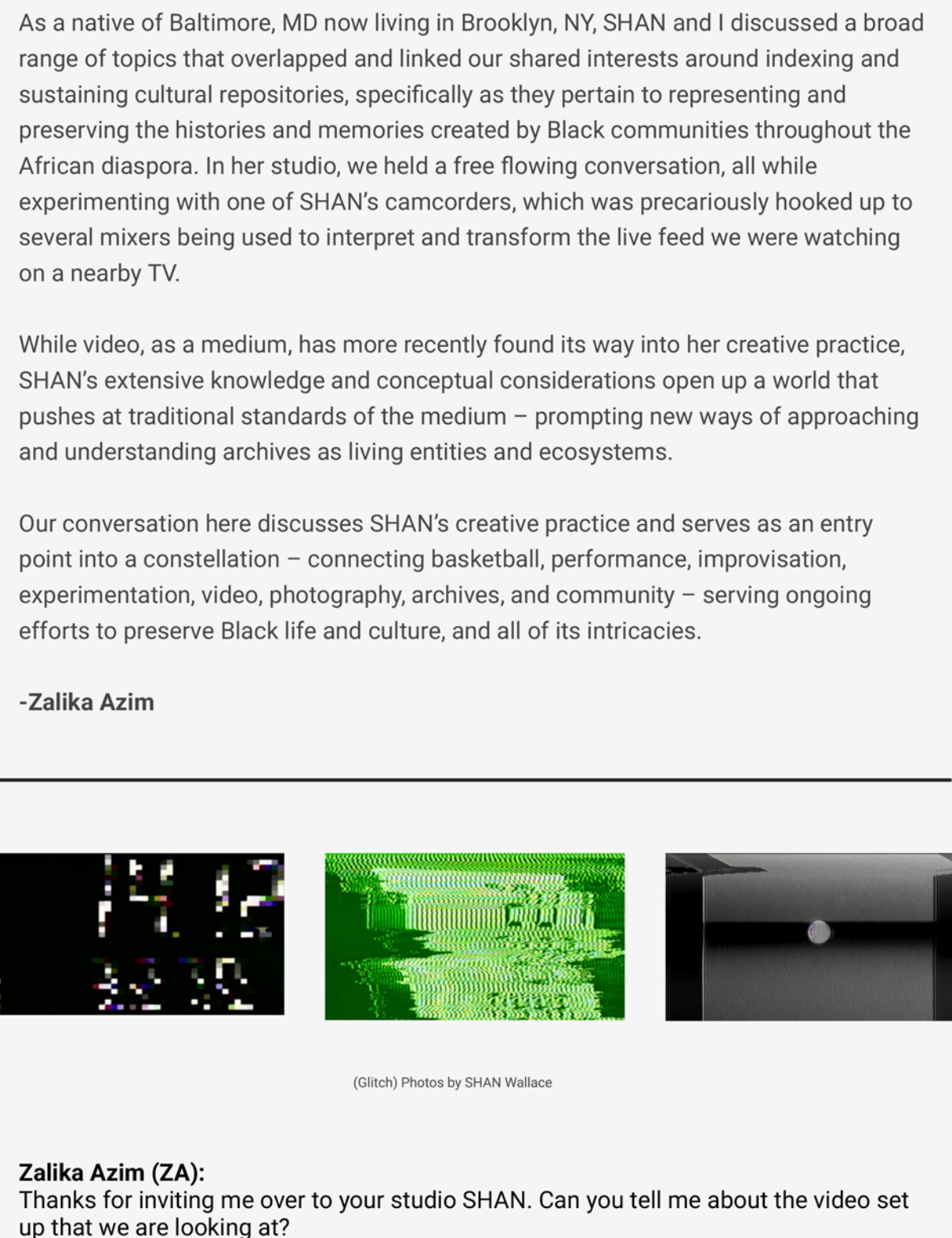


COMMON PRACTICE

We are excited to release the first of our “1-on-1” Artist Dialogues series, which features two incredible minds and emerging talents within the art world — SHAN Wallace and Zalika Azim.

We extend our deepest thanks to SHAN and Zalika for their time and consideration. This conversation exemplifies the power of connectivity, and what bringing people together can do to foster meaningful dialogue, and strengthen bonds.

This is what both art and basketball have the power to do.



