



CIIS *today*

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GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY

CIIS Renovations in Step With Changing Landscape

JAMES HORMEL'S PASSION FOR HUMANITY

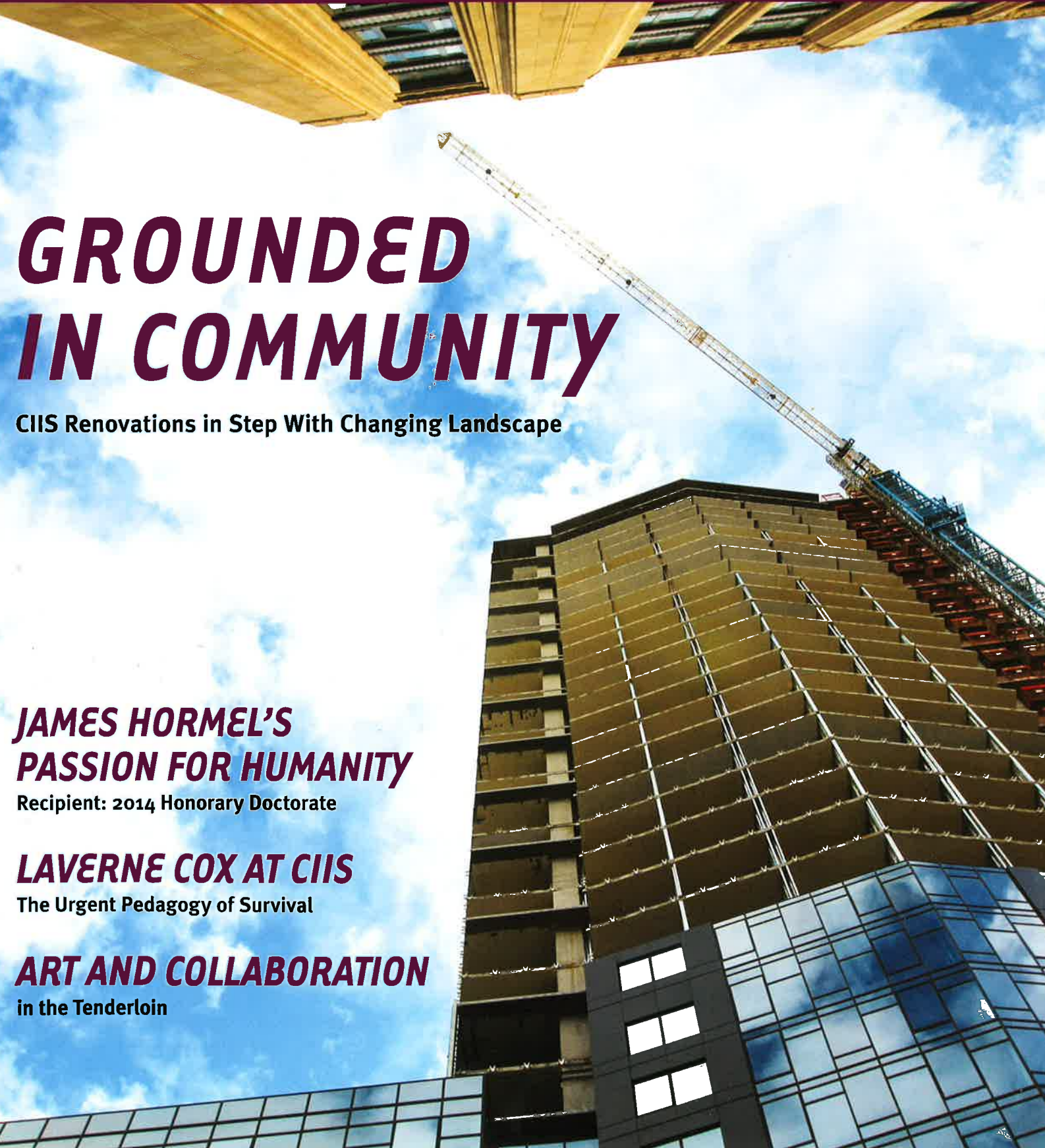
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LAVERNE COX AT CIIS

The Urgent Pedagogy of Survival

ART AND COLLABORATION

in the Tenderloin





MAKING ART, BUILDING COMMUNITY *in the Tenderloin*

by Deirdre Visser

Skywatchers had its genesis in Anne Bluethenthal and Dancers' (ABD) year of guerrilla art, 50 Random Acts of Dance (RAD). Each week arriving in a different space in San Francisco—crosswalks and sidewalks, city parks, BART and Muni stations, the steps of the Old Mint, or the Embarcadero—ABD dancers, boom box in hand, arrived, danced, and left. Offered for free and without promotion, the dances were performed with the intention to infuse daily life with art, rather than leaving it to the rarefied environment of theaters.

