

**ART IN VACANT STOREFRONTS:
A NEW ARENA FOR CREATIVE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract: Pop-up galleries are appearing with growing regularity in cities like New York, San Francisco and Chicago. The practice of placing art in vacant storefronts, while seen as preferable strategies by landlords and community stakeholders who might otherwise face emptiness, vandalism or neglect, has also been employed as strategy to beautify neighborhoods, draw pedestrian traffic to commercial areas, attract new tenants, and provide much needed exhibition space for artists. However, there is value in this trend beyond its ability to solve the problems at hand. In fact, some artists use empty storefronts as sites for creative research and development, “laboratories” for experimentation. Reminiscent of the alternative, artist-run spaces that rose to prominence in the 1970s, today’s omnipresent pop-up galleries can potentially fill some of the void left by the National Endowment for the Arts when it stopped funding experimental spaces for artists. This paper aims to determine the significant merits of the pop-up gallery trend in a comparison of this practice to earlier artist-run organizations; an examination of both practices as sites for creative research and development; and a discussion of the benefits and limitations for artists who exhibit work in vacant storefronts, facilitated by various organizational models.

Introduction

Art installations or exhibitions in vacant storefronts, otherwise known as pop-up galleries, are appearing with growing regularity in cities like New York, San Francisco and Chicago. A sign of the times, these temporary projects seem to offset the abundance of empty storefronts in urban centers, a very public manifestation of today's economic woes. The practice of placing art in vacant storefronts, while seen as preferable strategies by landlords and community stakeholders who might otherwise face emptiness, vandalism or neglect, has also been touted as a beautification campaign that draws pedestrian traffic to commercial areas and that even has the potential to attract new tenants. In addition to all these benefits enjoyed by property owners and community stakeholders, empty storefronts provide much needed exhibition space for artists looking for experience and exposure. Upon first glance, this practice solves problems for and serves the interests of disparate interest groups. The increasing popularity of pop-up galleries, as well as the recent advent of pop-up restaurants and shops, however, suggests there is value in this trend beyond its ability to solve the problems at hand. A closer look at this practice, in fact, reveals that some artists use empty storefronts as sites for creative research and development, "laboratories" for experimentation.

It is not a new concept that artists need space to test new ideas. Beginning in the 1970s and throughout the 80s and mid 90s, alternative, non-commercial arts spaces like Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago played an important role in the development of emerging artists' careers, and in some cases, provided entry for these artists into the larger cultural community. These organizations were supported by the National Endowment for the Arts as part of its mandate to nurture the growth and development of the nation's artists. Following the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 90s, however, the National Endowment for the Arts stopped awarding

grants to artist-run, experimental art spaces. Without federal funding, many of these organizations failed, leaving artists without adequate space to experiment and develop their ideas before entering the commercial market or institutional world.

Today's omnipresent pop-up galleries can potentially fill some of this void, and more. Like the artist-run spaces that rose to prominence in the 1970s, these temporary and informal art projects potentially fulfill a vital set of needs for artists; at the same time, they provide advantages for landowners and other urban stakeholders. As the practice of placing art in vacant storefronts becomes increasingly popular, this paper aims to determine its significant merits. Specifically, I will compare the benefits of this practice to earlier artist-run organizations; examine both practices as sites for creative research and development; and discuss the benefits and limitations for artists who exhibit work in vacant storefronts, facilitated by various organizational models. This study of art in vacant storefronts will demonstrate why this practice has value beyond its role as a reaction to the economic climate and how it fits into contemporary visions for cultural policy which advocate for the arts as part of economic policy.

The Rise of the Pop-Up

Empty storefronts are among the most clear and obvious symptoms of an economic recession. Property owners, chambers of commerce, and municipal agencies, as well as artists and art collectives, have responded to the stagnant commercial real estate market by joining forces in unlikely partnerships to make better use of the plethora of empty storefronts. These solutions often result in what is widely known as “pop-up galleries,” temporary projects in spaces not typically used for the purpose of displaying or promoting art. The practice has also spread to include retail and restaurant concepts, further demonstrating how some view these empty spaces as opportunity, instead of problem. Garnering much attention from the media, pop-up projects have been touted as win-win solutions for everyone involved. For property owners, having something in their windows is better than nothing at all. Retail districts benefit from the energy and pedestrian traffic drawn to their areas. Pop-up galleries have been compared to beautification initiatives and attributed with attracting new tenants. The practice is relatively inexpensive for artists, retailers and restaurateurs alike, while providing much needed exposure, marketing power, and exhibition space. Overall, there are many benefits to pop-up projects for all involved.

Empty storefronts are prevalent in cities all over the world. According to a November 2010 article for *Crain's New York Business*, the retail availability rate was 13% nationwide and 8.4% in New York City as of the third quarter¹. In Chicago, *Chicago Real Estate Daily* reported an even more worrisome vacancy rate of 13.6% in Chicago's Loop district in 2010². Although this rate has recently declined, and most agree the economy is slowly improving, these empty spaces are daily reminders that the recession is not over yet.

¹ Cole, "Vacancies Hold Steady," *Crain's New York Business*.

² Baeb, "Loop Retail Vacancies Tumble," *Chicago Real Estate Daily*.

