



ARTISTS IN
RESIDENCE
IN GOVERNMENT



ARTISTES EN
RÉSIDENTIE
À LA VILLE

GET.TOGETHER. RASSEMBLEMENT.

**In December 2024, Arts Ottawa held “Get.Together.”
-- a gathering of community arts practitioners
representing a diversity of artistic disciplines,
backgrounds, and objectives.**

The event, held at Carleton Dominion-Chalmers Centre, concluded with a dialogue between the City of Ottawa's inaugural Artists-in-Residence-in-Government (AIRG).

The AIRG program, launched in 2023 by Arts Ottawa, City of Ottawa, and Third Way Creative, brings a fresh perspective to municipal challenges. Artists Olivia Onuk and Jordan Danger have been working within the city's Integrated Neighborhood Services Team (INST) and Solid Waste Services (SWS) department, respectively.

During this conversation, Olivia and Jordan shared insights into their unique residencies, the value of embedding creatives in government, and the surprises and challenges they've encountered along the way. Their conversation highlighted the potential for artists to bridge gaps, advocate for change, and bring human-centered solutions to complex civic issues.



Olivia Onuk



Jordan and Olivia at Get.Together
02/12/24



Jordan Danger

Jordan and Olivia in conversation

(The below interview has been edited for length and clarity)



Olivia

My name is Olivia. I am an interdisciplinary artist, and my practice is rooted in the truth of art as therapy, as a tool for connection and making sense of trauma. I worked as a counselor and event coordinator and curator for over 12 years, creating spaces where people can connect with art and themselves.

Currently, I am working with the City of Ottawa's Integrated Neighborhood Services Team, which supports the housing department. Much of the work has really been around resource allocation and service provision. In this residency, I focused on exploring the themes of identity, migration, survival, transiency and hope, and much of the work has been engaging residents and staff through community conversations, sharing circles, coloring pages, clothing drives, community kitchen evenings and soon, photo days.

Much of my time in this residency so far has been spent understanding and refining existing internal processes and resources from an artistic perspective but also leveraging technology and my design background to create sustainable solutions to these to the issues that they're facing. And for me, this work has and continues to challenge me to think beyond traditional art forms. While there will be a painting, I am also going to be creating interactive installations and inviting the public in to also reflect on these experiences of the lived experiences of the people, and also to see themselves represented in these stories. Because I do believe the more we can see ourselves represented in the stories, the more we can see ourselves represented in the solutions. And think of ways that we can and want to be a part of the solutions.



Jordan

A little bit about me - I've been really blessed to have a variety of career paths. Initially, I thought these paths don't really link together, but they do. Through my work in social services, I had done over 6000 hours of volunteerism with the LGBTQ community, and so I was a huge advocate, and I had many opportunities to apply art to intersect with those projects.

Marketing was a 10-year crash course in communicating in ways that help people make decisions. And that's really all marketing is - helping people make a decision when you take a lot of other stuff away. So, when it comes to creating art, I found that to be very helpful and I really do want my art to always encourage and incite something in people, so marketing has been also very, very powerful for me.

About a year and a half ago, I went full time into art, so that has been a huge step for me, and the amount of focus I can give to my practice has really changed, and it's changing my relationship with art too. So, those are the bullet points of my career.

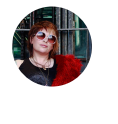
Today, what we're going to do is ask some questions to one another. Olivia and I are also newly acquainted, and so the answers, for the most part, will be a surprise to us as well.

Q: What drew you to the AIRG program? Why did you apply?



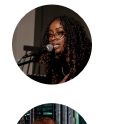
Olivia

I applied to the program because it felt, for me, like a powerful opportunity to use art as a bridge between people and systems. I was excited to be working with a team that is boots on the ground, going into the communities and actually meeting the people where they're at, connecting them to the necessary resources that they need to actually settle and rebuild their lives. I was excited to be offered a chance to explore how creative approaches could add a human element to these spaces that are so often dominated by policy and procedure.



