

ARCADE

WRAPPING

LEAH
ST. LAWRENCE
AND
CAMILLA
SZABO

SOUNDBATH

ROB
MOURA

KAITLIN
MCCARTHY

UNTYING

MICHAEL
BARKIN

NIGHT

TOMMY
GREGORY
AND
CASEY
GREGORY

DARKNESS

ARCHITECT

SOLOMON
COHEN

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Letter from The Editors:
Wrapping up ARCADE's 43rd Year

As ARCADE enters 2025, we want to use this letter to reflect on our evolution from the *possibilities* of ARCADE, to the *potential* of its legacy, to the ways we were able to *actualize* our goals.

In 2024, we published a total of 36 digital articles and 28 print essays from 32 different regional writers. 182 archival issues were published online and are now available for download. ARCADE hired 2 staff members to the editorial team and worked with 13 talented designers to build our publications. 200+ specially designed tote bags were handed out and we hosted 7 events alongside our wonderful partners.

We could not have accomplished any of this without our growing membership and organizational supporters.

Our hope for ARCADE is to continue to meet the expectations and needs of our vast community while also holding dear the legacy of print and tangible publication. We have some exciting plans to further engage the archive in order to bridge the historical, the current, and the future. One of these initiatives is to expand our digital reach as a means to engage with a more national audience and provide more opportunities for writers and thinkers to deliberate on the subject of the built environment and design.

This initiative led us to develop “ARC”, a digital feed publishing essays on a rolling basis in order to further support literary projects and the design community - look for it by the end of March. Launching something of this magnitude would never have been possible without our newest staff member and ARCADE's Digital Editor, Claire Needs.

As we develop ARC, we are retiring the quarterly digital magazine and migrating our audience and readers to a more robust, albeit still impeccably designed, web interface. And so, in this final issue, you will find the last installment of “Artist Spaces”, by Michael Barkin; an interview with Sonam Tshedzom Tingkhye by Kaitlin McCarthy; our new Dance and Performance Editor, an exploration of Seattle's neon artists ft. Kelsey Fernkopf and Steve Gilbert, and the final part of Solomon Cohen's Desert Diaspora series. You will be able to find new columns and essays from all of our digital magazine writers on ARC.

If you want to be more involved, become a member.

Our membership is ever expanding and gives you inside access to the happenings of ARCADE.

04

“LET’S
LISTEN
TO SOME
MUSIC!”

SOUNDBATH: A Night of Icelandic Music In Ballard’s Shibuya Hi-Fi

Written by
Rob Moura

Interviewee
Quentin Ertel

Images Courtesy of
Shibuya
Quentin Ertel

Quentin Ertel makes the announcement as he faces the audience. We’re in the deepest chamber of Ballard’s Shibuya Hi-Fi, and listening to music is the entire point of the room. Just outside its ligneous quarters, a busy bar thrums with a Friday night’s worth of patrons, but not an ounce of the outside noise seeps into our ears. We’re completely sealed in, our shoes in disorganized piles near the door after having removed them as a requirement for entry. Aside from a few unlucky standing souls, we’re curled up on couches and chairs upholstered in dusty reds, dark blues, and beiges. The sharp transition from ambient revelry to complete silence injects a sacredness into the space that leads us to hush our voices instinctually.

Next to Ertel, a skinny man in a red velvet blazer and two long strawberry-blond braids interjects. “Don’t you want to go over what this room is?” he asks, his English graced with just a hint of a native Icelandic accent.

Later he jokes that he was just nervous, trying to buy time before his hour-long presentation on Iceland’s young musical history, but I was grateful for the question as it saved me the effort of asking it myself. Ertel obliges, immediately launching into a breakdown of the room that he, co-owner Brain Rauschenberg, and musical director DJ Supreme La Rock, designed to be the centerpiece of Shibuya Hi-Fi.

He begins with the sound equipment. In the corners rest a chunky pair of Klipschorns, built by Paul Klipsch himself nearly fifty years ago; their cabinets, husky boxes of stained wood, partially blend with the wooden slats on the walls like pieces of a pop-up book. Standing beside them is a pair of ATC SCM50 loudspeakers, a long standing staple in the world’s most famous recording studios, from Abbey Road in London to Electric Ladyland in New York City. Behind Ertel, on a short varnished cabinet housing a selection of LPs, is a Luxman L-505uXII amplifier (hand assembled in Japan) with 100 watts

per channel; the turntable beside it is a Technics 1200G outfitted with a Nagaoka MP200 cartridge, its nude diamond stylus providing particularly silky mid frequencies. The jargon and stats make my head spin. I’m not an audiophile, and I’m aware of how far a confident stance can go in these realms of refinement. It only takes a cursory search, however, to prove that the equipment is genuinely impressive (and inordinately expensive).

Details on the art and furnishings follow, starting from the ground up. A gorgeous rug, patterned like a tray of chevron licorice Allsorts, covers most of the floor. The exquisite tufts of the rug, constructed by five Afghan artisans over a period of eight months, yield only slightly to our sock-covered feet. Towering behind Ertel, an enormous painting by local abstract artist Christy Hopkins presents a striking contrast to the plaintive, parallel cedar slats surrounding it. Both Ertel and Rauschenberg found Hopkins’ signature, a clash of orderly compartments and chaotic colors, a perfect fit for the space - this piece in particular, influenced by Miles Davis’ “Flamenco Sketches,” layers disruptive streaks of black over bright yellows and cool pastels (perhaps it’s a coincidence that the painting is kind of blue.)

Those colors deepen under the soft lighting of the room’s unique chandeliers. According to Ertel, they’re part of Seattle music history. Danish lightning manufacturer Louis Poulsen designed only ten of them to hang over Benaroya Hall’s Founders Lounge; that means the two hanging above us are the only ones of their kind currently lit in the world. “For some insane reason, they got rid of all ten,” says Ertel. “And for some equally insane reason, we bought all ten.”

The intention of these inclusions is to allow a ceremonial gravitas into an experience that’s been rendered quotidian in the streaming era, when listeners don’t (or perhaps cannot) conceive of listening to music as an activity.



Most of us interface with music as either a passive accompaniment to daily life or an auxiliary addition to it, and songs are as accessible as they are disposable. Here, virtue hides in the inaccessible: besides the ritualistic entry process and the presence of tens of thousands of dollars worth of audio equipment, there's a \$20 admission fee - two-thirds the cost of owning the vinyl itself - and a limited number of spaces available per session. These elements present the act of listening as ceremonial (and presumably worth such a fee), and the entrant is led to treat it as such.

It helps their case that those scheduled sessions are usually for modern classics in the Western canon: records that many devoted listeners already treat as special, and also tend to have been hailed as triumphs of audio engineering upon their release. The alien landscapes of Radiohead's *Kid A*, the revolutionary Black soul of D'Angelo's *Voodoo*, and the dense cerebral atmosphere of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* have all been featured in the space. While any records would benefit from this kind of technology, the opportunity to listen to these specific works in crystal-clear fidelity, without shelling out a fortune for state-of-the-art gear, is an enticing proposition.

