

Art Market as Community Builder: Empowering the Makers of Welcome Editions

Kate Bonansinga

Since its founding in 2014 by artists Calgano (Cal) Cullen and Geoffrey (Skip) Cullen, Wave Pool in Cincinnati, Ohio, has commissioned nine internationally recognized artists and dozens of craftspeople, many of them migrants and refugees, to work together to create limited-edition artworks under the imprint of Welcome Editions. Both the artists and the fabricators earn payment up front.¹ Each edition is designed, approved, and signed by the artist. Wave Pool rented a booth at The Armory Show (New York City) in 2021, 2022, and 2023, the Independent Art Fair (New York City) in 2022, and Expo Chicago in 2023; they sold the editions and commanded prices that audiences of such art fairs expect. The proceeds from each edition finance the next one. Thus, Welcome Editions harnesses the exuberance of the fine art market to support both artists and craftspeople, offering a silver lining to the commodification of art. In this chapter, I will illustrate the importance of this action by applying ideas developed by twentieth-century cultural theorists to three Welcome Editions that specifically address displacement and the importance of community, drawing upon the personal experience of the makers to enforce the artistic concept. Throughout, the term migrant refers to a person who moves from one place to another to find better work or living conditions; a refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape persecution.

1 Fabricators earn a minimum of \$25.00 per hour; some earn more.

Since at least the 1970s, the artistic avant-garde has been resisting art-as-product. Installation art, performance art, and video art are some of the genres that developed at that time because many artists wanted to create a non-object-oriented, temporal experience that could not be bought or sold. In the decades following, several critical theories of culture focused on consumer goods and objects and their role in society. For example, in 1986, Arjun Appadurai's influential edited volume *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* focused "on the things that are exchanged rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange" (3). In 1999, Graham Harman posited Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), which studies the nature of being by placing the "thing" front and center. Then, in 2001, Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" borrowed from Heidegger's distinction between objects and things and posited that an object becomes a thing when "the insufficiency of the desired object" (2003, 4) becomes clear.² We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us. In short, cultural and social intellectuals were (and are) trying to make sense of all of the stuff in our lives on the heels of fine artists who resisted, and continue to resist, the production of more material goods and the market that production engenders. Welcome Editions are object-based and collectible, but because one of their goals is social justice for refugees, they turn commodification on its head.

2 Brown subsequently reveals his understanding of "art's drive to reify itself and thus resist commodification" (2003, 13).

Figure 5.1: Lorena Molina, *At what cost?*, *Welcome Edition* #8, duotone print, embroidery, walnut frame, 2023, edition of 6, 21"H X 30"W.



Source: Photograph courtesy of Wave Pool

Figure 5.2: Lorena Molina, *Do you feel safe?*, *Welcome Edition* #8, duotone print, embroidery, walnut frame, 2023, edition of 6, 18"H X 30"W.



Source: Photograph courtesy of Wave Pool

Figure 5.3: Lorena Molina, For who?, Welcome Edition #8, duotone print, embroidery, walnut frame, 2023, edition of 6, 18"H X 30"W.



Source: Photograph courtesy of Wave Pool

Figure 5.4: Lorena Molina, Do you feel free?, Welcome Edition #8, duotone print, embroidery, walnut frame, 2023, edition of 6, 18"H X 30"W.



Source: Photograph courtesy of Wave Pool

Lorena Molina

Lorena Molina (b. 1985, San Salvador, El Salvador; resides in Houston, Texas), the artist of *Welcome Edition #8*, was born in El Salvador and lived through the civil war there. In 1999, she and her family migrated to the US to escape the conflict; Molina has grappled with feelings of displacement ever since. Consequently, her artwork focuses on the challenges that immigrants face in establishing new homes and communities. *Welcome Edition #8* is a series of four photographs appropriated from internet-based media of sites to which migrants who crossed the southern US border were transported by unwelcoming governors of states such as Texas and Florida. The images are of Martha's Vineyard; Vice President Kamala Harris's home near the Naval Observatory in Washington, DC; Chicago's Union Station, and Manhattan's Port Authority (Figs. 5.1 through 5.4). To accompany each one, Molina wrote short phrases such as "Do you feel safe?" "Do you feel free?" and "At what cost?" The artist has iterated these phrases many times before in previous bodies of artwork. These are questions that she is constantly challenging herself and others to ask. How are we complicit in the economic and social exploitation of others?

