

CITY PAPER

AUDIENCE OF ONE

ODYSSEY WORKS ENGINEERS

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

By Maura Callahan

Ayden LeRoux **awoke** on the morning of Nov. 12 to find her mother and a stranger in her Brooklyn bedroom. The stranger introduced herself as Kristen Racaniello, a sculptor. She'd be making casts of Ayden's breasts that morning. Ayden began to weep. Her mother comforted her as Kristen poured the mold over Ayden's chest, capturing its curves as shells to later be filled with wax. The wax and the alginate used to create the mold came from a box given to Ayden by a friend, Ariel Abrahams, at the opening reception for Ayden's solo show at IDIO Gallery in Williamsburg. He'd told her to keep it under her bed; she'd know when to open it.

At 27, Ayden had recently decided to get a double mastectomy—doctors said she had an 88 percent chance of getting breast cancer. The wax would harden and peel away from the mold, and Ayden would carry the two casts with her for the next two days.

Ayden had begun her Odyssey.

An Odyssey is a layered, durational work of art created by the company Odyssey Works (odysseyworks.org). Each piece is designed for a small audience—a very small audience. Just one person.

The idea started with an orange juice carton. Abraham Burickson, then a poet and architect who now lives in Baltimore and teaches at MICA, was walking along the cliffs overlooking the beach in Big Sur in 2001 with theater director and painter Matthew Purdon when Abraham crumpled the carton he'd been drinking from and dropped it in the sand. The friends looked down to study the image. Matthew noted what he perceived as the beauty of that carton in that particular place—the juicy contrast of the colors and so on. Abraham saw no beauty in the image; he was put off by the bright, commercial colors. But he and Matthew were both struck by their deviating perceptions.

“Why do we have these different subjectivities?” Abraham remembers asking. “The same thing makes it through the labyrinth of your personality, of your way of seeing the world, and arrives at you as a

beautiful thing and arrives at me as kind of an ugly thing.”

The two friends began to scheme over how they could apply this question to their art practices.

“What if we understood that labyrinth first?” Abraham says. “What if we started from your subjectivity and then worked our way backward, then understood the form of what we wanted to make based on what we knew you were open to?”

He and Matthew, who is located in San Francisco and still occasionally involved, established Odyssey Works as a collective of artists and collaborators working across the country to create “Odysseys,” funded largely by donations and grants, for select individuals. The performances have taken place, among other cities, in New York, Seattle, San Francisco, Austin, and most recently Baltimore.

The company conducts a long, arduous search for the “participant,” whose life and worldview will serve as the basis for their personal Odyssey performance. Those who are interested in an Odyssey begin by filling out a brief survey to narrow the field to a few applicants who prove themselves to be completely open and available to the experience. Those applicants then fill out an eight-page questionnaire that takes a minimum of two hours to complete, asking them to elaborate on their family relationships, their favorite color, their dreams, their sexuality. Odyssey Works then calls friends and family members—references—before they settle on a single

person. Odyssey Works has selected over 20 people to be thoroughly researched for months before finally being placed at the center of an immersive, multiday performance informed by their own history, interests, relationships, dreams—every facet of their life that the company has mined.

"They've invited us to completely invade their lives so that we can understand as well as humanly possible how they take in the world," Abraham says. "And in some ways it's this crazy act of surveillance and research, and in other ways it's like the mechanics of falling in love. Because the more you know about somebody, the more you can empathize with them and the more you can empathize with them the more you're going through this like kinesthetic experience of falling in love. That's what you do when you fall in love with somebody; you want to fill yourself with everything about them."

After the research period which can last as long as several months, company members embark on a retreat to study and discuss their findings. They listen to the music, read the books, and watch the movies their participant likes and dislikes. They go over their interviews with references and the participant's answers to the lengthy questionnaire and subsequent video interview. After the retreat, the research continues; company members visit the participant's family members, their place of worship. They try to relate to the participant through their own experiences.

"And then we say, what do we have to offer this person? What would be a powerful experience for them? Not 'what do they

want?’—that is not what we do. Not, ‘let’s show them their life.’ That’s not what we do. But what would be an incredibly moving, narrative, and aesthetic experience based on the work we do, based on our interests, based on this static electricity between us and them? Where’s the heat?”

Pieces of an Odyssey might involve choreography, music, a guided hike through the woods, a book or poem—all composed just for this particular person. Depending on the scale and budget for the piece, over a hundred artists and collaborators—from designers to actors to dream analysts—can be involved. And each Odyssey has its own specific structure: Ayden’s, Abraham says, would have a classic hero’s arc inspired by the Medieval tradition of pilgrimage.

