragpickers of nearby Ragpickers' Court, where Columbus Park is today, to present-day canners and trash pickers. First documented in the 1880s, Ragpicker's Court once described the area below Canal Street and on Mulberry Street in Manhattan's Chinatown where ragpickers would live or congregate, sort through the city's refuse, and resell their findings. The demographic of this area was mainly immigrant groups including Irish, Italians, and Chinese, and free Black Americans.⁵ Today, as a predominantly Chinese ethnic enclave with a vibrant West African community, the neighborhood has sustained a similar ecosystem of collective repurposing, from street vendors to canners, who CSRA dubs as

5 Myles Zhang, "A Brief History of Mulberry Bend," October 21, 2018,

<https://myleszhang.org/2018/10/21/mulberry-bend-chinatown/>.

“ecological engineers operating at the edges.” CSRA will continue their research of Ragpicker’s Court to learn from the practices of gleaners, ragpickers, and canners, and form new imaginaries within a city of extreme inequity and waste.

As *Mulberry Bend* unfolds, CSRA is collaborating with artist Siyan Wong and Sure We Can—a nonprofit recycling center, community space, and sustainability hub in Brooklyn—to set up a temporary redemption center that advocates for an increase in the deposit rate per bottle or can. The current rate of five cents was set in 1982, this project proposes that it be doubled.

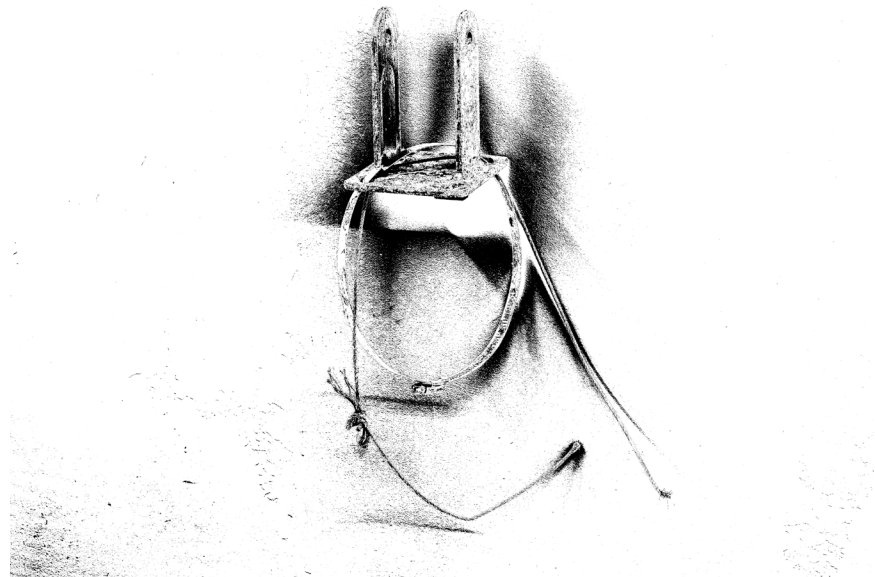
By intervening in the hard economics of recycling labor, that have remained stagnant in the face of over four decades worth of inflation, CSRA’s project offers a concrete infrastructural proposition while inspiring direct public engagement.

In doing so, it highlights the informal systems of reuse and redistribution that continue to sustain the neighborhood amid widening economic inequality. A press conference organized by CSRA, Wong, and Sure We Can accompanies the project, making visible the “Bigger, Better Bottle Bill,” which would legally raise the deposit to ten cents, currently under discussion amongst legislators in Albany.

Sourced from standpipes around buildings near the exhibition site, David L. Johnson’s *Loiter* series extracts the elements of hostile architecture—typically spikes and other forms of obstructive designs that prevent sitting, sleeping, or occupation. Installed under the guise of maintaining order, safety, and curtailing “improper” social behavior, these interventions visualize the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms through which public space is regulated by municipal and private entities. The removal of these hostile additions provide a material outcome, opening space to sit on standpipes, ledges, and other city surfaces, and de-contextualizes the now removed object from its commissioned utility by a gesture of guerilla intervention.



Canal Street Research Association, *Can Flower*, 2026



David L. Johnson, *Loiter (James)*, 2021
Removed standpipe spike



Sidian Liu, *Can we share some time together?*, 2025
Performance activating broom made of human hair collected from haircuts,
Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Madison, ME



Paul Pfeiffer, *Perspective Study*, 2026
Reference perspective of the construction site on 124–125 Walker St.