In 2011, fresh from the year of dancing in public spaces, with a growing interest in developing relationships with a few sites rather than dancing in spaces with which company members had no history, Bluethenthal was drawn to the Tenderloin National Forest (the Forest), a community garden and one of few open spaces in the high-density urban neighborhood.

Bluethenthal, core faculty in the MFA programs and co-founder of the new Center for the Arts and Social Justice at CIIS, quickly

realized that instead of bringing her ensemble of dancers into the Forest, she was more interested in developing a relationship with the community that lives adjacent to and uses the unique garden setting.

“So instead of bringing my dancers to the space, I brought myself there regularly—hanging out and getting to know residents and the people who came through,” she says. “And also getting to know Community Housing Partnership.”

Community Housing Partnership (CHP), which operates the Senator Hotel adjacent to the Forest, as well as many other spaces for low-income Tenderloin residents, is the only San Francisco nonprofit organization exclusively dedicated to providing permanent, supportive housing to formerly homeless individuals and families.

In time, by working first with CHP residents and then its staff, ABD realized that this organization was an ideal community partner for the creative project that was emerging.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

In the beginning, Bluethenthal met with individuals, talking about their lives, their stories, and their relationship with the Forest. The first person interviewed in that nascent process was Janice Detroit, who lived in the top-floor corner apartment. From that vantage point, Detroit—who describes herself as a “skywatcher”—looks out over all the people in the neighborhood, particularly the children. Her job, she says, is to take their tears away. Inspired by Detroit’s spirit and self-description, ABD adopted the project title, *Skywatchers*.

The performance that emerged from those interviews blended resident stories into a soundscape within which CIIS MFA student Nicole Klaymoon’s Embodiment Project dancers moved. Resident-participants and audience members also accompanied ABD collaborator Melanie DeMore’s “spontaneous choir.”

In the second year of *Skywatchers*, Bluethenthal’s growing relationship with community residents was paralleled by their deepening participation. When they saw that the piece was about them, about their lives, community residents took ownership of it and started to show up in the tenant lounge to share their stories and translate those narratives into movement.

In a community-based practice that begins with the artist creating a space for folks to show up and tell their stories, serendipity has a prominent role. Early in the second round of *Skywatchers*, Rennon, a Senator Hotel resident who typically positions himself a few yards outside the circle that forms Wednesday afternoons in the tenant lounge, handed Bluethenthal a stack of his writing, which included a poem called “Whereas,” about the right to “free sleep.” Sleep seems so essential and basic for most of us that it goes unquestioned, but for low-income and homeless community members, it’s a right too often denied by sit/lie laws, or simply the noise and lack of safety in the neighborhood.

The personal and collective stories that emerged from these dialogues about the intersections of sleep, community, rights, and privilege became the catalyst and centerpiece for the second performance, which was held in the Forest in fall 2013. Reflecting ABD’s deepening relationship with the community, 12 residents were active performers in this iteration, collaborating with professional artists on an evening program that transformed the Forest and traversed the neighborhood.

A GROWING ENSEMBLE OF PERFORMERS

To date, 40 community members and 14 professional artists



(Above) Tenderloin resident co-creators perform alongside local dancers.

(Facing page) June Johnson, Donel Fuller, and Bradley Edwards perform *Right to Free Sleep*.

have participated in the development and presentation of *Skywatchers*. With ABD entering the third round of the project and bringing in residents of a second and third housing complex, Bluethenthal is struck by the uniqueness of each iteration of the project. Now at the Cambridge Hotel, her Wednesday afternoon visits are more jam session than verbal storytelling session.

Sasha Silvaneau, ABD Director of Community Engagement, is also launching a project site with the youth living in the Arnett Watson Apartments, another CHP site in the Tenderloin. While the project slowly grows, Bluethenthal preserves its intimacy; Instead of moving to another location and leaving behind previous participants, she continues to engage residents in leadership capacities at the new sites, and brings old and new together in an ensemble of community artist-performers related through the creative process.

ABD has recently received two grants to fund *Skywatchers*: one from the Sam Mazza Foundation and the other from the San Francisco Arts Commission’s Arts & Communities: Innovative Partnerships program. The support will fund Silvaneau’s position as well as contribute to production costs.

At its most fundamental level, *Skywatchers* is about building relationships among neighbors, illuminating the lives and stories of community members who are too often reduced to statistical data, and exposing issues both personal and collective. While many programs send artists into underserved communities to provide art to residents, Bluethenthal’s approach is driven by the community members themselves: “The outsider—who is me—is just creating a space, and then taking what it is that happens in that space, and putting a microphone up to it, putting it out in the world in a way that is coherent and can be experienced both by those within and outside the community in a way that’s meaningful and memorable.” ●