But though the inspiration for the space comes directly from Japan, its functional simplicity, stark hues, and visual similarity to a sauna makes it an ideal classroom for an education on a certain sect of Scandinavian culture. Today we've specifically gathered here to learn about the pop canon of Iceland, a Western country unfamiliar to most Americans.

Our teacher for the night is Sveinbjörn Thorarensen, aka Hermigervill, the man with the fiery braids standing next to Ertel. For the last two decades, Thorarensen has worked as a recording artist and DJ who specializes in atmospheric sample-based trip-hop. His first two records, 2002's *Lausnin* and 2005's *Sleepwork*, are notable as much for their status as relics of the "plunderphonics" EDM movement as they are for the distinct pieces he plunders. Now and then, Thorarensen is a devoted scholar of Icelandic music, and both his DJ sets and his recorded releases are strictly composed of recordings from his home country.

He's certainly the most knowledgeable in the room on the subject, a fact he demonstrates as he lays Hljómar's second record on the turntable and lets the needle descend. As it decodes the grooves in the wax, the room fills with the sunlit harmonies and airtight melodies of the famed quintet. Thorarensen's voice, genial and deep, rises over the music as he instructs us of Hljómar's foundational power. "These guys were always called the Icelandic Beatles," he says, and it's easy to hear why - the smooth edges

and satiny warmth of Gunnar Þórðarson's voice on "Ástarsæla" bears more than a little resemblance to that of Paul McCartney's.

He continues, leading us through the context of cuts from Þorir Baldursson's self-titled record and Magnús Eiríksson's *Smámyndir*. He delivers this torrent of information with concision and wit. "Hermigervill," in English, loosely translates to "artificial intelligence," and he certainly comes across as an endless repository of facts about the topic. Much

of Iceland's early music, he explains, comes not from Reykjavík but from the coastal city of Keflavík, where the country's main airport resides. The airport, which has also doubled as a U.S. army base since the 1940s, allowed American radio to more easily infiltrate the city's airwaves and influence its young musicians - hence the apparent Beatles and Motown comparisons on Hljómar II. (The band did try to make it in America as Thor's Hammer, but were met with scant success.)

As we familiarize ourselves with the names in Thorarensen's saga, it becomes apparent how much of Iceland's musical bedrock was constructed by a mere handful of individuals. Then as now, the country's music scene is so tight-knit as to be incestuous. Hljómar's bassist Rúnar Júlíusson, for instance, was best friends with Baldursson, a

man not only responsible for some of Iceland's most beloved tunes but who was also the programmer for the motorik chug of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love." The two would end up recording together in Giorgio Moroder's studio with Baldursson's wife, who was Júlíusson's sister. Hljómar's Þórðarson, meanwhile, would build Iceland's first significant recording studio Hljóðriti, where future Icelandic superstar Björk Guðmundsdóttir first laid her voice to tape as an eleven-year-old. The studio was also where Mezzoforte's Björn Thorarensen recorded one of the most recognizable synth lines in Iceland's musical history. "I hate that my father wrote it," Sveinbjörn cracks.

The night advances. It's incredible to hear such old records rendered so clearly. Those mids are, indeed, particularly silky. The LP sleeves are passed around the audience, and as they approach my seat I attempt to replicate the foreign words, sounding out the accents. I glean nothing, but nothing's necessary for me to glean. The spirit of the music suffices: the gleeful greed of a snare's ghost notes, the collaborative wonder of human voices stacked in harmony, brash horns replicating Shady Owens' euphoric declaration as the wooden walls around us try their hardest to contain her epiphany.

"Ég elska alla!"

The phrase, we are later told, means "I love everything."

“EG
ELSKA
ALLA!”

“I
LOVE
EVERYTHING”



08

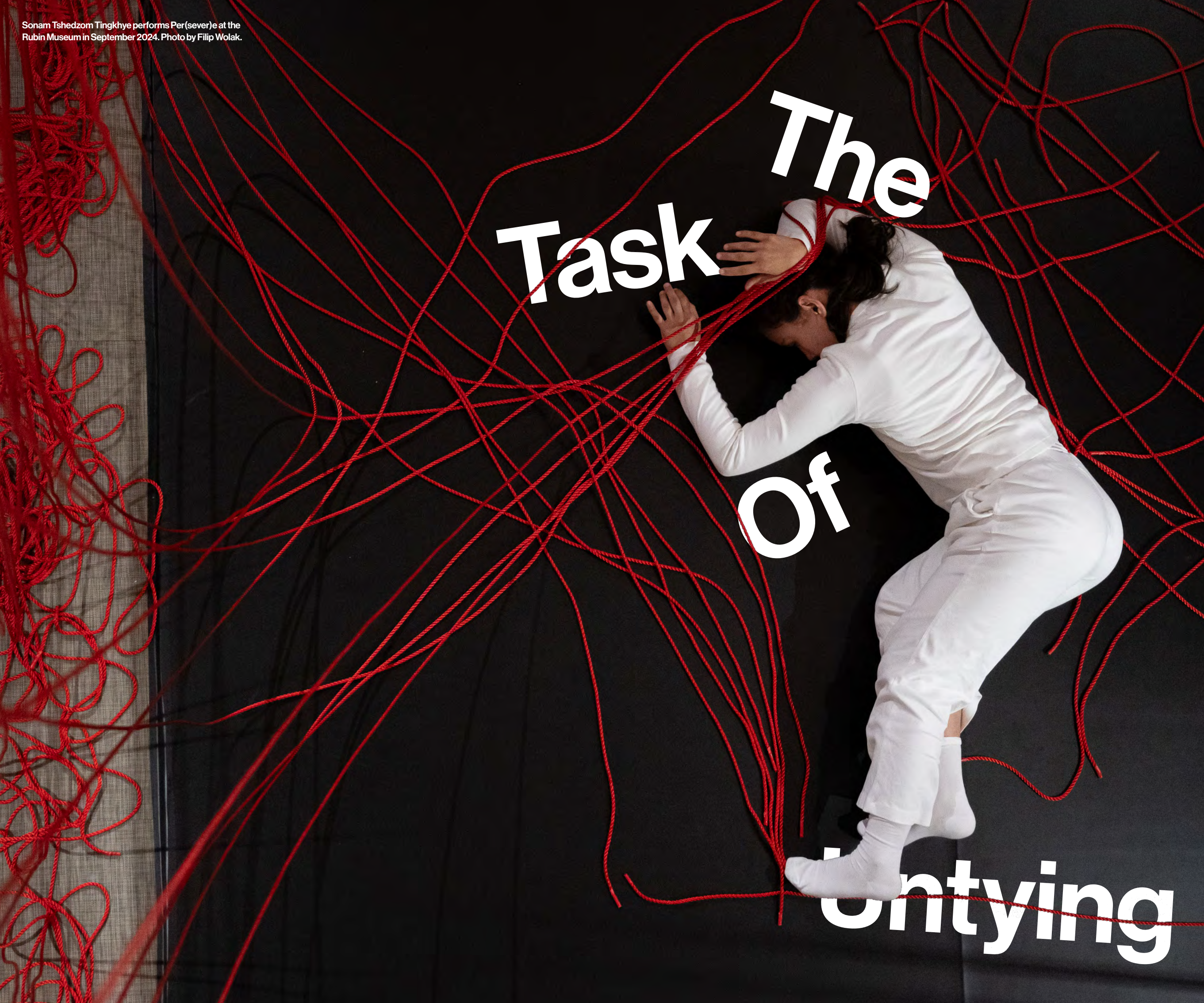
The Task of Untying

Written by
Kaitlin McCarthy

Interviewees
Sonam Tshedzom Tingkhye

Photography Courtesy of
Filip Wolak
Lhundup PT Photography

Sonam Tshedzom Tingkhye performs Per(sever)e at the Rubin Museum in September 2024. Photo by Filip Wolak.