For a variety of reasons, pop-up galleries are often viewed by developers, chambers of commerce, and property owners as positive, if temporary, alternatives to the eyesores their vacant properties have become. If not used for temporary projects, these empty spaces potentially face neglect, vandalism and dereliction. According to Kelly Kleiman in a May 2010 article for the *New York Times*, “although the trend does not signal a sudden cultural awakening among business owners, many of them consider the displays preferable to papered-over or blacked-out windows.”³ Landlords are eager to take what they can, and renting out their properties for short and limited periods of time produces more income than none at all. In some cases, reflecting particularly agreeable negotiations, landlords and temporary tenants consent to terms that will contribute to the upkeep of the property. Artist Simon Tarrant, who founded Queen’s Elm Artists, a collective in London that matches artists with empty storefronts, drafted one agreement with a landlord where “he would pay for all utilities and return the property in the same or better condition than when the collective moved in.”⁴ In Brooklyn, Jed Walentas, of the development company Two Trees Management, offers empty space to artists specifically because they are the kind of problem-solvers who can react quickly to the situation at hand. He says, “the question is who can you find that’s going to make an investment in a space with that level of uncertainty, and often it’s the artist.”⁵ In another case, a temporary art project was specifically intended to prevent crime in a depressed urban area. In February 2010, a project organized by the Designing Out Crime Research Centre at the University of Technology aimed to “use art to fight crime,”⁶ in a particularly dangerous and abandoned alley in Sydney,

³ Kleiman, "What to Do With an Empty Storefront?" *The New York Times*.

⁴ Werdigier, "Art Pops up in Vacant Spaces," *The International Herald Tribune*.

⁵ Cardwell, "Luring Artists to Lend Life to Empty Storefronts," *The New York Times*.

⁶ Corderoy, "Crime-fighting Plans for Art in Dark Laneways." *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Australia. Despite the short-term nature of these plans, the impact of these pop-up projects would ideally be long-lasting.

Additionally, as commercial development slows, urban stakeholders- including developers, chambers of commerce, and property owners- want to make sure their neighborhoods remain active. It is in their best interest to maintain the energy of the retail district, even when new projects fail or pause due to lack of funding. For example, Veronika Belenkaya of New York's *Daily News* chronicles a group of independent retailers in Brooklyn who were "booted by a developer to make room for a glitzy new, \$208 million commercial and residential complex." To keep the area alive while the project temporarily stalled, "the Willoughby Windows art show in prime retail space in Downtown Brooklyn mask[ed] the eyesore of a ghost retail corridor created," by the big developer.⁷ The aforementioned Two Trees group, also of Brooklyn, agrees it is important to keep people coming to their neighborhood; a spokesperson for the company said, "any sort of activity is better than no activity."⁸ The hope is that once the economy speeds up, the neighborhood will already be a destination for potential customers.

For a number of reasons, then, it is understandable why neighborhood stakeholders are looking for creative solutions to their problems. But some find that pop-up galleries not only prevent bad things from happening, but bring good things to their properties and neighborhoods. They can, for example, engage passers-by to stop, look and admire, functioning much like an urban beautification initiative. The Art in Storefronts project in San Francisco was first organized by the San Francisco Arts Commission in 2009. One positive outcome of the temporary displays, says Chloe Veltman in a review of the project for the *New York Times*, is

⁷ Belenkaya, "Fiscal Window Dressing," *Daily News*.

⁸ Cardwell, "Luring Artists to Lend Life to Empty Storefronts," *The New York Times*.

that “They encourage passers-by to take a break from the holiday shopping frenzy to linger over something unusual and, in some cases, beautiful.”⁹ Similarly, the Art Under Glass project coordinated by the Evanston Arts Council and EvMark, the downtown merchant association for the Chicago suburb, has also resulted in engaging curious pedestrians. Jill Brazel of the arts council says, “Even in the process of installing work, the people on the street are just stopping and looking.”¹⁰ In these instances, pop-ups are functioning not as mere cover-ups, but as contributions to the improvement of a place.

Yet despite the many appealing aspects of employing artists to re-purpose empty space, the ultimate goal for property owners and other urban stakeholders is to attract and secure new and more permanent tenants, and some believe pop-up galleries can help. In New York in 2003, artist and property owner Harriet Fields filled her empty storefront with her own artwork. She “thought a nice display might be just what was needed to attract new tenants.”¹¹ Although it is unclear exactly what role the artwork played in the process, a national retail chain eventually expressed interest in the space. In another success story, the storefront in London filled with artwork by Simon Tarrant of the Queen’s Elm Artists brought in new visitors who “expressed interest in renting the space.”¹² While these lucky landlords most likely do not represent the norm, their stories no doubt influence others to seek help from artists to install artwork in their empty store windows.

As demand increases for temporary projects in unoccupied property, artists and creative entrepreneurs are attracted to the inexpensive nature of pop-ups and the exposure they provide. Here, and in the arguments that follow, a detailed look at pop-up restaurants and shops, as well

⁹ Veltman, "When Businesses Move Out, Art Moves In." *The New York Times*.

¹⁰ Kleiman, "What to Do With an Empty Storefront?" *The New York Times*.

¹¹ O'Donnell, "Installation Turns an Eyesore into Vacant Art." *The New York Times*.

¹² Werdigier, "Art Pops up in Vacant Spaces," *The International Herald Tribune*.

as galleries, informs a more complete picture of the benefits of these temporary projects. As discussed earlier, the current state of the real estate market is dreary; and it makes securing permanent venues near impossible for artists, retailers, and restaurateurs alike. In a 2007 article for *Print* that surveys the pop-up trend in the retail sector, Bruce N. Wright identifies “the rising cost of real estate in prime locations,” as the primary force “driving the interest in pop-up retail.” Wright continues to suggest that more permanent business decisions, particularly when it comes to new product development, “would be prohibitively expensive without guarantees of success.”¹³ Similarly, as Kate Leahy cites in an October 2010 article for *Time Out Chicago*, restaurateurs too are “turning to pop-ups at a time when opening a restaurant is financially harder to stomach.”¹⁴ Across the board, then, new ventures face significant financial setbacks.

