

IS DIY Culture The New Avant-Garde?

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A Unique Dealer Heads Chicago's Oldest Michigan Avenue Gallery

\$8 U.S.

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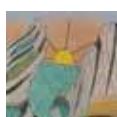
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New Art Examiner

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The New Art Examiner is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

EDITORIAL POLICY

As the *New Art Examiner* has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship, we think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The *New Art Examiner* does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary is welcome. The *New Art Examiner* has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the *New Art Examiner* is well defined in the statement of purpose above.

WANTED: WRITERS

The **New Art Examiner** is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

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Radical Form/Radical Politics: A Talk about Today's Avant-Garde

by Evan Carter

Chicago's influence in the art world is unique. With its storied history of experimentation, social and civic activism, ample space, and affordability for young artists, the city offers opportunities to test new ideas and endeavors in art making and exhibiting, specifically the DIY movement. As this issue of the *Examiner* explores some of smaller independent galleries in Chicago and beyond, the editors thought it worthwhile to investigate the force that often drive the mind of the independent artist: the avant-garde. I spoke with artist and educator, Geof Oppenheimer, to discuss notions of the avant-garde in our 21st century cultural landscape.

Evan Carter: It seems that the common understanding of the avant-garde in art is that it is the presentation of unconventional and experimental ideas that stand in contrast to the mainstream, the accepted, or established notion of what art is. For the sake of our conversation, would you like to add anything to that or further unpack the term and its common historical definition?

Geof Oppenheimer: I think you are correct in the sense that today the avant-garde is thought of as primarily formal innovation. Novel forms. And that may be true as far as it goes. But if you think about it historically and perhaps in the way that I'm interested in it, the avant-garde is about pushing the policed boundaries of culture and meaning.

Avant-garde is a military term for the waves of assault troops that first define the terrain of the battlefield. The waves that set the precedent for what follows. I find this way of thinking about the term more productive. Or at least it more closely reflects my ambitions for it.

EC: Would you agree that art history has shown us that the defiance of convention is treated as controversial but comes to be accepted as the norm shortly thereafter?

GO: In my mind, to make this argument in 2018, that the defiance of convention is radical, is a socially conservative position to take. It's a bourgeois value.

Today, I think the most radical thing one can do is to embrace formal convention as a tool to explode social convention. One of the most radical things an artist today can do is wear Brooks Brothers.

EC: You mentioned having ambitions for the avant-garde. It sounds to me like you have a kind of personal investment in furthering the idea of the avant-garde.

GO: Absolutely.

EC: Do you see this in artists today and in contemporary art practice today? To what degree?

GO: I think there always has been and always will be people who use art to further social discourse. I think that's something that art can do really well.

With the financialization of certain aspects of the art industry, not all art does that anymore; some art is just there to kind of ingratiate itself to capital—which there has always been a place for. Art has always had that aspect. That's what the Medici were.

I do think that there are groups of artists now, and hopefully always will be, that use art as a tool to push the boundaries of culture and to reorganize vision. Those are my ambitions for my own art, and I think there are other artists in the world who also aspire to that. I'm not as pessimistic as I think some of your questions frame it.

I totally understand your pessimism. The world's pretty fucked up. But I actually think that there's a healthy space in art for unpacking meaning, and I think that's what the avant-garde does.

EC: I think my pessimism comes from a few different places. Such as seeing how the aesthetics of the avant-garde get used under the assumption that they are still serving the purposes of the avant-garde but don't necessarily succeed. I guess I'm trying to locate the avant-garde in the midst of today's landscape.

GO: I think that's true. Maybe something that's more pernicious now but maybe is also historical is that the forces of aesthetic capitalism sort of take, not the ideas of the avant-garde, but only the aesthetics and usurp it for the forces of power. There is an unquenchable appetite in post-capitalism to take the aesthetics of novelty that the avant-garde produces and use it for the service

of power and capital. And that metabolism is fast, they take that shit quick for sure. So it's easy to get bummed out. But I don't know. It might just be that the social metabolism is naturally fast now.

EC: That connects to a question I have about education. One of my concerns is the capitalist metabolism and the usurping of aesthetic power you described. Have educational models also succumbed to that same kind of usurping of aesthetics for capitalist power?

GO: Talk more about that.

EC: Some of my experience in seeing, and not just in my education at DOVA but across the higher art education spectrum, is that the aesthetics of the avant-garde are presumed to be functioning or behaving as avant-garde when perhaps they are not necessarily succeeding at doing so. Rather, capitalism has had an influence on education to the point where these academic programs may sit in some kind of gray area where the work is seen as performing the avant-garde but is really functioning within the banal confines of a capitalist system.

GO: I think the art education system that I taught you in, and that I also went to graduate school in, is a kind of '60s/'70s Marxist critique that has become mannered. The education I was part of as an undergrad was grounded in a conservative, Beaux-Arts model. That's really different from what art education is today at the graduate level. Today, it is an extension of the 1970s rejection of that nineteenth-century model, influenced by Marxist critique that saw itself as adversarial to the market. Fortunately or unfortunately, this has settled into middle age and maybe assumes radical form is radical politics. I think that is something that I question at this point in my life.

Part of the beauty of visual art is that it can, not always, operate on the level of the subconscious or the pre- or post-cognitive level, the animal aspects, that we all share. In graduate education today, that constant need for an academic rationalization of the form is something that, as I have gotten older, I've become very skeptical about.

EC: When you bring up the sort of subconscious or the 'shared animal' characteristics, would you say that is a realm of the avant-garde?

GO: For sure. I mean you'll get a million different opinions on this, but I think radicalism today really needs to sort of...actually, this is totally my own shit so I'm really only speaking for myself, but I think we live in such a hyper-codified world where everything is a metric, that what the avant-garde can do today is reconcile

that with the irrational, maybe destructive animal aspects human beings still have.

How you reconcile Amazon Prime with our death drive is something that I think needs to be worked on.

EC: Can you describe [what you mean by] death drive?

GO: I'm using that as a kind of blanket term for our animal desires and drives. Fuck, food and money. The less rational aspects of what we are.

EC: So, going back to the question where I asked if you agree that our history has shown us the defiance of convention is treated as controversial but comes to be accepted as a norm—you said that it is conservative to make that argument and that it's a bourgeois value. Can you further explore that?

GO: Again, going back to that historical narrative, the art education that I was raised in and that you were raised in, it's a modernist ideal of fetishizing the shock, like our goal as artists is to constantly radically shock conventional value, aesthetic value.

That to me is a conservative, well-worn track that the of role of the artist is to "blow up form" and "shock and offend" the sensibilities. That has become a bourgeois, conservative value; art for a kind of novelty. People want to be challenged and offended. That is a role the arts can play and is definitely part of the market. Rich people go to art and are like, "Oh, it's so shocking," and spend their money on it. There is a place for that, but I also think it is a limiting way to think about art. I also think you can embrace formal convention and redeploy social convention. Take those more historical conventions and weaponize them. Make them tools to explode social conventions.

EC: That's really helpful because I think I was seeing defiance of convention and going against the mainstream as kind of the same thing, but you have made a helpful distinction here between the two ideas. So, thank you for that and for this conversation. To wrap up, could you cite a few examples of work you have recently encountered that could be described as avant-garde?

GO: Igor Stravinsky, *Ebony* Concerto; Zach Galifianakis, *Baskets*; Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*; Joan Didion, *Miami*. ■

Geof Oppenheimer is a sculptor who lives in Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Evan Carter is a contributing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He earned his MFA degree in 2017 from the University of Chicago and wrote about documenta 14 in a prior issue of the *Examiner*.

Three Tales of DIY Culture—Introduction

This issue of the New Art Examiner explores the explosive growth in practice and influence of DIY culture and Co-op galleries in three Midwestern cities, Chicago, Detroit and Indianapolis.

These galleries are traditionally small spaces, often run by artists and driven less by the profit motive and market values than by artistic interests. In Chicago, there are Extase and the Condo Association, which we profile on inside pages, along with Heaven, Baby Blue, Agitator, Level 3, Tiger Strikes Asteroid and Slow galleries among many others.

But are the more artistic features of these spaces enough to define them as the new underground or the avant-garde of the 21st century? Can such a once historical phenomenon still exist in our contemporary cultural landscape?

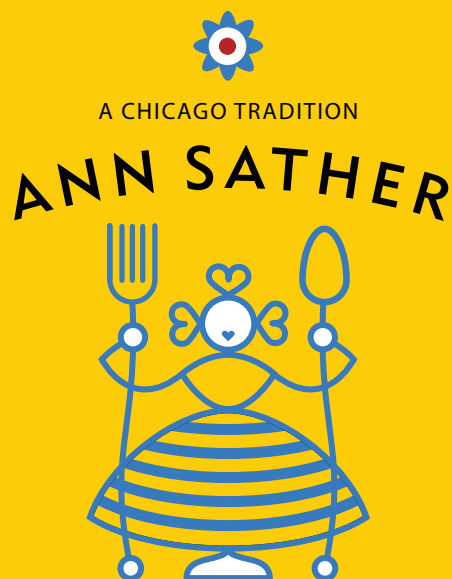
The provocative views of artist, Geof Oppenheimer, make a useful contribution to the discussion. Oppenheimer states, in his interview with contributing

editor, Evan Carter, that avant-garde's meaning has shifted from unconventional and experimental ideas to a current definition of novel forms.

Oppenheimer's interest in the concept is more about "pushing the policed boundaries of culture and meaning." The old view of the avant-garde as being a radical defiance of convention is seen as a bourgeois value today. He also believes that the most radical thing one can do is to weaponize historical conventions. Artists, he claims, should "embrace formal convention as a tool to explode social convention."