Ayden was intimately aware of all this when she experienced her Odyssey, more familiar than most participants. She is the assistant director of Odyssey Works and has been collaborating with Abraham for the past five years. They released a book on their work called “Odyssey Works: Transformative Experiences for an Audience of One” from Princeton Architectural Press just days before Ayden’s Odyssey began. The authors frame the book as a handbook for both artists and non-artists. While going deep into the company’s approach and practice by way of six “proposals” for new ways of thinking about art and experience, the book hinges on questions. But instead of simply repeating the questions artists hear and ask themselves on a regular basis—like “who is my audience?” and “how can I move my audience?”—Abraham and Ayden offer new ways of considering those pressing quandaries. For

example: "What if the task of a work of art were to provide the audience with the sense that they are seen, rather than making the audience do the work of seeing?" The company also recently premiered the "Library of Experiences," a digital catalogue containing sets of instructions guiding users in creating singular experiences of their own.

With most Odysseys, Abraham and Ayden and their fellow company members select a stranger as their participant. But every so often the group selects one of their own as their audience. Despite her fellow company members knowing her so well, Ayden still had to fill out the questionnaire. Abraham himself has received two small-scale Odysseys.

"How can you make work for other people if you don't know what it's like yourself?"



Ayden LeRoux pours hot wax into molds of her breasts to create votives.
(Xandra Clark)

After the sculptor finished creating the mold, Ayden ate a breakfast prepared by her housemates at the co-op where she had lived along with her partner, Lucas Loreda, for the last two of her eight years in New York. Ayden would be leaving these friends, who she calls her family, to move to Austin in a few days to join Lucas, who had moved there a few months prior to start a writing fellowship.

With breakfast finished, Ayden's friend Xandra Clark, a fellow company member, picked her up and together they took the subway. On the way to their unknown location, they talked about prayer and

devotion. Ayden is an atheist, but is fascinated by religion and prayer in particular. As an artist, she tells me weeks later over the phone from her new home in Texas, she wants to “inherit the urgency of prayer, and the clarity.” She’s interested in art that “feels like writing a letter,” which she associates with the act of prayer.

As she talked with Xandra, she thought back to her experience a few days prior, when Abraham had taken her to what she was led to believe was a bathhouse but turned out to be a Dervish lodge, or Sufi meditation space, where for over two hours they sat in silent meditation, moved in concentric circles with other visitors, and chanted different words for “God.” Ayden entered a trance-like state. The next day, her friend Dare Turner—a medievalist and the assistant director of Ayden’s Odyssey—took her to a sensory deprivation chamber, where she floated in the dark for an hour. All this was not a part of the performance proper for which she had totally cleared her schedule, but still a part of the Odyssey experience.

“It was kind of priming me for slowing down and pushing all the extra things, the busyness of New York City, outside of myself, and just clearing that away,” Ayden says.

Following their visit to the sensory deprivation chamber, Dare gave Ayden a copy of the children’s book “The Velveteen Rabbit.” Ayden had never read the book as a child, though she did once keep a rabbit as a pet. Now, the message of the book—how love “makes you real”—resonated with her. Tucked inside the book were letters between two friends, one of whom was going on a trip to

the Southwest. One of the letters included a packing list, which Ayden had interpreted as a list she should use to prepare for her own Odyssey.

Ayden and Xandra got off the subway and headed to the New York Public Library's Picture Collection—one of Ayden's favorite places in the city, a grand space housing long rows of categorized file folders stuffed with images of anything and everything. Lucas was there—this was the site of one of their earliest dates almost three years ago. Growing up in New England as an only child into a very independent adult, Ayden had always struggled to accept help. She credits her relationship with Lucas in helping her allow herself rely on others as she stares down her impending operations—but it's not easy.