The Task Of Untying



W

riting about music is like dancing about architecture, or so the saying goes. Regardless of the intended point about music criticism, this maxim always seemed blithely naive about the nature of both dance and architecture, two forms that actually have a lot in common. Both are mediums of space, movement, shape, and scale. Both are designed around the human body. And as a performer who has worked extensively in site-specific work, I can assure you, dancing about architecture is not the absurdity it's made out to be. For this reason, ARCADE expanding their content to include performance writing makes a lot of sense. When you're invested in an art form, it has the tendency to expand and become everything—I see dance everywhere I go, and I'm sure this phenomena is true for artists of all stripes. It's this expansiveness I hope to bring as ARCADE's new performance editor. I've been dancing professionally in Seattle for 15 years, and writing about local performance for nearly as long. It is a joy to bring a performance perspective to a publication that is also thinking expansively about art in Seattle, and I'm thrilled to start with an interview with Tibetan-American dance artist Sonam Tshedzom Tingkhya on her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with the household name in performance art, Marina Abramović, and creating a new work for the Rubin Museum.

NO PHONES,
NO CLOCKS,
NO TALKING,
NO READING,
NO EATING.

These are the conditions of Marina Abramović’s *Cleaning the House* program. Developed over 40 years of teaching, the five day workshop is a “complete internal reset” to prepare artists for durational performance. This fall, Seattle native Sonam Tshedzom Tingkhye was hand picked by Marina Abramović and the Rubin Museum to attend the workshop in preparation to present a new work at the museum of Himalayan art, inspired by a piece in their collection.

Despite being born and raised in Seattle, Tshedzom’s Tibetan heritage was a huge part of her upbringing. Her father escaped Chinese occupation in 1959, eventually resettling in Seattle along with several relatives in the Greenwood neighborhood where they attended Sakya monastery. Tshedzom grew up taking Tibetan language, music, and dance classes, as well as dancing at the renowned Creative Dance Center. Eventually she attended Boston Conservatory at Berklee for dance. Tshedzom says when it comes to her work, “Buddhist themes and Tibetan culture definitely find its way in. Sometimes I don’t always plan it. It just happens naturally.”

Based on her previous work, Tshedzom was invited to apply for the Rubin exhibition *Reimagine: Himalayan Art Now*, the performance aspect of which was a collaboration with the Marina Abramović Institute. Once Tshedzom’s proposal was accepted, she worked virtually with Abramović to refine her ideas before traveling to upstate New York for the workshop. Staying in an outfitted barn on Abramović’s extensive property, facilitator Billy Zhao woke her each morning, and after she bathed in a creek off the Hudson river, would give her the next set of instructions. “He would explain the rules, usually pretty simple, and he would leave and then come back at the end. So we never knew how long something was going to be.”

The exercises, the participants found out later, lasted anywhere from one to six hours. They included The Mutual Gaze as made famous by Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* at MOMA, as well as separating rice from lentils, exploring the property by looking only

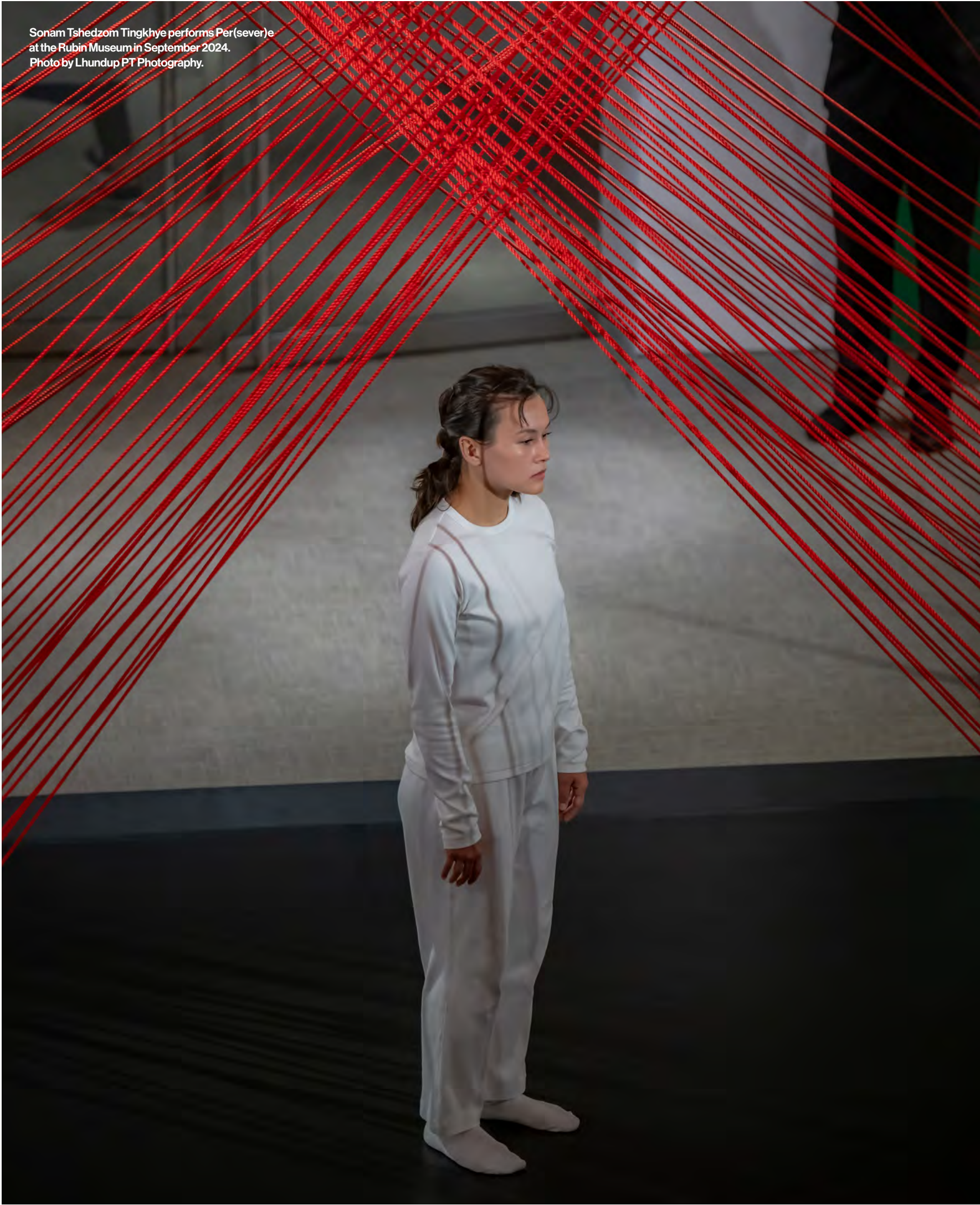
in a hand mirror, staring at colored canvases, and walking in slow motion. Being lost in time and task brought Tshedzom into several transcendent experiences. During her slow motion walk she remembers thinking “Wow, I am moving at the speed of the trees growing and the leaves falling. I felt very attuned with the sounds, the bugs...we were in the middle of nature. I felt like I was moving at the speed of everything. I thought, Why can’t life always be like this?”

