

Interview with Rafael Soldi from Strange Fire Collective

The Strange Fire Collective is a group of interdisciplinary artists, curators, and writers engaging with current social and political forces through their work. Formed in 2015, the Strange Fire Collective seeks to “create a venue for work that critically questions the dominant social hierarchy and [is] dedicated to highlighting work made by women, people of color, and queer and trans artists.” The “In Solidarity,” editorial team had the pleasure of interviewing Rafael Soldi, one of four Strange Fire co-founders and a Seattle-based photographer and curator.

In Solidarity, Editorial Team: Thank you so much for taking time to speak with us today. Rafael, we wondered if you could tell us a little bit about your trajectory as a photographer and how you became a founding member of the Strange Fire Collective.

Rafael Soldi: Thanks for having us, we're excited to talk with you. I was born and raised in Peru and I moved to the U.S. as a teenager. For as long as I can remember, being an artist was the only thing that I could really see myself doing. I went to school in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute College of Art and worked in New York before moving to Seattle, which is where I live now. I've been here working as an artist and as a curator. About five years ago, I was approached by Jess T. Dugan about creating some kind of project that would contribute to an art world that represents who we are and that stands for the values that we stand for. We saw an art world that's primarily white, that's primarily male-driven, that's primarily cis and heteronormative. We wanted to create a space for ourselves that represented us, and that's how Strange Fire Collective was born. I think a big part of the collective, and why it has worked so well, was because we wanted it to be something we were passionate about, that was appealing to us, and what we would have liked to see as young artists.

Jess invited me, Zora Murff who is an artist based in Arkansas, and Hamidah Glasgow who is the curator at the Center for Fine Art Photography in Fort Collins, Colorado. Ever since, we've had two coordinators to the group who've been helping us with a lot of logistics and doing really fantastic work and creating new content as well. In Haë Yap, and Kevyn Handley-Byrne. The collective has really progressed over the years and taken on a life of its own. The primary activity of the collective is the weekly interviews—we produce one in-depth interview every Thursday of every month for the last five years.

So far we have nearly 250 interviews. For us, it was really important to find a core activity for the collective that was sustainable. All four of us are very busy, very engaged people in our own lives. And we knew that we needed to come up with a straightforward deliverable and that it needed to be something that we could all handle without dropping the ball. So there's four of us, there's four weeks of the month, and we each do one interview per month.

IS: What is it like working with partners that are kind of all over the country? I imagine that your work took you all over the globe in a pre-pandemic world.

RS: It's been really interesting. I think, especially now during the pandemic, because we were already working in the ways that most people are working today. We had a program recently at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design where we gave a lecture and people were really surprised to hear that that was only the second time we had all been in a room together. So we've been working virtually and on the phone for a long time, and it's worked really well. A big part of that has been because we came up with a manifesto that we all agreed on and that guides our work. We came up with a structure that we all feel we can deliver and that we can sustain and hold each other accountable.

We have created an environment in which we trust each other to do the work, and a set of values that we rally around and are each personally really committed to. I think that's what sustains the work long-term, even though we're not in the same room. And then within that, we started the collective in a very democratic way, in that we would all vote on everything. We would all agree

on everything. And we would disagree oftentimes, but you know, we would come to an understanding.

And finally, in the last few years, we've learned to give each other a little more independence and each of us has something aside from the work that we rally around together. Each of us has taken on projects that we're passionate about within the collective and have spearheaded, and that's been much more productive because you can't have four people working on everything all the time. It just takes a lot of time.

IS: I think you've already mentioned it briefly, but part of the mission that you all are coalescing around is to highlight work produced by women, people of color, queer, and trans artists. Can you say more about the importance of intersectionality to your work?

RS: Yeah, it's huge. It's always interesting because we use those words very clearly to define the spectrum of people that we work with. But we're being specific because it's important for us to call out those identities loudly and clearly, even though we're not really interested in indexing people into categories. Intersectionality is at the core of what we do; I would say most of the people that we work with fall under more than one of those categories. And oftentimes, all of those things connect in really interesting ways. So, intersectionality is incredibly important and it's really at the core of what we do in connecting all these identities. We started this collective to show the world that it's a lot more complex than what we've been seeing on the surface.

