



Op-ed Re-Engineering Re-Engineering: Artist-Run Spaces

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The Op-Ed column is a space for readers and contributors to sound off about Art Practical's content and to contribute to the larger conversation about Bay Area art which Art Practical supports.

Re-Engineering is a series of op-ed articles and real-time conversations co-produced by Art Practical and the Gray Area Foundation for the Arts that invites constructive dialogue between the region's art and technology sectors. By bringing together seemingly disparate voices from both communities, these conversations underscore the creative impulses, capacity to take risks, and desire for positive social impact that these groups have in common.

"Re-engineering" is a periodic series of Op-Eds that address art, gentrification and the new tech economy. This is the third installment.

— Aaron Harbour

The San Francisco Bay Area has a long history of artist-run spaces. Many of our local institutions, such as Southern Exposure and Intersection for the Arts, took shape first as artist-run projects. To speak only of spaces as "artist-run" would seem to miss other options, such as curator- or writer-led projects, but in practice the vast majority of independent, not strictly commercial art spaces are operated by practicing artists. These spaces are a big part of the vitality of the Bay Area art scene, popping into existence and sometimes folding just as fast (R.I.P. Sight School, Queens Nails, etc.). They bring with them new vision, ideas, and intentions. At a conference on Institutions by Artists, as I listened to talk after talk about intriguing projects from such far-flung places as Trinidad, Beijing, and Vancouver, I was struck by the similarity of forward-thinking outlook among the presenters, but even more so by how different all of the projects were, each a unique solution to a particular set of circumstances and desires.¹

I run a space with two other people that sits as a hybrid of artist-run space and traditional gallery. So I am far from impartial when I express my excitement for these projects and what they mean for our region. It has been another great year for the opening of new artist-run spaces, despite skyrocketing rent and the growing discontent among the creative community toward the latest tech surge. Each time I think I've taken an inventory of all the new openings, I hear a rumor of another.

My feeling is that art persists, and maybe even thrives, amid adversity. For one reason or another, a previous generation may look at an urban area as no longer suitable, but another wave will find a way to make it work. Artists are disruptive.² And as culpable as communities of artists are for gentrification, by moving into previously off-limits spaces and making them palatable for those who will eventually price the same artists out of the market, they also retain the potential to collaborate, interrogate, détourn, or otherwise form relationships in whatever new situation they find themselves.³

So, with this in mind, I've asked four recently opened art spaces a series of questions about issues pertaining to their origin and place within the Bay Area art scene. There are new spaces opening all the time, so I tried to choose a mixture of projects I am familiar with and those I've only heard about and have yet to visit. Full disclosure: City Limits hosted a show of my collaborative work with Art Practical Associate Editor Jackie Im in its previous location in an Excelsior apartment. Each space has very individual agendas, aesthetics, and approaches to its exhibition-making practices:

- Bicoastal artist Kirk Stoller's c2c is a way to make a bridge between his two home communities: "For each show, c2c will invite an artist from NYC to come to San Francisco and pair him/her with a Bay Area artist to see what the duo creates."⁴
- 1038 is a project space and contemporary art gallery in San Francisco, run by Diego Villalobos, Rene Franco, Benjamin Ashlock, and Agnes Widbom. The space is unique in that it is a mostly finished garage with a raw-dirt-and-concrete back area.
- Savernack Street, created, directed, and curated by Carrie Sinclair Katz, is "a gallery located in the Mission district exhibiting site-specific works that are experienced through the encounter/event of peering through a reverse peephole."⁵
- City Limits is curated and operated by artists Evan Reiser and Alyssa Block in Oakland, California's Jack London Square. For each exhibition, "emerging Bay Area artists or curators are invited to exhibit new works which deviate from their typical art practice or discipline."⁶

Aaron Harbour: Why now? Why have you chosen to start a space now?

c2c: I've been thinking and planning to open my project space for about two years. It came about now because I felt I needed a vehicle to reengage myself with the art scene in San Francisco. c2c seemed the perfect vehicle... The idea really fit into the makeup of my current life, flying back and forth between San Francisco and New York.

1038: We moved into this house and saw a great deal of potential in the garage as a plausible exhibition site. We saw the opportunity of creating a space where we could showcase art that mattered to us. The quirkiness of certain aspects of the space presented exciting possibilities for future projects to occur. In general, we do acknowledge that this is coming out of a need for upcoming artists to have a site to experiment and exhibit works outside of the school and gallery context.