Molina resides in Houston, Texas, and worked remotely with Cincinnati-based fabricators on *Welcome Edition #8*. It was the first time that she had worked remotely with a team; she had also never before printed in two tones on fabric, a process that she trusted to University of Cincinnati graduate student Peiyu Liu. Migrant embroiderers associated with Casa de Paz, a Cincinnati-based non-profit that provides safety for Latinas and their children escaping domestic violence, stitched the text on each photograph after receiving Molina's guidance about placement and color. Molina states, "I am constantly thinking about migration, and how you create a place and belonging, and who gets to feel safe and free in this country.... I didn't need to explain the work to [the embroiderers]... they got the concept right away.... I think working with them was the most rewarding part of it" (Zoom interview with author, 14 June 2023). Each piece is partially framed by a strip of wood, one on top and one on the bottom, fabricated by Jake Girth, so that it suspends much like an Asian

hanging scroll, though Molina's pieces are wider than they are tall. The presentation format highlights the concept of suspension and instability, of waiting to land. Fabrication by a team supports Molina's interest in community and inclusion; the fabrication process confirms the artistic concept while also offering Molina a method of expanding her capabilities and impact.

Figure 5.5: Welcome Editions booth at Expo Chicago 2023.



The land border between the US and Mexico is 699 miles long, and much of it is remote desert territory where the physical barrier between the two countries is either nonexistent or permeable, an undefined in-between place. Wave Pool unveiled Welcome Edition #8 at Expo Chicago in 2023. Molina designed a photographic wall mural with an image of the US/Mexico border (specifically a location where the border “wall” is in reality a fence) superimposed with an image of a line of railroad freight cars stacked two high, altered so that their colors are fluorescent. In 2022, Arizona’s then-governor began to construct what was to be a ten-mile-long temporary barrier consisting of stacked shipping

containers through a federally protected forest on the state's southern border. (The project was illegal and never completed, but it damaged a vital wildlife corridor.) Molina's representation looks like a child's train set or stacking blocks, alluding to the border as a political toy, as well as to "La Bestia," the freight train on top of which Central American migrants ride across Mexico, risking their lives. The four scrolls hung on top of this mural-cum-wallpaper (Fig. 5.5). Molina states, "I was mostly thinking about this idea of makeshift borders, and I wanted that to be the space where the images are seen" (interview, 14 June 2023). This presentation emphasized the point that national borders are political fabrications, rooted in the assertion of ownership and power, and in dividing people from one another.

Brown's Thing Theory might posit that the currency of this message will determine whether *Welcome Edition #8* is an object or a thing. As long as there are nation-states with borderlands that are far from the centers of political power, and as long as there are diasporic peoples attempting to create a new home, and as long as someone somewhere is looking at *Welcome Edition #8* and being reminded of this political condition, it will be an object that serves its function. (Brown [2003, 3] describes his new idiom as beginning with the effort to think with or through the physical object world.) Object Oriented Ontology (Harman 1999) might suggest that in the case of *Welcome Edition #8*, the idea itself, rather than the physical object that conveys it, is the thing. The idea is front and center.

Baseera Khan

Baseera Khan (b. 1980, Denton, Texas; resides in Brooklyn, New York) grew up in Texas, the child of working-class Muslim parents who migrated from Bangalore, India. The family lived in near isolation due to the threat of deportation; much of Khan's artwork references displacement and the Muslim experience in the US. Khan's *Welcome Edition #7* is a prayer rug emblazoned with the verbiage "Muslims = America" to remind us that the US was and continues to be built on the physical and in-

tellektual labor of many under-recognized peoples (Fig. 5.6) The residue of the political backlash from 11 September 2001, when al-Qaeda terrorists crashed planes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, remains in the American psyche. The misplaced identification of Muslims as terrorists is a component of that residue. Khan reminds us that the stereotype is misplaced.

*Figure 5.6: Baseera Khan, Muslims=America, Welcome
Edition #7, wool, 2022, edition of 13, 36"H X 24"W.*



It began as a protest poster: seven letters in each word make the equation true. When approached by Wave Pool to create an edition, Khan decided that the message would translate well into a woven and embroidered prayer rug, and that it would be further empowered by a material and format that refers to the expression of worship, woven by female refugees from Central Asia, specifically Bhutan, who lived and wove in refugee camps in Nepal before coming to the US.³ Muslims are only one of the possible population groups to identify in the piece. Khan implies that we could and should imagine the insertion of other marginalized groups in lieu of “Muslims”: women, African Americans, Asian Americans, LGBTQIA peoples, etc. Khan shares, “Yes, there are complexities with race, class, gender, but at the end of the day, there is a very central human instinct... We have to come together collectively to achieve those goals” (Zoom interview with author, 26 June 2023).

Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati hosted Khan's solo exhibition *Weight on History*, and through this the artist became familiar with the city. Several rugs exhibited there were designed by Khan and fabricated by craftspeople in Kashmir. Khan shares, “I think that my work becomes more powerful because of the moves that I make actually relying on a community of craftspeople.” Speaking about Welcome Edition #7 and the Bhutanese weavers, Khan states that it was “important for me to work with this particular group during this time of rising xenophobia and fascism all over this country and all over the world.... [it was] a process of me wanting a particular design and them coming back to me and saying, well, we can't do this ... but we can do this, or we don't have this color, but we have this. It was a generative collaboration.” Khan was also motivated by the fact that the weavers would benefit financially. “Money is a funny thing. It means everything but nothing at the same time” (interview, 26 June 2023).

3 Ethnic Nepalese were forced out of Bhutan in the 1990s to refugee camps in Nepal. By 2016 most of the Bhutanese refugees had been resettled in the US. Cincinnati received many of them. <https://www.wgbh.org/news/2016/12/29/bhutanese-refugee-camps-nepal-wind-down-resettlement-program-considered-success>.

Khan seems interested in the mercilessness of financial markets and in questioning who benefits from the art market. For example, in the exhibition “*iamuslima*,” Khan’s New York debut in 2017, the print *Prayer (prostrating in submission five times a day to an entity outside of your body)* included the lines “SOME FAMILIES STACK THE DOLLAR BILLS. MY FAMILY STACKS THE TRAUMA. NOW I’M TRYING TO MAKE SOME MONEY OFF UNDERSTANDING MY MAMA’S DRAMA” (Larmon 2017, 364). Another, less direct example is Khan’s *The Liberator* (2022), a 3-D acrylic bust rendered from a digital scan of Khan’s own body sliced at chakra points.⁴ It was inspired by Naro Dakini, a ferocious female Tibetan Buddhist deity who wears a garland of skulls and a skirt of bones, an eighteenth-century example of which is in the collection of the National Museum of Asian Art (Smithsonian Institution 2023). By referencing the historical sculpture, Khan also challenges us to question the appropriateness of the museum display of a religious object intended for Buddhist devotion and prayer. Other questions expand from this one: How did this object come to the US? Who gained and who lost in this transaction? The market probably determined its monetary value and dismissed its cultural one when it was extracted from its home and its original purpose. Who was complicit in the financial transaction does not matter as much as acknowledging that we are all complicit now.

The Liberator’s iconography illustrates blockages of feminine power; its historical reference conveys our responsibility to interpret and understand the beliefs of those from places and times other than our own, manifesting Appadurai’s (1986) goal of lending new perspectives on the circulation of commodities in social life. What was originally an object of Tibetan Buddhist devotion became a commodity the moment it was sold to a Western collector. Later, when it was accessioned into the collection of an art museum, it transformed for the second time, into a work of art. Brown (2003, 46) confirms that physical objects have metaphysical properties. Those properties of this object changed as it moved across international borders and into a museum setting. Wave Pool capitalizes

4 Chakra means “wheel” in Sanskrit and refers to energy points in the body.

on the market that Khan and Brown critique, bringing social justice to the crass commerce of the global art fair.

Vanessa German

“If you could make a piece of art that had a superpower, what would it be?” artist Vanessa German (b. 1976, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; resides in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) asked attendees of the first workshop for Welcome Edition #6. After hearing the answers, German developed a plan for creating the multiple parts that would comprise each of the eleven Power Figures in the edition. The components, all blue, include carved wood torsos by Nigerian wood carver Michael Olludare; cast ceramic songbirds and anatomical hearts by two members of Visionaries and Voices, an organization that supports alternatively gifted makers; and woven and dyed fabric shaped like teardrops or water, with a wish for the future handwritten by workshop participants and other community members encased inside each one. German guided twelve to fifteen helpers in the assemblage of each sculpture and then completed each one with additional parts and marks. “Her hands are like magic,” states Cal Cullen, artist, co-founder of Wave Pool, and director of Welcome Editions. “This blue is like a feeling, it is a powerful emotion. She keeps coming back to this color again and again” (interview with author, Cincinnati, Ohio, 26 June 2023). Titled *a holy blue togetherness for planetary awareness of the single universal breath*, the edition exemplifies, in German’s words, “how the color blue is a gift; for the gifts of water, creativity, and togetherness as balm and center in times of disconnect and delusion: a way to be here together. A way of loving” (Fig. 5.7).⁵

5 <https://www.wavepoolgallery.org/welcomeeditions>.

Figure 5.7: Vanessa German, a holy blue togetherness for planetary awareness of the single universal breath, Welcome Edition #6 (front), mixed media, 2022, edition of 10, approximately 15"H X 12"W X 10"D.