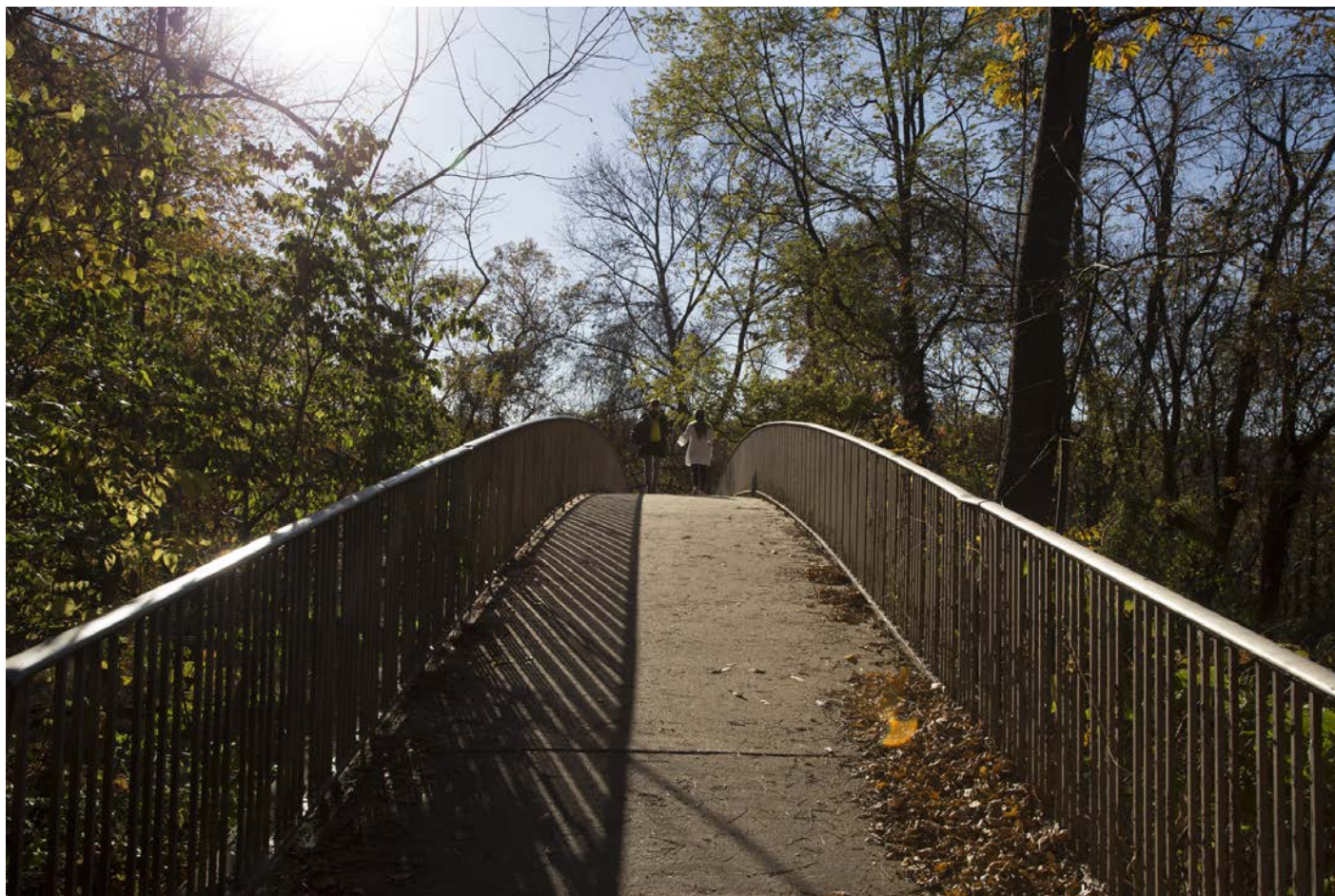
At the library, Lucas handed her an envelope carrying a clue that led her to a folder carrying another clue to another folder, and so on. The folders took her through different categories of images including "Bread," "Labyrinth," and "Pilgrimage," leaving her with the final clue, an address.

She said goodbye to Lucas and set off for the address, where she found a building with a sign on the door that said "Odyssey Works workshop." Inside she was greeted by friends, including Abraham, as well as Kelsey Crouch, a woman Ayden had just met a week prior, at the opening of her solo show. There Kelsey had told Ayden she was on a first date and, noticing a copy of the new Odyssey Works book on the gallery's shelf, said she knew an actor who had been involved in Odyssey Works years before. What a coincidence.

At the workshop, Ayden realized she was there to help lead the event: A piece of paper instructed her to guide the group in a kind of game that involved creating tarot cards about the most important objects in their lives, objects with a connection to their past, present, and future. Abraham joined Ayden in facilitating the conversations spurred by the tarot readings. After everyone left, the two played the game themselves and discussed their art practices.

"As humans we have these really incredible stories that some pretty mundane objects in our lives are witness to," Ayden says of her work. "My sculpture and installation practice for the last three years has been mostly about beds and these objects where all the aspects of our lives are imprinted upon those objects. They see us fall in love, they see us be born, our hearts are broken, we watch Netflix, we eat, we get sick, now we work on our laptops in bed, we dream."