Alternatively, temporary projects are more feasible since they are short-lived and require relatively fewer resources. In some cases, pop-ups enable companies to keep costs down, both for themselves as well as for the consumer. Clothing retailer Clemens en August, based in Munich, has strategically incorporated temporariness into its business plan; it doesn’t operate from a fixed location. Instead, pop-up shops appear for temporary stints in galleries and other locations throughout Europe. Because the company is not committed to a long-term lease, they can avoid costs associated with building upkeep, sell products in “limited numbers,” and keep prices at “less than half of what they would be at retail.”¹⁵ Regardless of where companies are able to cut costs -- and in most cases, it probably isn’t for the consumer -- the temporary plan is significantly less expensive and more conducive to the current economic climate.

Those looking for more bang-for-their-buck find exposure to be an important aspect of the pop-up concept. Pop-up projects are particularly effective at attracting publicity, generating

¹³ Wright, "Poppin' Fresh Retail," *Print*.

¹⁴ Leahy, "NOW Food Trucks NEXT Pop-ups," *Time Out Chicago*.

¹⁵ Toyama, "Pop-Up Shopping," *Time*.

buzz, creating a sense of urgency, and even exclusivity. The marketing strategy behind pop-ups is often cost-effective, especially when compared to more traditional alternatives. Pallavi Gogoi of *Bloomberg Businessweek* claims, “usually, [pop-up stores] are less costly than television ads, which can run in the millions of dollars to produce and broadcast, and the stores generate similar buzz and publicity for new brands.”¹⁶ Pop-ups often provide priceless exposure, even if briefly. For artists, they occupy spaces typically out of reach because of their location in high-traffic and high-rent neighborhoods. In 2009, for example, Charlie Phillips of the London gallery Eleven organized art exhibitions in vacant storefronts in the trendy Belgravia neighborhood. According to Phillips, these projects “represented a chance, if temporary, to expand to ‘a great location that under normal circumstances we could not afford.’”¹⁷

In Chicago, artist Nick Cave has recently experimented with the pop-up concept and sees it as a chance to expand his audience. In a recent article for the *Chicago Tribune*, Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz reports Cave’s goal as “to get his art in front of as many eyes as possible, so that it might inspire others to explore new bounds of creativity.”¹⁸ Cave found that exhibiting in a vacant storefront enabled him to reach new and diversified audiences. Although not always the case, this exposure can lead to exciting opportunities for artists. For example, Christopher Simmons, who participated in San Francisco’s Art in Storefronts project found “an increase in visitors to his Facebook page since the unveiling of his installation,” and following his participation in the project, he “was in talks with galleries about future commissions.”¹⁹ Clearly, pop-up projects represent the chance to be seen.

¹⁶ Gogoi, "Pop-Up Stores: All the Rage," *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

¹⁷ Werdigier, "Art Pops up in Vacant Spaces," *The International Herald Tribune*.

¹⁸ Elejalde-Ruiz, "Nick Cave Is Ready to Fly," *Chicago Tribune*.

¹⁹ Veltman, "When Businesses Move Out, Art Moves In." *The New York Times*.

Additionally, the act of opening a pop-up venue can be viewed as a marketing strategy in and of itself. Proponents of pop-ups are reacting to an over-stimulated, fast-paced market. That these experiences are fleeting only contributes to a sense of urgency, a “get-it-while-you-can” mentality. Bruce N. Wright for *Print* likens the experience of opening a pop-up to “the red carpet and visual pizzazz at a movie premiere,”²⁰ suggesting it successfully generates buzz as spectacle. And, in a November 2009 article for *Time*, Sean Gregory reports that national clothing retailer “Ann Taylor opened and closed three pop-ups in New York City and afterward noticed an increase in traffic to its permanent stores nearby.”²¹ The fast pace of the pop-up concept, some also say, matches the way today’s consumers process information. Pallavi Gogoi for *Bloomberg Businessweek* describes: “In a world of BlackBerries and instant messaging, there’s a growing sense of haste in people’s lives. In response, companies trying to get consumers’ attention are trying to create a sense of urgency.” Gogoi continues to assert that the pop-up “store itself is the new limited edition.”²² Zina Murray, who runs the shared commercial kitchen space Logan Square Kitchen, agrees. In July 2010, along with local chefs Jason Hammel and Bill Kim, Murray briefly opened a pop-up restaurant. Of the experience, she says, “people are attracted to precious, fleeting experiences.”²³ Similarly, Mourad Mazouz, who has opened several pop-up restaurants and clubs in London, believes the pop-up concept is viable because “London’s nightlife culture is fairly transient; a new bar or restaurant opens, everyone is curious to try it, then often people move on to the next new thing. The pop-up is in keeping with this...[it] offers

²⁰ Wright, "Poppin' Fresh Retail," *Print*.

²¹ Gregory, "Pop-Up Shops," *Time*.

²² Gogoi, "Pop-Up Stores: All the Rage," *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

²³ Leahy, "NOW Food Trucks NEXT Pop-ups," *Time Out Chicago*.

something fresh and immediate.”²⁴ Audiences flock to pop-ups because they are exciting and of-the-moment.

Part of the attraction most likely comes from the “event-like” quality of pop-ups. For pop-up retail concepts, it’s not just about shopping anymore; it’s a can’t-miss experience. Wright, continuing his spectacle analogy, describes, “the excitement generated by the ephemeral and eventlike quality of these stores draws shoppers the way a circus attracts children.”²⁵ This excitement is certainly exemplified in the case of Flash, a temporary restaurant that opened in November 2008 inside the Royal Academy in London. According to Nick Curtis, who previewed the pop-up in the *Evening Standard*, Flash’s “temporary nature almost guarantees it will be a hot ticket, while evoking the spirit of the artistic happening, the rave, or the one-off jam session.”²⁶ The combination of big-name artists, gourmet food and temporariness culminated in a moment few wanted to miss. Clemens en August founder Alexander Brenninkmeijer similarly compares his roving and temporary clothing shop appearances to dynamic events: “It’s like a rock concert,”²⁷ he says. Oliver Strand of the *New York Times* also agrees that pop-up experiences are not simply destinations, but events. In an October 2010 article describing the recent trend of pop-up restaurants, he says, “for emerging cooks, these are part recital and part art happening, a chance to dazzle an adventurous and demanding audience.”²⁸ The pop-up offers an opportunity for audiences not just to see something, but to be part of something.

