

On the importance of artist-run spaces



Artist and curator Alex Paik on the pleasures and complications of artist-run spaces .

October 10, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2713 words.

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When you meet someone at a party and they ask, "What do you do?" what do you tell them?

I say I'm an artist, and that I also help run [Tiger Strikes Asteroid](#), which is a nonprofit network of artist-run spaces. We have locations in Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. I also curate something called the [Satellite Art Show](#), which is an art fair in Miami. I'm also chief curator at [Trestle Gallery](#), which is another nonprofit in Brooklyn.

You're able to maintain an art practice while still doing all these other things?

Yeah, and I still prioritize that over the other things.

What was it that drew you to doing this other kind of work outside of your regular art practice?

I started the Philadelphia space with a couple of friends, and that urge came out of... not necessarily frustration, per se, but I just wanted to see certain kinds of shows that didn't seem to exist. I wanted to see artists from outside of Philly get shown more in Philadelphia, so it just seemed like we could make a little space and start putting on shows together there. We perceived that there was this need, and it really just started out as a way to address that. There was no master plan to expand into different cities; it was more a way to make a place for ourselves at the table.

Had that been a longstanding point of frustration for you? Not getting your work seen, or noticing other people not getting their work seen?

Yeah, there aren't enough galleries. There's literally not enough wall space for all the artists that are out there making stuff. Maybe there shouldn't be as many artists, but you can't really control that.

Tiger Strikes Asteroid started with one space and then grew from city to city. How did that evolution happen?

A couple of friends and myself started the one in Philadelphia in 2009. It was just a singular space with no plans to expand or anything, but then I moved to New York because my wife got a job up here. At that point, I wouldn't say we were really well known at all, but we had shown a bunch of New York artists, so some had heard the name Tiger Strikes Asteroid. So I was like, "Well, it'd be cool to start a space up here, too." I found another group of people and we just said, "Hey, why don't we just keep the same name and see what happens."

After that, we had people—mostly people who we'd worked with in the past—approach us about starting locations in

Los Angeles and Chicago. Then after those were in the process of opening up, I stepped back and was like, "Oh okay, I guess this is what Tiger Strikes Asteroid is becoming." There's a certain point as a visual artist where the work wants to go a certain place and you can either get out of the way and let it do that, or you can try to corral it into what your idea of what the work should be—and that's kind of how it felt with TSA. I was like, "Okay, it's becoming this thing, so we're just going to get out of the way." It evolved from there.



NY Didier William - We Will Win, 2018

For TSA, what does having an artist-run space actually entail?

The artist-run space community is really about literally creating an alternative to the more commercial art scene. That doesn't mean that we're against commerce per se, but I guess we're kind of adjacent to it. These spaces are generally run by artists. They're also generally curated by artists and for the most part, they're all kind of doing it for free just to have a place where you could show the work of people that you want show and have a place to physically gather and celebrate other artists' work.

I think a lot of these spaces tend to be more experimental in that they aren't reliant on sales to stay afloat. But the flip side of that is that a lot of these spaces generally last for about one lease cycle, so like three years, or maybe five years at the most. They always have this youthful energy, but often they fizzle out. What I'm interested in now is what happens if you're a dinosaur in that world, like Tiger Strikes Asteroid is at this point, and you've been around for like 10 years. What does that mean? Do we just keep doing the same thing? Or is there a way to mature as an artist-run space and still do the things that we want to do?

What has allowed Tiger Strikes Asteroid to sustain itself for so long? Are you doing something differently from other artist-run spaces?

Everything comes down to saving time, in many ways. At this point, the spaces can pretty much run themselves. We have a lot of documentation online. Everybody knows where all the internet passwords are, or where you're supposed to put the press release, blah, blah, blah, so that nobody has to send up stupid emails, like, "Oh, what's the password again?" We don't have to waste time like that.

Also, we have about 44 members now that are spread across the country, so everybody's chipping in a little bit of their time every week. We have the equivalent staff of a small institution. Spreading the workload around keeps us going. With a lot of artist-run spaces, it's generally a few people doing *all* the work. It's tiring after two or three years because you're also not usually making any money. People want to have more time in their studios. So we try to spread the work out as much as possible, so nobody feels overwhelmed.

How do people get involved?

You just show up at some of our spaces and start to be a part of the community. We do get emails about starting spaces in other cities, but if nobody's ever worked with that person in our group, it's going to be hard for that to magically happen really quickly because we're all sharing the load together and we all have to trust each other quite a bit since we can all access bank accounts and things like that. So there has to be a lot of trust involved. But I guess I'd say the first step is just to be around. To show up, you know?



LA Sundial curated by Liz Nurenberg, 2018

When something starts to grow like this and it's happening in multiple cities, does each base sort of become its own little ecosystem? How do you keep the whole thing from becoming unwieldy?

Artist-run spaces are unwieldy. I don't think there's any way to avoid that. The way that we're structured, we

have two co-directors at each site and their task is to keep tabs on what's happening, and then manage the day-to-day stuff. I wouldn't use the word "oversee," but I try to have open eyes and pay attention to what is happening at every site. I try not to get too involved, especially with the programming. Each site is pretty much independent in terms of their programming.

We have quarterly meetings where all the co-directors from each site get together and we talk about network-wide stuff and try to get updates from each site. We have those meetings, but we are always working online and updating each other online through email, or Slack, or text messaging, or whatever. So yeah, it's a little unwieldy.