At her solo show, Ayden had presented four beds, each covered in a different material— salt from Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," rice, soil harvested from beneath a tree struck by lightning, and pages from women's diaries stitched together to form a bedsheet. The gallery listed all four beds on Airbnb for \$50 per night. Her fellow company members had taken note of the bedsheet scrawled with intimate messages, in particular.



Leanne Zacharias (Left) leads Ayden LeRoux on a three-hour journey through the woods. (Katy McCarthy)

After the workshop , Kristen the sculptor appeared with the molds created from Ayden's breasts earlier that morning. She guided Ayden as she melted wax and poured it into the molds. Leaving the wax casts to harden, Ayden passed through a door in the room to find author Rick Moody ("The Ice Storm," "Garden State"), a previous Odyssey Works participant (and contributor to the Odyssey Works book) who, naturally, Ayden had come to know very well. He spoke with Ayden about mentorship—both being mentored and being a mentor—as well as their mutual affinities for land art in the American Southwest. Rick then asked Ayden to write down her thoughts on mentorship,

and on paper she mused about her high school art teacher, still a friend. Rick then read to Ayden his own writing on mentors and mentees and asked her to tear apart her paper.

At that point, Ayden told Rick that this experience felt forced.

"I get it, it's symbolic, but I don't want to do this."

Rick repeated a passage from what he'd written: Mentees do whatever their mentor says "without question."

Ayden complied. Under Moody's instruction she put the pieces in the mail. She chose to send her letter to a close friend living in San Francisco.

Lucas met them by the mailbox outside and walked Ayden east to a ferry passing from Manhattan to Brooklyn. The sun sank over the city as they crossed the East River. Ayden soon found herself in Brooklyn Bridge Park and met up with her mother, who walked her to the middle of a large field. There, a dancer named Kristin Swiat, also a previous collaborator with Odyssey Works, began to perform. As Ayden approached the dancer, she realized she was surrounded by people sitting around the perimeter of the field. Some faces Ayden recognized as old friends from her early college years, roommates from various places Ayden had lived, friends she met studying abroad. Others were unfamiliar.

More dancers joined Kristin as she danced around Ayden. After a moment, the dancers

spread out, forming a massive circle around her. The seated people rose and joined in the circle, and the dancers arranged themselves “like points on a compass,” slowing their movements and the circle, now holding about 50 people, began to turn. Ayden’s mother remained with her daughter as the circle closed in on them in the center, pulsing inward and out. White sheets scrawled with writing—illegible to Ayden, at this point—found their way onto her body, wrapping her in a tight, warm cocoon. Ayden felt herself levitate onto the shoulders of the dancers, friends, and strangers, who carried her out of the park, the sheets soaking up her tears.

Telling me about this moment weeks later, Ayden falls silent for a breath.

“I’ve never felt so much love,” she says. Lifted in the tender arms of people from disparate points in her life, Ayden felt humbled. “I felt brought to the Earth.”

The hands gently lowered Ayden in her cocoon onto a rock. She looked at the warm faces around her one last time before everything fell dark—blindfolded. She felt dozens of hands resting on her as she sat.

Levitating again, Ayden felt her wrapped body settle into a car, which drove for what seemed like three or four hours—though it was hard to tell, she recalls, when you can’t move or see. She sensed the presence of Abraham and Lucas and Xandra with her in the car.

Finally, the blindfold and cocoon were removed, and Ayden found herself looking down at an intricately patterned rug. She was in a small house, almost entirely empty but for the people surrounding her.

More familiar faces, as well as more strangers. They made dough from a recipe titled "Pilgrim Bread" on a piece of note paper, and as Ayden waited for the loaves to rise, she chatted with the others, who kept referring to their environment as "the Pilgrim House" or "the Way Station." Ayden sensed that every person here, like her, was on a journey of their own, though no one would say where they were going when she asked. Shortly after they all went to sleep on mats in an otherwise empty room, the pieces of Ayden's cocoon now their blankets.

Ayden rose at six in the morning to bake the bread. Paul Spitz, who Ayden knew as a friend of Abraham's, arrived to tell Ayden to check the mailbox outside. There she found what seemed like thousands of postcards addressed to 1314 Morling Ave. in Baltimore, Maryland—a rowhome in Hampden.

Every postcard started "Dear Fallen Star..." and went on with various weighty ruminations: how to make a difference, how to live a meaningful life. Ayden remembered mentions of a fallen star or dark star in the letters tucked into "The Velveteen Rabbit."

