For Immediate Release

HEADLANDS CENTER FOR THE ARTS PRESENTS
PHILLIP ANDREW LEWIS: SYNONYM

Exhibition explores alternative communities and the legacy of experimental drug-rehab group with roots in Bay Area

Phillip Andrew Lewis, SYNOYMN 000263 (still) 2014; HD video, 18:29 min.; artwork and image courtesy the artist

Sausalito, CA, December 6, 2017 – A solo, public exhibition of recent and new interdisciplinary work by Memphis-based artist Phillip Andrew Lewis that investigates the attractions and dangers of group psychology will debut at Headlands Center for the Arts in its Project Space galleries from January 14 through February 18, 2018.

In the late 1980s, when Lewis was a teen, he was held against his will for two years in an unmarked building in Memphis, Tennessee, as part of a drug rehab program he describes as using extreme methods of sensory deprivation and cultic mind control. He later discovered the treatment center was an offshoot of the anti-drug empire and experimental society known as Synanon. Founded in 1958 in Santa Monica, California, Synanon eventually went international and expanded key operations to northern California, acquiring buildings in San Francisco and Oakland, thousands of acres in Marin County, and compounds southeast of San Francisco in Tulare county. The group created a self-help rehabilitation model for narcotics addiction and catalyzed the “tough love” industry before falling into controversy in the 1970s. Following numerous lawsuits, the group was formally dissolved in 1991.

Lewis’s ongoing SYNONYM project takes its name from the original Synanon group and is based on five years of research into the disbanded organization and descendant programs, that emerged to take its place, such as Straight Inc., Seed, Life Inc., Kids, and Second Chance.
“I’ve been tracking Synanon’s evolution and processing all these artifacts and fractured narratives,” says Lewis, who notes the project also creates an experimental autobiography, offering slices of information from his personal perspective, memory, and imagination as a survivor. “Long before I started consciously pursuing this project, which began 15 years into my art career, I was making work about light, sound, repetition, duration, and emerging patterns. I wasn’t completely aware of why I was drawn to create contemplative atmospheres of dominating tone or mood, but now I understand I had already begun a form of self-deprogramming.”

Headlands’ program director and curator Sean Uyehara says, “SYNONYM synthesizes deep research and personal narrative in ways that are as heartbreaking as they are eye-opening. Bordering on obsession, the show’s deep dive into the labyrinthine world of alternative communities will resonate with anyone reflecting on how societies construct and maintain power.”

**Tracing Synanon’s Fragmented History**

Formed amid national fear over drug use during the birth of 1960s counterculture, Synanon’s rise and fall is well documented in media coverage, books, documentaries, and even a Hollywood film. (Members made headlines in 1978 for placing a live rattlesnake in the mailbox of Los Angeles attorney Paul Morantz after he exposed the organization’s illegal activities and abuses.)

The group’s practices seeped into popular culture. Founder Charles Dederich – a former Alcoholics Anonymous member who left to start his own enterprise – is said to have coined the phrase, “today is the first day of the rest of your life.” For a time, Synanon attracted popular jazz musicians trying to kick heroin and became a hang-out for curious Hollywood celebrities. When George Lucas needed hundreds of extras with shaved heads for his 1971 film *THX 1138*, his team brought in Synanon members from Bay Area chapters.

To prepare for his Headlands exhibition, Lewis has been building relationships with organizers and former and current members around the world, traveling to compound sites in locations ranging from Berlin, Germany (the only chapter still in operation), to Tomales Bay, just north of San Francisco (the Marconi convention center and Walker Creek Ranch in Marshall were originally Synanon properties).

**Exhibition re-creates artist’s experience**

Filling both 1,800-square foot Project Space galleries on the third floor of Headlands’ Main Building 944, *Phillip Andrew Lewis: SYNONYM* illustrates and evokes Synanon’s various philosophies and methods: the “Hand of Friendship” (way of physically managing patients similar to handcuffs), “The Game” (brutal peer criticism); enforced silence, absence of food
choice, no reading or visible text, no TV, no family, no privacy, no connection to the outside.