Those behind the production of pop-ups often capitalize on this event-like quality by employing experiential marketing strategies. As Gogoi argues, “pop-up stores bring brands to life and let people sample products in a great format.” For retailers, pop-ups offer opportunities

²⁴ Wood, "Pop-up Power: the Rise of Trendy Temporary Stores," *The Observer*.

²⁵ Wright, "Poppin' Fresh Retail," *Print*.

²⁶ Curtis, "Royal Academy Plays Host to a 'pop-up' Restaurant." *The Evening Standard*.

²⁷ Toyama, "Pop-Up Shopping," *Time*.

²⁸ Strand, "Where Activist Diners Find Emerging Chefs." *The New York Times*.

for consumers to see new products and experience them in creative ways. For example, “when electronics company JVC opened its pop-up store, it offered karaoke and let people film themselves using its newly launched video camera and make their own DVDs, which folks could then carry home as gifts.”²⁹ Temporary shops provide opportunities for the retailer to directly engage with its customer base. Randall P. Ng, managing director for Fitch, oversaw the design for the Motorola pop-up shop in Chicago a few years ago and also used experiential marketing techniques. Ng interpreted his role in the design of the concept as the storyteller. “We are choreographing an experience with the product within a branded environment- ‘storyboarding’ it like a discovery walk,”³⁰ he said. In these cases, promoters are matching the hype generated by pop-ups by creating memorable experiences for the consumer.

Even when marketing strategies are more subtle, however, pop-ups benefit from their perception as exclusive, dramatic or adventurous experiences. Advertising for Munich-based clothing designer Clemens en August “is strictly by word of mouth or e-mail invitation.”³¹ According to Toyama in *Time*, this creates an aura of exclusivity where customers are eager to be part of the inside track. “So far, the guerrilla tactic is working...Clemens en August has steadily gained a cult following. Its e-mail-subscriber list has more than doubled in the past year, and sales have increased 30% over last season.”³² In New York, the Smith-Stewart art gallery similarly operates from temporary and often mysterious locations throughout the city. Owner Amy Smith-Stewart said in a May 2010 interview for the *New York Times*, “I’m more interested in the discovery of art- not only going to see art, but going to find art.” For Smith-Stewart’s roving gallery, “each show ‘exists a bit like a rumor,’ since no one knows where the next one

²⁹ Gogoi, "Pop-Up Stores: All the Rage," *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

³⁰ Wright, "Poppin' Fresh Retail," *Print*.

³¹ Toyama, "Pop-Up Shopping," *Time*.

³² See note 31 above.

will happen.”³³ Here, finding the pop-up is part of the appeal. Oliver Strand agrees that the suspense often adds to the excitement of pop-ups. He says, “that the locations are often secret, sometimes dramatic and operate in a regulatory gray area only adds to the sense of culinary adventure.”³⁴ The technique works especially for pop-up restaurants which offer limited opportunities to experience the temporary adventures. Reindeer, a pop-up restaurant that opened in London over Christmas 2006, was sold out before it opened. One critic reported, “You can’t get a table if you are Prince William, Madonna, Roman Abramovich or God.”³⁵

Pop-up projects also benefit from being able to suddenly appear at the right place and time in order to reach a targeted audience. Pop-up Halloween costume shops open and close just before and after the holiday. But some pop-up projects, like Studio East Dining in London, capitalize on more significant cultural moments. Designed by architect Carmody Groarke, Studio East Dining overlooks the developing construction site of the 2012 Olympic Games. Offering exclusive views of the London’s preparations for what is sure to be one of its most exciting cultural moments, the concept has been met with extreme popularity. Rob Gregory previews the pop-up’s success for *Architectural Review*:

For the three weeks straddling the summer solstice, Studio East Dining will host 140 seated guests per night. It is, of course, a sell-out, with practice director Kevin Carmody confirming, ‘even before a press release was written, 1,700 of the 2,000 tickets had already been taken up.’ Blink and you’ve already missed it.³⁶

³³ Williams, "You Never Know Where Her Gallery Will Pop Up Next," *The New York Times*.

³⁴ Strand, "Where Activist Diners Find Emerging Chefs." *The New York Times*.

³⁵ Curtis, "Royal Academy Plays Host to a 'pop-up' Restaurant." *The Evening Standard*.

³⁶ Gregory, "Carmody Groarke Observes the Olympic Site," *Architectural Review*.

Here in the United States, during Art Basel Miami Beach in 2009, luxury retailers like Fendi and Gucci opened pop-up shops as part of the Limited Edition Experiences program in the Design District.³⁷ Pop-ups, then, allow planners take advantage of its most relevant moment.

There's a lot to be said for the temporary nature of pop-ups and the benefits they provide for all involved. What started as a quick and easy answer to a lingering dilemma has developed into an intentional, dynamic strategy. While many are drawn to the concept for its cheap rewards, others find this practice to positively impact the way urban space is experienced and generate buzz and excitement around people, places and ideas.

³⁷ Nelson, "Not the Usual Museum Shop," *The New York Times*.