The works displayed in the exhibition function as aesthetic evidence, or material residue, of these acts of removal, while the actual consequence of the intervention remains active in public space.

Johnson's action suggests a political imaginary and form of sociality that reflects a collective right to the city against its carceral mechanisms.⁶

In *照拂* *reflect/brush*, Sidian Liu foregrounds invisibilized caregiving alongside its societal and familial expectations to sustain the conditions for everyday life. Liu invites residents of Chinatown who self-identify as caregivers to collaborate and participate. The artist broadly defines caregiving to encompass the performance of reproductive activities across domestic, communal, and professional contexts, all devoted to caring for others. This encompassing interpretation resembles Jackie Wang's notion of "gendered expropriation" in which gendered actors are held responsible for enacting care, emotional, domestic, and reproductive duties.⁷

During the exhibition, Liu installs a temporary salon offering participants free haircuts and the option to have their oral histories recorded. Such stories touch on culturally specific hair care, sense of belonging, and gestures of caregiving. The hair cuttings of participants are then transformed into cleaning tools that are identified by participants used in their own daily caregiving tasks. The subsequent series of performances call the general public into a "cleaning zone" where Liu motions them to be brushed using these crafted "hair" tools, leaving traces of caregiving participants' hair while reproducing the gestures of the caregivers. The public is also invited to brush the artist in return, extending the intimate exchange while the recorded stories play in the background.

By collaborating with people in the neighborhood who remain largely overlooked and shoulder the weight of caregiving within our shared urban fabric, Liu considers forms of collective

6 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities* (Verso, 2012), 4.

7 Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Semiotext(e), 2018), 119.

engagement centered around caregiving as an action.

The production of 照拂 *reflect/brush* through its public engagement, and the matrix of actors and their stories that extend beyond mere expressions of “struggle,” demonstrates a return to collective life, emerging from lived realities, and resists a sense of resolution or product-oriented outcome.

Paul Pfeiffer presents *Perspective Study*, projecting footage of the construction site on 124–125 Walker St. where the Borough-Based Jail is scheduled to be built. Using the video as an entry point, Pfeiffer creates an adjunct platform for the voices and positions of stakeholders who have spent years protesting the jail’s construction, while highlighting affordable housing alternatives, and the context and history of the site.

A growing list of community resources and ongoing public events surrounding the jail site will be publicly displayed to attune the public to a

plurality of positions, sharing knowledge, organizing efforts, and municipal channels.

In March 2021, Godzilla officially withdrew from a planned retrospective at the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), citing the museum’s perceived complicity in de Blasio’s borough-based jail plan.⁸

Letters from community members, including artist and Godzilla member Tomie Arai, and Neighbors United Below Canal (NUBC), condemning MOCA’s involvement began to publicly circulate in May 2019.⁹

8 Godzilla, “Letter to Nancy Yao Maasbach, MOCA Board, and Staff Announcing Withdrawal from Godzilla vs. The Art World: 1990–2001 Exhibition,” March 5, 2021.

9 Neighbors United Below Canal (NUBC), “Community Letters,” including letters by Yin Kong, Director of Think!Chinatown (May 10, 2019); Siyan Wong (July 15, 2020); Chinatown-International District Coalition (September 16, 2020); Amy Chin, President of the Board, Think!Chinatown (September 25, 2020); Josephine Wong, Founder, Focus Occupational Therapy PC

(September 28, 2020); Alvin Tsang, filmmaker (October 15, 2020); Arlan Huang, artist and collector (September 1, 2020; revised October 21, 2020); The W.O.W. Project team (October 23, 2020); Jonathan Hollander, President and Artistic Director, Battery Dance (October 24, 2020); Evelyn Kim, former staff, Museum of Chinese in America (November 5, 2020); Bill Bialosky, Bialosky New York Architects (January 12, 2021); and former staff of the Museum of Chinese in America (October 2021), accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.nubcnyc.com/community-letters>.

Attention to the matter grew when a letter by artist Betty Yu and Chinatown Art Brigade was amplified by Hyperallergic in October 2020.¹⁰ These previous efforts set the precedent for the cultural organizing that surrounds the jail site construction today.

