Rachel Kessler
Artist Bio

Rachel Kessler is an innovative community artist, multi-disciplinary collaborator and educator who explores landscape and community. She co-founded the collective Wa Na Wari, a residential reclamation and story-telling project centering contemporary Black art and media in Seattle’s Central District. Her experiments with boundary-breaking performance art, music and film led to co-founding interactive community art collaborations Typing Explosion and Vis-à-Vis Society in response to the isolation of raising young children. She is a writer whose work is defined by years of collaboration, teaching, recording, editing, publishing and distributing her own and others’ work. Her teaching philosophy embraces trauma-informed emergent curriculum and encourages everybody’s innate creativity. She believes art connects individuals to each other, helps establish and strengthen community, and that this web of connection has the power to heal and transform. For 25 years, she has facilitated hands-on art and writing classes and workshops through organizations such as Cornish College of the Arts, Writers In the Schools, and Path With Art, which provides trauma-informed therapeutic arts classes for adults in recovery from houselessness and addiction.

Her work is deeply rooted in place: she lives and works on Yesler Way, the Seattle street her ancestors immigrated to, worked on, built synagogues and schools on and died on. Mining her own personal identity and family history, she launched a community cartography project called “Profanity Hill: A Tour of Yesler Way,” connecting 20,000 years of geography, historic first-hand accounts, music and mapping and story-telling. As Artist-In-Residence at public housing project Yesler Terrace, (where her great-grandparents lived) she and community members activated a vacant apartment slated for demolition with live music, poetry and story-telling, potlucks, dancing, photo albums, art shows, immersive VR and collective murals. It was one of the great honors of her life to help foster such expression, and to bear witness to the powerful transmission of personal memories and global history to their community. Her latest publication features her illustrations of the Pacific Northwest urban shore, Cascadia Field Guide: Art, Ecology, Poetry. Currently, she is working on an illustrated children’s book about abortion with Shout Your Abortion.
WHAT HAPPENED HERE?

Who lives on this street?
The function of art is... to imagine what is possible. - bell hooks
CORE SAMPLE:
LAYERS OF LIVING BEINGS

Coast Salish text in center
text of oral histories in English on outside
bas-relief or incised/intaglio/engraving

Ladino, Yiddish, and Hebrew text on next layer of spiral

Abstract/Geometric engraved or relief
Tree of Life overlaid with geometric-shaped cut-outs; lined up through all layers
at all heights so all people can peek through to layers of text + history to center.