It is the goal of this issue to ponder these questions and allow them to drive us toward a deeper understanding of art and its role today. Consider sharing your thoughts on this pressing contemporary issue with us by writing to www.newartexaminer.org. We would like to publish your reactions in the next issue.

The Editors



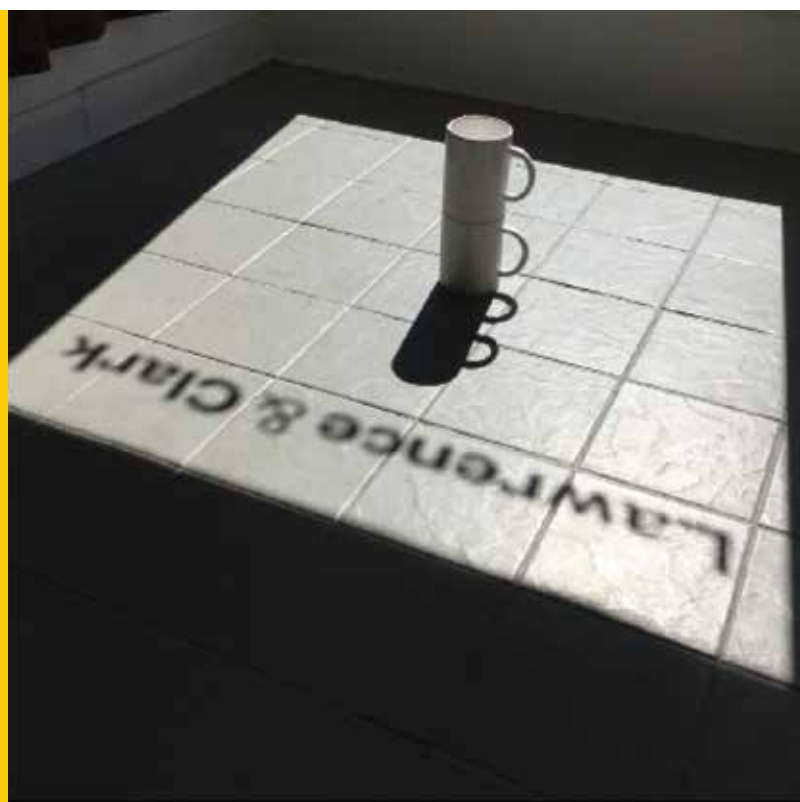
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Art Beyond Cubes: DIY Small Space Galleries in Chicago

by Whit Forrester

I am in a Ukrainian Village space, standing in front of a closet closed off with a piece of vinyl-sided plywood. It has a drilled hole which I am looking through into an installation by Jesse Meredith. The room I am in is all white, facing Chicago Avenue, with a photograph of the suburbs and a wall of stick sculptures that have been carved with phrases like “I’M NOT INSECURE YOU’RE INSECURE.” As co-curator Jameson Paige puts it, Meredith is “grappling with how people draw ideological moral lines between inside and outside, friend or foe” using a kind of vernacular language for his materials that stare into the suburbs.

In another room, I walk across a handwoven carpet made to fit the room it is in, dense in meaning and soft in texture. It’s the most recent part of a decade-long collaboration between artists Mia + Máire. Swirls of color in patterns suggest flow; colors which conjure the nexus where pristine and the polluted encounter one another hem in a drain-like phase suggesting breakdown. A text reads, “The recklessness of the perpetual now is no longer supported on this device.”

Plastic bags are sometimes utilized as the raw material for weaving, and there are several iPads playing video that documents a *Survivor*-like show with a feminist refocusing, part of a larger project on which the artists have been working. Some of this is

also a projection mapped onto the garage in the backyard, projected over more of Jesse’s woodwork. In this instance, a series of logs ask the viewer: “What blade cuts down the tree of liberty?”

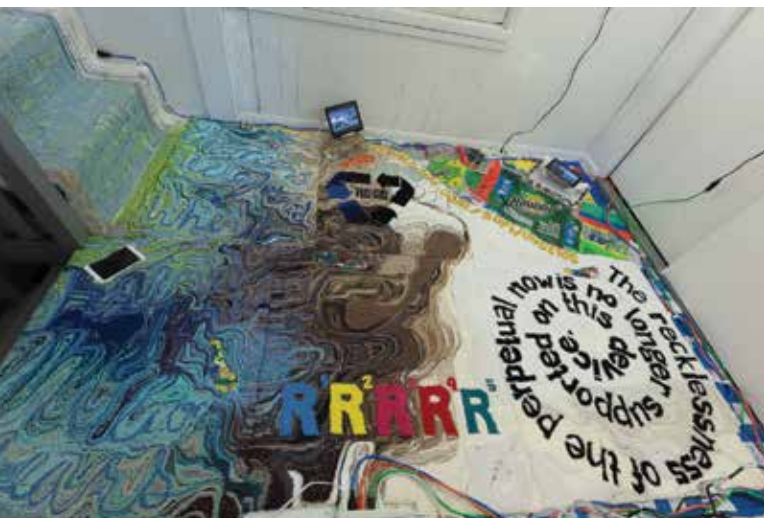
For gallerist and co-curator Julia (Budgie) Birka-White, the show pushes the viewer to “resist behaviors and traditions that become normalized through habit and instead coax[es] the viewer into questioning everyday systems lest we become dangerously complacent.” The integration of the show into the space is seamless.

In the rooms where the artwork is living, you feel very much encompassed by the work. There is a table with information, a press release, an informational poster in the 13x19 range with images, a map of the space, and some background information on the show “Reckless Comfort.” I am in the Extase apartment gallery. Pronounced “ecstasy,” it is named in reference to the troubled history of feminine emotional expression conflated as pathology.

Extase is a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) space. The history of the phrase “DIY” is a bit fuzzy, but the shorthand has its first usages in reference to home repairs around the turn of the 20th century. In the ’70s, it became synonymous with the patchy, loose and fast organizing of the punk community. The aesthetic has now morphed, but the term’s operative DNA is still very much intact and at work, especially in today’s digital age. This term is a late comer to an already established understanding that this is what marginalized communities have done throughout all time, yet the specificity of DIY to the last 50 years is important in thinking about decentralized artistic networks. To call something DIY usually bears with it a history of politicized engagement.

I now am walking around an art space, Reckless Comfort, thinking about watersheds—how water falls on land and immediately starts moving towards the sea. If one were to conceive of the art world as an ecology, DIY and alternative spaces are the tributaries that feed the rivers, the mountain streams that feed the Mississippi. The community-driven apartment gallery DIY space is where work shows up first and begins

Mia+Máire, installation view. Photo courtesy of Extase.





Basement Merch Shop, installation view. Photo courtesy of Extase.

making its way through the art world towards larger forms of recognition.

These spaces have become incredibly important. Not only are projects supported, but there is larger community engagement and the development of work that resonates with the moment. It is, in retrospect, the raw material which becomes the backbone of curatorial research into origins of artistic movements and eras. They are tributaries, but they are also the ocean ridges wherein the earth's crust is created. The apartment gallery can be the place where new earth is formed.

Extase's website states its mission and goal is "showcasing the work of local and underrepresented artists, giving them a space to execute new ideas in the comfort of a home" and fostering new connections through the building of community. According to the website of The Condo Association in Humboldt Park, DIY means prioritizing "the creativity and productivity of queer people, people of color, women, and other marginalized communities" as a collective of "sex positive, anti-fascist, and anti-capitalistic humans."

Where the mainstream public may not be able to understand or accept work that is made in the present, artwork's slow rise to prominence falls in favor of the *avant-garde* and as being unintelligible to the vast majority in the moment. For instance, queer art about bottoming, such as the Gødbottom show at The Condo Association, may not have been legible 10 years ago, though today it stands as an artistic achievement and milestone for Chicago.

Extase and Condo are not alone in this. It is a growing trend in the larger world of which the art world and art market are just reflections. Identifying this need

in their mission statements, both Extase and Condo shift art world conversations and support the adoption of lenses for looking at work which critically empower those at the margins. In reverse, this then goes back to affect the larger world to which art is speaking.

The apartment gallery approach solves the problem of rent and utilities. Rent is covered by the person or persons living there, which opens up a space for art-making that is not connected with sales *per se*. Having such an intimate connection to the space means that conversations about what is possible become more informal and thus more flexible. Ambitious and experimental artwork might be a risk for a commercial gallery but, in the protected and nurturing space of the apartment, it becomes a possibility and vivacious contribution. Chicago has plenty of affordable, large apartments for such activity to boot.

Some apartment gallery owners have abandoned regular space entirely, as is the case with In/Habit roving art series. A curatorial project of Rebecca Ladida and Mitsu Salmon, In/Habit creates what they call an "open platform dedicated to holding space for brilliant weirdos, fostering collaborations between queer, feminist, BIPOC, radical thinkers and artists with various degrees of recognition in the (art) world."

The first thing on the website is a Territory Acknowl-



Jesse Meredith, installation view. Photo courtesy of Extase.

edgement, acknowledging that the United States and, by extension, Chicago are occupied territory that was stolen from First Nations. The deeply collaborative project continues from there. As Ladida states, the idea

was to rove between DIY spaces and institutional art spaces, generating work, shows and dialogue in the process. However, they also cite the struggle to be properly paid when working institutionally as a perennial concern and one which takes an inordinate amount of time and resources in addressing—time that could be spent on planning shows.

Their commitment to working between and among different art worlds reflects the goals that many DIY and alternative spaces have. Whereas this would have once been scoffed at as lofty dreaming, at the current time, when brick-and-mortar galleries are shutting down in droves, citing financial strain, it seems as though there is something to the roving apartment model which works.