Seated on a rug, she and her fellow pilgrims ate a fresh loaf as their breakfast—Ayden was to consume only that bread and water until the end of her Odyssey (after which she and her fellow pilgrims and Odyssey Works members would break fast at the Baltimore

home of Stoop Storytelling co-host Laura Wexler, where they were forbidden to discuss the Odyssey and quickly depleted the large meal Wexler had prepared)—and read the postcards, as well as the sheets from the cocoon, which Ayden could now see were inscribed with prayers and messages of support written directly to her, as well as notes about the power of art and how to create meaningful change in the world.

After eating, they set off—as usual, to an unknown location. Ayden carried her wax casts with her. The walk was brief, just a few blocks, before they reached their destination: The Hunting Ground, a shop housed in an 1875 church that also houses the multipurpose venue Church & Company upstairs. Ayden was led up the stairs by the front doors, where a sign pointed to, again, an Odyssey Works event—this time, a book talk.



Odyssey Works Director Abraham Burickson (center) leads a crowd carrying Ayden LeRoux in a fabric cocoon. (Katy McCarthy)

And that's where I came in.

I and several other guests—friends, students, and colleagues of Abraham's; others who had taken interest in Odyssey Works through media coverage and word-of-mouth—arrived at the church around 9:30 a.m. under Abraham's instruction. Outside we met him as well as Nate Brown, a local author, and Lucas. Ayden would not be arriving for another 45 minutes or so.

I didn't know what was going to happen. I had spoken to Abraham multiple times over the past year about the next Odyssey Works performance. Because the Odyssey was for

one person and one person only, not to be interfered with, my presence for Ayden's Odyssey as a journalist was restricted. When Abraham invited me to observe this "public scene," he stressed that I was not only there to observe, but also participate. If I wanted to experience a true Odyssey Works piece, it all still had to be about Ayden's experience. I couldn't just watch in the corner with my notepad. And Abraham had been reluctant to tell me the exact plans for the Church & Company scene. All I really knew was what Abraham had written via blast email: "The public scene will be a book event with a twist. Please come prepared to discuss your own path in life."

This was the Sunday after the election. I'm in my 20s, and like Ayden, I'd been facing significant changes in my life. If I had a path in mind before (and I didn't, really), I didn't know what it would be now. I'd wondered if I should leave the country and start over. So I came unprepared.

Outside the church, Abraham briefed us on a few points in Ayden's pilgrimage thus far—the Dervish lodge, crossing the river, the dancing in the field, the cocoon, the bread, the postcards.

"She's on her journey," he said. "And so are we."

Nate Brown, he said, would be moderating this book event for the new Odyssey Works book.

"When we have our Q&A, there's no 'A.' There's just 'Q.' A pilgrimage is driven by a question. Otherwise, why are you going?"

What are you looking for? So our aim is for everyone to bring their own in a real and sincere way. The thing that hit me Thursday, when we were at the Dervish lodge, was that this whole thing is very performative, it's very theatrical. The dancing, the prayer, everything...what struck me is nobody's pretending, we're not play-acting, we're doing something intentionally."

Abraham and Nate walked us upstairs to a space lit only by a few string bulbs crossing the exposed, vaulted ceiling and light pouring in through blue stained glass windows. We sat in metal folding chairs arranged in rows to face the back of the room. A couple taxidermy heads hung from the dark wooden walls, and stacks of books filled a fireplace. In a corner, blue china gathered dust on an old piano. A tortoiseshell cat prowled and mewed as Abraham explained what would happen, and what we would need to do, once Ayden arrived. With a few minutes left, we practiced the scene.

Then, seated in front of us, Abraham and Nate began the book talk—the scene needed to be in motion once Ayden arrived. She would be late to a talk on her own book. Nate asked Abraham about his work as a poet and as an architect, and how those relate to creating Odysseys, as well as the book. They talked about how work is categorized, how Odyssey Works is often regarded as "immersive" performance or art installation.

Ayden appeared by the stairs. I had never met or seen her before, but it took no time to pick her out from the small group of fellow travelers behind her petite figure and blonde knot atop her head.

Knowing some details of her last 24 hours, I was struck by how collected she looked. As the pilgrims took their seats, Abraham motioned for Ayden to come sit next to him at the front with Nate.

"Something that's addressed time and again in the book and we've talked about already this morning; a harder line between art and life or our day-to-day and performance seems thinner and thinner," Nate continued. "Particularly in Odyssey Works, it's almost like a memory, there's a permeability about it where we can move between our day-to-day and something that's more performative even if we don't realize it's a performance."