The presentation features approximately 12 installation-based works and numerous pieces of ephemera, including:

- An enormous chandelier salvaged from an abandoned group compound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains (Lewis notes lighting was a key element of Synanon’s treatment spaces). Equipped with microphones, it was made by Synanon to function as a surveillance device. Lewis has added new recording equipment to the fixture that will feed live audio to speakers in the adjacent gallery.

- A long display table of paper airplanes that were found in another custom light fixture salvaged from a former Synanon building. Some planes were made by another community group who occupied the compound after Synanon.

- Videos depicting real and imagined documentation of Synanon-designed spaces and reenactments of activities.

- A grouping of live plants with psychotropic properties (e.g. ayahuasca, salvia, etc.) that link to the natural science of self-examination and spirituality.

- Still photographs and other ephemera that piece together a fragmented timeline of Synanon and its cultural remnants.

Also activating the space intermittently will be Bay Area-based groups such as Delancey Street Foundation, co-founded by a former Synanon member; ERIE, a nonprofit research center dedicated to sharing transpersonal knowledge; and Threshold Choir, which sings to the dying to ease end-of-life passage. According to the artist, these and other community entities “may be physically present or have left behind some sign of their presence in the space.”

*Phillip Andrew Lewis: SYNONYM* is free and open to the public Sunday through Thursday, from noon to 5 pm from January 14 through February 18, 2018. Gallery activations every Sunday at 2 pm. [headlands.org](http://headlands.org), 415-331-2787

**RELATED EVENTS AND PROGRAMS**

**Opening Reception for Phillip Andrew Lewis: SYNONYM**
Sunday, January 21, 4 to 6 pm  
Headlands Center for the Arts, Project Space  
Free and open to the public

**Sunday Supper**
Sunday, January 21, 6:30 to 9:30 pm
Headlands Center for the Arts, Mess Hall
$40 general; $30 members

Come early for the opening of Phillip Andrew Lewis: SYNONYM and stay for Headlands’ seasonal Sunday Supper, crafted and cooked by Chef Damon Little and served family-style in the historic, artist-renovated Mess Hall. Bring a couple of old pals, or come ready to make some new ones, and let the weekend come to a close around an inspired table. Menu coming soon. Tickets at headlands.org/events.

ABOUT THE ARTIST
The studio practice of Phillip Andrew Lewis (b. 1973, Memphis, Tennessee) often responds to historical events, psychology, and phenomenology. The artist’s work typically takes final form as photography, video, objects, or sound. Lewis holds a BA in psychology from University of Memphis (1996) and graduated from Memphis College of Art in 2000 with an MFA in photography. His work has been shown at numerous venues nationwide, including Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (2017), the Hunter Museum of American Art (2014), Pierogi Gallery in New York (2015), LMAK Gallery in New York (2016), and Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles (2014). In 2012 he received a Creative Capital Grant in visual art for early research on his ongoing SYNONYM project. Lewis is also co-founder of Medicine Factory, an independent arts organization in downtown Memphis committed to supporting installation-based work. He teaches in the photography and media art programs at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga. More at phillipandrewlewis.com.

ABOUT PROJECT SPACE
Located on the third floor of Headlands’ Main Building 944, Project Space comprises two adjacent galleries that feature site-specific work informed by artists’ experiences and research while at Headlands. Home to select Artists in Residence each season, as well as occasional group exhibitions by visiting artists and curators, Project Space is a place of exchange among working artists and public visitors—a place where ideas are germinated, conversations shared, and new work is made. Recent exhibitions have debuted new work by artists such as Will Rogan, FICTILIS, and Chris Duncan.

ABOUT HEADLANDS
Founded in 1982, Headlands Center for the Arts operates a multi-disciplinary, international arts center best known for its dynamic public programs and highly lauded artist residency. Located in the coastal wilderness of the Marin Headlands, within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Headlands’ historic nine-building campus is dedicated to process-driven exploration and risk-taking contemporary art in all disciplines. Its year-round programs provide visual artists, performers, musicians, and writers with opportunities for research, professional development, and peer-to-peer exchange at critical times in their careers. More at headlands.org.

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