

ART(ISTS) ON THE VERGE II

2019-2021

Candice **Davis**

A.P. **Looze**

Kelley **Meister**

Sarah **Nassif**

Introduction

The 11th Art(ists) on the Verge fellowship took place in a time of historic uncertainty. When we met for the first time as a group – four cohort artists and three co-directors – in the fall of 2019, none of us could foresee the ways we would need to bend and stretch in the year that followed. Seven months into the “year-long” fellowship, our cities went into lockdown due to the COVID-19 outbreak, and mere weeks after that, the Twin Cities erupted in protest after the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. The conscientious world followed. Here at home, our streets were actually on fire.

And yet, artists don’t stop being artists in times of crisis, whether personal or global or both. Prior to this upheaval our monthly gatherings felt electric. Never in the history of this program has a cohort drawn so many lines of interconnection between projects. Each meeting we stepped into ever more fruitful entanglement through ideas of ancestry, genealogy, data, land, archives, embodiment, Blackness, Whiteness, invisibility, systems. As the fellowship stretched into a second year, A.P. Looze, Candice Davis, Kelley Meister, and Sarah Nassif demonstrated keen curiosity in finding ways to complete their projects despite uncommon uncertainty. They asked brave questions about the purpose of being an artist and what it means to make work in a world upturned. This commitment to creative practice and growth is what we hope to cultivate through AOV. I feel honored to have participated in these intimate conversations.

In addition to the unplanned changes of AOV’s 11th year, we did plan for a significant shift in the program; moving away from a group gallery exhibition as a culminating event. Rather, the artists each organized and presented an independent public space project. This change sought to further experiment with ways the fellowship could support emerging artists’ practices and align with Northern Lights.mn’s work of supporting art in the public sphere. The projects you see documented in these pages took place in the summer of 2021.

AOV11 was funded by the Jerome Foundation, who acted with grace in recognizing necessary program adjustments to meet artists’ needs at a difficult time. This work was also guided by many generous people: my co-directors Mike Hoyt and Piotr Szyhalski, themselves practicing artists whose own creative pivots and ways of working through collective grief were so valuable to the whole. The mentor artists were called upon for a new kind of support and they showed up. We were able to schedule one day-long critique before things went askew and were joined by wonderful guest artists who lent insightful responses to the in-process works. Attention to detail was tenderly given by Maija Brown, the program’s writing mentor, as well as by our skilled photographers. (All participants are listed in the Colophon.) Lastly, I thank Mara Duvra, our essayist, for her care-filled approach to listening to the artists and weaving this text from hours of conversation.

I invite you to sit with these pages and dig in, feel big, think complexly, and learn with these works. They are guides for a way of living that I believe will be necessary far beyond this moment of change.

Sarah Peters, Co-director, Art(ists) on the Verge and Executive Director, Northern Lights.mn

Candice Davis



Kelley Meister



A.P. Looze



Sarah Nassif



Embodied Practice:

offerings towards an evolution

By Mara Duvra

“Empathy isn’t just listening, it’s asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see.”

—Leslie Jamison, [The Empathy Exams](#)

Within the work of Candice Davis, A.P. Looze, Sarah Nassif, and Kelley Meister there are horizons of context that reach towards the distinctly human and vulnerable parts of our being and consciousness, the parts of our identity and presence that extend beyond our control and are impacted by the weight of historical and ancestral trauma. From extracting genealogical information in order to reconstruct a fractured past, sitting in prayerful contemplation, organizing communal moments for collective consciousness, to meditations on trees that uproot idyllic notions of our past and the reality of our present, these artists have all worked to lay bare parts of consciousness that at times feel better hidden, but only heal when exposed.

Through the extended AOV11 fellowship, these four artists embarked on a process of research and emergent making while adjusting to a time of deep uncertainty and stillness. Their creative process, social practice, and collaboration had to shift, making adjustments for a time characterized by constant flux.