Savernack Street: I decided as soon as I realized graduate school was over and the main thing I saw other emerging artists doing was applying, applying, applying. Sending their work out. I was so resistant to doing it that, instead of just feeling like a slacker, I started being curious about my reluctance. It came down to [the fact] that applying to shows/contests/residencies/etc. costs money I didn't have, but most of all I hated the disempowered feeling of putting oneself out there and hoping to be chosen. That method is

just not comfortable for me. I've applied to about three shows in my entire art career. Instead of looking at what entities exist already and where my work might fit, I preferred to make a new entity entirely.

City Limits: Why this specific space? A combination of good timing and opportunities. I used to operate a gallery in my apartment, but I had to move under lousy circumstances. Some friends tipped me off about a commercial space that was available, and I couldn't pass it up. Alyssa Block, my partner in the gallery, is also just out of grad school, and we're chock-full of ideas and ambitions for the space.





1038, interior view. Courtesy 1038.

AH:

If your previous answer did not address this, does this relate more to your own needs/desires or to the perceived needs/desires of the region/scene?

c2c:

It was more for personal reasons, really, but I think that I've hit on a niche that will benefit San Francisco. I hope it will demystify New York as well as highlight the strengths of the San Francisco art scene. The point of c2c is to find common ground in the creative pursuits.

SS:

Savernack Street is an extension of my own art practice, so it is by nature driven by my own desires. There is a generous aspect to it in that I've always seen more artists wanting to show their work than receive the opportunity to do so, and I knew one more exhibition space in San Francisco would only help those odds. But the space itself is not simply altruistic because it feeds my own artistic interest in shaping social space and interaction. I've essentially created a sculptural piece in the shape of an operating gallery, and Savernack Street is really a conceptual project of my own more than just a white cube I curate.

CL:

Opportunities are scarce for emerging artists everywhere, but the situation seems especially grim in the Bay Area, where there is a tepid market for contemporary art and few gallerists willing to take chances on less-experienced artists.

Also, there's a definite disconnect between the artists and shows I enjoy in the Bay Area and the museum and gallery shows which are given the greatest attention. There are many vapid curators with no idea what's really going on, and no desire to find out. It frustrates me to find great artists flying completely under the radar.





Savernack Street, exterior view. Courtesy of Savernack Street. Photo: Carrie Katz.

AH:

Speaking of his hometown Detroit in a recent interview, rapper Danny Brown asked the compelling question, "How can you love something if it doesn't love you back?"⁷ Do you feel empowered by the region or do you think of what you are doing as against the grain?

c2c:

I think I feel empowered by the region...at least with the initial response from the artists and viewers who have been to c2c. I really think that there is a curiosity for what is happening in New York, art-wise, and this project helps to satisfy this in a small personal way by bringing one artist from there at a time to introduce them and their work to the Bay Area (and hopefully the reverse will happen, with the New York artist taking the San Francisco artist's work, friendship, etc., home with them).

1038:

We definitely view ourselves as going against the grain—the fact that we are opening a space in our garage, rather than somewhere else, is a reflection of the lack of affordable "space" in San Francisco. We know that there's a rich history of artist-run spaces in the Bay Area, so we know that we are not breaking new ground, however the fact that spaces such as this keep popping up is more indicative of the continuation of this issue and artists wanting to exhibit regardless of a market.

SS:

I feel empowered through the history of the Bay Area and also the inspiration I get from the many amazing endeavors that are happening here right now, even in this difficult moment to be an artist in an expensive city that's growing rapidly more so.

I feel encumbered by the region too, though, because by choosing to live here I need to work several jobs just to survive, and the creative work I do is an additional unpaid job I have to squeeze in somehow. I get very, very little sleep.

CL:

Well, I'm answering this a week before the new location of City Limits officially opens, so it's hard to predict if and when I will ever be loved. I feel totally empowered by the art community I know here, but it's easy to win "cool points" from your friends for opening a space. What's more important to me is that we challenge expectations from the art community, and vice versa. Creating interest and access to our gallery in other communities is also a must, and a much harder task, but we're working on it.

AH:

Art dialogue both online and in person has for a while been dominated by a tech-versus-culture narrative. How do the issues raised by these conversations affect your practice and/or your personal life?

c2c:

Those working in the tech field don't seem to be affected too much about the divide. I've never been one to expect much crossover between the tech world and my own. However, the everyday rise in the cost of living brought on by the tech culture is something that is affecting many friends of mine, mostly with housing prices. The same drama is happening in New York (which probably helped elect their new mayor), but not exclusively with the tech industry. It is still the haves versus have-nots.