In the case of Extase, this model is compatible with larger ambitions. While many DIY spaces aim to simply showcase the work of artists working within their directly affiliated networks and communities, Budgie's experience comes from her time at Gagosian Gallery and Jessica Silverman Gallery, both in San Francisco. This experience in the blue-chip market has given her an ambitious set of prerogatives, from curatorial programming to sales to attending art fairs such as Mexico City's Material Art Fair.

Gødbottom installation view. Photo courtesy of The Condo Association.



Gødbottom installation view. Photo courtesy of The Condo Association.

It is the art that takes priority and the working with artists around ideas for what can happen inside the constraints of an apartment gallery. These constraints of space can provide the necessary friction for the creative problem-solving and risk-taking that are the hallmark of successful projects.

It is the DIY attitude of places like Budgie's gallery that allows artists and supporters who may be turned off by or turned away from the commercial art scene to enmesh themselves within communities of other makers to pursue ambitious, risk-taking projects. ■

Whit Forrester is an artist living in Chicago. They have shown at the Satellite Art Show, the International Museum of Surgical Science, Aspect/Ratio, the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, and at Kuir Bogotá in Colombia. Their solo show opens January 11, and you can find their work currently exhibited in the show "Groundings" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Gødbottom installation view. David Nasca, *A Spot*, 2017. Leather, metallic shagreen, thread. Courtesy of The Condo Association.



Place Making: Tube Factory Artspace and Big Car's Success Secret

by Phillip Barcio

One recent cold December morning, Jim Walker and Shauta Marsh received some warm news. Big Car Collaborative, the D.I.Y. arts organization they founded in 1999 in a rented closet, had just received a \$3 million grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc., a philanthropic foundation established by Josiah Lilly, son of Colonel Eli Lilly, founder of Eli Lilly and Company.

The press release quoted Colonel Lilly's grandson of the same name: "It takes an artist to make us see, not the bewildering details of the world around us, but the great universals that give significance to our human experiences."

The \$3 million windfall will help Big Car expand Tube Factory Artspace, the non-collecting museum/community gathering space it opened in 2016. Located on Indianapolis' southeast side, the Artspace formerly served as a dairy bottling plant and, unsurprisingly, as a metal tube factory.

When Big Car purchased the property, it also acquired a small commercial structure on nearby Shelby Street. Both buildings were vacant and boarded up, as were about a dozen surrounding homes. They transformed the smaller commercial space into Listen Hear, a gallery housing a community radio station; the station is streaming at <https://www.wqrt.org/>. Tube Factory, meanwhile, hosts two exhibition galleries, a woodshop, and a large open space functioning variously as a community meeting hall, pop-up market, lecture space and performance venue.

Big Car also partnered with Riley Area Development Corporation to acquire the neighboring abandoned houses, which they renovated into artist housing. Some are for artists to purchase with the caveat that they can only later be sold to artists, at a controlled inflation rate; others are used as artist rentals or for Tube Factory's residency program.

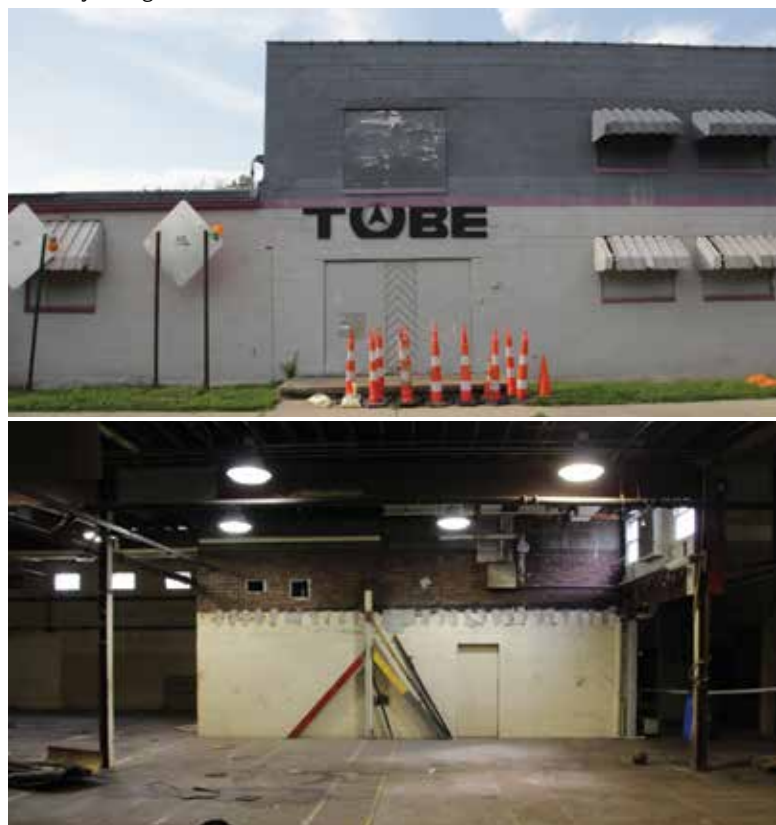
This latest grant will help Big Car purchase and renovate another adjacent industrial building. "It will have 25 studio spaces and a flex space that will be able to hold large-scale installations with multimedia capabilities," says Marsh.

Based on this description, it is tempting to see Big Car as a well-oiled, well-funded machine—nothing like most scrappy, D.I.Y., alternative arts organizations. But things were not always like this for the collective.

Flashback to 1998: Indianapolis's alternative art scene is centered at the Faris Building, a near-downtown industrial building housing 50 art studios and five artist-run galleries. For a decade, the Faris was legendary, spawning the underground performance venue Brand X and avant-garde exhibition spaces like Hot House. Then, Kite Realty bought the building, intent on renovating it as the new corporate headquarters of, who else, Eli Lilly and Company. The artists had four months to vacate.

One of those artists, Philip Campbell, Hot House founder, made a bold decision. Rather than simply moving to the next artist building that would eventually get shuttered, he approached Southeast Neighborhood

Exterior (top) and interior (bottom) views of the new building Big Car will purchase and renovate with \$3 million grant. Photos courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.



Development Inc. (SEND), a community development corporation operating in Fountain Square, a depressed nearby neighborhood. SEND owned a historic commercial building where a G.C. Murphy five and dime store once operated.

Campbell offered SEND an alternative to converting the Murphy Building into lofts and a parking garage as planned: “I wrote a seven-page proposal about how the arts have been the success of every great city in the world,” he says, “and they bought into it.”

SEND helped Campbell and his business partner Ed Funk purchase the Murphy Building from them. Studios and galleries soon filled the space into which many displaced Faris artists moved. “It was a labor of love,” says Campbell. “I didn’t want to become a landlord. It was like, ‘Oh my god, nobody gives a shit about this community of artists.’ It was just going to be dispersed. So that’s how the Murphy was born. I think we finally had heat in February of the next year.”

Walker and Marsh were two of the earliest tenants. Campbell rented them a 16’ x 16’ closet. Actually, he gave it to them for free.

“Shauta and I were paying for everything out of pocket,” says Walker when recalling the early days. “I was a journalist and a teacher. Shauta was a journalist. Whenever Phil Campbell had an empty retail space on the ground level, he allowed us to use it for a show, free of charge. A lot of our first community shows took place in those spaces. This was the beginning of us

learning it is best to work with either someone who’s really invested in the arts or to own your own space.”

Marsh concurs. “Phil operated the space in a way that supported the artists. When people were late with rent, he was kind about it. He knew what it was like to struggle. Most artists are broke or under a mountain of student loan debt. A lot quit making art after a while because they can’t afford a studio or supplies. Phil was an important influence on us as an organization.”

When a 1,200-square-foot studio became available, Walker and Marsh traded up, and Big Car was born. In the ensuing years, Big Car impacted the scene significantly. Walker, Marsh and several other artists and writers worked together to establish it as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit. They structured the gallery’s programming around the ideas of placemaking and community. They hosted artist talks, First Friday art shows and musical performances. They applied for 24-hour wine and beer permits to help raise funds. Sun King Brewery, which was also just starting out, donated beer.

Soon, Big Car’s projects extended beyond the gallery walls. They hosted community movie nights in the police station parking lot and assisted with a neighborhood mural project. One of their most influential projects is the annual Masterpiece in a Day event—founded by Campbell and later operated by Big Car—which invites everyone in the community to gather in the central business district to create a work of art that day, to be exhibited at a free event that evening.

Neighborhood movie night at Tube Factory Artspace. Photo courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.



Not only did Big Car create a successful alternative art space, it has also fostered renewal in the Fountain Square neighborhood, which had struggled for generations since the interstate came through, destroying hundreds of houses. With an artist-friendly landlord and increasing interest from philanthropic organizations, it appeared Big Car had nowhere to go but up.

Then 2008—the Great Recession—struck. Campbell describes the devastating impact: “Fifth Third Bank had our mortgage on the Murphy Building. Back in 2000, they just handed us money. It appraised for more than a million dollars. The next year, they gave us another \$150,000 for renovations. Then in 2008, I get called by this person I had never spoken to before. The bankers we had been talking to for eight years had been fired.”

Campbell was told they could no longer afford their mortgage. An independent appraiser valued the building for \$800,000. The bank called in the loan. Campbell hired an attorney who told them nothing illegal was going on. “There was nothing we could do,” says Campbell. “We somehow managed to work a deal that, if we put the building up for sale, they wouldn’t foreclose on it. Eighteen months later, we closed the sale and basically walked away with nothing. We didn’t owe anything, but we didn’t have anything.”

Two local property developers, Larry Jones and Craig Von Deylen, bought the Murphy Building. Their loan was financed by Fifth Third Bank. Once again, the Indianapolis artist community was scattered. Campbell moved on to help establish Indy Indie Artist Colony, a six-story building with artist live-work spaces, practice rooms for musicians and a gallery. Now he’s a full-time artist with representation in New York, Louisville and Indianapolis.