IS: In doing these interviews and amplifying all of these different artistic practices, I'm wondering how you start to build solidarity across folks of different identity categories. How do you see that kind of communication happening through the sharing of artistic practice particularly?

RS: Absolutely. I think that art is particularly well equipped to do that work and that the reason, or one of the reasons art exists – Nina Simone said, “An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times.” I've always identified with that quote because I think that artists have always held a mirror to the horrors, joys, beauty, and injustices in the world.

Art is an incredible window through which to see the world. A good example of how we've used the collective to address these themes in an intersectional way, is that when we gave our talk at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, we did a pretty deep audit of the collective to understand what are the themes that are showing up in our work? What are the things that the artists were engaging with and looking at? There were many – maybe 10 or so. And we zeroed in on three themes that we found really important: Policing bodies, Here & Now, and Access to power.

We presented four or five different artists who were engaging with each of those themes in completely different ways, completely different mediums, from different perspectives. I thought that was really great because we did want to show how Strange Fire could be a very useful teaching tool as well. And to be able to say, are you talking about gender? Are you talking about blackness? Are you talking about any of these themes? Here's five perspectives from five artists who are looking at it from really different points of view, from very different experiences, age groups, countries, and how they're engaging with it through different mediums. So I think that's where the collective can offer an intersectional perspective on certain topics by way of its growing archive.

IS: One other way we've been thinking about your work at Strange Fire Collective is as an archival project or an archival institution. In some ways, over these five years, you all have developed this really incredible and deep archive of interviews. I'm curious about how you and the collective relate to this idea of the archive, whether you think there's such a thing as archival activism, and if so, what that might mean to you?

RS: We often speak of Strange Fire in archival terms: we consider ourselves as building a new archive. That being said, I have had conversations and we're really aware of the fact that the “capital-A” archive as we know it is the purest expression of colonial intervention. So it is really important for us to both recognize that, and then become part of a new archive or a larger kind of microcosm of archives that are being created in different places, and that tell a new story or perhaps a more accurate history. The archive as it is, is very corrupted. How do we infiltrate that? How do we create something new?

At the same time we have had conversations, for example, when we ask how to make our website more searchable? How do we categorize things? How do we put our educational resources into sections that make sense for people? And understanding too, that that system of indexing, of naming things, also has a colonial past. It's a really tricky thing and I don't think we can necessarily escape it, but you can question it.

IS: I recently watched a really interesting panel discussion called “How to have Sex in a Pandemic: Intimacy, Disease, & the Politics of Vulnerability” hosted by New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. It was a really lively discussion amongst a group of queer theorists. One of the panelists said something that I jotted down in between cooking my dinner: “allyship is a form of kinship.” I just loved that quote and I think there is some connection here to Strange Fire's work. What do you think the role of non-biological kinship or kin-making is within the Strange Fire Collective?

RS: It's a big one. I mean, I think it's why we came together. I would say at the time we formed the collective, the four of us – Zora, Hamidah, Jess, and myself—were, I wouldn't say strangers to one another, but we weren't very close. We knew of each other's work, and I think that's what led us to come together. But what brought us together was this kinship around issues that were really important to us. Strange Fire itself is a reflection of that notion: that kinship around issues that are important to you, or things that you're passionate about, that you connect to on a deeper level, can create something really meaningful.

For us, for example, we always talk about this Strange Fire Family. Anyone we feature is immediately a part of this Strange Fire Family. Anytime we curate a show or do any kind of programming, we always pull from within the archive because we have 250 people ready at any time, and it keeps growing. And when we see any of our Strange Fire featured artists or curators doing something cool, then that gets amplified, that gets celebrated. So that type of kinship is really important for me personally.

I would say queerness is probably the identity that carries the most weight within me. I've always felt a really strong kinship with other queer artists, even those whom I don't know well. I've always felt that there's a shared experience that carries a lot of weight within our identities.

IS: For this issue, part of the work we're doing as editors is soliciting letters to activists, but another part is to crowdsource different definitions for allyship, advocacy, and housekeeping as they relate to solidarity work.

Interestingly, two of my colleagues on the editorial team for this issue are from different lingual backgrounds: Lily is a Spanish speaker and Laura is a Portuguese speaker. In gathering these definitions, we've already come upon some interesting issues regarding translation. For example, advocacy doesn't have a direct translation in Spanish and Portuguese. So we end up having this multiplicity of definitions that are very tangential or personal – not coming from Merriam Webster. We were wondering if you would share your own definition for one or several of these terms.