A Comparison: Art in Vacant Storefronts and Alternative, Artist-Run Spaces

Value in placing art in vacant storefronts also comes from the opportunities they provide for creative risk-taking and experimentation, often acting as test sites for artists, retailers and chefs. Pop-up projects, because they are temporary and generally more flexible than traditional spaces, are ideal for testing out new ideas before committing to more permanent endeavors. Similarly, the alternative, artist-run spaces that rose to prominence in the 1970s functioned as places where emerging artists could experiment with ideas and practices. Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago, touted as “one of Chicago’s premiere artist-run exhibition and performance spaces,”¹ was one such space, where emerging artists were encouraged to experiment and where artists were involved with all levels of administration, even determining the content of exhibitions. That Randolph Street Gallery was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts consistently throughout its existence demonstrates that even the federal government believed it important to support experimentation for artists. On a number of levels, then, the history of creative research in development that occurred in alternative, artist-run spaces like Randolph Street Gallery sets the precedent for today’s displays of art in vacant storefronts.

In a recent article on the pop-up bakery PieLab for the *New York Times*, John T. Edge suggests, “The term ‘pop-up’ implies that a concept may be too cutting-edge to sustain.”² Because there is no promise of sustainability, pop-ups can operate as labs for experimenting with new ideas and evaluating the need and demand for new products with real audiences, consumers and customers. Chicago chef Bill Kim of Urbanbelly and Bellyshack equates the experience of

¹ Hixson, "Randolph Street Gallery," *New Art Examiner*.

² Edge, "Pie + Design = Change," *The New York Times*.

opening a pop-up restaurant to “a pilot for a television program,”³ where he can try out a concept and evaluate its likely success before presenting it to investors. Flexibility is also important for pop-up proponents. Stevie Parle, who started the Moveable Kitchen in London in 2006 says, “when you start off being temporary, you have more freedom. It doesn’t have to be a firm concept because you’re just doing something for one night or for one week.”⁴ This scenario is potentially ideal for creatives.

For Manon Slome, Chief Curator for the New York City-based non-profit No Longer Empty, the practice of placing art in vacant storefronts provides more freedom than traditional museums can offer. Having curated exhibitions at the Chelsea Art Museum and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Slome said in a 2009 interview with *Bad at Sports*, “I wanted a different model.” Slome enjoys working outside the museum’s realm because she “like[s] not having to think about the whole structure” of an institution, where “there are politics, financial concerns, and institutional concerns that often get in the way of art.” Of her work for No Longer Empty, Slome says, “I love the freedom this gives me,” and “my freedom gives freedom for the artists.” Furthermore, exhibiting in vacant properties, according to Slome, presents opportunities for artists “to do things they can’t do in a traditional gallery setting.” Slome believes experimentation is important to the growth and development of artists, and that they “need the freedom to take risks” before entering the commercial market.⁵

Likewise, Randolph Street Gallery offered significant freedom and flexibility to the artists it exhibited. Founded in 1979, the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago emerged as part of a trend of artist-run, alternative and non-commercial arts organizations. According to Dan Gunn

³ Leahy, "NOW Food Trucks NEXT Pop-ups." *Time Out Chicago*.

⁴ Strand, "Where Activist Diners Find Emerging Chefs," *The New York Times*.

⁵ Slome, "Bad at Sports Episode 202: Manon Slome," Interview by Amanda Browder and Tom.

in a 2009 article for *Proximity Magazine*, the early 1970s marked the onset of “large alternative spaces and collectives,” which were interested in “anti-commercial, ephemeral or Feminist work.”⁶ Primarily supported by government funding, this kind of organization, Gunn claims, could “function as an alternative to the commercial gallery and as a home for the multitudinous art practices that emerged post-Minimalism, namely performance, video and installation.”⁷ Terri Cohn, in a 1999 article entitled for *Artweek*, similarly suggests this trend was “motivated by artists’ desire for venues that would be open to showcasing their own experimental art-performance and installation in particular- which had few existing venues at that time.”⁸

In 1980, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded \$52,000 of the Visual Art Program’s \$919,550 to Chicago visual arts organizations.⁹ Chicago, in fact, acted as a hub for these kinds of organizations, as home to the Randolph Street Gallery, N.A.M.E. Gallery, ARC and Artemisia. According to Gunn, these organizations “offered exhibition opportunities to local emerging and established artists, as well as important national and international artwork.”¹⁰ Cohn attributes the NEA’s support of these kinds of spaces as one of “the fundamental reasons the alternative art scene was able to thrive at that time.”¹¹ This is part of how the National Endowment for the Art accomplished its goal to promote the growth and development of the nation’s artists, and many artists in Chicago benefitted from this support.

Randolph Street Gallery was a particularly important player in the alternative art scene as an artist-run organization. In fact, Gunn describes it as “the most influential of the large alternatives.”¹² Randolph Street Gallery (RSG) exhibited work, including performance, video,

⁶ Gunn, "Artist-Run Spaces: A Brief History Since 1984," *Proximity Magazine*.

⁷ See note 6 above.

⁸ Cohn, "Circa 1970: The Evolution of the Alternative Art Scene," *Artweek*.

⁹ Bowersox, *Annual Report 1980*, National Endowment for the Arts.

¹⁰ See note 6 above.

¹¹ See note 8 above.

¹² See note 6 above.

and installation, that was not yet embraced by more traditional and formal museums and galleries. In a 2006 essay, Robert Atkins references RSG as a place that “offered virtually the only venues for the development of conceptually oriented, noncommercial forms such as video, installations and actions.”¹³ Not only was Randolph Street Gallery’s programming, according to Kathryn Hixson, “a central component of the Chicago avant-garde art scene,” but the organization was “a vital segment of the national scene,” and “a model for alternative spaces across the country.”¹⁴ As such, “the organization attracted many of the most provocative artists who [made] politically oriented work,” and Hixson attributes Randolph Street Gallery with introducing much of this work to Chicago, “which then became more acceptable to larger institutions and audiences,” and “enabled artists to pursue other venues.”¹⁵ Many important artists came through RSG, including Andres Serrano and Rirkrit Tiravanija.¹⁶ In this way, Randolph Street Gallery played an important role in the development of new and experimental artwork in Chicago and beyond.