Walker and Marsh meanwhile faced an existential question: what would become of Big Car when it lost its lease? Rather than succumbing to the woes of this all-too-common narrative—an alternative art space being displaced by economic forces beyond its control—they mobilized.

They realized the most successful Big Car projects connected artists with neighbors at events like Masterpiece in a Day. Aesthetic phenomena that engage people in social discourse are part of a larger movement called social practice art. “At that time we had no idea what social practice art was,” says Walker. “But that’s exactly what we were doing.”

They applied for grants to instigate more social practice interventions. They widened their programming



(Top) Tube Factory Art Space exterior after renovation.

(Bottom) Tube Factory Art Space interior after renovation. Photos courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.

all around the city. They managed a space in an abandoned mall and in an old auto shop. They also organized pop-up exhibitions in underserved neighborhoods. The projects were geared towards the needs of each community and designed to engage neighbors in ways that transcend typical artist-viewer relationships.

Says Marsh, “We made sure at least one of our artists lived in the neighborhood where we were working. We wanted someone going to the neighborhood associations, meeting the neighbors and making sure things were done in a way that’s respectful, not just imprinting what we want in the neighborhood.”

They instituted a significant change from their earlier model: nothing was for sale. “We weren’t anti-commodity,” Marsh says, “but it was not the focus. We wanted people to understand how important art is. We believe fundamentally that art has the power to transform people. I always say people are more open to art than to each other. We learned there are all these different entry points to art. There’s hobby and craft, which is very important. There’s the high-art world and the part that’s about commodity. There’s making art just for pleasure. A lot of people stop making art because they can’t sell it. If you feel good about making something, we think you should make it. We want the



(Top) Jim Walker and Shauta Marsh.

(Bottom) Juan William Chávez's bee sanctuary.

Photos courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.

public to see all these different ways people can learn about art and art appreciation.”

Certain struggles kept recurring, however. Every rented space was temporary, and every landlord had censorship power. Ultimately, they realized the only way Big Car could be sustainable was if it could buy a permanent space outright.

Walker and Marsh realized that dream in 2015, using grant money to acquire their current properties. One of the first things they did was acquire a permanent wine and beer license, which they say is key to fundraising. It helps that Sun King still generously donates beer to Big Car's events. They also established a fee-for-service practice, offering design and placemaking consultation to architecture firms and other businesses.

The biggest lesson Walker and Marsh learned, however, has nothing to do with fundraising, or even with owning their space. The real secret of their success is that they fulfill a social need. Tube Factory Artspace is a vital, participatory member of its community.

Marsh recalls going through a difficult period during which she reflected on how she felt about working in the arts. She saw a woman at a bus stop crying in 10 degree below zero weather. “She’s standing in this spaghetti strap top and sweat pants, and there’s snow on the ground. These are people lacking basic needs. They don’t have food, they don’t have clothing, so I

asked, why am I doing this? Shouldn’t I be addressing these needs? Is art a band-aid for this?” Marsh realized she couldn’t fix those things. As a child, coming from an abusive home life, the arts had been an escape for her.

“You can give people food, clothing and shelter,” Marsh realized, “but if they can’t see an alternative future where they have power and agency, they get stuck. So, I went back to that. I thought about how we can provide a space and a platform for people to understand each other through an artist, or through themselves—maybe they make art that shares their perspective. As humans, we have to be reminded of what other people are experiencing all the time. Also, the arts do reach the wealthier one percent, so if an artist has access to people who can make change, they can get across the idea that this is important and should be given attention.”

Tube Factory welcomes neighbors during all business hours to socialize, read, work and look at art. It’s public space. They publish a newsletter to let residents know about everything that’s going on. There’s even a neighbor on their panel to judge which artists receive residency opportunities.

“We also have a chicken area out back,” says Walker. “Shauta is working on a project called the Chicken Chapel of Love, where people can get married and have chickens as witnesses. We also have a bee sanctuary that the artist Juan William Chávez from St. Louis built.”

Walker also recently partnered with Kevin McKelvey at the University of Indianapolis to create one of only a handful of social practice art master’s degree programs in the United States. “We’ve always thought about how much we have to learn from the people we’re working with,” Walker says. “It’s not just about you and your vision. You have to be interested in other people and their stories.”

Such a vision is what makes Big Car work. It’s about more than just about having an alternative art space, a D.I.Y performance venue, or an artist-run gallery. It’s about creating a paradigm in which art, placemaking, and social engagement assist in the practical evolution of a more connected culture. ■

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Detroit's DIY Art Scene: Change is the Constant

by K.A. Letts

“No matter what becomes of it, art is local, local to a place and to a person, or group of persons...it happens somewhere, not everywhere,” said the late Robert Creeley, poet and sometime Detroit resident. His observation fits Detroit to a T. Responding to the Motor City's recent brush with financial disaster, the city's creatives have developed unique coping schemes and survival strategies born from the relative scarcity of established commercial galleries and a countervailing abundance of entrepreneurial ingenuity. Here is what a tour of the city's rich DIY scene revealed.

1XRun

1XRun, an ever-mutating constellation of creative enterprises under one roof, takes full advantage of the possibilities presented by the city's rebound. 1XRun moved into Detroit's Eastern Market neighborhood in 2010 and has since morphed into a downtown art leviathan, featuring online print releases, a yearly mural festival, musical events and art exhibitions. 1XRun's CEO, Jesse Cory, describes its curatorial approach: creative populism, influenced by SoCal custom car culture, skate culture, graffiti writing, techno music and the rave scene.

Business partners Cory and Dan Armand, who is 1XRun's creative director, started out small. “We would screen print all our own t-shirts, we would build all our own structures, we would be vendors at street fairs in the city,” says Cory. “My partner Dan and I come from very humble backgrounds. Our parents had enough for us to get by and that's it. But we knew that, if we put in the hard work, we could actually make a living from our efforts and see a return on our labor.”

Over time, the partners conceived the idea of developing their shared interests in graffiti writing, skateboarding and techno music into a creative concept that didn't so much oppose established artworld orthodoxies as blow right by them.

The original revenue-generating arm of 1XRun is an ingenious, limited-edition online print sales enterprise designed along the lines of a sneak release. Art prints by street artists and fine artists from Detroit and beyond are offered for a limited time online. The number of prints in each edition is based on sales generated during the release, with a small additional number archived for future sale. It's a clever way of matching supply with demand combined with a sort of aesthetic crowd-sourcing.

(Left) Scott Hocking, *17 Shitty Mountains 8692*, archival pigment print on Moab fine art paper, 18" x 13". Scott Hocking's photograph of his site-specific installation. (Right) Shaina Kasztelan, *Regurgitate*, acrylic and resin on canvas, 8" x 10." Photos courtesy of 1XRun.





(Left) Nic Norton, *Cautionary Tale #1*, Mixed media on canvas. Playground Detroit. Photo: K.A. Letts. (Right) Bre'ann White, *Untitled (Definition of Red Series)*, digital photographic print, 40" x 51". Photo: Playground Detroit.

Murals in the Market, now entering its 5th year with over 125 murals installed throughout Eastern Market and beyond, is a natural outgrowth, Cory explains, of 1XRun's relationships with its printmakers, many of whom are muralists who travel and paint internationally: "The goal of the mural festival is multi-faceted. What we learned from other festivals, the best ones that we had gone to, was that they would teach people about their culture, why they were there. [Murals in the Market] provides an opportunity for our friends, neighbors and people that we are inspired by locally to have a significant amount of exposure and priority in the festival. That's really critical to our mission."

"We're bringing in people...who travel the world," Cory continues, "We introduce them [to Detroit artists] and they become friends, and the [Detroit artists] can teach the visiting artists a little about who we are as people, what our city is like, what we're like culturally ... and they become ambassadors for our city. We've created this really unique opportunity that gives local artists as much credibility as it does to the international traveling artist. We don't have any hierarchy."

In 2017, 1XRun found itself in transition. They had outgrown their building in Eastern Market and needed to find a larger space--and one in better condition--to house their growing print operation and accommodate their expanded needs for storage. They also welcomed the opportunity to rethink their business plan and develop new programs that would be possible in a larger space. So they sold their Eastern Market building in

2017 and moved to a much larger commercial location in Islandview, near Tyree Guyton's landmark Heidelberg Project.

They are hard at work now, developing a partnership with Guyton called Heidelberg 3.0, with plans for a gallery/performance space/café and bar called Spotlight to be curated and run by 1XRun chief operating officer Roula David. To cap it all off, 1XRun recently bid on and won a contract with the City of Detroit to supervise the new City Walls project, Detroit's first government-sponsored art project since 2000, when Detroit's Department of Cultural Affairs was disbanded.

The one constant for 1XRun seems to be change. "Do we have to continue to do the same thing forever?" asks Corey. "I don't think so. Do we have to do the same thing next month as we did this month? That's not in our DNA."

PLAYGROUND DETROIT

In stark contrast to 1XRun's populist approach is one of Detroit's newest and shiniest galleries, PLAYGROUND DETROIT. The elegantly-appointed commercial gallery has landed, like an exquisite alien spacecraft, on a fairly desolate stretch of Gratiot Avenue, one of Detroit's main thoroughfares. Part independent gallery, part talent incubator, and open for one year, it is owned and operated by art entrepreneurs Samantha Schefman and Paulina Petkoski.

The two have roots in Detroit and decided a few years ago to come back to the city to support the art

community here. Schefman lived in New York City for a time and worked in Chelsea's elite galleries before returning to make her mark in the Motor City's contemporary art scene. She describes her decision as both pragmatic and idealistic.

"I had at the time become a little disenchanted with New York," she says, "and realized all the artists we were working with here [in Detroit] really needed support on the ground." She continues, "I wanted to do something bigger, and I didn't want to do it in a shoe-box space where we couldn't show much of anything, where we couldn't frankly afford to do anything. So, a lot of it was about price, but it was even more about community."