RS: Yeah, of course. Thanks for sharing this space with me and Strange Fire Collective!



RS: I would love to. As a quick side note, and as a Spanish speaker myself, I find that speaking two languages or coming from two different cultures is such a gift because you immediately see the world through two different perspectives. Language is so interesting, it's just fascinating. I saw a post from a deaf activist recently. He said that sometimes when he wants to understand something better, he will take the phrase, or the concept, or whatever it is, and translate it into sign language and then translate it back to English. I can't remember the exact example, but he was saying something like, if we say “I care for you” or “I really care about you,” the sign language translation might be something like, “I hold your heart in my hands.” I wish I could find the exact example that they used.

Because there isn't really a direct word translation, it's a series of ideas that are woven together through signing. I thought that was such a beautiful way to use language, to understand something, or a concept in a more nuanced way, you know? Just beautiful. In terms of allyship, advocacy, and housekeeping, I just wanted to say that I've been thinking about them a lot. Obviously during this year from the pandemic to the social uprising; I think it's really important for people to really think where they can make the biggest impact.

For me, I feel that I can make the most impact within these concepts in the arenas that I can most deftly navigate and where I yield the most influence. And for me, that is the art world. And I think Strange Fire is a very clear reflection of that. I know my way around the art world. I know the people in it. I know that I have colleagues, and resources, and access, and that's where I've chosen to do my work. So thinking of allyship in this context of social justice framework, I would define allyship as discomfort.

I think that not doing what you're already doing, but doing what you haven't been comfortable doing yet to stand with, for, and behind those who suffer from systemic injustice. For me, the true meaning of allyship is something that I've reckoned with myself where I was like, “well, I'm already an ally.” And I was like, yeah, that's easy to just do what I'm already doing. There was so much more that I could be doing, that I'm not doing because it's just a little bit uncomfortable. So I think that's where true allyship comes in.

I would say advocacy is ceding space, understanding your own privileges, and then being able to cede space for somebody else to take it. So, if you have access and privilege the worst thing is to abuse it, but the second worst thing is to not use it on behalf of others.

And then finally, housekeeping. I'm going to use this in my own context and also in the context of Strange Fire. I think where we're holding ourselves accountable. We had an important moment when all the Black Lives Matter protests started, and we wanted to put out some kind of statement. We then realized that we already do the work, but that doesn't mean we're immune. It doesn't mean we don't have blind spots. It doesn't mean that we can't continue to grow. And a lot of the work that we've done since has been around identifying blind spots and figuring out what are the areas in which the collective has to grow. Like, native representation is minimal on the website. Not only do we not have a huge representation of differently abled artists, but our website isn't really accessible per se. So I think to me, that's housekeeping: it's to really look inside our own collective, get the broom, and start sweeping—figuring out what needs to be put away, what needs to be sorted out, what needs to be taken care of.

IS: I love that definition. And your definition of advocacy is so interesting because we often think of “taking up space” in terms of our language and our privilege within institutions. But “taking up space,” is also a deeply spatial and material issue. And for students, thinking about how to cede space as an architect is a very challenging question to approach, but I think it's one of the most crucial questions. It's something that a lot of people at the School of Architecture are wrestling with.

RS: Yeah. And I mean, racism is deeply seated in architecture and the way we build the spaces. We know that that's not a taboo, that's not a secret. It goes hand in hand with urban planning as well.

IS: What's on the horizon for the Strange Fire Collective? How can students at Yale School of Architecture keep up with your work?