Zalika Azim (L), SHAN Wallace (R) :: Photo by SHAN Wallace

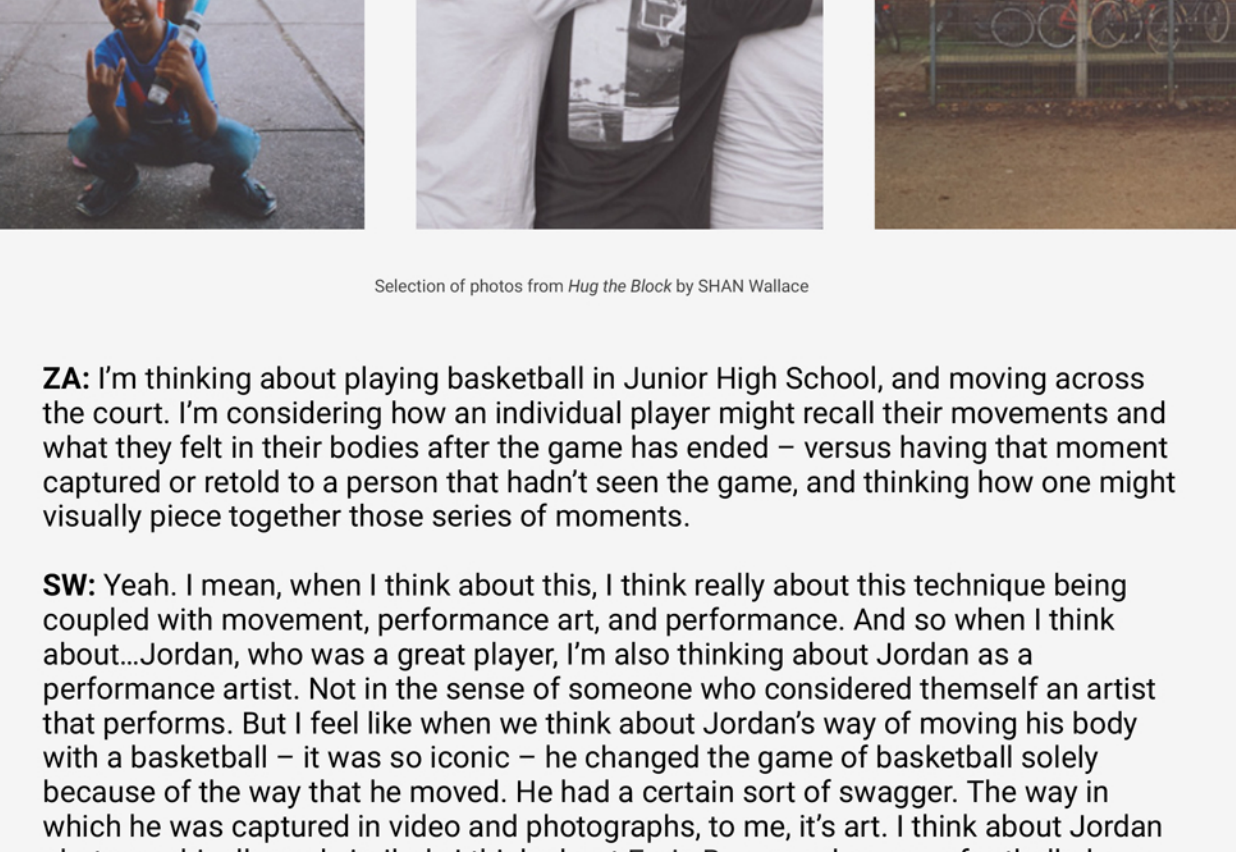
Last year, during an early Spring afternoon, I traveled up to the Bronx to meet with fellow interdisciplinary artist, archivist, and image-maker SHAN Wallace for a studio visit. This would be our second conversation, and our first in-person convening to emerge after being introduced via email in order to hold this discussion.

As a native of Baltimore, MD now living in Brooklyn, NY, SHAN and I discussed a broad range of topics that overlapped and linked our shared interests around indexing and sustaining cultural repositories, specifically as they pertain to representing and preserving the histories and memories created by Black communities throughout the African diaspora. In her studio, we held a free flowing conversation, all while experimenting with one of SHAN's camcorders, which was precariously hooked up to several mixers being used to interpret and transform the live feed we were watching on a nearby TV.

While video, as a medium, has more recently found its way into her creative practice, SHAN's extensive knowledge and conceptual considerations open up a world that pushes at traditional standards of the medium – prompting new ways of approaching and understanding archives as living entities and ecosystems.

Our conversation here discusses SHAN's creative practice and serves as an entry point into a constellation – connecting basketball, performance, improvisation, experimentation, video, photography, archives, and community – serving ongoing efforts to preserve Black life and culture, and all of its intricacies.