Reconciling always seems like a compromise, like a lesser version of what was to be. However, in this instance, perhaps reconciling ourselves to the hereafter has opened up chasms that have identified what is necessary. As all of our attention shifted, perhaps the work followed, refocusing on the urgent and pressing, the deep and unending, the present and future-ness of being alive—a simultaneous head spinning alignment.

So, what is the work?

Care, attention, expansion, ritual and breathing, meditations on land and colonization, a collective space for fear, or locating ancestral histories. To make work right now is to be acutely aware of the body. The body in space, in proximity to others (past, present, future) the awareness of a stranger and hyper awareness of ourselves. The work; could it be what is keeping us alive?

These artists engaged in a process of discovering and stringing together narratives that move through the body with alterity, unfolding untold stories that are repressed but deeply embodied and heartfelt.

Whether it’s nuclear fallout, climate change, systemic racism, or inherited trauma and dislocation, the empathetic work of these artists tap into our anxieties of knowing, or, in many cases, not knowing.

Candice Davis (she/her)

“The past lives in our bodies, we are an extension of those that came before us, knitted into our unique DNA.” —Candice Davis

Candice Davis’s work is a collection of embodied archival processes, locating, documenting, and imaging layers of seemingly irretrievable histories. Her practice feels like a form of attending to Black people’s connection to archives, personal and historical collecting, and oral history traditions within families.

Davis’s work is recursive. The process of uncovering requires the ability to be clerical, intuitive, and speculative, expanding what is possible through abstracting data and extending our reality and perception of what is available to Black people. Regarding all that has been lost: names, stories, traditions, bodies... what is available to us in that space of irretrievable loss.

“When the genealogy is cut either by will or demonstration, there’s not an easy way to retrieve or go back to. What exists in the place of what’s unavailable to you?” —Dawn Lundy Martin, [Good Stock Strange Blood](#)

There is a pulse beneath the threads of Davis’s work, tracing lines that are constantly shifting and evolving. This work is connected to what is visceral and unending in our culture: the dislocation and displacement of marginalized people, both their bodies and their stories. Davis identifies her work as “exploration of non-empirical visual representations of historical and genealogical research.”

One such method is the development of a search engine with the use of Slave Schedule transcripts as a source for locating unnamed enslaved ancestors. This process contends with the fact that individuals were seen as property and documented as such. It acts as another method of collecting, gathering fragments and approximations that lead us to the potential of knowing.

When learning about this document as a method of locating, it conjured up an image for me of something abstract and it felt almost like a form of echolocation. The knowledge of one collective source could potentially bump up against

another and reverberate, dislodging and unearthing a deeper knowing that could locate and humanize bodies lost in systems of intentional disregard.

Davis's recent projects have sought ways to visualize her research, making it physical and tactile, allowing emotional and personal interaction with the unearthed stories she is laying bare. This work emerges from the margins and seeks to connect the interstitial spaces where Black ancestry remains fragmented.

Davis works through a myriad of connective threads, working to digitally interpret records, reading primary source documents, contacting historical societies, finding images in local records, all while piecing these fragments together with familial stories and ancestral memory. The work is ghostly and corporeal—it makes space and etches into our consciousness that which is glaringly absent.

A.P. Looze (they/them)

“Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”
—Simone Weil, [Gravity and Grace](#)

Centering process, this work is about ritual and silence as modes of being that embrace tradition while bringing into focus heirlooms of familial and religious traditions inextricably linked to individual and collective trauma. Looze states “At the core of my creative process is a devotion to healing and self-actualization.”

What emerges in the work is the presence of desire. A desire to connect through culture and spirituality, for connection that oscillates between solitude and community. Looze's work aerates and provides a home for contemplation while holding space for the grief of living in the ongoing state of oppressive histories.

“In this room each strung rose hip is a prayer, a meditation, a wish, a thought, a dream.”
—A.P. Looze

This work is a form of devotion. Walking into their installation [Heart Strings: A beading Ritual](#), I stood quiet and contemplative as heat prickled and bloomed on my skin. The installation is simultaneously heady and grounding. The warm rose scent fills your nose and the heat pulls you deep into your body.