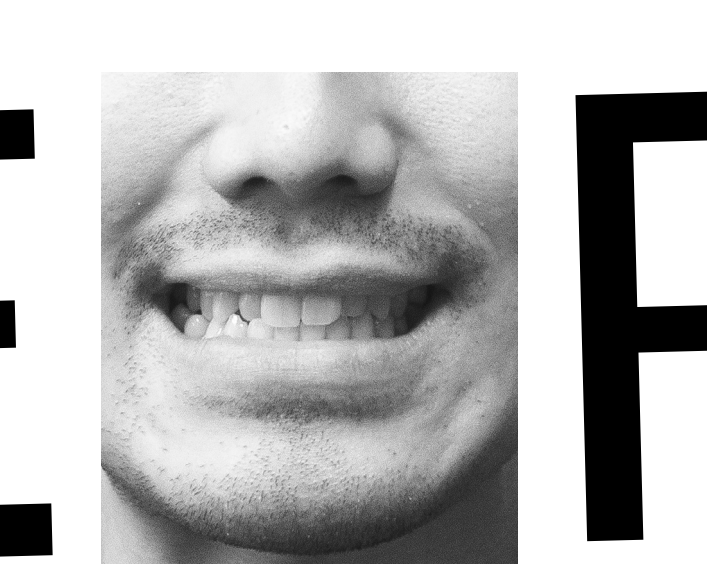
RS: We have some actual things that are happening, and some ideas and dreams. The immediate future is that we are continuing to do the work that we're doing right now. That's really important for us to say, because we're often asked, “Okay, great, what's the next step? How are you going to grow?” And we've come to an understanding that we like the work that we're doing and that's where we're going to stay. We have a couple of exhibitions coming up in Seattle at Soil Gallery in January 2021. We also have an exhibition opening in February 2021 at the Gustavus Adolphus College.

A big part of our efforts right now are going to educational resources. They're very much a working document because we wanted people to just be able to see what's in there so far and to contribute ideas, content, criticism, questions. So a lot of the effort of the collective right now is focusing on building this really robust resources page that's very tied to teaching and learning. One of our amazing coordinators, Keavy Handley-Byrne, put together a section of alternative canons which I loved; if you typically assign Sontag, for example, consider assigning these other young black scholars who have something to say about this thing this white person wrote about in the seventies.

And then, the dream world is two things—we have our eye on the horizon. One of them is a book, or books, of some compilation of the interviews. And some kind of retreat is also something we've been thinking a lot about: creating a week-long retreat that is completely free for young artists, queer artists, BIPOC artists who can come and do a whole week of professional development, growth, and critique. It's back to that idea of ceding space and access, and leveling the playing field.

IS: Thank you so much for sharing your time and your thoughtful responses with us. We really appreciate it.

RS: Yeah, of course. Thanks for sharing this space with me and Strange Fire Collective!



ALLYSHIPS

Allyship: The practice of sustained, reactionary participation in support of another person or group of people; a series of concerted and continuous efforts to empathize with and join in the amplification of others' voices, especially when those voices are oftentimes unheard or disregarded by people in power.

Advocacy: The practice of sustained, proactive participation in support of a cause; a series of acts that collectively serve to deliberately bring attention to and demand change for a specific cause, proposal, or facet of existence.

Housekeeping: The consolidation of others' efforts and well-meaning intentions into productive action; working towards change for a specific cause, proposal, or facet of existence; the day-to-day organizational, managerial, and maintenance work necessary to slow deemonstrations of advocacy and allyship to effectively make a difference.

Each word individually doesn't have much baggage, but it's interesting how the adjacency of the three rubs in the wrong way. They evoke what can only be called “indefinable” corporate America. When you ask me to be empathetic and relate to these words, whether in my own language or within the American context, these words grab me as the white liberal American understanding of solidarity—terminology used to philosophize and ideate, at the expense of true action.

Housekeeping is work done in the shadows. Advocacy is work done in the light. Allyship is being present for someone in need.

Allyship is a form of kinship.

Allyship: Demonstrating support/comradery through overt action, speaking up when words are needed, attending protests/marches, being aware of how your presence might affect those you're trying to support or be in ally to and spreading that awareness to others.

Advocacy: Supporting policy/certain issue but doing so through a structured, systematized process like supporting a cause/raising awareness or funding through a certain organization or formal group.

Housekeeping: Leftover tasks that still need to be accomplished. I associate this word less with allyship/advocacy and more with mundane tasks and day-to-day “to-do's.”

Allyship, n. \ ə- li- ship
with state or condition of being an ally; supportive association with another person or group specifically; such association with the members of a group to which one does not belong.

Advocacy, n. \ əd- və- kə- sē
the practice of supporting a cause or proposal; the act or process of advocating.

Housekeeping, n. \ haiz- kē- pin
the routine maintenance tasks that must be done in order for a system to function or to function efficiently; the behind-the-scenes work of activism.