German's overall efforts as an artist focus on collective healing from systemic racism; by honestly admitting the injustices of the past, we can correct our present behaviors and look toward a better future. Her sculptures are generous in their physical and visual abundance. She is munificent in her daily life as well. In 2011, she founded Love Front Porch to provide a time and space for her neighbors in Pittsburgh to create and

share. (This enterprise grew into ARThouse, a community studio, artist's residency, and outdoor theater and garden.) In each of her assembled sculptures, she brings together disparate objects to build a cohesive expression, much as she coalesces individuals to make a community.

Sometimes, German uses articles from everyday life and repurposes them as components for her sculptures, a quintessential example of transforming dysfunctional things into meaningful objects if we apply Brown's Thing Theory. But for Welcome Edition #6, each of the individual components was fabricated anew by skilled craftspeople: a glass blower, a wood carver, a ceramist, and several weavers, among others, participated in this community effort. German combines lovingly crafted objects into another object that has even greater meaning because of her input: theorizing through OOO, the being of the thing is multiplied. Cal Cullen, who hand-built one of the ceramic components, describes, "A lot of it was about connecting people, about creating inclusive spaces, being able to lift one another up" (interview, 26 June 2023).

In its review of the Independent Art Fair 2022, the *New York Times* mentioned only a few artists; German (presented by Wave Pool and Kasmin) was one of them (Heinrich 2022). Maria Seda-Reder, Director of Exhibitions/Artist Support Initiatives at Wave Pool, staffed Wave Pool's booth at the fair. She recalls, "We are leveraging the names and cultural cachet of really important artists on behalf of the local community.... For some people, that really resonated: collectors, curators, gallerists... people who themselves are artists... [are] searching for more meaning in art-making. It is so important right now" (interview with author, Cincinnati, Ohio, 28 June 2023).

Wave Pool and German have similar motivations and working methods: both bring people together to generate meaning for the makers and the audience alike, and sometimes these two groups are one and the same. This type of art making has been ascending in importance since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Generally known as socially engaged art, it is rooted in Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. It blurs the divide between artist and audience as a method for empowering the latter to be an agent of change. "The role of artworks is... to actually be ways of living and models of action..." (Bourriaud 2002, 13).

This builds on the previously mentioned artistic resistance of the 1970s against the commodification of art. Wave Pool claims socially engaged art as one of its institutional foci, making the creation, marketing, and sale of its Welcome Editions a socially engaged practice. The institution itself is a socially engaged practitioner.⁶

Conclusion

Other Welcome Editions gain resonance because they are fabricated by migrants and refugees. For example, Jeffrey Gibson's (b. 1972, Colorado Springs, Colorado; resides in Hudson, New York) Welcome Edition #5 comprises twenty-five weavings, each about the size of a notebook page, with the text "Let Me Be Who You Need Me to Be" as the main image (Fig. 5.8). Gibson is Choctaw/Cherokee and much of his work is abstract, but this one, executed in patterns and colors found in much traditional Native American art, speaks directly to the egregious displacement of Native Americans by the US government. Robbed of land and dignity, they were forced to assimilate. Welcome Edition #5 was woven by refugees from Nepal and Togo who are finding a new home in the US and who likely identify with Gibson's message that the responsibility of adaptation and acceptance is shared by those who have migrated and those who have not—or, more expansively, by anyone in any type of relationship with any other being. Gibson chose to leave each weaving attached to its wooden loom, which in turn serves as its frame, a reminder of the making process and of one of the artworks' messages: change and movement are constant. Guillermo Galindo's soon-to-be-realized edition will be built from things left behind by migrants near the US/Mexico border.

6 Wave Pool is an example of New Institutionalism, which refers to "critically reflexive work... that emerged in the 1990s... to redefine the contemporary art institution and its role in expanded notions of the exhibition and social engagement" (Voorhies 2017, 17).

Figure 5.8: Jeffrey Gibson, *Let Me Be Who You Need Me to Be, Welcome*
Edition #5, 8/2 Tencel weft with a cotton warp, cherry finished pieces are 17"W x
21"H X 17"W.



Each of these Welcome Editions supports Wave Pool's mission as "a socially engaged art center that acts as a conduit for community change through artist opportunities and support."⁷ Fabrication by migrant

7 <https://www.wavepoolgallery.org/mission>.

makers enforces each Edition's conceptual focus on displacement and the longing for human connection. The iteration of this idea, coupled with the sales proceeds supporting the makers who execute them, many of whom are migrants and refugees, means that Welcome Editions are an effective method for fulfilling Wave Pool's mission. Their commodification lends itself to the theoretical analyses of things and commerce, and also fosters social justice.

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