What began as a practice of creating beaded strands of rose hips, enacting a tactile ritual during a time of social distancing, emerged into an embodied practice of creating connections to the spirits of

loved ones or, as they put it, “moving and opening up portals.”

This work is a form of making space for the artist themselves, which in turn opens up possibilities for others. An illuminated space channeling a spiritual connection to the physical form of the rosary, a string of prayer beads meant to count component prayers of the Holy Rosary, which is symbolized as a crown or garland of roses.

Looze's work manifests in many forms, which resemble a kind of tending or stewardship: collecting rose hips that they soaked in water before beading, making wild rose essence and rose water, and inviting others to sit in communion with them and engage in this devotional work.

This work feels relational. Though originating as a solitary practice, it opens up space for companionable silence or circles of people to gather around a single purpose. In this way Looze shifts away from their previous performance work, and is present alongside the viewer ushering them through in tangible and ephemeral ways.

Within this work is an offering both past and ongoing. It is a meditation setting the scene for the possibility of connection to self and to others, for existing momentarily in the space of unmixed attention.

Sarah Nassif (she/her)

“Leaf Trace/Land Trace illuminates a monument hidden in plain sight that underlines many of our struggles today: We are embedded and live in this monument.” —Sarah Nassif

Sarah Nassif's [Leaf Trace / Land Trace](#), a meditation on finding our way through the trees, creates a container for understanding how place and landscape inform our understanding of ourselves, family histories, inequity, and communal connectivity. Tracing how the borders of our communities have originated while finding ways to unravel harmful mythologies, Nassif asks the question “Can we, by tracing natural systems, build deeper awareness of systems created by people? How might trees help us find our way?”

This work uses meditative prompts as a tool for observing trees—recording, and sharing ways to approach an understanding of the layered histories they contain. Within the work is an effort to bring into focus and awareness buried or forgotten truths, a desire to develop a sustained racial awareness. This asks the viewers to locate ourselves within histories that feel faraway.

Nassif's work is a wide invitation, aimed at orienting people in subtle ways within conversations

that require acknowledging difference and historical trauma. Her work serves to remind us of our humanity, our embodied and cultural ways of knowing and making. For Nassif, this work has led to deep research and internal confrontations. In this way, the artist acts as a conduit for finding language and creating space where expertise fails us and curiosity is necessary.

“The land knows you, even when you are lost.”
—Robin Wall Kimmerer, [Braiding Sweetgrass](#)

This project, distilled into a workbook, makes tangible the practice of finding our place through land stories, making connections to the Public Land Survey System. So much of what we know of homesteads, redlining, and real estate inequities stems from this early form of mapping.

Nassif's work leans into this idea of practice and grounding. Shifting our thinking and developing awareness is both somatic and communal work. Her practice as a maker with fiber and community returns us to the tactile connection of putting the work in viewers' hands, connecting them to a tangible way of learning while also creating opportunities that open up space for critical conversations.

With this work, Nassif asks the viewer to develop or attune their attention, to use the natural observable world to shift into focus that which was made invisible, dismantled and reconstructed.

“Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world.” —Robin Wall Kimmerer, [Braiding Sweetgrass](#)

Kelley Meister (ze/hir)

Kelley Meister's work is a form of social practice that asks viewers to participate in individual and collective ways of data collection, drawing, thinking, and observing together. This work makes space for a process of contracting and expanding, of letting go and holding onto uncertainty.

Within hir work Meister is embarking on a creative practice that cultivates multiple spaces for empathetic inquiry, asking questions whose answers need to be listened to, both shared and held. The connective threads of Kelley's inquiries trace a web of increasingly disconcerting connections to our human condition as it relates to living in a system of climate change and nuclear threat. These very real and looming concerns become foundational for the emergence of seeking community and connection, searching for what is familiar and grounding.

Meister's research is focused on investigating the 100 mile space between two nuclear power plants in Minnesota, one at Prairie Island and the other in Monticello. Hir ongoing project [Hot Zone](#) is a process of navigating and orienting ourselves within a specific area of nuclear concern. Ze points to environmental degradation within proximity to “hot zones,” whereas ze states “millions of us live in close proximity to radioactive waste.”