In another exercise, she opened and closed a door as day turned into night. “I started playing with this idea of who I’m opening the door for. Who am I seeing come in and who’s leaving...And I saw a vision of my grandparents, who have both passed away, and that was really moving for me.”

The tasks could be physically and mentally challenging. Sustained by only honey and herbal tea for four days, “our bodies felt so heavy,” recalls Tshedzom, “but I personally felt like the fasting made sense when we did all these slow motion things, because I could only move slow.”

The most stressful task happened to be the only timed exercise. “We had to write our name once, keeping the pen on the paper for one hour...my hand has the muscle memory of it, but when I write that slow, I’m like, Oh my God, am I writing it correctly? The whole thing wasn’t a test, but I had to undo that way of thinking.”

Undoing, as it turns out, ties literally into Tshedzom’s work for the Rubin. She stretched 108 strings across the two-story lobby of the museum, and over the course of eight days – 48 hours of performing – Tshedzom untied them. *Per(sever)e* drew inspiration from a 19th century painting of Machig Labdrön, surrounded by dancing dākinīs. Tshedzom was drawn to the work because it depicted a female deity figure. “And she’s dancing, she’s doing this very wrathful ritual.”



Sonam Tshedzom Tingkhye performs *Per(sever)e* at the Rubin Museum in September 2024. Photo by Lhundup PT Photography.

Machig Labdrön (born 1055) was a founder of the Tibetan Buddhist lineage of Chöd, Tshedzom explains, which involves a practice of severing your sense of self and ego. “Practitioners go to charnel grounds, caves, areas that invoke fear, and visualize severing their limbs and offering them to feed these demons, then eventually dancing on the demons.”

Tshedzom didn’t want to re-create this ritual through any sort of literal depiction, but the idea of severing manifested the 108 strings. “I thought about how these strings represent attachment to myself.” As for an area that invokes fear, performing such a challenging work in a museum lobby “is kind of scary. This is my charnel ground in this moment. Over the eight day performance, I’m releasing my attachment to myself. Severing my sense of self.”

Being in front of an audience, Tshedzom grappled with the pressure to entertain and to prove herself. “Some people were like, well, is she going to dance? Feeling that jolt in my self. And then, calming and being like, No, I’m standing still. This is me existing. Me being is the performance.” While this left some viewers baffled, some museum patrons stayed with her for hours, feeling the energy exchange between Tshedzom and her witnesses that was a driving force in the performance.

As a dancer, Tshedzom is used to approaching performance from a very structured, choreographed place, so doing an entirely improvised work on such a large scale was a huge leap into the unknown. She prepared several scores (sets of directives that guide improvisation) based on the five elements depicted in an illustrated Kalachakra Cosmology from the museum’s collection. “In the beginning, I was pulling more from the scores, but as those days went on, I just became very still and very slow and just worked on the task of untying these strings.” The *Cleaning the House* workshop, Tshedzom explained, had shown her the value of stillness, of doing nothing. “I thought of some of the things that Marina said...it’s more about the process unfolding versus the

product of it. And the artists themselves and their body being the art versus what the body is doing.”

What happened when Tshedzom finally untied the last string?

“I cried....It was so beautiful. I had this whole crowd of people standing around me, I untied the last string, and I looked up and just all these released strings surrounding the space...I felt really proud of myself, honestly. I didn't think I was able to do something like this.”

After 20 years of showing Himalayan art in New York City, Tshedzom's work was one of the very last to be shown before the Rubin's physical space closed on Oct 6. *Per(sever)e* may have been about Tshedzom releasing attachment to self, but it also seems an apropos closing ritual as the museum begins a new chapter. Transitioning to a model of traveling exhibitions, participatory experiences, and a digital platform, they seek “new possibilities for how museums might reach, engage, and serve the public worldwide.”

As for Tshedzom, she's not leaving choreography behind, but the experience of this piece opened up new possibilities for her own practice. She plans to make more installation performance art “because of the way it moved me, and seeing how people were moved as well. Doing less can be very impactful.”



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Art Spaces: Seattle at Night

Written by
Michael Barkin

Photography by
Michael Barkin

Vistas, galleries, salons, studios, and stages
are illuminated after the sun sets.

Late-fall and winter are the darkest.
Calm streets assuage the mind,
unlike the city’s daytime commuters and churn.

Nights are cooler as average temperatures decrease.

These walks are sometimes meditative. The marine
layer reflects the light of the built environment.
Clouds remind me that the earth is an ecosystem,
though it’s easy to soon again forget.