-Zalika Azim



(Glitch) Photos by SHAN Wallace

Zalika Azim (ZA): Thanks for inviting me over to your studio SHAN. Can you tell me about the video set up that we are looking at?

SHAN Wallace (SW): There is a bunch of stuff on the table but here are some videos that I digitized from Detroit, some videos that I've taken in Baltimore, a video from Pittsburgh. I made a video where I recorded the numbers at the gas station. It's pretty short. But when the camera is on, it records and then it allows the images to respond to technical tension, resulting in inconsistencies and and abstractions that distort, glitch, and replicate, allowing the archival material and immaterial to define their own functions and you can manipulate. And that's where I'm going as far as video art.

ZA: How did you come upon this process? I know you've been doing archival work and we were speaking earlier about how you tend to go about preserving home videos.

SW: The processes between my older photographic and collage work and this work are somewhat related. I say that because you are dealing with a lot of wires and connections when you work with analog media. And so, it's connected in some ways, but it's kind of in its own lane as well. This is where I'm at now. So imagine this and Black people, Black things, Black movement, Black space, Black whatever.

ZA: The word distortion is coming to me, but I also don't want to use that in this instance.

SW: I mean, it is though. It's distorting a program.

ZA: I was thinking about our last conversation a few weeks ago. We were talking about the glitch and the ways in which time in this space of video tends to circle back on itself in very specific ways. Even taking it back to the photographic work that you've been making in Baltimore, the familiarity of being in certain spaces with people. Or how multiple sites being captured, by you both nationally and internationally, might function simultaneously as a community. I also know you said in some instances that you consider your photography, collage work, and the video work sort of separate entities.

SW: The only thing that makes them separate really is the process. When I'm collaging, I'm in the studio alone, but the process still very much involves other people. It's still so interconnected. The collages come from my photographs. Occasionally I'll draw and improvise, but for the most part I'm using my photographs. In the video work, because it's so new, the thing that I feel like connects it to my still images, is that I'm trying to make them all family. I'm trying to put them all together so they say similar things, but through different mediums, it's just that makes sense. I am just trying to learn so I can tell stories and imagine Blackness in a new way.

ZA: During our last conversation you were talking about not turning your back on photography and I'm wanting to ask, do you feel like film is capable of catching some of the slippages that photography at times tends to miss? Those in between moments or gaps?

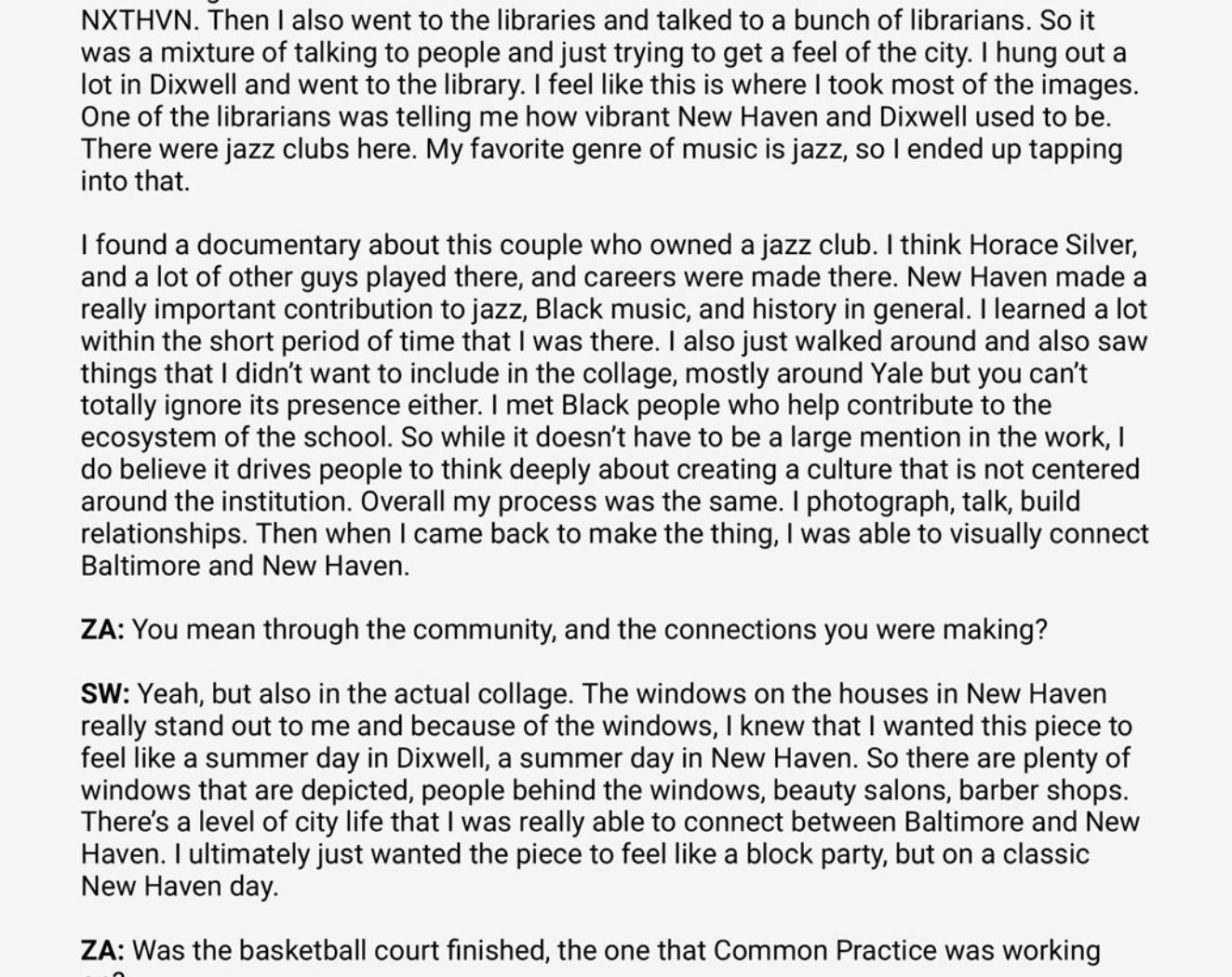
SW: Yeah.