Although Playground Detroit represents artists who live and work in Detroit, Schefman dismisses the idea that there is a particular sensibility inherent in the work made here. "I don't think there's a New York look and I don't think there's an L.A. look. I don't see that. I see such a wide range of work out of every city."

When pressed, Schefman admits there is such a thing as a Detroit look "But I would say that it's true, more so, in the public art spaces," she says, referencing public art installations by self-taught artists such as Olayami Dabls' MBAD African Bead Museum and Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project.

Judging by the accomplished artworks lining the gallery walls, it's clear that the artists represented by Playground Detroit would feel at home in New York,

Los Angeles or any major American city. As a group, they are mostly young, many of them graduates of Detroit's College for Creative Studies or other top area institutions.

They speak the language of the art world fluently, and their work is certainly on a par in quality with anything to be found on the coasts. The only thing they don't share with their coastal compatriots are high prices. Schefman points out that Playground Detroit focuses on representing young Detroit artists whose work is priced below 10k, prices that make their work attractive to a growing audience of young collectors.

American Riad: Social Art Practice at Work

Over coffee at Cafe 1923 in Hamtramck, artist/community activist Ulysses Newkirk makes the wry observation that "art is the bulldozer of gentrification." A life-long resident of Detroit's in-transition North End, Newkirk views projected improvements in the neighborhood with a mixture of hope and apprehension. He is a member of the Oakland Avenue Artists Coalition, which has teamed up with the international collective Ghana Think Tank, a local faith-based non-profit, Central Detroit Christian (CDC), and others to design and run a project they are calling American Riad.

Ghana Think Tank, a well-intentioned and energetic group that aims to solve major social and environmental problems by connecting the first world with the third world, is leading the project. They gather

Ghana Think Tank/artist's rendering of American Riad. Photo courtesy of Ghana Think Tank.





(Left) Olayami Dabls, MBAD African Bead Museum, permanent art installation. Photo: Knight Foundation. (Right) Said Dokins, mural at Murals in the Market. Photo: K.A. Letts.

individuals from various developing countries, often those most affected by first world interventions, to create third world think tanks.

These, in turn, identify some of the developed world's most vexing social and environmental problems and propose innovative solutions based on third world perspectives. The audacity and complexity of Ghana Think Tank's animating concept is matched by their fundraising prowess. They show an impressive ability to bundle matching funds and grants from governmental and cultural sources that enable their visionary projects to move forward.

Ghana Think Tank has tackled Islamophobia in Houston, immigration on the California/Mexico border and worldwide climate change, to name a few of their projects. They have now come to Detroit's North End for their most ambitious and sustained effort, American Riad.

American Riad is designed in collaboration with Moroccan and Indonesian think tanks to combat social isolation, a problem they feel is exacerbated by America's obsession with privacy and the single family dwelling. The design, inspired by Islamic architectural forms, includes a covered courtyard of pierced metal columns surrounding a garden for the North End neighborhood. Their plan includes an adjoining 8-10 units of affordable housing and 6 businesses with a single entrance to encourage social interaction.

The project partners expect that the graceful stainless-steel sculptures and open space will provide a public venue for gatherings, workshops, gardening, performances and the display of local and international art. Newkirk, an enthusiastic proponent of youth arts education, hopes that eventually the skills that

are learned in the context of building the project can translate into long-term employment for community youth.

Project members also hope that American Riad will prevent gentrification and displacement, a goal that seems, on its face, to be somewhat self-contradictory given the undeniable boost that well-designed public art often gives to real estate values in a changing neighborhood. It's hard to expect so many ambitious—and possibly competing—goals to be realized within a single project.

The project partners are aware of the inherent pitfalls but calculate that the potential benefits outweigh any unintended negative consequences. Even if only a portion of American Riad's idealistic social agenda is met, it will be a win for the community.

Detroit-on-the-rebound

One of the dubious advantages of building up a city from physical and financial ruin is an abundance of space for creativity. With cheap real estate and a steady supply of young creatives coming out of Wayne State University, the College for Creative Studies, and nearby Cranbrook Academy of Art, Detroit-on-the-rebound is enjoying an infusion of creativity and do-it-yourself optimism. The story of contemporary art in Detroit is being written right now, one project, one painting, one performance at a time. ■

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Art in Chicago: A History from the Fire to Now

University of Chicago Press, 2018

History is a funny thing. The significance of events in history can be measured by their impact. How much money was made or lost? How were laws upheld or challenged? How many people show up? How many died? But even events of great consequence can slip through the cracks. The history of art is even more vulnerable to this kind of informational bottleneck, but the recently published *Art in Chicago: A History from the Fire to Now* offers insight into the overlooked cultural history of one of America's great cities.

Chicago earned the nickname "Second City" for a number of reasons not exclusive to, but still suggestive of the idea that it stands in the shadow of the vast metropolis of New York, New York. It is not without good reason that, when we think of the great achievements of modern American artists, we think of New York. There were great artists who produced great works there and are lauded to this day.

But time and critical discourse have shown us that a select group of critics favored a select group of artists to elevate in status and public profile. Without getting too deep into the weeds of how patrimony dictated the furthering of modernist western values, I will just say that much has changed in the way that the history of art is written, and the changes are recent.

Notions of formal and conceptual strength and aesthetic value have been re-examined and further democratized in the 21st century. The circulation of images and ideas has leveled the cultural hierarchy, leaving the high-end contemporary art market more confused and dislocated than it has ever been in modern times. Though this has not made the lives of artists much easier, the role art plays in social and political discourse is highly active. With exhibitions in Chicago like the Smart Museum's "The Time is Now!" or the Chicago Cultural Center's "African American Designers in Chicago: Art, Commerce and the Politics of Race" gaining national attention, we are seeing how a facet of American art history is being unearthed, re-examined, and re-presented.

In the introduction to *Art in Chicago*, the book's editors, Maggie Taft and Robert Cozzolino, allude to the past to set the scene for Chicago's future. The 1933/34 Century of Progress world's fair in Chicago recreated

the home of Afro-Caribbean trapper and city founder, Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable, presenting it as a dingy log cabin when, in truth, this man, who ran a successful trading post, also kept a collection of fine objects. The objects omitted from the world's fair display included two paintings, mirrors, and windowed French cabinets.

Taft and Cozzolino go on to describe a kind of anxiety around the role of culture in Chicago. The contentious reception to the arrival of modernist abstraction has been well-documented in art history, but the reactions to the seminal Armory Show in New York were amplified to extremes in the reaction to Chicago's own "International Exhibition of Modern Art" at the Art Institute. Community leaders denounced the exhibition, and some even sought bans. Students of the Art Institute even held a bizarre mock trial of a caricature of Henri Matisse for "art crimes" and burned reproductions of *Blue Nude*. That these reactions earned Chicago a reputation for lacking in cultural sophistication is likely a contributing factor in keeping the city on the margins of America's art historical narrative.

This reputation may have been to its benefit, however. The book makes a persuasive proposal that Chicago, as a metropolitan art center, was and still is ahead of the curve. The activist spirit and diversity of Chicago, paired with its dismissal by the art world elites, may have enabled this city to be the incubator for much of what we see in contemporary art today.

John Pitman Weber and Oscar Martínez, *People of Lakeview Together*, 1972 (now destroyed). Photograph: Georg Stahl Mural Collection, University of Chicago Library.



Social practice art was arguably born in Chicago with Jane Addams' Hull House project, while more traditional art practice like painting and sculpture showed early signs of radical form in works such as Manierre Dawson's 1913 painting *Untitled (Wharf under Mountain)* or the precisely crafted miniature rooms of Narcissa Niblack and Frances Glessner Lee.

An "outsider" mentality continued to manifest itself in Chicago as artists like Nancy Spero and Leon Golub rejected the perceived position of New York as the leading representative of modern art. They were not just rejecting the economy of the art world but also the notion that one school of thought could be representative of this world. It was during the late '50s through the '70s that artists in Chicago chose not to accept the reign of abstract expressionism as the sole mode for aesthetic production.

In addition to Spero and Golub, artists such as Ivan Albright, Evelyn Statsinger, and Ray Yoshida remained dedicated to the exploration of figuration and allusions to cultural forms both old and new. Pop cultural and mass production were explored through material concerns, yielding works like Albright's *Poor Room* and H.C. Westerman's *Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea*, which were couched in symbolism more so than detached minimalism.

This tendency toward artistic practice driven by the extraction and manipulation of cultural material is a defining characteristic of Chicago's art legacy. Carried forward in traditional forms by artists like Yoshida, Yoshida's Hairy Who disciples, and other groups like Momentum and AfriCOBRA, this mode of production would reconnect with the socially interactive roots that have characterized Chicago's conscious consideration of the role of culture in society. This is profiled in Rebecca Zorach's chapter, "Making Space: 1961-1976," wherein she chronicles the emergence of organizations and collectives that elevated and defined black artists in Chicago, resisting not only the Eurocentric modern art world but the ways in which boundaries of physical and cultural space were drawn to exclude the black community.

Zorach's tracing of the complexities of physical and cultural space led by organizations like OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture) are yet another marker of how Chicago has been at the forefront in generating forms of practice that, during their time, were not considered to be art by elite decisionmakers of the time but which are today being taught in higher education and deployed by artists around the world.

This kind of activism and organization around culture and the democratization of artistic authority for which art paved the way did not exclude traditional media. Instead, it took them to the streets with murals that brought the Black and Latinx communities into the Chicago art world with vigor. Though not all of the street murals of the 1970s are still on view today, anyone who spends time in Chicago will notice not only the sheer quantity of murals but also a mural culture that is boldly placed and meticulously crafted.