Artists who exhibited at Randolph Street Gallery praise the freedom they were given to experiment. While RSG closed in 1998, its archives are currently stored in the Special Collections of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2004, a group of students interviewed artists, volunteers and administrators from RSG as part of *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*. In these interviews, those involved with RSG unanimously describe the gallery as an informal and flexible place that valued experimentation. Performance artist Robert Metrick, for example, says, “RSG invited and encouraged us to stretch our boundaries, both in terms of the work we produced and our participation in an evolving and vibrantly

¹³ Atkins, "On Edge: Alternative Spaces Today," In *Censoring Culture: Contemporary Threats to Free Expression*.

¹⁴ Hixson, "Randolph Street Gallery," *New Art Examiner*.

¹⁵ See note 14 above.

¹⁶ See note 13 above.

engaged community of artists and audiences.”¹⁷ Similarly, Brendan DeVallance remembers, “There was absolute freedom to create the art you wanted to create.”¹⁸ Differentiating RSG from more formal arts institutions, Werner Herterich describes its approach as “open.” He says of the RSG administrators, “They would permit artists to do things that commercial galleries wouldn’t do.”¹⁹ Not only was RSG open to new ideas and encouraging of the artist’s creative process, but it was also an important social space. Paul Brenner, former Exhibitions Director at RSG, recalls a unique atmosphere where artists of all disciplines congregated and discussed their work:

There were not too many places for artists to gather and talk about work or socialize. It was interesting because [RSG] really crossed all ages, showing student work and including a mix of media and careers. Getting the artists together to talk outside of school. Different focus and an added distance from school settings...The one thing that was stressed at Randolph Street Gallery was facilitating dialogue about the work we showed. All disciplines could talk at Randolph Street Gallery.²⁰

RSG clearly occupied a special and necessary role in the Chicago art world as a supporter of experimentation and informal discussion. Robert Atkins goes so far as to say, “Randolph Street Gallery’s 19-year history embodies the vital roles that many effective alternative spaces have played: serving artists as research-and-development facilities, while serving audiences as facilitators and bellwethers of cultural discourse in the U.S.”²¹ This language is very similar to what we hear about today’s pop-up galleries. In this way, then, Randolph Street Gallery and vacant storefronts as venues for art exhibition are both supportive environments for artists to experiment and develop new ideas.

Another similarity exists between Randolph Street Gallery and today’s pop-up galleries in that both serve educational purposes for the artists and administrators involved. Notably, pop-

¹⁷ Metrick, Robert Metrick, Essay from *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*.

¹⁸ DeVallance, "Brendan DeVallance," Interview, *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*.

¹⁹ Herterich, "Werner Herterich," Interview, *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*.

²⁰ Brenner, "Paul Brenner," Interview, *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*.

²¹ Atkins, "On Edge: Alternative Spaces Today," In *Censoring Culture: Contemporary Threats to Free Expression*.

up galleries can provide valuable skills for young artists. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in partnership with the Chicago Loop Alliance's Pop-Up Art Loop initiative, has recently been involved in placing art in vacant storefronts near the school's campus. Michael Ryan, Director of Exhibition Curricula for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), oversees this activity. In an interview with Ryan, he cites SAIC's motivation for participating in this program as, "to be supportive [of the Chicago Loop Alliance and Pop-Up Art Loop], and to provide experience for students and student project managers." Ryan believes this is a great way to "activate the campus" while providing opportunities for students to develop skills in curating, installation, and general administration. Students who participate in placing art in vacant storefronts are directly involved in many different aspects of arts administration. Overall, Ryan says, "students learned a lot from these projects."²² The empty storefront venues present students with hands-on experience they may not otherwise have access to.

Other pop-up projects are using vacant storefronts for educational purposes outside the academic setting. The P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York recently launched its *Free Space* program, a "collaborative initiative," in which "artists and groups are invited to use P.S.1's gallery space for research and development."²³ P.S.1 partnered with the New York-based public art organization Creative Time on this program to offer feedback from curators for participating artists. Andrew Goldstein writes about this program in his 2009 article for *The Art Newspaper*. He quotes P.S.1 director Klaus Biesenbach: "It is important not to let the economy stunt creativity but rather use it as a time to push boundaries."²⁴ In this way, vacant storefronts function as sites for artists to develop new ideas and seek input from reputable art world figures.

²² Ryan, Telephone interview.

²³ "New Program Series at P.S.1," News Release.

²⁴ Goldstein, "Non-profit Galleries Pop-up in Vacant Sites."