Ze calls into question how fear influences our decisions and how we live, whether we look away or remain focused on those things that feel intangible and large, a continuous and unending state of being and perceiving.

The work points to a desire for resilience and adaptation looking at nature as a model for recognizing change. With a handmade zine, [Observe & Draw Together](#), Meister invites participants to look closely at the characteristics of the environment surrounding the hot zone. The prompts encourage curiosity and being present, asking the question “Will we notice any changes?” Nature is constantly evolving and shifting, and we often only notice the significant changes like leaves falling or lakes freezing. But with this workbook, Kelley is inviting us to a different type of attention, one that is intimate, sustained, and grounding. This feels like the impetus of a communally formed field guide, holding the collective observations of a space that exist as a complicated reminder of our ecosystem.

In conversation with Meister, ze addresses personal fears and anxieties when considering environmental impact and looks at art as a way of existing and processing our surroundings. Ze asks the question “how do we care for each other in these systems?” How do we think of collectivity and empowerment? Perhaps this work creates a space for all of these things as well as care and conversations with others as a practice for cultivating empathy.

Candice Davis

Slave Schedule

Peripherals

Candice Davis

Lives and works in Minneapolis, MN

My conceptual practice holds a mirror to White violence and complacency. I primarily focus on digital media, installation, and performance as a means of witnessing the trans-generational experiences of marginalized people. As a Black woman in the United States, I recognize my existence as the result of centuries of displacement, trauma, exploitation, and propagation for the benefit of Western capitalism.

My process relies on research and examination of the past as a framework for critiquing the present. I prioritize how visualization and tactility can help make generational experiences of the disenfranchised more visible and intellectually accessible. The archives and history of Black people are integral to my practice. I source physical and visual materials from the archive and use them in my work as a means of bringing them back into the present. I mimic the way that, when retold, histories that exist exclusively in an oral tradition are fluid and become integrated into personal memory rather than remaining distant and stagnant. By visually showcasing parallels between issues of transgenerational relevance, I create a more easily identifiable link between the experiences of my diasporic contemporaries and those of their ancestors.

Through my work in personal genealogy, I have learned to consider how the hierarchy of a physical or evidential archive within Western culture excludes people who have been marginalized. To limit the genealogical search process to only the parameters under which the original documents were created poses a particular challenge for historians of color. And to limit the interpretation of these records to that which is purely empirical tends to disregard the emotionality and nuances of their context and impact.

In 2018, I began prototyping a search engine that would allow Black Americans to search Slave Schedules. Prior to 1870, the primary means of documenting Black people was namelessly, as property, on these Schedules. The proposed search tool would allow users to filter through digital transcripts using parameters of age, gender, and racial identity [Black or Mulatto], in order to identify the slaveowners of slave ancestors, unnamed on the documents. The advantage of identifying an ancestor's potential slaveowners may point towards additional information about the slaveowner's family and plantation. Knowing a potential slaveowner's name helps researchers begin to unpack name origins, helps with the identification of other primary documents, and reinforces accountability for slavery by implicating beneficiaries by name. The goal is to share the code through open source developing websites for others to use as a basis for their own similar database creation.

The Art(ists) on the Verge fellowship period has facilitated a host of adjacent artistic projects, which explore non-empirical visual representations of historical and genealogical research. The first of these projects was the digitization of family photos and documentation of oral histories. The second project, 1900 Columbus: Artist Working with Archive, was an installation and publication surrounding the visual storytelling of histories related to location. The final interpretive projects from the fellowship period were part of a larger examination of methods of memorial for ancestors. Exhibited under the title I Was Born With A Silver Spoon in Your Mouth, this series of projects maintains a focus on the penultimate goal of realizing the Slave Schedule Search while acknowledging that within the realm of historical research there are limitations to what quantitative records can represent. This is especially so when those records were created in a context of oppression and trauma.