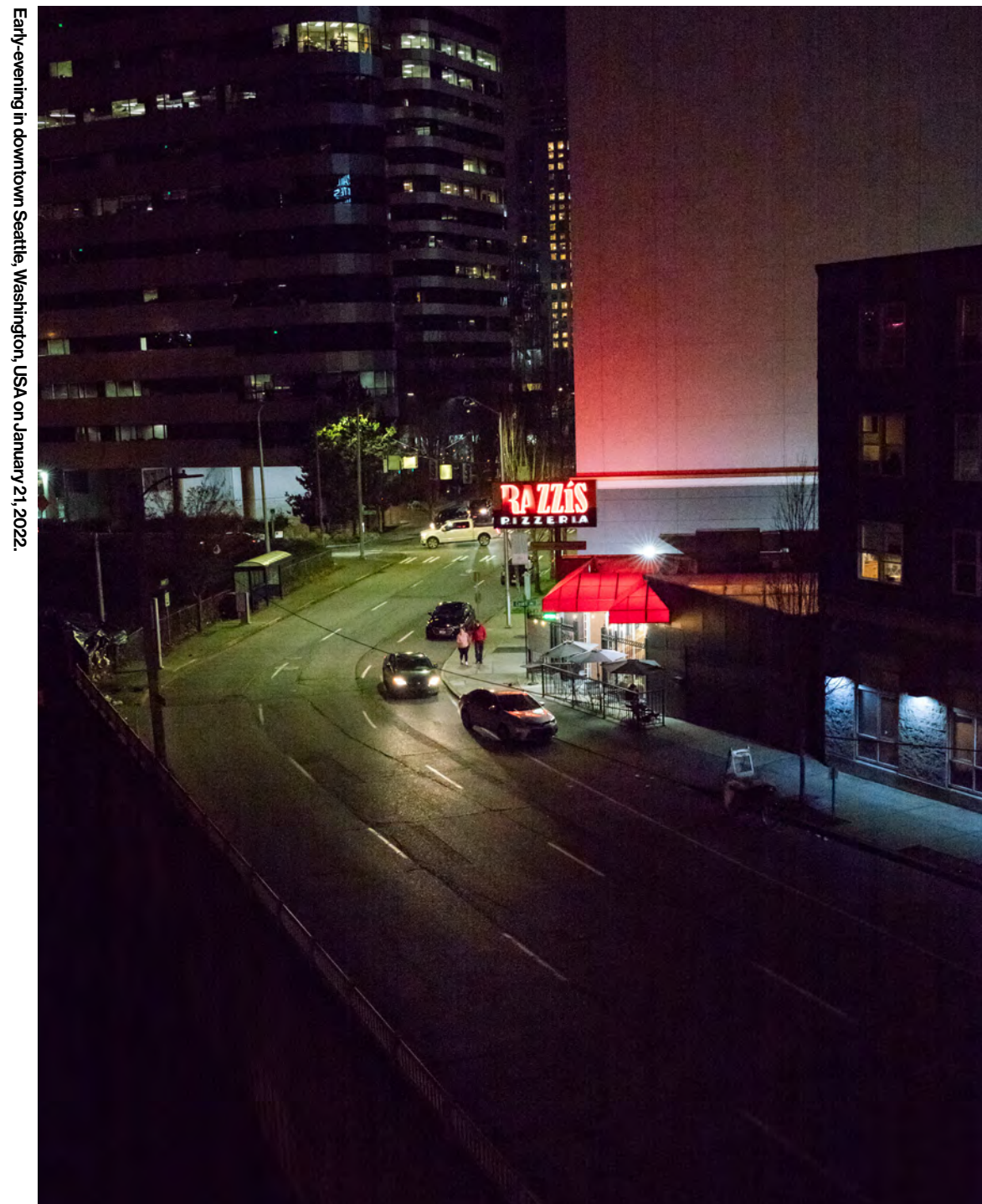
I occasionally duck past the bouncer into a
dim venue or watering hole. The definitions of art
are challenged on these forays. Small displays
of creative expression are outbursts of
insight, humor, anger, sadness, and joy.

Many artists question the conventions of our economy.
Some work outside arts establishments but not
necessarily under the stars. The concrete and
steel forms are both an inspiration and a canvas.

A conceptual hint on a street corner or the
nook of a dimly lit bar can pose as many
questions as work in a museum or gallery.

Cal Anderson Park in Seattle, Washington, USA on March 22, 2022.





Early-evening in downtown Seattle, Washington, USA on January 21, 2022.



Sound artist Robert Mills plays records at Vernilicon in Seattle, Washington, USA on June 26, 2024.





The moon rise from Gas Works Park, in Seattle, Washington, USA on September 9, 2022.



Night descends on the murals of SODO alley on October 5, 2024 in Seattle, Washington, USA.



The neon of Pike Place Market in Seattle, Washington, USA, on November 28, 2022.

28

As Darkness Falls: Neon Shines Bright

Written by
Casey Gregory
Tommy Gregory

Interviewees
Henry Jackson-Spieker
KCJ Szwedzinski
Kelsey Fernkopf

Photography by
Steve Gilbert

Darkness is a fact of life in Seattle, but it doesn't have to be all gloom. It makes this city the perfect backdrop for light-based art, in particular the warm radiance of neon. Several factors have converged in recent years, revealing neon glass as a medium ripe for a renaissance, even as industrial demand wanes. For illumination on the subject, we reached out to University of Washington's Henry Jackson-Spieker, interdisciplinary artist and educator KCJ Szwedzinski, and installation artist Kelsey Fernkopf. Each had a particular view into the reasons neon as an art form is undergoing renewed interest, and how that redounds to their own artistic processes.

Of the three, Fernkopf has the longest tenure in the business. He's seen many shifts throughout the decades, "It's died many times and come back. We can't put it in the ground yet," he laughs. Fernkopf began working in 1985 creating and repairing signs by day and making multimedia sculpture by night. "In the beginning I didn't

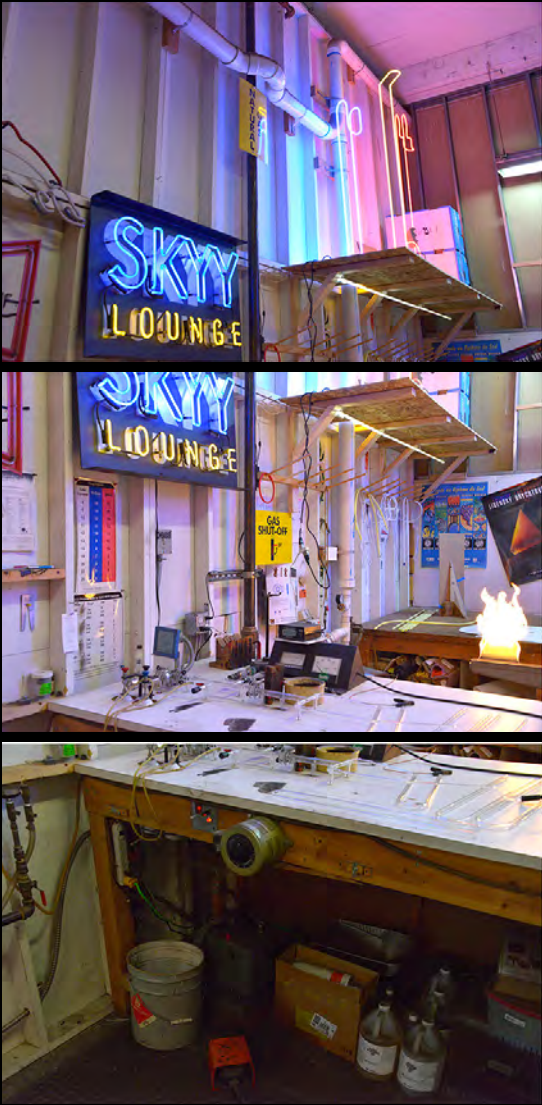
want to make neon art because I was making neon all day long," he explains. But in recent years, he has abandoned other media to work in neon exclusively, creating ever-more-impressive feats by installing oversized, minimal tubes against the Pacific Northwest's breathtaking landscapes or cityscapes. The neon itself can't remain long in such an environment, so Fernkopf's friend and photographer Steve Gilbert documents the works. Sometimes it starts with a bike ride, which Fernkopf says is "about getting it out where you would never expect it." An added benefit is the delight of random passersby, "Lot's of time we've been out on trails. [other people] are kind of shocked! They say, 'wow, that's amazing!'"