Many cities, particularly NYC and LA, have thriving public art scenes. But Chicago is unique in how the city itself feels like a museum turned inside out. Having this history in print breathes even more life into this ongoing outdoor exhibition on Chicago's city walls.

Decades of art, being utilized as the means of advancing social discourse and elevating communities, not only reshaped the social fabric but transformed artistic practice. In past issues of the *Examiner*, we have delved into notions of exhibition as form and the cyclical feedback loop between the making, display, and discussion of artwork.

Chicago generated and still has a bustling community of artists who also organize exhibitions and write about art (myself included). The contributing authors and editors of *Art in Chicago* do not merely chronicle the recent progress and issues that arise around this unique but fickle economy; they also present tangible dialogue between artists, writers, and curators in an extensive series of interviews that comprise the latter half of this book.

I have barely been able to touch on the wealth of knowledge and history this comprehensive text has to offer, let alone the cultural ambitions that can be garnered from the discussions in it, which include Tempestt Hazel, Theaster Gates, Chris Ware and Michelle Grabner, just to name a few. It is a resource and reference that feels essential not only to anyone who is interested in art but also to anyone who is interested in urban life and culture, as well as politics and history.

I can't help but refer back to Chicago's old "Second City" nickname and its implication that Chicago will forever exist on the margins of the cultural vanguard. If someone still believes the center of the art world has stayed fixed, despite the radical changes brought on by globalization in the 21st century, this same person may see this book as a grasp at relevance. They would be sorely mistaken.

Continued on page 26.

R.S. Johnson: A Different Kind of Art Dealer

by Tom Mullaney

R. Stanley Johnson is not a name familiar to most Chicagoans. Yet, he is a highly regarded dealer, art historian (the identity he prefers) and publisher. The R.S. Johnson Fine Art Gallery's origins date from 1955. It has occupied space on North Michigan Avenue since 1963, when it was headed by R. Stanley Johnson's father. Its former second-floor windows (now upstairs on the ninth floor) usually highlighted exhibits of master drawings by Dürer, Chagall, or Picasso or stellar group shows of works dating from the Renaissance.

I often read those exhibition titles and wondered what lay inside its front doors. So, one day about a quarter-century ago, I took an elevator ride to the second floor and was met by Stanley who, without inquiring about my financial means or art knowledge, proceeded to give me an impromptu lecture about the art on the walls by masters dating from the 15th century up to Picasso. My knowledge of how to view prints, their various editions, series and pulled states dates from that meeting.

In the last issue, I interviewed two long-time Chicago gallerists, Rhona Hoffman and Carl Hammer. We did not have space to run my conversation with Stanley. Yet, Stanley is a singular gallerist in several respects who deserves this separate interview. His tenure in the Chicago's art world dates from 1968, longer than the other directors. He led quite an adventurous life prior to making art his life work.

Most tellingly, he and his wife Ursula, a fellow art historian, not only research artists but are collectors who own their inventory, which set them apart from other gallery directors. He is renowned in the trade, with sales to more than 90 museums, and is the only North American art dealer decorated as an Officer of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture. The only other Chicagoans so honored are Art Institute curator, Gloria Groom, and former museum director, Douglas Druick.

Tom Mullaney (*New Art Examiner*): When did you begin your career as a gallerist, and where was the first gallery located?

R. Stanley Johnson: My father founded the gallery at 424 South Michigan Avenue and then he came up here (645 N. Michigan Avenue) in 1963.

TM: You did not join the gallery until 1968. But I understand you had a fascinating background before starting your art career phase.

RSJ: Correct. I spent one year in South America in Lima, Peru and two at Mexico City College studying archeology. Then I was 15 years in Europe, including four years in Vienna (two years as an American Liaison Officer, when Stanley says "I was a spy" for the CIA).

Stanley also described his years in Innsbruck, Austria where he met his future wife, Ursula. They both studied art history at the University of Vienna and then moved to Paris, where they married in 1960.



TM: What was your life like in Paris during that exciting period?

RSJ: It was an extraordinary experience to live in the Latin Quarter in the 1950s and 1960s. Our first home there, at no. 29 on the rue de Verneuil, was a very simple sixth floor walk-up (cold water only). We had a side window looking down the rue de Beaune across the

Seine and to the Louvre. What could be more inspiring for a pair of budding art historians than to wake up in sight of the Louvre?

At my philosophy professor's apartment, I met composer Pierre Boulez. We kept crossing paths with actors Catherine Deneuve and Jean-Paul Belmondo. We sometimes encountered artist Max Ernst at a small café on the rue de Seine. We met Pablo Picasso, with his piercing eyes, at his dealer Daniel Kahnweiler. We discussed the intricacies of existentialism with Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel in their classes at the Sorbonne, the College de France or at the more casual Café de Flore. We could not afford the snobbish Brasserie Lipp, but often had our meals, instead, in the nearby student bistros and creperies.

TM: When did you decide to follow your father in the art business?

RSJ: I never made that decision. I came into the art business when my father suddenly passed away in 1968. But, between the time I spent at Innsbruck and Vienna, I attended the Sorbonne in Paris, where I spent 10 years. At the Sorbonne, I was a student of the noted Renaissance art professor, André Chastel, and that was a real big deal.

The inner circle of Chastel's students, besides ourselves, included Pierre Rosenberg, who became the director of the Louvre, Françoise Cachin, who became head of the Musée d'Orsay, and so on.

TM: But, unlike nearly all other dealers, you are a private collector. So, what gave you that idea, your dad?

RSJ: Yes, he bought things and kept them. We showed our Cubist collection in 1991. And then, another high point in early 2017, we showed 150 works from our collection at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, England (founded 1681, 100 years before the Louvre) in the exhibition "From Degas to Picasso."

We had 55,000 visitors at Oxford. Then we sent the whole collection to the Milwaukee Art Museum, where they established a new attendance record of 59,000 visitors for a total of 114,000 museum visitors at both museums.

[Ed. note: the *New Art Examiner* reviewed the show in its January/February 2018 issue.]



Duilio Barnabè, *Sitting Figure*, circa 1950. This painting is part of the Johnson's private collection of more than 500 works.

TM: You say you never sell works from your private collection, which consists of over 500 works of art. But you sell other artists' works, don't you?

RSJ: Yes. We sell contemporary works. We collect works by who we consider great artists, like Degas, Picasso, Manet.

TM: You began the gallery in 1968. Go back in time and tell me what the Chicago art world was like back then.

RSJ: It was a smaller circle of galleries back then. Since that time, we have sold works to 90 museums, which is more than any other art gallery in America.

TM: You also publish catalogues. This catalogue on your desk, “Flying Over Paris,” is your 175th catalogue. Is that true?

RSJ: Yes, the 175th. We do this because both Ursula and I are art historians.

TM: When you started in 1968, is that when you and your wife started the collection, or was it already formed by your father?

RSJ: My father had nothing to do with it.

TM: We are now in the era of art fairs—Expo, Basel—a very different way of learning about and selling art.

RSJ: We have very little to do with the art fairs. The only art fair we participate in every year is the one in New York for print dealers. We do that every year. I did one at Navy Pier a couple of years ago and, actually, Mayor Emanuel made a tour of the 200 galleries and came up to me and said, “Mr. Johnson, you are the best

gallery here.” I said, “I know that! Thank you for telling me.”

TM: Tell me, has the way you do business changed in these times?

RSJ: Not really. We deal with museum-quality works of art. We advertise in *Artnews* and on the Internet. And we do these catalogues too.

TM: So, you [use] the catalogues as a marketing tool. Who do you send them to?

RSJ: Major collectors, every important museum in the United States, every important museum curator gets our catalogue.

TM: What’s the biggest misunderstanding collectors have about the art business? I know you like and have to educate people.

RSJ: Right, right. So collectors have one idea in their mind and they look around for things which they like and within a certain budget and make a decision to buy something. What puts them off in the wrong direction is the category which they’re buying. Most people are buying the wrong category.

TM: Like what wrong category?

RSJ: Old Master Paintings. It’s a bad category because there aren’t any anymore. Those buying old master paintings are making a series of mistakes.

TM: What if they come and they’ve got a category and a price they’re willing to spend, do you have to tell them, “Well, you know, for a little bit more, this is a better category”?

RSJ: Probably a little bit less. The great works of art that we sell are not necessarily expensive. If the collector has a 10-room home, in nine rooms of which there are 36 bare walls and three bare walls in the 10th room but, in one corner, there’s an etching by Goya from the “Cathedral” series. The director of the Louvre would say, “You have a first-class art collection.” But most of the art that one would see if you go into private homes, most of what you’d see is “bad stuff.”

Jean Metzinger, *Young Woman with Dish of Fruit*, 1923. This painting is part of the Johnson’s private collection of more than 500 works.



TM: Is there a sale you've made, aside from Old Masters, that has given you the greatest satisfaction?

RSJ: Well, we sold a collection of 41 Mary Cassatt engravings. We kept the collection together rather than break it down and sell them individually. I felt morally the collection should be kept together as a group. And so, we sold them to one museum in Maine for \$625,000.

TM: What gives you satisfaction today after 50 years in the business?

RSJ: I feel proud of all the exhibitions we have done and museums that have bought from us. And all the knowledge we've imparted to clients who have now become collectors.

TM: Nowadays, do you buy art over the Internet or at shows in Europe?

RSJ: No, right now, we don't buy much in Europe at all. Most of the works we're now buying we are buying back from collectors who had bought from us. We've sold 15,000 art objects, and we know where they all are from the files in our computer. We call people up and ask, "How are things going?" Sometimes the barn has burned down, and we ask "So, do you still have that Rembrandt?" If they do, we say we'd love to buy it.

TM: Tell me the role of your wife in all of this.