For me, as long as I'm not trying to control every little detail, as long as I'm not trying to micromanage, then I trust that it will work out. It could end up that things won't always be exactly how I personally would do it, but I think that's good because then each site can really take ownership of their part of the group and that is kind of the key to keeping people involved. If they feel invested and have some ownership, they're more likely to continue.

Is relinquishing control a hard thing to do?

Yeah, it's really hard. My instinct is often to just do things myself, like, "Fine, I'll just do it. Don't worry." But over the years I've seen that it's important, at least for Tiger Strikes Asteroid, that I lead with a really loose hand. It sometimes ends up actually making more work for me, but I think for the health of the organization, it's better. Each site kind of has their own personality too, which has also been interesting to deal with. I've learned that the West Coast stereotype is very real, and so is the East Coast stereotype.

Do you feel like the idea of also being a curator—having a stake in what other kinds of art gets shown—is something that a lot of artists actually crave?

I think a lot of artists feel pretty helpless about their careers a lot of the time because it can feel so random. Maybe you're just in the right place at the right time, and you get a good review or you get some people interested in your work, but then in five years you kind of disappear. I think it's frustrating as an artist to not really see how things work since there's not really a ladder. There's not really something like, "Oh, if I show here, then I'll show here, then I'll show here." It really doesn't work like that. I think artists want to feel like they have some sort of power in the way that their art is shown and the way that all art is shown in general.

The art world is very symptomatic of larger societal problems in terms of race and sexism and wealth inequality. I think that artist-run spaces and spaces like ours are just trying to carve out a little part of the art world that we all can feel good about. It's still imperfect, but I feel very fortunate to be a part of this community.



PHL Anachronism and Liberation curated by Mary Henderson and Jane Irish, 2017

How much does the work that you do for Tiger Strikes Asteroid impact your own creative practice? How do you strike a balance between the two?

I don't know. I don't think there is a balance. It's just like whenever you're doing something, you're consciously not doing something else. Does that make sense? I was teaching, but then when we had our daughter it just didn't make sense financially for me to keep teaching, so I became a stay-at-home dad. I lost a lot of studio time, but when I was taking care of my daughter, the other stuff had to take a back burner, which was fine. If you try too hard to balance *everything*, it'll never work out. You just try to be present in whatever sort of task that you're doing in the moment, whether you're in the studio or answering emails or whatever. You should just focus on doing that part and not worry about trying to devote equal amounts of time to everything. It was making me kind of insane to try and do that.

What advice do you have for young artists, particularly those who maybe aren't in a big city and are trying to figure out what to do? Is it about starting up your own thing and creating a space with other like-minded artists?

That can help. I could answer this question two ways. I think that first of all, artists need studio space and then they need community. They have to figure out a way to find those things and have a balance between them. If you live in the middle of nowhere, you can have a giant studio space but there's a very small community. If you live in a place like New York, you have a very small studio space—if you can have one at all—but the community is basically infinite. Knowing that and figuring out how to balance those two needs is important.

I think for young artists managing expectations is really important. I'd say they probably need to change their terms of success, or what their idea of success or "making it" looks like. Almost no visual artist makes a living

off of their work at this point, even the ones who are showing in big museums and stuff. If people are lucky enough to get good gallery representation, maybe that'll be for five years and then the gallery will close. Or maybe you'll have a good run where you're showing all over the place for a couple of years and then people kind of forget about you.

So if you change your definition of success to something like, "Hey, I want to be really old and still be making work and still be excited to go into the studio because there are new questions and new problems that I want to explore," maybe that is healthier. That is what I'm trying to steer my life towards. That really will be a successful run. So whatever it takes to get there is fine. If you have to wait tables for the rest of your life, but you still get lots of studio time, that's fine. That's still very successful because you get to make work.



CHI Manatee curated by Meg Duguid, 2018

What will happen next for Tiger Strikes Asteroid? Will there be other new spaces in new cities? What do you feel like is on that horizon?

I'm not sure, really. We just became an official nonprofit last year, so we're still figuring that out. We've gotten a few small grants, but hopefully we can start getting bigger grants to fund some of our more crazy ideas. And yeah, maybe another space or two will open up in the next five years or so—that's tough to say.

I feel like our shows have been getting more and more weird and ambitious because we're all kind of competing, but in a healthy way. Some of us will show together and be like, "Fuck, that's a really good show." Then you feel like, "Alright, my show is gonna be really good, too." It's just been getting more and more interesting and it's less like these big group shows with just a bunch of medium-scale paintings on the wall. There are a lot more exciting and interesting things going on now, conceptually and materially. I'm hoping that the shows continue to

go in that direction. I'd like to show more established artists and try to make the programming more intergenerational, which is something that we've been talking about as a group. I've been talking a lot about how we can make our programming more diverse across the board and how we can do that without it coming off as tokenism or something.

We've shown a few established and mid-career artists and I think it's really cool to put their work in the context of some younger artists and some artists that are slightly older. That makes the shows more rich than just being like, "Hey, here are 10 artists under 30!," or whatever. This is why we got into it in the first place -art allows you to have conversations with people that span generations. You can have a real connection with somebody that lived and died 200 years ago. Art has the ability to cross time in that way, which is exciting.

Here are 5 artist-run/alternative spaces I've been interested in recently:

Ortega y Gasset (Brooklyn, NY)

We Buy Gold (New York, NY)

FJORD (Philadelphia, PA)

J AUS (Los Angeles, CA)

Gray Contemporary (Houston, TX)

Name

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Vocation

Artist, Curator



Photo by Jen Maler