"That's the great offering that performance art has given the world, even though we think of it as all these people doing all these ridiculous things," Abraham said. "One of the main attitudes is that it's working with reality, not pretend."

Ayden jumped in. "There's more meaning that can be stretched out of that and lifted from reality...Something we talk about in the book is that suspension of disbelief is really crucial to the traditional art forms, but maybe there's something more powerful if we are willingly doing that."

"That's really interesting and brings up more questions that I would like to ask," Nate replied.

"But I've been asking all the questions so far today. Does anyone else have any questions?"

A young woman rose from her seat in the audience and pulled it to the front beside the speakers. She sat, and looked into Ayden's eyes.

"I wonder," she said slowly, "what is necessary?"

Everyone fell silent for a beat. Two. Ayden offered no reply; she merely studied the woman's face.

More members of the audience moved their seats forward and asked questions we'd been requested to come up with and meditate on, questions that stir our own paths in life.

"If each moment is new and fresh, how do we keep them all feeling that way: fresh?"

"I'm always wanting to relate—why is that?"

"What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"What is home?"

"What do I say to my children?"

"Is it worth trying to reconnect with the person you once were?"

"I often feel that there is so much happening that keeps me from being present that I feel that I would have to set all of that aside in order to be present. My question is, what's left?"

After asking their questions, each audience members put their chair back and left the building, peeling away one by one. With each question, Ayden returned only a steady gaze.

After most audience members had left, I shifted my chair forward and asked my question, trying not to appear nervous.

"I'm wondering how we can understand ourselves through place, and when does place have nothing to do with it?"

I sat there for a minute, looking at Ayden, and left. I joined the other audience members around the side of building, waiting for the cue that Ayden was gone, off for the next leg of her Odyssey.

"It was maybe one of the most interesting things that I experienced in moving from making these works to being a participant, was how much I wanted to watch," Ayden says of the scene later. "I don't want to have to be in front of people. I want to just sit back and take it all in. I think that was an interesting switch for me, to hesitate to go up and play the role I needed to play."

She said she remembered the gravity in the voice of the first person who asked "What is necessary?" and knew that she was supposed to just listen deeply, not to provide answers.

She clung to a question from former student of hers and Abraham's, who asked "How do you know you're making the right decision?"

Ayden thought about all the doubts and questions she had surrounding her own future, having to uproot her life and find new work and live in a new city and face threats against her health.

"As people came forward," she recalled, "it was this accumulation into the larger

message that it's OK to ask questions and if you aren't asking questions you're not doing your job, you're not living right."



A view through a tunnel into Dark Star Park in Arlington, VA. (Xandra Clark)

After all the audience members and Abraham and Nate had left the old church, Ayden was left with just one person. Local artist Graham Coreil-Allen, dressed in his usual teal, was there to take her on the next leg of her pilgrimage. Graham is known in Baltimore for, among other projects, his public art and group walking tours called "New Public Sites" that guide participants through overlooked public spaces in the city—it was through one of these tours that he

met Abraham. I had recognized him in the audience, but Ayden was new to him.

Graham led Ayden along the Jones Falls River down Falls Road to the 29th Street bridge, scrambling up the steep embankment and through the arched vaults, covered in elaborate graffiti. The bridge took them to Druid Hill Park where they hopped over guardrails and walked along what Graham calls the "Remote Sidewalk Sublime," a nonsensical path strongg from one guardrail to another. They crossed an 83 ramp to face the massive earthen wall containing the reservoir and climbed the hill to overlook the city. From there they zigzagged their way to the small park at Mount Royal Terrace, lined by elegant rowhomes and scattered with trees and salvaged pieces of old monuments.

Along the way, the pair moved in and out of conversation, Ayden gently pressed Graham for clues as to who he was, Graham responded by shifting the conversation to their surroundings—he knew this had to be about Ayden, it could not be about him. Abraham had given him loose direction on what this walk needed to be, namely, that it started at the old church and ended at the light rail, that it be contemplative.

"I don't know any other city that moves from world to world as quickly as Baltimore does, from one block to the next," Abraham said to me before the Odyssey. "What that means for the beauty of making a performance like this is that you don't have to go far to have covered a lot of territory."

Ayden's Odyssey was the first to touch down in Baltimore, but Abraham doesn't want it to be the last. Graham had helped open Abraham, a fairly recent transplant, to the city's geography, its undervalued spaces, the dramatically varied manifestations of life from corner to corner. But the experiences Graham crafts for his typical tour participants are different from the one he helped create for Ayden.