10 Valentina Di Liscia, "Museum of Chinese in America Should Reject 'Jail Money,' Says Artist-Activist Group," Hyperallergic, October 1,

2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/591414/museum-of-chinese-in-america-chinatown-art-brigade/>.

Mulberry Bend is presented by Protocinema at Immigrant Social Services (ISS) Storefront for Ideas, located at 127 Walker Street. ISS Storefront for Ideas has served as a platform and resource for immigrants and under-resourced communities, and a place for community programming, artistic experimentation, and civic inquiry in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Its previously dormant status is reminiscent of a broader issue faced in the neighborhood, such as the lack of government aid for small businesses, COVID-19 shutdowns, and anti-Asian hate in recent years.

During the exhibition, The SHOP—a community education and resource hub focused on air quality and health in Manhattan Chinatown—operates within the storefront as a complementary installation. Designed to resemble a souvenir store or visitor center, the installation uses objects, displays, and educational materials to introduce visitors to the environmental justice issues affecting the neighborhood.

Positioned as relational, speculative, collective, and local, the artworks in Mulberry Bend point towards the infrastructural failures that paint the country's cultural landscape in broad strokes. Rather than setting out to propose solutions for the systemic and structural deficiencies led by bureaucratic narcissism, Mulberry Bend explores the use value of the exhibition, not as a medium displaced from context but a practice for collective action, recognizing the capacity for art and curating in engaging our collective social conditions. While New York City's new administration may signal the possibility of change, the realization of our shared public life ultimately depends on collective participation. Through civic imaginations and shared practices of organizing, talking, and being together, Mulberry Bend asks how art might lend its emancipatory tendencies informed by ongoing efforts of resistance and dissent that continue to unfold here and now.

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Launched in 2015, the Protocinema Emerging Curator Series (PECS) is a mentorship program that provides professional training, first-hand experience, and network and camaraderie building, utilizing the exhibition-making process as a teaching tool. PECS is an incubator for emerging curators to gain hands-on experience through the process of realizing an exhibition from inception to deinstallation, including fundraising, developing concepts, building artist lists, writing critical text for Protozine, securing an exhibition space, installation, documentation, communication, promotion, press, opening events, and public programs. This program offers tailored mentorship and guidance to nurture experimental curatorial work and time working closely with Mari Spirito and invited mentor curators. PECS serves as a valuable platform for the emerging curator to present their vision and create further professional opportunities.

Protocinema is a nonprofit arts organization that collaborates with artists and institutions to create artworks exploring the shared human experiences that connect us all. We build relationships across local and international contexts, bringing together individuals with diverse perspectives and backgrounds. With a presence in both the U.S. and Turkey since 2011, Protocinema advances this urgent and nuanced work through commissions, exhibitions, public programs, the *Protocinema Emerging Curator Series* (PECS) mentorship program, *Protozine* exhibition texts, and *Protodispatch*, our monthly digital publication. These initiatives are rooted in our belief in the common ground where we live, gather, and grow.

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Creative Time, New York; Fanta-MLN, Milan; Theta, New York; Skowhegan School Of Painting & Sculpture, Maine; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Thomas Dane Gallery, London Immigrant Social Services (ISS) was founded in 1972 to improve the conditions of immigrants and other under-resourced persons living in Manhattan's Lower East Side/Chinatown. Since then, ISS has diligently and proudly served multiple generations of immigrants in the neighborhood. Over the years this has taken the form of various activities and services, including English language instruction; assistance with housing, employment, and immigration; afterschool/summer programs for children and youth; substance abuse and violence prevention programs; youth employment; cultural, sports, and recreational programs. issnyc.org ISS Storefront for Ideas, located at 127 Walker Street, is a space for inquiry, curiosity, and creativity. It exists to explore community issues that matter and to co-imagine the possibilities for Chinatown, now and into the future. storefrontforideas.co

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Protocinema Emerging Curator Series 2025–2026

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Dylan Seh-Jin Kim

ARTISTS

**Canal Street Research
Association**

David L. Johnson

Sidian Liu

Paul Pfeiffer

ON VIEW

April 30–June 7, 2026,

Thursdays–Sundays

12:00–6:00 p.m.

HOSTED AT

ISS Storefront for Ideas

127 Walker Street, Chinatown, NY