Like pop-up galleries, Randolph Street Gallery was a place where artists learned valuable skills. Artists at RSG were involved in many aspects of administration. In fact, those who were involved with RSG at one point or another also emphasize the important role the artist played within the organization. This fits into Atkins' definition of the alternative, artist-run space, where "most relied on artists to curate shows, rather than professional curators."²⁵ Former Executive Director Peter Taub believes that artists' involvement at RSG was particularly meaningful. He mentions artists like Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, Dan Peterman, and Hamza Walker, who "were not only artists when they were making art or showing art [at RSG] but they were also artists when they were organizing projects and writing about art and diverging organizational capacities to bring public attention to issues that they were excited about." Taub credits RSG's strength to its structure as "a place run by artists."²⁶ Similarly, Mary Jo Schnell, former Time Arts Director, believes that the artist-run structure of RSG was important to its success because it "provided artists with an additional dimension to their work- artists' involvement in organization-wide programming and curating."²⁷ Gunn also makes note of the role organizations like Randolph Street Gallery played within the larger arts community by helping to "export many local artists to commercial galleries and museum shows." These alternative spaces, according to Gunn, functioned as sites where artists learned "not-for-profit gallery operations and exhibition practice." Because "artists were involved at all levels of these institutions, including planning, fundraising, and installation," they learned valuable skills in the world of arts administration, and these artist-run spaces acted as much training ground for artists.²⁸ In this way, artists at RSG were involved in the exhibition of their work on a number of levels, enabling them to think more

²⁵ Atkins, "On Edge: Alternative Spaces Today," In *Censoring Culture: Contemporary Threats to Free Expression*.

²⁶ Taub, "Peter Taub & Mary Murphy," Interview, *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*.

²⁷ Schnell, "Mary Jo Schnell," Interview, *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*.

²⁸ Gunn, "Artist-Run Spaces: A Brief History Since 1984," *Proximity Magazine*.

broadly about their work and learn valuable administration skills. Doro Boehme, who manages the RSG archives at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, suggests, “The local arts community was in fact educated by, and grew up alongside, this gallery’s experimental mission and many of its former staff members currently occupy curatorial positions within the city’s high-ranking museum and gallery network.”²⁹ In fact, Peter Taub now works as Director of Performance Programs at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Hamza Walker now works as Director of Education at the Renaissance Society in Chicago. Because of its unique artist-run organizational structure, RSG functioned as a “launchpad” for artists and administrators, introducing them to the larger arts world.

Thus, today’s pop-up galleries, restaurants, and shops are reminiscent of alternative, artist-run organizations like Randolph Street Gallery in two important ways. These venues were and continue to be conducive to experimentation, and both venues have provided opportunities for artists to be involved in exhibition practices on a number of levels. When considered in relation to the historic precedent set by spaces like Randolph Street Gallery, the potential certainly increases for pop-up galleries to accomplish more than securing new tenants and beautifying commercial areas.

²⁹ Boehme, *Doro Boehme*, Essay from *The Randolph Street Gallery Archives Project*.

A Brief History of the National Endowment for the Arts and Funding for Artist-Run Spaces

It is important to note the similarities between alternative, artist-run organizations like Randolph Street Gallery and the current trend of placing art in vacant storefronts because support for creative research and development for artists has significantly declined since the 1990s. The National Endowment for the Arts was once the primary form of support for this kind of practice. Established in 1965 under the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) intended to foster creativity and nurture the growth and development of the nation's artists. In its early years, in order to fulfill this mission, it granted funds to individual artists and to artist-run organizations, like Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago, among others. These grants were selected by a panel of well-respected artists, curators, and experts in the field. In this way, the NEA directly supported creative research and development for emerging artists. However, the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 90s resulted in drastic changes to the organization. Faced with fierce opponents to the work it had supported, and in order to avoid controversy, the NEA eventually stopped funding grants to individual artists and artist-run spaces and changed its decision-making process. A vastly different organization exists today, which may no longer embody the nation's original vision to promote "freedom of thought"¹ and certainly does not support research and development for artists as it once did. Because these changes to the NEA have significantly limited opportunities for artists to experiment in supportive environments, it is worthwhile to understand the story behind these changes.

¹ *The National Endowment for the Arts 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts.*

In his overview of government and the arts in America, *Twigs for an Eagle's Nest*, former Deputy Chairman Michael Straight introduces the history of the National Endowment for the Arts by saying, "As a general practice, Americans develop concepts only in response to immediate and identifiable needs."² In the case of the founding of the NEA, Straight claims, the "need" came out of a labor dispute at the Metropolitan Opera Association in 1960. Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg was sent to resolve the situation, and he returned to Washington D.C. with a new "concept" that would determine the future of federal funding for the arts. He said, "We must come to accept the arts as a new community responsibility."³ Aware of the financial limitations of arts organizations, Goldberg asserted it was the government's duty to "build and maintain the physical plant required by the arts," which along with support from the private sector and other government entities, like state arts councils, would sustain the cultural life of the United States.⁴

Once Goldberg's concept was approved by Congress, the National Endowment for the Arts was credited to have emerged from a national desire to nurture artistic talent. According to Terri Cohn in a 1999 article for *Artweek*, President Johnson supported the NEA in the name of "civic pride," stating, "empires and nations...which created no lasting works of art are reduced to short footnotes in history's catalogue."⁵ This "civic pride" had both national and international implications. In *Federalizing the Muse*, Donna M. Binkiewicz chronicles the history of the NEA and describes Kennedy's and Johnson's motivating factors in creating the NEA as twofold. First, a domestic policy was intended to "enlist the arts as a means of social uplift," which would in turn "reinvigorate creative ingenuity, beautify the cultural landscape, and remind Americans of

² Straight, *Twigs for an Eagle's Nest*, 12.

³ See note 2 above, 13.

⁴ See note 2 above, 13.

⁵ Cohn, "Circa 1970: The Evolution of the Alternative Art Scene," *Artweek*.

what true civilization embraced.” Second, the establishment of the NEA was part of a foreign relations policy in which the federal government “endeavored to outshine the Soviets in cultural displays and by so doing entice developing nations away from the lures of communist culture.”⁶ Similarly, Gregory B. Lewis and Arthur C. Brooks, in “A Question of Morality: Artists’ Values and Public Funding for the Arts,” cite that in the midst of the Cold War, proponents of the NEA sought to prove “that free societies produce dynamic art while totalitarian regimes create dull Stalinist or Maoist art.”⁷ The early vision for the NEA, then, arose from a labor dispute and represented itself as the government agency that encouraged a great nation to create great art it could be proud of, thus proving to its neighbors and critics that freedom of expression would inspire significant and exciting results.