ZA: I'm wondering if that's one of the draws for you in this developing work.

SW: So I digitized someone's home videos and the guy said that his mother just cried because seeing the video of the grandmother hit different than seeing the photo. Being able to hear her voice, being able to see her movements. So, as photographers, we have this ongoing complicated relationship with photography. How could we not? We live in a world where images are always being made. But also, how can we push through that and how can that work in our favor? I'm also like, how can I make the things that I want to see? Because here's the thing too, everything that you do in this type of image making works. You can turn the camera. You can throw images or light into it. You can do so many things that can help you tell the story.

ZA: Thinking through the relationship that you have between still image and basketball, is there something that you've located in video that starts to make parallels for you.

SW: I think so.



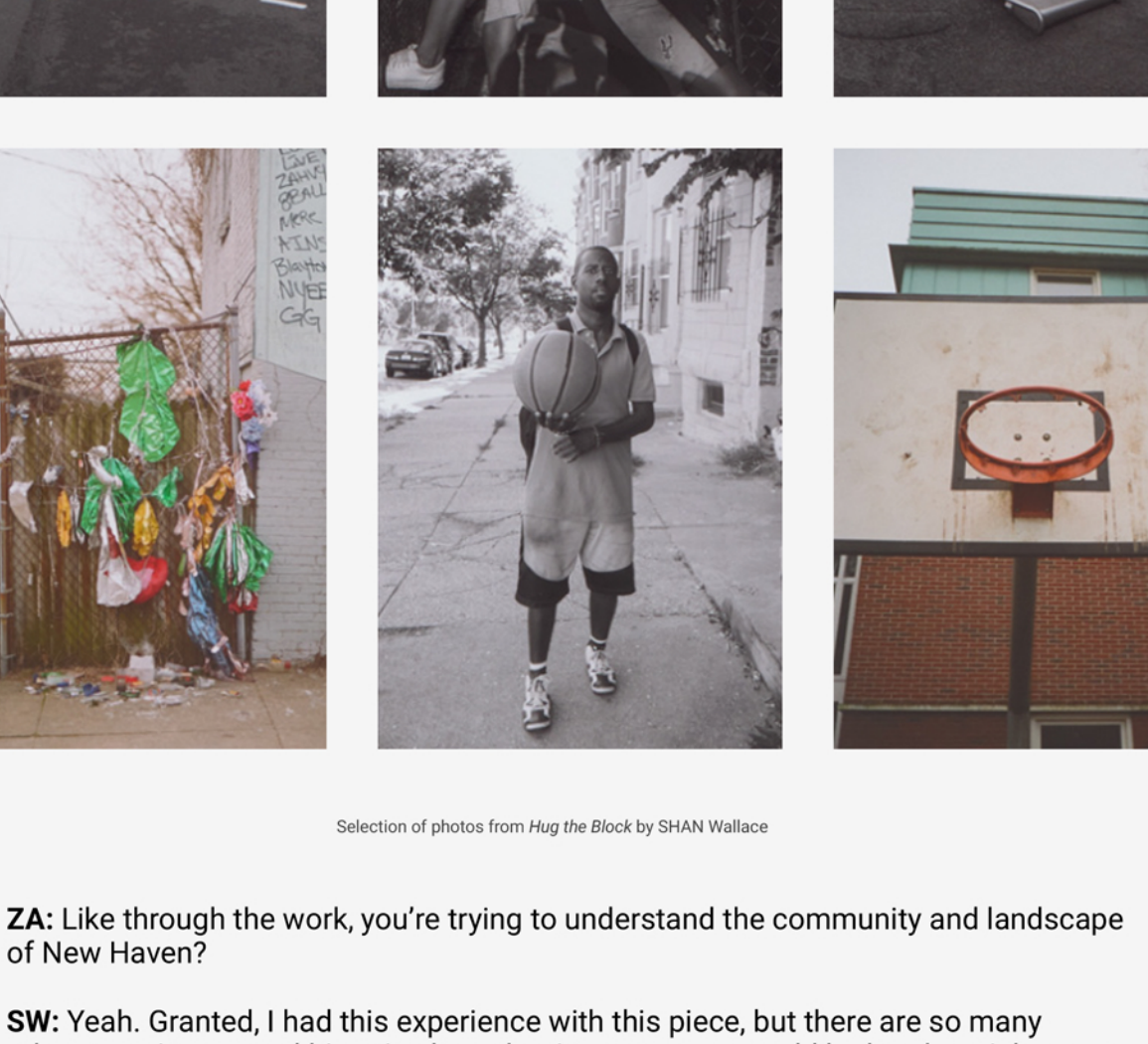
Selection of photos from Hug the Block by SHAN Wallace

ZA: I'm thinking about playing basketball in Junior High School, and moving across the court. I'm considering how an individual player might recall their movements and what they felt in their bodies after the game has ended – versus having that moment captured or retold to a person that hadn't seen the game, and thinking how one might visually piece together those series of moments.

SW: Yeah. I mean, when I think about this, I think really about this technique being coupled with movement, performance art, and performance. And so when I think about...Jordan, who was a great player, I'm also thinking about Jordan as a performance artist. Not in the sense of someone who considered himself an artist that performs. But I feel like when we think about Jordan's way of moving his body with a basketball – it was so iconic – he changed the game of basketball solely because of the way that he moved. He had a certain sort of swagger. The way in which he was captured in video and photographs, to me, it's art. I think about Jordan photographically, and similarly I think about Ernie Barnes, who was a football player. How he used movement, but also how we translated that to his paintings of everyday people in church, at home -