<http://northern.lights.nm/projects/candice-davis/>





A.P. LOOZE

Heart Strings: A Beading Ritual

A.P. Looze

Lives and works in Minneapolis, MN

The core of my creative process is devoted to healing and self-actualization. I play and research alone, in a room or in nature, unlocking the secrets, tricks, and mysteries of materials, myths, grief, ecology, ancestry, and the cosmos. I use a diverse set of artistic practices to draw connections between themes. Art making is a multi-dimensional pilgrimage for me, in which I risk losing the safety of the familiar for the sake of new learning.

I am invested in making rituals and work that can be a common meeting ground with and for others who are also seeking to uproot violent histories, who are recovering from the cultural plague of narcissism, who are invested in building a post-white supremacy reality.

<http://northern.lights.mn/projects/a-p-looze/>

I want to contribute to a world that values love and connection, treats art making as sacred practice, and contributes to the emotional, psychic, and physical well-being of myself, others, and the earth. Heart Strings: A Beading Ritual (2021) is a month-long contemplative and embodied ritual conducted both in solitude and with others intended to foster connection to the body and the earth using specific parts of the rose.

In the formless days of the pandemic, I began stringing rosehips. It turned into a private ritual: first soaking the rosehips to soften them, and then ending the day by stringing them onto strings of various lengths. Prayers, mantras, and songs came to me through this mundane act, and I was moved to tears, thinking of my lineage, my body, our collective body, the hardship of the pandemic, and the trauma and genocide this country was founded on. I was tending to the sacred work of grief. Without realizing it, I had recreated an ancestral practice that was made clear to me later while researching the rosary.

Before the 59-bead rosary was indoctrinated into the Catholic church, rosaries were strung to be whatever length people found necessary. Before Catholicism, prayer beads were strung from gathered flowers and seeds in honor of the mother goddesses of Paleolithic and pre-Christian times.

Stringing rosehips has brought me in closer contact with my ancestors who prayed down toward the earth to honor the goddesses of the land who provided them with life. When I string these beads, I am reminded of the deep and atrocious violence the Catholic church has inflicted upon so many cultures and people, the way crosses were hammered into the ground as a means to seize land from indigenous people. With each bead, I carry forth the intention of being a better steward to this land and its first peoples, and I thank the wisdom of the rose itself.

For Heart Strings, I brought my materials into a solitary backyard studio in my neighborhood. I combined days of stringing beads alone, with days open to practice with others. I invited people to sit with me and shared instructions about how to string the rosehips, then let the beading itself guide the interaction. I asked how people connect to time, ancestors, or descendants. Participants could either take the rosehips home with them or leave them in the space. As the strings accumulated, I hung them in the studio, creating an installation inspired by the month of shared creation and reflection.





Kelley Meister

HOTZONE

Kelley Meister

Lives and works in Minneapolis

I am an interdisciplinary visual artist who builds transformative experiences that encourage empathy through a shared emotional exploration. My work primarily utilizes drawing, hand-made objects, digital media, site-specific installations, and socially engaged, participatory events that overlap and intersect. Over the last decade, my work has focused on shared worldwide issues, such as climate change and nuclear war, in order to investigate empathetic responses that emerge from global threats and existential fear. Through my work, I seek an antidote to this fear.

Over the course of the extended AOV11 fellowship, the world shifted in unexpected ways. Fear and uncertainty became ever-present in my life, beginning with watching the shelves rapidly empty in stores. I knew my work had something to offer to this moment, but for much of the fellowship period, I felt paralyzed by fear and corresponding grief. Eventually, last winter I found a new working pattern, one that was slower, more introspective, and deeply personal.

For the culmination of my AOV project, I launched a long-term investigation of the 100-mile stretch of land and water between the two nuclear power plants in Mni Sota, so-called Minnesota, at Prairie Island and Monticello. This includes a sculptural component of windsocks that call attention to the wind that moves particulates, smoke, dust, pollen, seeds, insects, and more through the 100-mile space. The wind disperses what is here, while also depositing small artifacts from along its route. These windsocks were installed at various points throughout the 100-mile HOT ZONE area throughout the month of September 2021.

