Harlem’s history is bursting with artistic innovation and people working together to deepen their connections to the community. Since 2002, The Laundromat Project (TLP) has worked to make art accessible to all regardless of income, background or experience by bringing free art programming to laundromats and community spaces. Through its artist residency program, the TLP commissions New York-based artists to collaborate with community members on public art projects at their local coin-ops.

This summer, Shari Peters presented “The People’s Laundromat Theater,” a micro-festival of the Clean Rite Laundromat on Malcolm X Boulevard (Lenox Avenue) and 129th Street. Peters used two of Clean Rite’s four television screens to loop more than twelve hours of short films from thirty-two contributing artists working in genres ranging from performance and narrative to animation, comedy and documentary. She encouraged community involvement by hosting film discussion groups, conducting art-making workshops and gathering feedback through comment and rating cards. Through her work in video, collage and printmaking, Peters challenges viewers to reconsider their relationships to popular media and media culture.

“The People’s Laundromat Theater” grew out of Peters’ desire to “reprogram” the television sets at a neighborhood laundromat by screening material that did not consist of popular broadcasts or network television. Changing the programming on a community television from a popular show such as the Wendy Williams Show to images like children playing in a park or a film by Peters admits that initial reception for the project was lukewarm. As residents began to learn more about the endeavor—the television screens showing the clips were visible from the street—Peters observed that the films became an important motivator for people to strike up conversations with strangers, not only in the Clean Rite, but also throughout the neighborhood. “I’ve worked with lots of people in different settings in Harlem, but the TLP has been the most consistent and expansive [teaching experience] for me,” she says. “This project led to so many discussions about the past and future, Gil Scott-Heron, the Apollo...and Harlem history...so much!” The art-making that takes place at many of the LP’s ongoing, free drop-in workshops—including those held at the Laundry Room coin-op located nine blocks south of the Studio Museum and those that take place at the Museum during Target Free Sundays—often serve as a catalyst for under discussions about culture, politics and daily life. “The People’s Laundromat Theater” culminated with a red-carpet screening of the top-rated films, along with a panel discussion at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture featuring community members and the filmmakers.

Creating space for strangers to become neighbors through art-making has been vital to the LP’s work, making it a natural fit for the Studio Museum’s education efforts that focus on encouraging dynamic spaces for creative exchange. By providing opportunities to engage with art at the Museum, on the streets or at the laundromat, The Laundromat Project encourages the idea that everyday people can know the value of and contribute to their own creativity. Art-making always results in a series of shared narratives, past and present. When neighbors share their creativity, they share their hopes, fears, desires and dreams—a mix of transformation that still art-making forms a private act in a public dialogue.
Harlem’s history is bursting with artistic innovation and people working together to deepen their connections to the community. Since 2007, The Laundromat Project (The LP) has worked to make art accessible to all regardless of income, background or experience by bringing free art programming to laundromats and community spaces. Through its artist residency program, The LP commissions New York-based artists to collaborate with community members on public art projects at their local coin-ops.

This summer, Shani Peters presented “The People’s Laundromat Theater,” a micro-film festival at the Clean Rite Laundromat on Malcolm X Boulevard (Lenox Avenue) and 129th
Street. Peters used two of Clean Rite’s four television screens to loop more than twelve hours of short films from thirty-two contributing artists working in genres ranging from performance and narrative to animation, comedy and documentary. She encouraged community involvement by hosting film discussion groups, conducting art-making workshops and gathering feedback through comment and rating cards. Through her work in video, collage and printmaking, Peters challenges viewers to reconsider their relationships to popular media and media culture.

“The People’s Laundromat Theater” grew out of Peters’s desire to “reprogram” the television sets at a neighborhood laundromat by

The Wash & Fold Film Club discussion group meets outside Clean-Rite on Lenox Avenue and 129th Street, home of “The People’s Laundromat Theater,” 2013
Image courtesy The Laundromat Project
Neighborly Interventions

The Laundromat Project

The Laundromat Project's teaching artist Maya Valladares presents a T-shirt-making workshop at The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2011. Image courtesy The Laundromat Project

Art-making workshop with The Laundromat Project's 2013 artist in residence Shani Peters outside Clean-Rite on Lenox Avenue and 129th Street, home of "The People's Laundromat Theater," 2013
Image courtesy The Laundromat Project
screening material that did not consist of popular broadcasts or network television. Changing the programming on a community television from a popular show such as the Wendy Williams Show to images like children playing in a park is risky; Peters admits that initial reception for the project was lukewarm. As residents began to learn more about the endeavor—the television screens showing the clips were visible from the street—Peters observed that the films became an important motivator for people to strike up conversations with strangers, not only in the Clean Rite, but also throughout the neighborhood. “I’ve worked with lots of people in different settings in Harlem, but The LP has been the most consistent and expansive [teaching experience] for me,” she says. “This project led to so many discussions about the past and future, Gil Scott-Heron, the Apollo and Harlem history . . . so much!” The art-making that takes place at many of The LP’s ongoing, free drop-in workshops—including those held at The Laundry Room coin-op located nine blocks south of the Studio Museum and those that take place at the Museum during Target Free Sundays—often serve as a catalyst for wider discussions about culture, politics and daily life. “The People’s Laundromat Theater” culminated with a red-carpet screening of the top-rated films, along with a panel discussion at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture featuring community members and the filmmakers.

Creating space for strangers to become neighbors through art-making has been vital to The LP’s work, making it a natural fit for the Studio Museum’s education efforts that focus on encouraging dynamic spaces for creative exchange. By providing opportunities to engage with art at the Museum, on the street or at the laundromat, The Laundromat Project encourages the idea that everyday people can know the value of and celebrate their own creativity. Art-making always results in a series of shared pushes, pulls and negotiations. When neighbors share their creativity, they share their hopes, fears, desires and dreams—acts of transformation that shift art-making from a private act to a public dialogue.

Lee Ann Norman is a writer and cultural maker interested in spaces that increase the reach of the arts in our everyday. She has planned and presented programs with organizations such as Experimental Station (Chicago), Creative Capital (New York) and the Art Institute of Chicago. Her writing, which includes vague fictions, diplomatic criticisms and factual diatribes, has been featured in publications such as ArtSlant.com, BOMB magazine and the Penn GSE journal Perspectives on Urban Education. Norman earned an MA in Arts Management from Columbia College Chicago and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York.