Allyship: Being able to understand a community even though your own identity is not part of it. The best allyship is when you can be a resource as well, standing together.

Advocacy: Using your privilege to speak out—this privilege no being necessarily in wealth or education, but having a time in the day to participate. Can be as simple as speaking about it.

Housekeeping: Housekeeping has a very personal dimension of opening your heart to other people, and also not being afraid to yourself in a very uncomfortable position, because the truth is more important than your comfort.

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Allyship: A mi parecer, es la unión entre dos fuerzas que buscan un bien o un objetivo en común. Cabe aclarar que estos objetivos no son necesariamente “buenos moralmente”. Solo con que sirva para algún beneficio de las fuerzas basta.

Advocacy: En español, la traducción más cercana aunque no completa sería la abogacía que significa la acción que ejercen los abogados en su profesión es decir el apoyo profesional a una persona en torno a una situación legal. En este sentido la “abogacía” la entiendo como el soporte de los que no tienen voz, o de los que no pueden o no hacen escuchar por sí mismos. En Colombia solo hace falta hablar de personas como Jaime Garzón quien fue la voz del pueblo colombiano hasta que el estado quiso callarlo en 1999.

Housekeeping: En español no conozco la palabra que traduciría a “Housekeeping”, pero la entiendo como las labores cotidianas que promueven a algún activismo o ideal en cierta comunidad. Estas acciones o labores son las que dan la forma e identidad objetiva a los diferentes colectivos o activistas.

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Allyship: I am hesitant to acknowledge that change can be made with a summit and categorization through three loose terms. I assume that these three terms have the intention of being legal. I believe that I could not stop someone, however, if they do not want to. I think that the present situation and packaging of the three terms will result in the respective abolition and packaging of the three terms in a different way. The context of social justice in which the abolition is being made is not the same as the context in which the three terms were made. Politics, which is the secondary issue, these terms likely do not address, which is the primary issue. The abolition of the three terms is a political act, which is the secondary issue. The abolition of the three terms is a political act, which is the secondary issue. The abolition of the three terms is a political act, which is the secondary issue.

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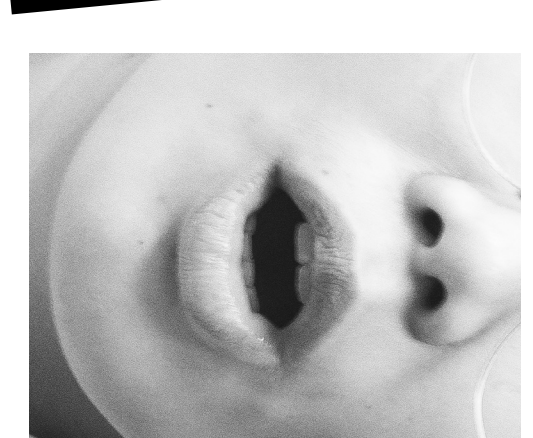
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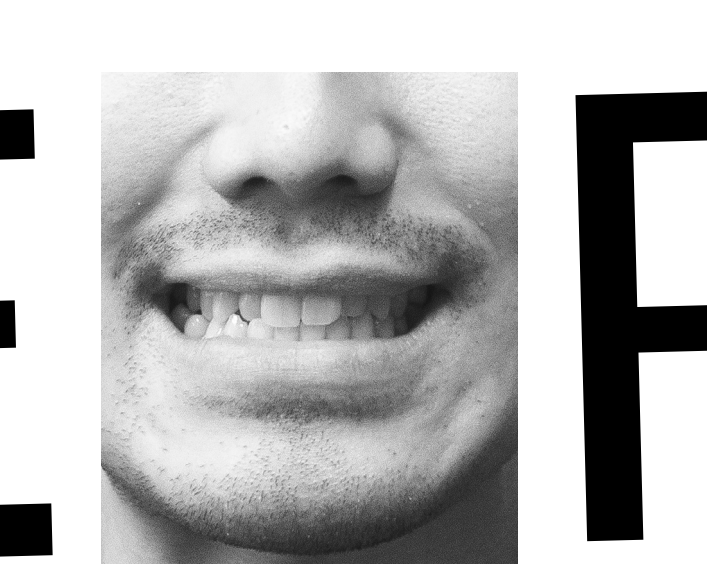


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