Additionally, I created a participatory online platform that explores our proximity to nuclear waste through data collection; drawing and visual observation; bicycle rides and other mobile endeavors; environmental radiation monitors; and connections between people. Audiences are invited to submit drawings and photographic observations to the website hotzone.kelleymeister.com.

At an informal gathering, others were invited to join me in looking closely at the ecosystem in a small oak savanna lying adjacent to the Haha Wakpa / Gitchi Ziibi / Mississippi River. Guided by a small zine that I created that included drawing prompts, we carefully observed plants and small creatures of the habitat, created a document of their lives in that location on that date, and added our observations to the website.

My goal is for this work to bring new awareness to our environment and to the delicate microcosm around us. Many people are surprised to hear that there are two nuclear power plants just outside the Twin Cities. By taking time to look closely at the ecosystem along the river, this work opens up space for deeper observation and contemplation of our future.

<http://northern.lights.mm/projects/kelley-meister/>





Sarah Nassif

Leaf Trace / Land Trace

Sarah Nassif

Lives and works in Minneapolis, Minnesota

In my community-engaged art projects, I connect people, plants, and place through sensory exploration of natural and human-built environments, hands-on skills practice, and person-to-person sharing.

Humans have always relied on their five senses to engage with the world and relate to one another. While this skill set remains our birthright, modern life pulls us away from practicing this way of knowing. As we increasingly turn to technology to connect us, solve our problems, and serve us information about the world and ourselves, I'm concerned we will forget the basics of connecting with each other and of understanding through open-ended conversation.

As a botany student, I learned how observation, curiosity, and conversation is crucial to generating new understanding. In 2000, I moved from the Pacific Northwest to Minnesota, and despite my botany degree, I had to start from scratch learning Minnesota flora. I took digital photos that became a series of screen prints tracing the unique silhouettes

of Minnesota plants, starting an unexpected art career. Looking to the plant world for direction has become a grounding principle of my practice.

Leaf Trace/Land Trace springs from my journey to understand how I got here. As a botanist, I was fascinated by the role trees played in the laying out the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) survey lines in the 1800s. These bearing trees were used to mark the four corners of each quarter-section. Some of these trees are still growing well over a hundred years later.

The purpose of the PLSS was to catalog lands seized in the American Revolution. Today, we recognize its physical imprint as the rectangular patchwork of land visible from the air. This cozy image belies how the PLSS dictated the long-term inequitable distribution of wealth in the U.S. Homesteads, redlined city blocks, and modern real estate documents selling unceded Native American land all descend from the PLSS. This bald truth struck me as something anyone could interact with if they were led to make the connection.

I am descended from European immigrants, homesteaders and entrepreneurs whose ingenuity and effort allowed them to build wealth in the twentieth century. I, like many white Americans, am conditioned not to question this story: that I enjoy a life of ease because of the hard work of my ancestors and the work ethic I inherited. As an adult, I'm learning to unsettle this story and reframe it to include the missing pieces in search of my full heritage, both hopeful and harmful.

Leaf Trace / Land Trace invites others into this journey by tracing a series of familiar systems. Participants are given a paper booklet and a red pencil imprinted with the text "Can the system see itself?" The pencil point is offered as a starting point, a reminder you have already arrived at the beginning. The first system trace is outlining a leaf and its veins, warming up to the idea that simple observation yields insight. A series of meditations unfold as steps emphasizing our ability to learn by taking the time to observe the world around us and converse openly with others. The ending activity traces landmarks created by people and recorded in the PLSS in the 1800s.

As individuals, we are caught up in the fabric of systems we often do not notice. Can curiosity replace complacency? In the face of injustice and uncertainty, how might our viewpoints and actions shift by tracing systems, both natural and human-made?

<http://northern.lights.nm/projects/sarah-nassif/>







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**Art(ists) On the Verge II
2019–2021
Northern Lights.mn /
Jerome Emerging Artist Commissions**

<http://northern.lights.mn/platform/artists-on-the-verge-11-artists/>

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