ZA: at the club -

SW: ... at the bar. To me, Ernie Barnes' paintings are parallel to an image or moving images of Michael Jordan playing his game. And so when I make those types of parallels, I think about this particular [technique - get SHAN Input], I'm definitely thinking about how can I incorporate that type of movement into this developing video work and create that same type of feeling, that same type of idea of movement being captured in a ways that relate to the everyday movements that we all do, the movements of performing artists, the movements of basketball players. How can I intersect that or create a parallel with this work, through analog image making. I could easily take photographs of a performance artist or someone moving and let that be the work, but I feel that this particular medium feels very appropriate for considering movement because so much of the image is solely based on technique and what you use. It allows a sort of glitch and distortion that forces you to look at these images as deeply, deeply flawed and also deeply layered.



Dad on Elgin, photo by SHAN Wallace

ZA: Yeah...I'm also thinking about you as the orchestrator of this experience and wondering what you feel you are asking of those that engage with this part of your practice. Like what is the work that a viewer might need to commit to doing while navigating moving image, and does this step beyond the ways in which viewers typically anticipate they will have to participate or navigate, let's say in a gallery space?

SW: I think I ultimately want to blur the lines between different types of imagery. Because right now in this piece, you are focused on a photograph of mine that in some ways was created into a collage, and now we have it on the screen. It's in some ways moving. And so I think I really want the viewer to take the journey of the process with me. To think about the different ways of making images, but also to think about the different ways that images can exist.