"I found it very interesting and a neat challenge as someone who usually operates as a very public tour guide to be creating a kind of more intimate space that is less didactic and more chance-based," Graham says to me later. He'd been struck by how Odyssey Works engages the public in their performances. While an Odyssey is designed for an audience of one, anyone can join in the public scenes, like the one at Brooklyn Bridge Park and at Church & Company, and through these experience their own intimate, challenging moments. One woman had been moved to tears as we practiced the scene in the church, coming up with our questions.

"It opened up for her a very safe space," Graham remembers. "I was totally impressed in terms of this being a technically public event—anyone could come—and then immediately cutting into, in the practice session, this totally raw and unscripted thing."

"Yes it's for that one person," Abraham says of the Odysseys, "but it really is their offering, if nothing else as a kind of narrative, symbolic, aesthetic center of gravity for the public, for everybody who comes into their orbit."

Soon Ayden found herself at the North Avenue light rail stop, where Graham purchased her a ticket and told her to hop on the approaching train.

With the ticket he'd given Ayden was a book of matches with writing on it, instructing her to get off the train at Linthicum. When she got off, she found no one she knew waiting for her, to her surprise. A stranger nearby asked her for a light. She offered her matches. The man lit a cigarette and pointed to a payphone across the tracks.

"That phone is ringing for you," he said.

The phone wasn't actually ringing, but nonetheless Ayden crossed the tracks, picked up the phone, and recognized Abraham's voice on the other line. He gave her walking directions; she would encounter something big and beautiful, he said. She followed his directions and came across a monumental orange- and white-checked water tower sitting bright against the clear blue sky. Her close friend Adam Sica sat at a table beneath it and offered her bread and water. As they ate and talked, he gave Ayden a notebook along with a white Medieval-style tunic and amulet. The notebook contained a letter from a Native American woman who had had a mastectomy and wrote that Ayden would find protection in her art practice as well as in the amulet and tunic, which the woman had made and blessed with protective prayers. Ayden put on the amulet and tunic, and found herself blindfolded and loaded into a car, again.

After what felt like 45 minutes, Ayden left the car and saw Leanne Zacharias, a cellist who

had previously collaborated with Odyssey Works on Rick Moody's piece. She'd come all the way from Canada to be here now. Leanne led her along a trail for about three hours—Ayden didn't know where they were, or where they were going. They got off the trail and met Ayden's friend and former roommate Katy McCarthy. Leanne and Katy each gave Ayden a new amulet along with wishes—Leanne wished Ayden a good journey and Katy wished for Ayden to continue sharing her wisdom with the world—and together they continued walking.

Soon Ayden noticed a sign: Georgetown. As the women crossed over a bridge, the supermoon rose into the dimming sky. After a while the scenery changed; they were now surrounded by glossy buildings—hotels, skyscrapers—looming above their heads with bridges crossing between them. There they found Xandra, who gave Ayden another amulet. At this point, the fatigue of walking for hours and eating nothing but bread was closing in on Ayden. The group grew larger as they encountered more women with whom Ayden had awoken and shared breakfast at the Pilgrim House earlier that day. Each gave Ayden an amulet and a wish. Finally, she saw Dare, who too gave her a token.

"I wish for you to feel whole," Dare said. Ayden crumpled.

"It was like she had put a needle into a balloon and it just burst," she says later.

Then, another blindfold. A hand guided her way.



Ayden leRoux (left) listens to Adam Sica at Church & Company before embarking on a journey with artist Graham Coreil-Allen (right). (J.M. Giordano)

I waited with 11 Odyssey Works company members and Ayden's fellow pilgrims on the edge of a crescent-shaped park nestled under the lengthening shadows of tall concrete and glass buildings. We were in Rosslyn, just inside the perimeter of Arlington, Virginia. I'd driven down there alone soon after the scene at Church & Company. Inside and just beyond the crescent across the street, large concrete spheres and tall poles cast deep shadows. A place marker indicated that this was Dark Star Park, a work of land art created by Nancy Holt in 1984. Every year on Aug. 1 (the day William Henry acquired the land that became Rosslyn in 1860) at exactly

9:32 a.m., the shadows of the spheres and poles align with metal impressions laid into the ground. Abraham had told me that Ayden had been deeply affected by Holt's "Sun Tunnels" years earlier in Utah. Dark Star Park is the only work of land art located on the East Coast.