But like many artists, Fernkopf's progress is impeded by lack of space and he has had some notable setbacks. In 2017 he and others launched the Western Neon School of Art to pass along the knowledge of the craft to a new generation of artists, but the school had to close because of COVID. "The price is very prohibitive," he says of working in Seattle, "I've been lucky to have benefactors. The shop that I had my studio at closed. Luckily I'm good enough at what I do that people want me around," he laughs. He credits organizations like She Bends with generating interest in the medium, "If a lot of people don't pick up the mantle and carry the torch, it could go away," he says.

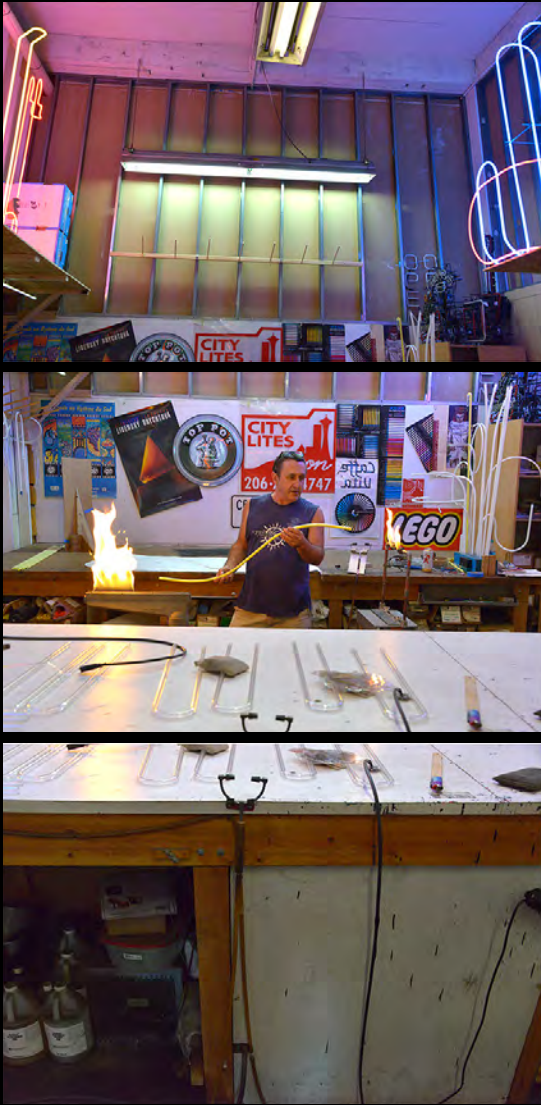


“IT MAKES THIS CITY THE PERFECT BACKDROP FOR LIGHT-BASED ART, IN PARTICULAR THE WARM RADIANCE OF NEON”

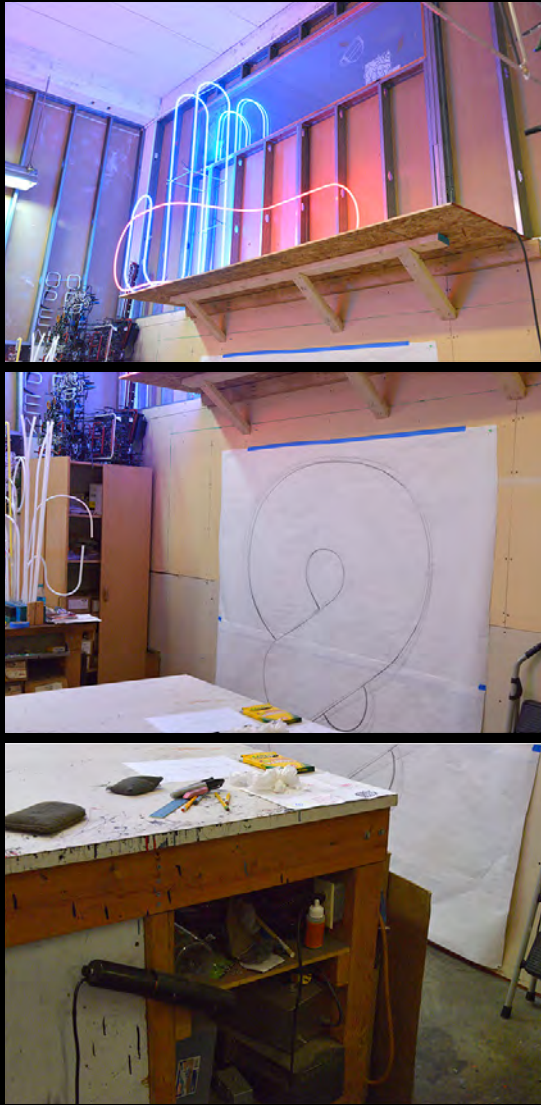
The University of Washington's associate professor and Dale Chihuly Endowed Chair of Glass Henry Jackson-Spieker is one of the artists on track to pick up this mantle. With deep connections to various local institutions, Jackson-Spieker values collaboration and community. “My background and my upbringing was at Pratt,” he says. The local fine arts center is the place where he fell in love with making art. “I learned about neon in grad school at Alfred University, under Sarah Blood.” He says it “opened up a larger vocabulary for pushing depth of field and space” in his artwork. Now on the teaching side, Jackson-Spieker says, “we’ve always had a solid foundation of interest in glass [at UW]. The disciplines used to be more siloed.” But with artists like Jackson-Spieker using neon as an element in a much larger palette of sculptural modes (he uses metal, fiber, and glass among others), he sees a future for setting up a neon shop within the program. “In my mind there are certain levels to the process we can expose the students to. They could bend the tube. When it comes to bombarding (the process for removing impurities from the working gas of a sealed neon tube)...maybe here we only do plasma and backfill pieces with a kiln.” In this way, students can achieve various levels of experience and add neon to a panoply of artistic skills. Jackson-Spieker says it’s about asking the question, “How does light become a material?”



Further proof that this is a burgeoning area of artistic interest comes from KCJ Szwedzinski, whose artwork explores sacred objects, belief, and memory. “Megan Stelljes and I facilitated a neon residency [at Pilchuck School of Glass]. We had identified this void,” she said. “We were so over-inundated with interest, there is really a desire to have education.” Szwedzinski began her artistic career as a printmaker, another discipline which requires lots of collaboration. “I went to Penland [School of Craft] in 2007,” she says, “the studio behind the print shop... there was always music and laughter coming out of there.” It was the glass studio, and Szwedzinski was irrevocably drawn in. “Neon,” however “is a bit more meditative,” she explains. Szwedzinski, Stelljes, and other artists have been working to “Light the Forest” for Pilchuck’s second iteration of the event, placing neon artworks around the glass school's bucolic campus and inviting visitors for demos and a chance to see art well outside of the bounds of the big city. This event and others like it generate interest in the public at large, but specifically in glass art collectors and supporters.