SW: I think the beautiful thing about this being analog-made is that every intention, every gesture, it all counts. So if you are moving the camera to the left, that changes the frame. If you are spinning it around, that changes the frame. And so when we think about analog, it's like 'every step counts' and every step really does play a role in what that image is.

ZA: I'm really excited by the conceptual undertones that we are talking through. I recently had a dream where I was with a friend of mine, and I remember that I kept thinking to myself that the dream felt "too perfect". Something was off – the colors were super vivid, and the sky kept glitching. I kept looking in this working, "Nah, something is off." What does it mean to locate yourself in this work, or to navigate a space, and then constantly have to readjust or situate what that looks like?

SW: It's hard. Every intention, every step really changes the image. And we're all doing this with nothing digital. In some ways it's obviously a moving image, but depending on where you go with it, it's still for a second, and that still image just moves up and down on the television. It's all made with composite images. I've just started thinking about AI, and how we will be accustomed to images in the future and how our images will be used without our consent. I feel like we will all have virtual twins... And so I want this to be the opposite of AI, where it's so imperfect. It ultimately is hacking the system.

ZA: I was speaking with the students in my Intro to Photo class, about photo transmission and how photographers during World War I would send their images to news companies via telephotography, telegraph, or radio communications. So often the image would be broken down into information or what they would call "electronic impulses" and each line or segment of the photograph would be reconfigured on the receiving end. I'm thinking that there's something about that kind of information transference, that is interesting to think through here.

SW: Yeah. I mean, there is, and has been a long history of image making, and not even just photographs, but information making. And I'm wondering where it's going to go in the future.



New Haven Block Party, SHAN Wallace, photo collage on wood panel 48 x 96 inches

ZA: The collage that you made for the COMMON PRACTICE: Public Access exhibition at NXTHVN, did you make all of the images that the work consists of, or were parts of the piece also sourced from the library?

SW: I only used my images. I made it digitally, had it, printed, and then pasted right now - I'll keep that method going. I threw a bunch of stuff and images on it. The image that you were pointing at in this basket is actually from the collage. I double printed everything, because there were mistakes and bubbles and different things. But that is a part of the process, but I'm kind of a – I won't say a perfectionist, but there's just certain things that can work in the collage.

ZA: How did you find working within the community of Dixwell? Was that process similar to you making work back home?

SW: So the process was pretty similar. I went there for about a week, and took photographs, and talked to people. My cousin lives there, so she really helped by introducing me to some friends and the homies outside the little corner store near NXTHVN. Then I also went to the libraries and talked to a bunch of librarians. So it was a mixture of talking to people and just trying to get a feel of the city. I hung out a lot in Dixwell and went to the library. I feel like this is where I took most of the images. One of the librarians was telling me how vibrant New Haven and Dixwell used to be. There were jazz clubs here. My favorite genre of music is jazz, so I ended up tapping into that.

I found a documentary about this couple who owned a jazz club. I think Horace Silver, and a lot of other guys played there, and careers were made there. New Haven made a really important contribution to jazz, Black music, and history in general. I learned a lot within the short period of time that I was there. I also just walked around and also saw things that I didn't want to include in the collage, mostly around Yale but you can't totally ignore its presence either. I met Black people who help contribute to the ecosystem of the school. So while it doesn't have to be a large mention in the work, I do believe it drives people to think deeply about creating a culture that is not centered around the institution. Overall my process was the same. I photograph, talk, build relationships. Then when I came back to make the thing, I was able to visually connect Baltimore and New Haven.

ZA: You mean through the community, and the connections you were making?

SW: Yeah, but also in the actual collage. The windows on the houses in New Haven really stand out to me and because of the windows, I knew that I wanted this piece to feel like a summer day in Dixwell, a summer day in New Haven. So there are plenty of windows that are depicted, people behind the windows, beauty salons, barber shops. There's a level of city life that I was really able to connect between Baltimore and New Haven. I ultimately just wanted the piece to feel like a block party, but on a classic New Haven day.

ZA: Was the basketball court finished, the one that Common Practice was working on?

SW: No. No, it wasn't finished. I don't think the project had even started when I went.