RSJ: My wife is a great art historian and also a student of André Chastel. About 40 years ago, Chastel gave a novel to my wife as a present. We never opened that novel since we already had it in our own collection. But on the second page of that novel, there was a dedication to my wife that read, "To my best student." She's a great specialist in the School of Fountainbleu art. I take her advice on works of art with great respect.



Mr. and Mrs. Johnson today.

TM: You are known worldwide, but you're not exactly known in your hometown.

RSJ: Very few people in Chicago understand what we are doing.

TM: Is that frustrating?

RSJ: I couldn't care less. I go home, I do my research, I do all these different things, and that's it.

TM: So, you still have that passion for art?

RSJ: Wildly so. ■

Tom Mullaney is the *New Art Examiner's* Managing Editor. In his career, he has interviewed Art Institute of Chicago Directors James Wood and James Cuno, Phillippe de Montebello at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and museum directors in Minneapolis and Washington, D.C. These are his first published interviews with gallery directors.

Seeing Deeply

University of Texas Press, 2018

With shows currently on view at the Art Institute of Chicago and Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art and with upcoming exhibitions scheduled for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art next fall and the Whitney Museum in 2020, photographer Dawoud Bey is having an extended starry moment. To mark these top-flight openings, the University of Texas Press has issued a sumptuous 400-plus page photo retrospective of Bey's 40-year career.

Seeing Deeply reflects Bey's use of the camera to create a portrait capturing what Bey terms the "interior life" of a person. The subjects of his work tend to be either African-Americans or young people. These demographics are often overlooked or underestimated. The attention of Bey's photographic eye brings out a unique facial expression or gesture in his subjects. Throughout *Seeing Deeply*, readers can follow along with Bey as he tirelessly works with the medium to explore strategies for expressing an increasingly conceptual approach to photography.

Bey is a native New Yorker, born in Queens in 1953. The 1969 exhibition, "Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art has been noted several times as the first moment for Bey's inspiration to make photographs.

Though he navigated from Queens to the Met in order to picket the exhibition, once he was there, the sixteen-year-old Bey saw ordinary people, like those in his own neighborhood, memorialized among relics and other precious objects. In a 2015 TED Talk, he remarked that at that moment, he was given an idea of how to use the camera he had received from his godmother. Fast forward to 1975: Bey heads to Harlem with a small 35mm camera to document the neighborhood his parents had lived in before moving.

Bey studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York and eventually received his MFA in photography from Yale School of Art. He has garnered numerous accolades, including a MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 2017. Bey's artistic influence is doubled as an educator. He has taught many other amazing photographers, including fellow MacArthur grant recipient, Carrie Mae Weems. He is currently a professor of photography at Columbia College Chicago.

Seeing Deeply is organized chronologically in nine sections, beginning with 35mm street photographs from his first project, "Harlem, U.S.A.," and other "small camera works" shot in various locations, including Puerto Rico, Mexico, and New York City. The work shows the early development of Bey's unique style of portraiture. These photographs are dynamic and exciting. Some recall the influence of the field's greats, like Robert Frank, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Roy DeCarava. The best photographs go deeper than the traditional street photograph. The apparent connection Bey has with the subjects shows in their relaxed poses.



Dawoud Bey, *A Young Woman Waiting for the Bus, Syracuse, NY, 1985*. Photo: Art Institute of Chicago.

In the late '80s, Bey began working with Polaroid. At this time, artists could submit a proposal to the Polaroid Corporation to receive free film in exchange for artwork to be added to their vast collection. Polaroid Type 55 film is special because it creates a positive as well as a negative that can be fixed and used to create prints. The resultant photograph has an interesting ghostliness to it because the positive is a unique object and thus the light is captured directly from the subject onto its surface. In his "Type 55 Project," Bey gave the positives to the subjects of the portraits and retained the negative to be reproduced.

Bey's use of light is expert, but it is his use of the frame that truly sets his work apart. The edges of each image in the Type 55 project are carefully considered. There is a light edge around the frame created when the Polaroid is pulled apart. This edge adds a uniform



Dawoud Bey, *A Girl in the Deli Doorway, Brooklyn, NY, 1988*.
Photo: Museum of Contemporary Photography.

frame within the frame that gently embraces the figures. These street portraits feel like captured moments between two people.

The Type 55 series of black and white street photos gives way to large 20x24 inch studio portraits. The studio portraits activate the frame in a vastly different way. The life-size scale of the subjects is made through the piecing together of multiple 20x24 inch frames. The subtle changes give life to the subjects as we are afforded a close look at two moments at the same time. They are reminiscent of cubist paintings.

The top edges of the frames are smeared with the residue of the chemical process. This gives the photographs a painting-like feel. In this project, the material of the photograph is of equal importance to the work as the models in them. It shows a shift Bey has taken with his practice towards a more conceptual approach.

"The Birmingham Project" is evidence of Bey's most conceptual thinking. Reflecting on the tragic bombing of a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, this project memorializes the victims by granting them an extension of life through photography. The photographic element of the project consists of a series of diptychs. There is a young model and an older model both sitting in church. The young model represents a victim of the violent act, at the age when the atrocity occurred. The older model represents the same victim at the age they would have been had their life not been taken.

The casting is quite interesting, as both models, selected from the black community in Birmingham, are believable as versions of the same person. Bey

employs his ability to create a striking image of a person who cannot sit for this portrait and opens up the documentary aspect of photography in a subtle but powerful way.

Bey's photographic career began with street portraits in Harlem. In the recent project "Harlem Redux," Bey revisits the New York City neighborhood and documents its change since the 1970s. In some ways, the style seems a departure from Bey's portrait-making. The images do not engage with people in the frame. The frame is instead activated in clever ways to pick out aspects of the city in flux. Green construction walls obscure whole blocks. The boarded-up windows of the historic Lenox Lounge, which major figures of the Harlem Renaissance frequented, give an eerie feeling.



Dawoud Bey, *Three Men and the Lenox Lounge, Harlem, NY, 2014*. Photo: Stephen Daiter Gallery.

Throughout the images it is made clear that the body and demographics of Harlem have changed drastically. The lack of human engagement, in contrast to the previous collections of work, reflects a degree of cynicism towards the changes happening in this historic community.

Seeing Deeply is the quintessential Dawoud Bey collection. Informative and packed with beautiful reproductions of his best works, it comes at a pinnacle in the career of this influential photographer. ■

Rebecca Memoli

Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her BFA from Pratt Institute and her MFA in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows. Her latest curatorial project is "The Feeling is Mutual."

“Chicago Calling”: A Display of Self-Taught Chicago Artists

With Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrors* commandeering social media platforms, a type of outsider art has penetrated, albeit covertly, the ivy-covered barricades of the mainstream. The series, an array of rooms filled with misshapen geometries and overwhelming neons, is, unbeknownst to most, inspired by the artist’s hallucinations. While Kusama is a popular name in today’s art world, she has voluntarily lived for nearly four decades in what many deem a marginalized space in contemporary society: a mental hospital.

The notion of “outsider art” is a blurry one. It depends on how you define an “insider” and whether you believe either that people can flow between the inside and outside realms, or that certain factors place someone staunchly in one camp. Although not garnering as intense a following as Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrors*, the exhibition at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago’s River West neighborhood, titled “Chicago Calling: Art Against the Flow,” serves as a provocative showcase for ten artists who lived and created at the ragged edge of the art world. Like Kusama, they led a life that many would define as existing on the margins. Unlike her, many of these artists never skyrocketed into the kind of worldwide fame Kusama enjoys. However, many now enjoy mainstream, international recognition.

Afflicted by a combination of poverty, mental illness and art world prejudice, the artists in the show—Henry Darger, William Dawson, Lee Godie, Aldo Piacenza, Pauline Simon, Drossos Skylla, Dr. Charles Smith, Gregory Warmack (Mr. Imagination), Wesley Willis, and Joseph Yoakum—were self-taught, giving their artwork a spunky, untraditional flavor.

Yet their creative endeavors are integral pieces in the history of Chicago, a city that has come to pride itself on its historical celebration of “outsider” or “non-mainstream” art. Intuit has played an essential role in this endeavor. Since its informal opening in 1991, Intuit has hosted 130 exhibitions highlighting artists whose work and personal lives remained outside the hard boundaries of the mainstream art world.

The work of eminent outsider artist Henry Darger appears here in the form of several bold watercolor



Mr. Imagination/Gregory Warmack (American, 1948-2012). *Untitled (bottle cap frame with paintbrush portraits in niches)*, 1995. Bottle caps, paint brushes, wood putty, and paint, 31 x 51 x 6 in. Collection of John Cain. Photography by Kenneth Burkhart. Photo courtesy of Intuit.

paintings. Born in 1892, Darger, like Kusama, spent several years of his life in an institution. In his case, it was the Asylum for Feeble Minded Children in central Illinois, and this haunted early existence permeates his artwork. Two watercolors, both untitled and placed next to each other, portray swaths of naked young women frolicking in the woods. It is a classic scene somewhat evocative of Cézanne’s masterpiece, *Women Bathing*, yet Darger shatters the typical tranquility of the scene by inserting rapacious men who strangle and attack the young women. The result is jarring; a familiar portrayal made brutally violent. Yet, his style of painting is calm, maintaining the playful lines and soft palette in line with the watercolor medium. A satirical ethicality questions: can a horrific act be made beautiful by art?