Like other glass media, neon requires constant rejuvenation through the passing down of knowledge from one artistic generation to the next. The medium gains momentum through high profile artists who employ it for individual projects, from Nicolas Galanin’s breathtaking Neon American Anthem at the Seattle Art Museum to Glenn Ligon’s text based works, as well as those who use it almost exclusively like Cerith Wyn Evans and the late Greece-born, New York minted icon Chryssa. But where it “lives and dies,” is with its daily practitioners. As Szwedzinski puts it, “It’s my desire to keep the spaces inclusive,” she recalls, “when we taught people how to bombard, it was really magical to see people do that for themselves. I understand the barrier but it’s beautiful to see.”



32

DIASPORA

DESERT

Desert Diaspora: Part 4 - The Goy Architect

Written by
Solomon Cohen

Interviewees
Jack DeBartolo 3 FAIA

Photography by
Bill Timmerman
Debartolo Architects



BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO AGING SPACES PRESENTS UNIQUE CHALLENGES.

Culturally significant buildings must sustainably evolve to retain meaning for future generations. Over the last three installments, I've documented my ongoing research funded by the Arizona Architecture Foundation into how historic sacred spaces adapt to modern needs. The principal case studies, the Stone Avenue Temple in Tucson and Temple Beth Israel in Phoenix, have highlighted the difficulties in restoring and sustaining these institutions. These stories reveal how creative fundraising and adaptive reuse allowed them to continue serving their communities as museums for Holocaust education. However, not every abandoned synagogue can become a memorial without risking the depletion of already limited resources or, worse, the oversaturation of the very meaning they aim to preserve.

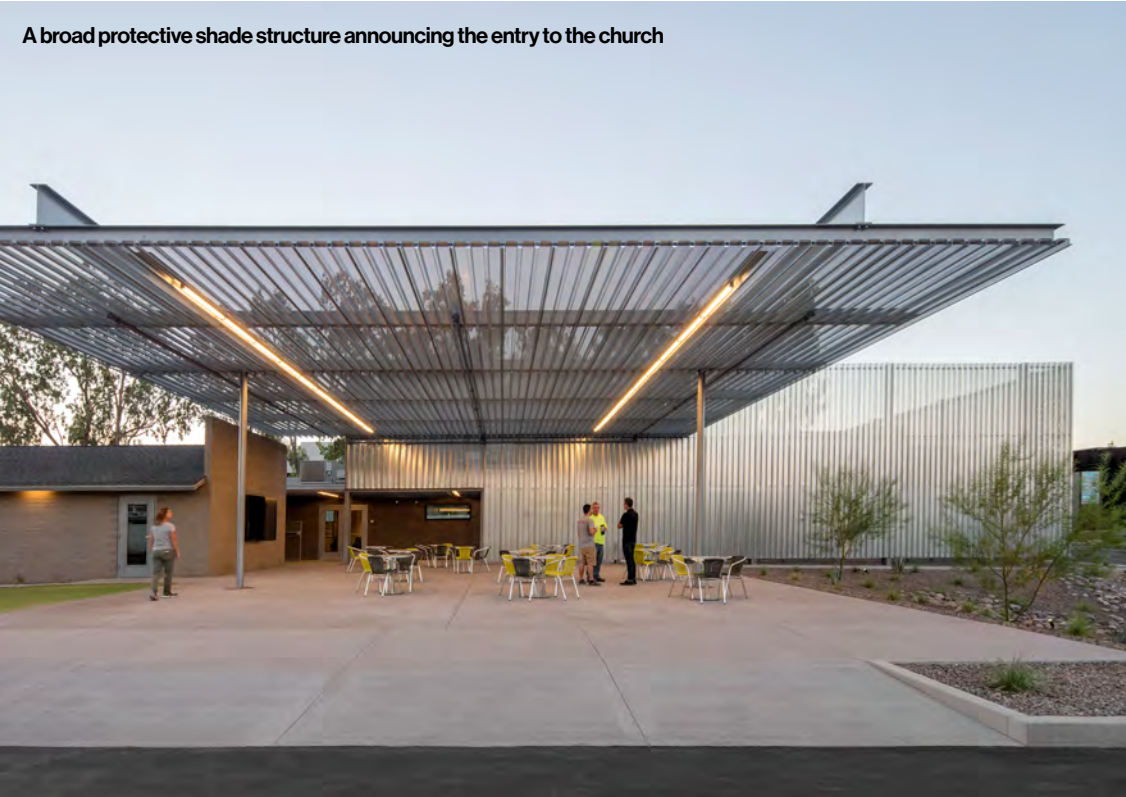
Given these challenges, I looked for examples in other communities to understand their approach to preserving and reimagining sacred spaces. In the fourth and final installment in the series, I sat down with Jack DeBartolo 3 FAIA, principal of the Phoenix-based debartolo architects, whose exquisite contemporary portfolio includes several religious projects across the Valley. As a man of Christian faith, DeBartolo offered valuable insights into rethinking the design of sacred spaces to more effectively resonate in a rapidly secularizing world.

S. COHEN

How much of your practice focuses on religious architecture?

J. DEBARTOLO

It varies from time to time. Our practice is focused on serving people and organizations who align with our values. There are times when nearly 70% of our work can have a faith-based focus, but [I get] a little uncomfortable when a majority falls into any one category. We don't necessarily want to feel typecast as church architects. It may sound like that's our focus, but in actuality, we just want to serve good people whose values align with our own.



S. COHEN

Fair enough. Even so, it isn't the most common typology. What prompted the focus? Was it circumstantial? Mission-oriented? Typological?

J. DEBARTOLO

It started by answering the phone and expressing positivity when my father and I began the practice in the late nineties. We've always wanted to work with people who share our values... who care about their kids, people, life, death, ceremony, and memory; about the metaphysical and pragmatic nature of how we live. We asked how we could do things we value that have a purpose; that are significant... People with those interests seem to seek us out.

We find it far easier to give our best when we're driven by [our clients'] cause, purpose, and vision. Our studio's focus is a response to our sense of meaning. We work for and serve many clients who don't share our faith; however, in those cases, we often share other passions. The agreement to work with a client comes from who we are and what we believe in. I want to work for good people that we respect. And many of them come with good values. We can't work on something where every decision is made because of market trends. We want to make meaningful work, period.



S. COHEN

Have you found there's a conversation happening as your work progresses, where perhaps the faith-based work is informing the secular and vice-versa?

J. DEBARTOLO

For sure. Because we all need it constantly. Sometimes, the sacred moments that catch you by surprise are more important than the intentional ones. If I'm standing in a beautiful synagogue during the perfect time of day when the light is coming in, that's great... that ought to work. But there are other moments when light streams where you don't expect it to. There's this magical holiness and you think, "Wow, that is the very same sun that's been shining and warming the earth since creation."

We don't believe there's a partition between our sacred life and our profane life. I don't agree with Eliade about the separation. I believe strongly that, based on the creation mandate, all of it is sacred. Yes, there are times when you would say, "Those are real sacred activities or spiritual exercises." In actuality, we believe all of life - meetings like this, getting together for coffee, serving a client, helping realize a building... we might call it ordinary life, but all of it can be quite extraordinary.

S. COHEN

Have the issues faced by the communities you serve noticeably evolved in your working lifetime?