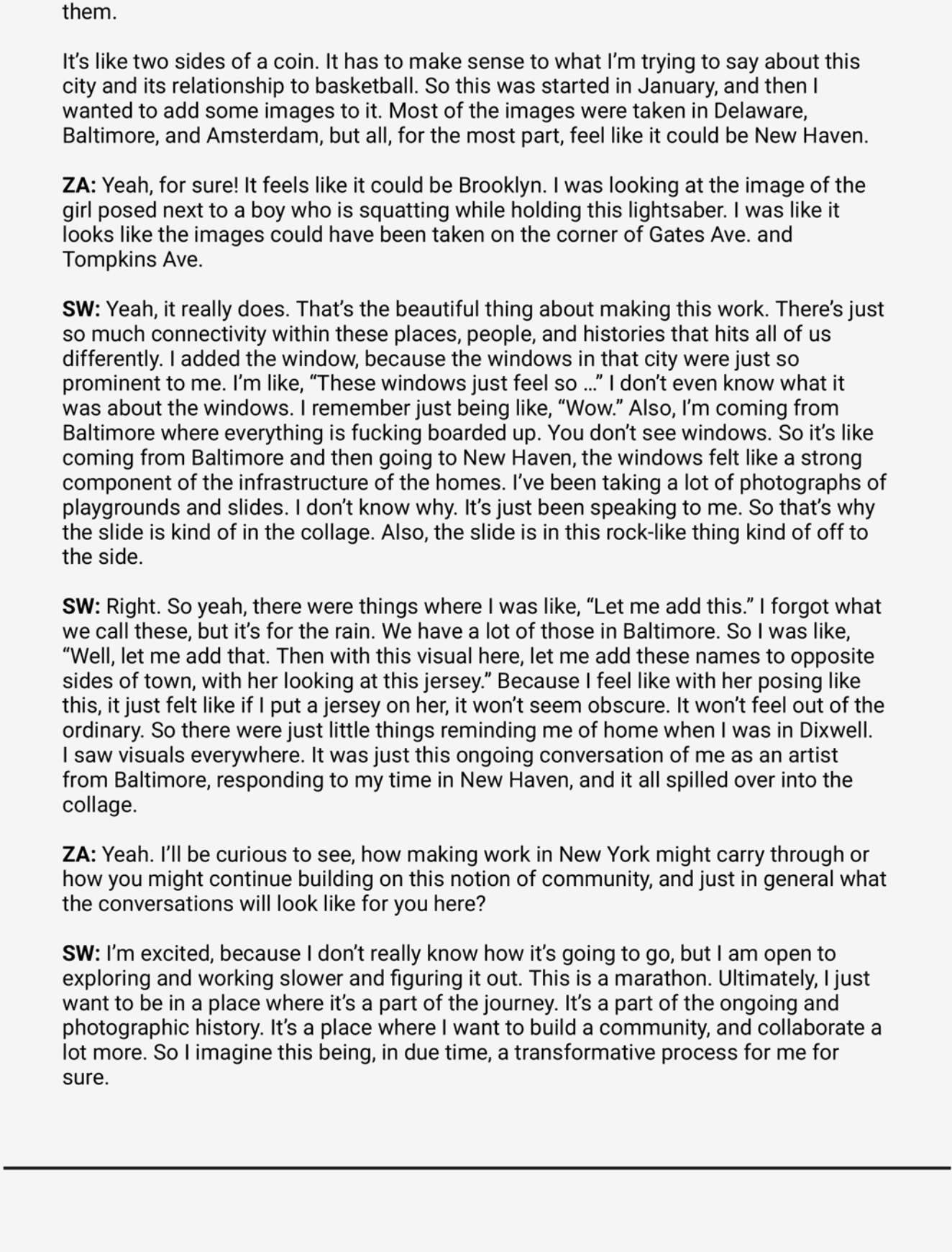
ZA: Yeah. I ask because I was wondering if that also found its way into your work or conversations. When I was a fellow at NXTHVN, I found myself paying a lot of attention to the way basketball showed up in the neighborhood.

SW: It was very clear to me that basketball's taken very seriously there. And Basketball's taken very seriously in Baltimore. I wanted the collage to accompany the community and all the work that JD is doing. Most of our conversations have been around basketball, the importance of it, and this universal language and connection that it enforces, enables and encourages. The collage consists of all of the things that make the city great and make basketball great in so many regards. So the focal point was all those incredible people I met, but it also speaks realistically and honestly about the city and its history. I feel like a lot of people had a very serious, nostalgic relationship to the history. "It Used to be this, it used to be that, and now it's this, and now it's that." That's everywhere in all Black cities.