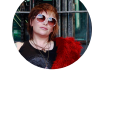
Jordan

I had spent two years as a marketing communications person in a City Councilor's office, and one of our portfolios had been waste management. So, I had familiarity with the department and with doing community-based programs. I could see how all my paths could come together here and be really useful. I also saw that [AIRG] was a fledgling program, and this is going to sound a little bit egotistical, but I thought "this could be delicate, they definitely need to pick artists who are ready to deal with the City experience and the level of community engagement." I felt like I would be a good steward for the [AIRG] program.



Olivia

What do you think is the use or value or benefit of a program like this?



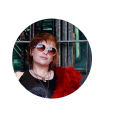
Jordan

I often think of the example of "desire paths". We've got the path that the engineers built, and then you have the path that people actually walk. Artists walk the desire path, and the City walks the path that engineers built. I think that there's great value here, and hopefully over time, gently stretching out the comfort zone of the municipal government in finding solutions, as well as having artists find different ways to communicate not just solutions, but the problems too.



Olivia

This reminds me of something that James Baldwin said, which is the artist's role is to lay bare the questions that are hidden behind the answers. I have the freedom to highlight the emotional and social dimensions of housing. My role is to remind stakeholders and decision-makers that these spaces aren't just physical—they are emotional landscapes. With the right investment, they can become powerful sites of transformation.



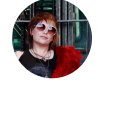
Jordan

We were talking about the forward-facing potential of the AIRG model. What do you see as a potential in that model?



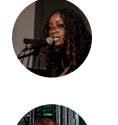
Olivia

I think that the potential of this program is that it highlights the power of embedding artists in government where they can bring their own fresh perspectives and these unfettered perspectives to approaches to challenges that we're facing. I also think that this can act as a model for how Cities approach complex issues, placing artists in these spaces, not just as outsiders, or as showmen, but really as collaborators who can go in and engage the communities in ways that the municipality just doesn't have the time or resources to and bring those perspectives back so that they can actually shape the solutions that we're providing.



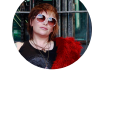
Jordan

I think artists are, first and foremost, observers. My hope is that the artists can come in and observe from the outside and find some of those key elements in the landscape that they can influence, or they can focus on and make it possible to make these small changes.



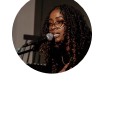
Olivia

I know you're still relatively fresh, but what has surprised you so far in your residency?



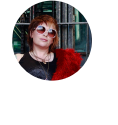
Jordan

What's been interesting to me is that I've had these paradigm shifting moments when talking to staff who are just doing their daily job. We went to the landfill and took a very in-depth tour with the man who runs the entire facility, one thing that really blew me away was they didn't talk about square footage at the landfill. They use the term airspace, and that's because they can only go up and they can compress down. So, it was just a simple language thing, but it flipped my vision. Because of this, I'm building some pieces and trying to show this layering in the landfill and how much space we have left at the top.



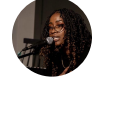
Olivia

So I think I've been most surprised by the willingness of the residents to engage with me, to have these conversations, to sit down for a meal, to colour with me and talk about the questions I have, especially just reflecting on where they're at and what it means to be where they're at. This has been instrumental in terms of making a case for what needs to change and how we can better serve the residents, what services need to be provided and what resources need to be revamped.



Jordan

What is your advice or takeaways that, because we were talking together about the need for us to work as alumni of the program, to support the next wave of AIRG artists?



Olivia

I would say the importance of listening, listen to everything. Listening, approaching with curiosity, and having some sort of staying power, because things will shift. Things will change. You will have to pivot. You will be disappointed, but approach everything with curiosity, and don't underestimate the power of small efforts, effort compounds. And it may be that all of the things that you hope to accomplish in the time they are there do not get accomplished, but you plant a seed that continues to bloom long after you're gone.

I'll also add one more: learn tact. It's very important in communication, in managing your disappointments. So those would be my tips for anyone working with the municipality.