J. DEBARTOLO

Problems have changed over time; however, it's probably not what you think. Early on in our practice, say the first decade, our clients were extremely trusting and the amount of design freedom seemed very high and almost without specific questions. There was a sense that as long as our designs solved their pragmatic problems, we were free to develop unique responses and they trusted our sense of place, materiality, use of light, and composition of experience. More recently, in the last 5-10 years, there seems to be a shift toward more skepticism and less trust. This is hard for me.

S. COHEN

Like many architectural typologies, religious projects are fraught with social and economic issues that can tarnish the experience for architects and end users alike. Have you confronted issues that made you question your participation in this arena?

J. DEBARTOLO

Yes - all these constraints affect our ability to make architecture and reduce the project to mere buildings. We know that souls matter more than inanimate space, but we also know that space matters and that God cares about place [Acts 17:24-27]. We have issues that make us question our participation all of the time, but this is the challenge of making architecture. Every project is filled with challenges. One will have plenty of financial resources, but the lead client is nearly inaccessible and communication is sparse and difficult. One will have too many voices involved in the decision-making process. One will have great decision-making, but fear of communicating the vision to the people who fund the project.

What role does existing infrastructure play in the conversation (Redemption Arcadia in Phoenix is a fantastic example)? What's been your experience with repurposing existing buildings in response to community needs and cultural narratives?

J. DEBARTOLO

Many of our clients want us to look at reusing their current facilities or help find a building and consider adaptive reuse...

Redemption Arcadia has an interesting story. The congregation aged out and they were down to the last four or five members from the original board. The pastor was still alive, but he was no longer teaching. The building was being leased out to smaller churches, but they received offers from developers to buy the land and turn it into multifamily housing.

For the community, the buildings were already paid for and none of them saw it as a money grab. The pastor was retired, but he couldn't see the church sold to become multifamily housing. So they went out to look for another church that might want to buy the property and give it a second life.

They put it out to about five major churches and interviewed each one. Ours was a site walk we participated in with Neil Pitchell, who was CFO of Redemption Church at the time. He was thinking about money and I was thinking about design and he took me aside and asked, "Can you save this thing? Is it worth it?"

It was hard to tell. The whole building was covered up with stucco. It was very confusing. I got the sense that they weren't frame walls but masonry underneath all of that icing. The only thing I could think to do was sandblast the stucco and remove almost everything that wasn't masonry. We did some exploratory demolition to figure out what we could save. The process revealed three masonry rectangles underneath all those layers: the worship building, the classroom building, and a little pool house that could house the administration. It was maybe 15,000 square feet in total - very small for a whole church. And yet, through the programming process, we figured out how to make it work.

They loved the idea of having a lobby that wasn't so interiorized, but part of the neighborhood. We felt that was a good idea because we couldn't fit a new lobby inside anyway. So we asked, "What if your lobby is actually in an outdoor shaded space in full view of Camelback Road?" They were intrigued so we developed the concept and began to think about wrapping the structure with perforated metal. We could reduce thermal heat gain while at the same time shaping usable outdoor spaces through shading.

The simple idea of extraction left us with three raw structures. It's a delightful little project because the church has come to love those buildings. They have a renewed value, by God's grace, because of what we exposed underneath the stucco. It felt real. It felt substantial. And so now it has this enduring quality. Underneath it all, we were able to preserve something that, I think, will get passed on to the next generation.

I believe we were the only ones who said we'd save the buildings. I think that's why they ended up choosing us. They sold the building to Redemption Church for a fraction of what they could have sold it to a developer for. They wanted to make sure the pastor was taken care of and a few other things were paid off, but the whole point was to make sure the buildings were in good hands.





The compressed entry into the historic timber-clad worship space

S. COHEN

These are exactly the types of stories my research has focused on thus far. The work has revealed an interesting pattern of communities revisiting and reshaping culturally significant ancestral spaces as well. Do you see much of that in the communities you work with? Particularly those that have had longer histories in specific territories?

J. DEBARTOLO

Unfortunately, I'm afraid we may not leave much value to the next generation from our current way of thinking about architecture as it relates to the evangelical church. The de-emphasis on physical space has created a glut of mediocrity and banality that typically generates bad buildings with nothing more than trendy entrances. We're seeing small glimmers of hope from the next generation who may not be able to afford it yet, but appreciate buildings constructed in real materials that have structural and permanent value, qualities of daylight in worship spaces, rational and thoughtfully laid out spaces that transcend pragmatic need and begin to focus on the majesty of God or the phenomenological qualities of creation...

...[from an adaptive reuse perspective], we need more projects like Tate Modern in London, where a massive turbine hall was turned into a modern art museum. We need to think of better uses for the buildings we already have. Those that can be used more than once a week. Our churches should be considering how they can team with other creative users to create more interesting cultural centers and community hubs that reduce the capital expense of buildings that remain empty for six days of the week.

My conversation with Jack DeBartolo 3 reinforced the notion that preserving culturally significant buildings is about more than structural adaptation – it's about evolving meaning. While these projects demand technical skills, they also require a sincere dedication to translating collective memory into enduring spaces. Their approach has had a lasting impact on how I think about design in this context.

As the research continues, I look toward projects and communities that view architecture as a vessel for cultural narratives – particularly through the lens of the historic synagogues in Arizona, where the two represent a remarkable historical throughline. From ancient mythologies and diasporic traditions to early settlements that grew into contemporary cities, the buildings embody a distinct intellectual and cultural lineage.

These experiences have underscored the belief that preserving such structures isn't about simply honoring the past, but aligning what we know with what we hope to become; acknowledging that the spaces we shape today hold the power to move future generations.



Cover Art

Michael Barkin

Description

Detail of a dress in SODO of Seattle, Washington, USA on October 5, 2024.

Casey Arguelles Gregory

Casey Arguelles Gregory is an artist, writer, and curator based in Seattle, Washington. As a curator and writer, Casey is interested in promoting the labor of other artists and examining creative processes as humanizing and transformative.

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As a dance journalist, Kaitlin McCarthy has spent the last decade writing about the Seattle scene as a regular contributor to City Arts Magazine, Dance Intl Magazine, PublicDisplay.Art, and SeattleDances.com, where she has been the Editor since 2016. During her leadership she grew SeattleDances from a volunteer site to one that paid its writers and staff. In 2022 she received a fellowship to the National Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Center for Theatre, where she studied criticism with leaders in the field. Her writing is informed by her fifteen-year performance and choreographic career.

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Steve Gilbert

is a fine art photographer based in Seattle. He's been involved photography in the northwest since the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, Steve lived at the O.K. Hotel in Seattle's historic Pioneer Square, which was used as a location in the movie Singles. He documented the art scene of that time period, capturing some now world famous visual artists and musicians. He toured with the Seattle band Soundgarden in the mid-1990s, and captured several iconic moments of Soundgarden on and off stage, as well as the New York City punk rock group the Ramones in performance, who Soundgarden toured with during those years. He works out of his studio in Seattle's vibrant Capitol Hill neighborhood. Steve opens his studio to show local artists, and help to create community among art patrons, collectors and area artists.

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