So I feel like looking at this collage, I see Baltimore. I see Detroit. I hear similar histories, similar realities, similar ways of being in community and having community together. It all echoes the same from all these different cities. New Haven fits right into my experience of receiving that from these different places. I've taken photographs in Detroit. I've taken photographs obviously in Baltimore and Milwaukee, these Black cities. All of these cities are basketball cities. All of these cities have a history and a legacy that people feel like is slowly slipping from their memories. It's up to us to talk to them about it, and in some ways keep it alive and keep it active, even if it's little, small details. But the folks in New Haven, for the little bit of time that I was there, I don't even think they know how they really poured a lot into me as far as my interests and my understanding of New Haven.

ZA: Yeah. It's a really interesting place for considering so many things. In addition to the history of jazz, I recall going through the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. I was up there doing research for a show that I had curated, and found a mass of documents about The Amistad Ship which you might know was overtaken by the 53 individuals that were captured and taken from Sierra Leone. After killing the captain of the ship, they attempted to sail back to Africa via the ship's navigator, but instead wound up off the coast of Long Island where the ship was seized by the U.S. Navy and taken up to Connecticut. It was here where they argued against their status as property before the U.S. Supreme Court. So there are all of these specific markers and indicators throughout history. It's a powerful place, and I usually tend to go through many waves of emotion whenever I'm up there. In many ways it feels similar to being in Brooklyn, where I grew up. I'm recalling what it was like to grow up in Bed-Stuy in the 90's, and thinking about how it has transformed over the years. How I've been working to preserve the history of what Brooklyn used to be, and safeguard the narratives of the Black communities that have made it home for so many years.

SW: When I was in New Haven, I walked everywhere and my cousin was like, "You walking?"; I'm like, "Yeah, it's small. Why wouldn't I walk?" I walked so many places. I feel like I'm trying to understand New Haven through the collage.



Selection of photos from Hug the Block by SHAN Wallace

ZA: Like through the work, you're trying to understand the community and landscape of New Haven?

SW: Yeah. Granted, I had this experience with this piece, but there are so many other experiences and histories here that in some ways could be harsh, or inhumane, or challenging, or oppressive. Those histories exist, and I don't know them as well. But all of these things are a combination of experiences that got me to this work, in order for the folks at the library and the people in Dixwell to have said the things that they said to me about being prideful, about feeling left out, about it being this thing. All of that is a result of these histories that might be challenging to talk about. But then those histories are also exciting and beautiful that you can't help but to talk about them.

It's like two sides of a coin. It has to make sense to what I'm trying to say about this city and its relationship to basketball. So this was started in January, and then I wanted to add some images to it. Most of the images were taken in Delaware, Baltimore, and Amsterdam, but all, for the most part, feel like it could be New Haven.

ZA: Yeah, for sure! It feels like it could be Brooklyn. I was looking at the image of the girl posed next to a boy like he is squatting while holding this lightsaber. I was like it looks like the images could have been taken on the corner of Gates Ave. and Tompkins Ave.

SW: Yeah, it really does. That's the beautiful thing about making this work. There's just so much connectivity within these places, people, and histories that hits all of us differently. I added the window, because the windows in that city were just so prominent to me. I'm like, "These windows just feel so ..." I don't even know what it was about the windows. I remember just being like, "Wow." Also, I'm coming from Baltimore where everything is fucking boarded up. You don't see windows. So it's like coming from Baltimore and then going to New Haven, the windows felt like a strong component of the infrastructure of the homes. I've been taking a lot of photographs of playgrounds and slides. I don't know why. It's just been speaking to me. So that's why the slide is kind of in the collage. Also, the slide is in this rock-like thing kind of off to the side.

SW: Right. So yeah, there were things where I was like, "Let me add this." I forgot what we call these, but it's for the rain. We have a lot of those in Baltimore. So I was like, "Well, let me add that. Then with this visual here, let me add these names to opposite sides of town, with her looking at this jersey." Because I feel like with her posing like this, it just felt like if I put a jersey on her, it won't seem obscure. It won't feel out of the ordinary. So there were just little things reminding me of home when I was in Dixwell. I saw visuals everywhere. It was just this ongoing conversation of me as an artist from Baltimore, responding to my time in New Haven, and it all spilled over into the collage.

ZA: Yeah. I'll be curious to see, how making work in New York might carry through or how you might continue building on this notion of community, and just in general what the conversations will look like for you here?

SW: I'm excited, because I don't really know how it's going to go, but I am open to exploring and working slower and figuring it out. This is a marathon. Ultimately, I just want to be in a place where it's a part of the journey. It's a part of the ongoing and photographic history. It's a place where I want to build a community, and collaborate a lot more. So I imagine this being, in due time, a transformative process for me for sure.

To learn more about the artists, please visit:

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