Members of the group laid sheets—pieces from Ayden's cocoon—over the concrete barrier encircling a sphere, creating a small altar. A votive candle rested on top. One sheet read in large, sweeping script, "We are more ready now than we have ever been."

Passersby entered and exited the park through a large circular tunnel built into the grass hill enclosing the space, and a smaller tunnel, a few yards deep and just large enough to crawl through, pierced another piece of the edge—through this tunnel, Ayden would enter Dark Star Park for the final piece of her Odyssey. Abraham, Dare, and Odyssey Works member Ana Freeman (who acted as this piece's production manager, among other roles) went over what we would all need to do once Ayden arrived.

We left briefly to see where Ayden would end her hike and meet her fellow pilgrims. We climbed to the stop of a stairway near the park, and looking over the edge of the landing I could see the Potomac River, and just beyond that, the Washington Monument and the Capitol. I tried but failed to shake thoughts about how in a matter of months, Donald Trump would sit behind the desk in the Oval Office, how the shock of the election results and the numbness I still felt might color the experience I was now trying to immerse myself in. I asked Abraham and

Dare how they were dealing, has the election affected their drive to push this project forward?

Abraham and Dare agreed. The election only strengthened their motivation.

When we returned to Dark Star Park, we discovered a liquid dripping from the inside from the small tunnel. We inspected the puddle—was it water? Beer? A man who had been sitting on the other end of the park walked over and informed us that, no, some guy had actually pissed in the tunnel just moments before. Seeing that we had been planning something for that spot, the observer, who called himself “Pistol Pete”, had tried to stop him, without success. A member of the group ran out to their car and brought Lysol wipes and filled everyone’s water bottles at the nearby fountain. After the piss puddle had been rinsed off and scrubbed away as much as possible, Adam lit a vanilla-scented votive candle and set it in the tunnel, now blanketed with a towel. Under no circumstances would Ayden enter what Abraham called the “offering site” through a makeshift urinal.

Dare and a few others left to meet up with Ayden and Leanne. I waited with Abraham, Lucas, Adam, and other members of the group. Dusk set over the park. After several minutes of listening to the airplanes roaring overhead and chatting with Pistol Pete, Abraham received a text alerting him that Ayden and company would soon arrive on the other end of the tunnel. We took our places along the barrier framing the park, sitting directly in front of the opening of the

small tunnel, facing the immense sphere and the altar.

We heard leaves crumbling under shoes on the other side of the tunnel, and soon after, voices gently singing “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough”—Ayden and Leanne had seen bikers singing it during their hike. That Leanne would resurrect that moment here and encourage Ayden to sing with her was something of a last-minute addition to the Odyssey.

Ayden’s blindfolded face appeared from our end of the tunnel. She crawled out and was led to her seat on the edge of the barrier. Then her fellow travelers took their seats. We flanked Ayden evenly on either side, sitting in silence. Her blindfold now gone, Ayden rose and approached the altar. She placed her wax breasts on the sheet, now illuminated by candlelight in the dark. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she returned to her seat. After a minute, the rest of us approached the altar in twos, starting with the people sitting at either end of our curved row and moving inward toward Ayden. Each of us placed our own objects on the sheet—most had small metal amulets. I left the necklace I’d been wearing, a chain with a sheela na gig pendant, an ancient grotesque with an enlarged vulva—a close friend had purchased four different sheela na gig pendants in Ireland for me, our roommates, and herself. It felt appropriate here.

Thinking back, Ayden remembers not wanting to give up those casts, but knowing she had to.

"It felt like giving away my body in that moment," she says.

We sat, and Ayden wept gently. After a few minutes we all rose and entered the larger tunnel nearby, leaving the moonlight and our votives behind. Inside the tunnels walls, we encircled Ayden and began to hum a single tone, a kind of loose "om," holding it for a minute. We placed our hands on her shoulders, arms, and back. This was a prayer.

She closed her eyes. Her Odyssey was over.

Weeks later, Ayden used the same recipe she was given in Baltimore to bake bread in her new Austin home. After heading back up to New York from Baltimore the night of her Odyssey, she had visited her childhood home in New Hampshire, and after a brief stay, she drove south for five days, a quiet stretch that offered time to reflect on her experience, though not enough to totally understand her transformation.

Ayden just learned that a woman she knew briefly and felt an affinity for had passed away from breast cancer. As her bread baked, Ayden lit a candle, thinking of this friend, a bit shaken. The candle is the melted down wax cast of her own breast. Here, she felt the warmth of the hands that carried her on her Odyssey.