1038:

Essentially, it is not an issue of it being either/or. Our society has constantly been modified by technology; the main difference is the pace at which this has occurred and the potential for self-awareness in acknowledging its overall impact in our lives. One of our shows, *I share therefore, I am*, dealt indirectly with the manner in which these narratives are intertwined in regards to how they serve in shaping a person's identity both in the online and offline world. While there is a need to be critical of these narratives, there is also an acknowledgment on our part of the accessibility of the works being presented primarily through the Internet.

CL:

If the tech sector spoke of artists a fraction of as much time as we spend talking about them, we'd be doing pretty good right now. We will be showing a few artists that are interested in this dialogue.





Jennifer Locke. *Dog Object*, 2013; installation

view, Savernack Street. Courtesy of Savernack Street, San Francisco. Photo: Carrie Katz.

AH:

What, if any, responsibility does the non-art world have to foster the creative community?

c2c:

I don't think the non-art world thinks much about it...except for when the uniqueness that they were attracted to in a place is gone because the creative community can't afford to live in that place any longer. I think that it would behoove them to really understand what it is that makes up the environment in which they like to live, to cultivate it and sustain it, instead of simply using it up until it is gone. I'm thinking of the farmer model as opposed to the locust.

1038:

Art has the function of connecting people to their environments; it can inform us of different social issues within our own community and is able to foment a dialogue amongst the art viewers. Simply by the act of being allowed to exhibit in a space is a means to create this connection and outreach.

SS:

Well, let's start with not asking your creative friends/acquaintances to do work for you for free.

CL:

There's no responsibility, to me. I think if the non-art world is charmed or entertained, they should reciprocate by buying or funding work. But this isn't almsgiving, and more people should understand that.

AH:

How do you weigh the financial/labor responsibilities between art space and artist?

c2c:

I am viewing c2c as an extension of my practice, so in that regards, there isn't a difference. I create sculpture by bringing things together, and this project is much like that. However, there are only so many hours in a day (and I only have so much money), so I continue to find a balance that works for me to sustain the studio practice as well as the art space (not to mention the day job). I've limited the space to three shows a year for this reason.

1038:

1038 is a collective effort that is very open and supportive of each other when one of the group proposes an idea or an artist for a show. As a result, we all contribute equally in our responsibilities of running the space. Curators take over primary responsibility in installing their shows, however we all assist in the process as much as we can. Dividing responsibilities amongst us ourselves lessens the workload and allows us to continue developing our own practices.

SS:

Carefully.

CL:

Gallerists need artists and vice versa. Doing this shit is hard. I work full-time right now so I can afford to do this. There is also no guarantee that either gallerist or artist will stand to make any money from a particular show, so it requires sacrifices from both.

Notes

1. Institutions by Artists maintains a wonderful resource of video and text from the event at: <http://arcpost.ca/conference>.
2. Art's ability to create internal logics that conflict both internally and with the outside world seems to me to be one of the methods via which it produces effects beyond itself, captured in moments of disjuncture and irreconcilability. "Disruption" may be the wrong word here, or the wrong word at this time, due to its thorough cooptation by the tech world. See "Stop 'Disrupting' Everything, How a once-useful concept turned into a meaningless buzzword," by Matthew Yglesias on *Slate*, May 1, 2013: http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2013/05/disrupting_disruption_a_once_useful_concept_has_become_a_lame_catchphrase.html.
3. An interesting parallel is kudzu, a fast-growing plant from Japan. Introduced to the United States in the Japanese pavilion in the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia for its potential use in various soil-improvement applications such as improving the topsoil and erosion control (and to several islands during World War II for camouflaging equipment), it escaped and persists to this day as a relentless weed. Its hard seeds may not germinate for years, causing its reemergence long after it is thought eradicated. Artists act similarly, self-importing into new environs and rarely leaving, or more accurately, resisting complete removal.
4. See <http://c2cprojectspace.com/>. Accessed January 7, 2014.
5. See <http://savernackstreet.com/>. Accessed January 7, 2014.
6. See <http://citylimitsgallery.com/about/>. Accessed January 7, 2014.
7. From a *Vice* video interview with Eddie Huang, "Fresh off the Boat, Detroit – Part 1": <http://www.vice.com/fresh-off-the-boat/detroit-part-1#oid=xa2l4Zjq6xgKAyoclyJUuP2PJ7YZlaM>.