The colored pencil, crayon, and ink drawings of Joseph Yoakum, also institutionally committed and the most successful artist of the group, serve as a soothing and less morally demanding counterpart to Darger’s shocking scenes. Also utilizing a luscious palette replete with teals, auburns, and soft yellows, Yoakum dismisses scale in favor of line work, presenting compacted landscapes both puzzle-like and immersive. A particularly enchanting piece, *Mt. Seple on Walgreen Coast of Marie Birdland*, takes on a surrealist quality despite using the strictly classical symbols



Joseph Yoakum (American, 1890-1972). *Mt. Seple on Walgreen Coast of Marie Birdland*, Oct. 3, 1969. Pencil, crayon and Ink on paper, 12 x 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (30.48 x 47.63 cm). Collection of Robert A. Roth. Photo courtesy of Intuit.

of trees, mountains, rivers, and suns. Mountains push into perfectly pointed evergreens; a sun with wheelbarrow spokes sets dramatically in a sea of orange. It feels almost like a fairytale land. This is ironic coming from a man who saw much of the real world serving in the horrors of World War I as well as while being part of a traveling circus.

The most evocative work in the exhibition is by Gregory Warmack, a South Side Chicago artist who went by the name of Mr. Imagination. His found material sculptures, made up of bottle caps, buttons, and paint brushes, rival Duchamp's in their lowbrow functionality. A totem pole sculpture that marks the end of the show's circular arc, titled *Women of Somalia*, consists of Black and Brown faces replete with bottle caps, button hairdos and wide, unblinking eyes. The piece is extraordinary, a feat of taking severely average materials and producing something worthy of sitting in a space marked for art. It serves as a symbol for the entire show: good art does not always necessitate fancy materials and studio spaces.

"Chicago Calling: Art Against the Flow" is a testament to the ways in which artwork, despite flouting conventional methods, can contain a universal emotional appeal. Organized simply, with artwork grouped peripherally across the walls into loose themes such as beauty norms, resistance, and landscapes, the works prioritize feel over tradition. Most paintings lack the gloss of an institutionally-displayed piece; the lines and color palettes feel freer and more whimsical rather than steeped in art history and visual jargon.

The only place where the exhibition seemed to falter was in the accompanying wall text. Overwhelmingly plain, the language did not match the vibrant, audacious quality of the artwork. The pairings of artworks sometimes felt forced; the lines whittled down to their simplest forms so as to offer only the smallest amount of context. The accompanying catalogue, however, serves as a robust alternative.

An in-depth curatorial essay by curator Lisa Stone and pithy entries on each artist chip away at the true pulse of self-taught Chicago artists. A remaining issue is that most people who come into the gallery space may not pick up the accompanying catalogue, thus departing with very little additional information. As the artists chosen came from vastly disparate and compelling backgrounds, more information offered via the wall label text would have augmented what is otherwise an extraordinarily visually pleasing—as well as culturally important—exhibition.

Sarah Gabrielle Adler

Sarah Adler is a recent graduate from the University of California, Berkeley. She is currently the gallery assistant at Monique Meloche Gallery, as well as an interpretive planning assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

Art in Chicago (continued from page 18.)

What this illuminating compendium shows us is that Chicago's art history is not the same as that of New York and that Chicago is not simply overshadowed by New York. Instead, Chicago has always been uniquely relevant. In fact, much of Chicago's art history foreshadows our contemporary moment given today's expanded field of social and political discourse, which is both more inclusive and more contentious than in recent decades.

Presenting this history in such a comprehensive format has the potential to serve purposes beyond the recording of recent art history in Chicago. Taft's and Cozzolino's text is one that I and many others will return to while pursuing a deeper understanding of human cultural expression and the ways in which that continues to shape our civilization. ■

Evan Carter is a contributing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He earned his MFA degree in 2017 from the University of Chicago and wrote about documenta 14 in a prior issue of the *Examiner*.

Artistic Collaboration Today

McFarland & Company, Inc., 2018

The visual arts often get stereotyped as pursuits of individual genius and expression. What often gets overlooked are creative groups or teams working together to produce art that could not possibly come from a solo practitioner's workshop, but only through the synergy of a group making creative decisions together. Victor M. Cassidy's new book from McFarland, *Artistic Collaboration Today*, shines a welcome and engaging light on the subject.

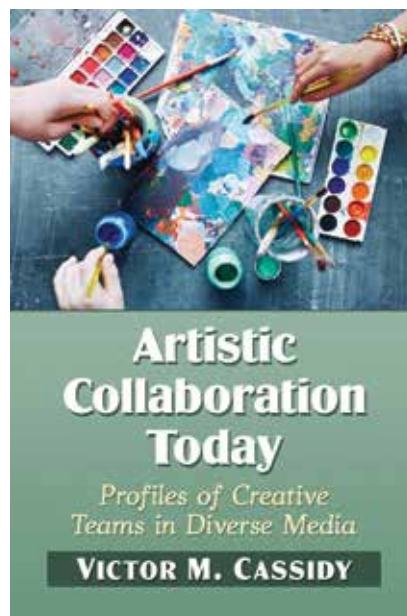
The book's subtitle, "Profiles of Creative Teams in Diverse Media," is an accurate description of what the book delivers: a scholarly and significant introduction to a subject that has not received much coverage. *Artistic Collaboration Today* was an enormous research accomplishment, from the selection of artists to travel plans and miles, to interviews and four years of days devoured by libraries.

As Cassidy points out, production and marketing teams are not artistic collaborations at the point of creative invention, brainstorming and authorship. With this parameter as a basic requirement for journalistic inclusion, the author presents chapters organized by fields of endeavor: "Collaboration in Three Dimensions"; "Paintings and Collagraphs"; "Printmakers"; "Photographers"; "Artists and Architects"; and "Artists and Performers."

Cassidy considered well over a hundred collaborative teams for inclusion and narrowed it down to just a few for each chapter. Most readers will not be familiar with the entire list of artists chosen, and this helps to keep the book fresh and interesting. The author is consistently able to provide fascinating details about each project by conducting studio visits and interviews, sometimes in other countries, and even by hosting guest artists at his home in Chicago.

Cassidy stays focused on facts while offering descriptions of artists and their work. Many readers will be grateful for the lack of dreaded "art speak." A comprehensive study of *Artistic Collaboration Today* will require reading in front of a computer and doing Internet image searches as you contemplate each collaborative project.

The art works are literally and figuratively all over the place, well-chosen, beautiful and engaging. However, this is a paperback, not a coffee table book; there



cannot be enough reproductions, and image quality is quotidian. There is a nice little collection of color inserts in the center of the book, but several images omit artist credits, and those of us who are fond of prying open art books to look at the pictures will be stymied and sent back to the text each time.

A corporate model dominates and structures all facets of contemporary life, so is it possible, desirable or necessary for artists to avoid it? Collaboration is a whole different kind of work from solitary studio practice and lends itself naturally to combinations of media, such as artists working with architects or performers. Painters usually fly solo and often are not keen on sharing authorship.

As to painters, William Wiley's "Three Amigos" (William Wiley, Robert Hudson and Richard Shaw) are described as a brief threesome art fling that never went anywhere. It may have been that Wiley's own overflowing world always co-opts every inch of space, leaving no room to share with others. In a more fruitful marriage of talents that lasted from 1974 until 1988, Californian painter Sam Francis extensively and successfully explored monotype collaborations with print maker and painter Garner Tullis, who did not just do the grunt work of pulling prints, but participated in the creative investigations; still, more readers will think Sam Francis rather than Garner Tullis.

In “Collaboration in Three Dimensions,” Cassidy details the work of Gerda Steiner and Jorg Lenslinger, who create site-specific installations that they describe as “sculptural assemblage.” Their materials include living plants, grown crystals, rubber snakes, pigs’ teeth, seeds and all kinds of stuff. In 2013, Cassidy traveled to the small Swiss farm village of Langenbruck to meet the couple and view their installation *National Park* in nearby Chur, Switzerland. The installation was commissioned as the final exhibition for a soon to be demolished and rebuilt addition to the city’s art museum, Bündner Kunstmuseum, so the artists were free to alter the walls, floors and ceilings. I won’t be a spoiler; just go to the Internet and search for “Steiner and Lenslinger National Park.” It’s wonderful.

In 2000, art dealer and curator Lance Fung considered organizing an exhibition of snow and ice structures in Lapland, Finland. Millions of dollars would be needed to pull it off, so Fung invited two art teams to Lapland for a trial run: sculptor and draftsman Jene Highstein and architect Steven Holl; and Finnish artist Osmo Rauhala, who was partnered with Hani Rashid and Lise Anne Couture (known together as Asymptote).

Ground rules for the invited teams included material composition of at least 80% ice and snow and the proviso that they were not to exceed 1,000 square feet. This “Snow Show” was a hit; Fung was able to raise the millions that were needed to mount a full-scale “Snow Show” in 2003-04, presenting fifteen structures made of snow and ice.

Other collaborative art teams covered in *Artistic Collaboration Today* include Patricia Leighton and Del Geist, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick, Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev, the trio of Wolfgang Buttress, Mark Braund and Tristan Simmonds, Barbara Cooper and Jan Bartoszek, and Catherine Lee and Shay Ishii.

In addition to all of the above-mentioned teams and others presented in six chapters, a collection of several brief descriptions of *already* well-known collaborative teams receive mention in the book’s appendix. These include Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin, Claes Oldenburg

and Coosje van Bruggen, Chris Ofili and David Adaye, and the famous trio of Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns.

Artistic Collaboration Today is a fun and informative introduction to joint artistic production that illuminates several contemporary artistic teams and will inspire readers to explore more works by these artists. Throughout the book, there is so much insider information that the reader is left marveling at how in the world Cassidy got the stories. His detailed bibliography and chapter notes will be very useful to scholars, and this book will no doubt become a resource for other students of artistic collaboration. ■

Bruce Thorn

Bruce Thorn is a Chicago-based painter and musician. He has degrees in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a Contributing Editor with the *New Art Examiner*.

Jene Highstein and Steven Holl, *Oblong Voidspace*, 2000. Photo courtesy of Lance Fung.



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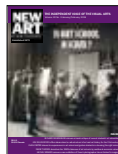
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