The establishment of the NEA was important in drawing attention to the arts in the United States, but it was particularly significant in terms of the power it gave to the artist’s voice. Michael Dorf, who consults nationally on arts policy and advocacy issues, notes that the NEA became “the first agency to grant money directly to private individuals and institutions to create and present works of art without governmental commissioning or control.”⁸ In 1964, Congress established the National Council on the Arts to function as the selection committee for the NEA. This committee, composed of artists, art historians and museum professionals, awarded NEA grants, rather than government officials. Members of the Council, which in its first year included the Museum of Modern Art’s Rene d’Harnoncourt, Tony award-winner Oliver Smith, and artist Richard Diebenkorn, were experts in a range of artistic fields.⁹ According to Lewis and Brooks, through the establishment of the Council, “congress gave the NEA tremendous discretion-

⁶ Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse*.

⁷ Lewis and Brooks, "A Question of Morality," *Public Administration Review*.

⁸ Dorf, "Artifactions," *The Brookings Review*.

⁹ See note 6 above.

buffering grants from political oversight and emphasizing artists' freedom over democratic accountability."¹⁰ In fact, the first Council was so far removed from governmental operations that it often convened at a private residence in New York state. Bienkiewicz suggests,

such privacy was meant to guard the NEA from political control and guarantee the aesthetic quality of its developing programs by leaving them in the hands of leading artists and fulfilling the legislative decree that no one in the federal government should exercise any 'control, over the policy and program determination...in the arts.'¹¹

In this way, grant decisions, although within arm's reach from federal, governmental administration, were made by experts in the field.

This artist-run decision method was meaningful because grantees were selected by respected figures in the art world. Also, the NEA grants provided much-needed legitimacy for grantees. Lewis and Brooks claim this system "increased the credibility of the NEA,"¹² and helped NEA grantees receive additional donations from the private sector. Although some of its initial gifts were small- the NEA began with a budget of only \$2.5 million- these gifts were likened to "Good Housekeeping Seals," which like the seals of approval, Michael Dorf claims, "assured private foundations and corporate donors that it was safe to fund a project and match the federal grant."¹³ In the beginning, then, the NEA was often the first to fund edgier projects, setting the standard for the rest of the cultural philanthropy community. Roger Stevens, the first appointed chairman of the NEA, differentiated the organization from other arts granting foundations by saying, "We do more daring things than they can do."¹⁴ Similarly, Lewis and Brooks claim that in the beginning, the NEA aimed to primarily support "artists who took risks,"

¹⁰ Lewis and Brooks, "A Question of Morality," *Public Administration Review*.

¹¹ Bienkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse*.

¹² See note 10 above.

¹³ Dorf, "Artifacts," *The Brookings Review*.

¹⁴ See note 13 above.

and “the future work of promising artists.”¹⁵ Respected artists were making decisions about grants with little governmental input, making it possible for the NEA to encourage the development of art as a process of creative research and development unfettered by censor from by the government.

Five years after its founding, in 1970, the NEA’s budget had grown to \$8,250,000.¹⁶ The NEA, in these early years, continued to be supportive of emerging artists who needed the means and encouragement to develop their skills. At the same time, Randolph Street Gallery and other artist-run spaces emerged as part of a trend where much of this alternative or experimental artwork was developed and exhibited. The NEA played an important role in funding these organizations and was very supportive of RSG’s mission to exhibit the experimental work of emerging artists, proving it a worthy cause. As early as 1976, the Visual Arts Program of the NEA awarded grants in a category called *Workshops/ Alternative Spaces*, which supported “artist-generated, short-term institutions for making and showing new work.”¹⁷ By 1980, the NEA’s language was even more explicit in its support of emerging artists, and it awarded \$919,500 in the “Artists Spaces” category which served “To enable organizations to provide visual artists with spaces where they can experiment and create new works; and to provide access to resources, such as exhibition space, not generally available from museums or commercial galleries.”¹⁸ RSG was awarded \$5,000 in this category, “For an exhibition, lecture, and workshops by local experimental artists.”¹⁹ Over the years, RSG continued to receive support in this category, its title later changed to “Visual Artists Organizations.” And RSG received \$50,000 in 1992, “To support visual arts exhibitions, interdisciplinary performance and

¹⁵ Lewis and Brooks, "A Question of Morality," *Public Administration Review*.

¹⁶ *The National Endowment for the Arts 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts*.

¹⁷ *1976 Annual Report*, National Endowment for the Arts.

¹⁸ Bowersox, *Annual Report 1980*, National Endowment for the Arts.

¹⁹ See note 18 above.

media presentations, installations, temporary public art projects, and related activities.”²⁰ In this way, RSG was part of a trend of alternative artists’ spaces that exhibited experimental work and that was deemed worthy of support by the NEA. Furthermore, the artist-run, alternative, and non-commercial model exemplified by RSG fit within the NEA’s mandate at the time to support emerging artists and the development of their careers.

However, this era of good fortune for the NEA, artists and artist-run spaces would not last. By 1981, the National Endowment for the Arts’ budget had reached \$158,795,000.²¹ While Randolph Street Gallery prospered under federal support for the arts, the values the NEA embodied were not universally accepted. President Ronald Reagan’s administration, responding to general opposition for government-funded arts support, pursued a significant reduction to the NEA’s budget.²² While Reagan’s proposal did not initially succeed, the NEA’s budget was in fact cut by 10 percent in 1982. For the next seven years, the NEA’s budget would fluctuate, eventually reaching \$169,090,000 in 1989²³, but never safe from scrutiny.

The year 1989 would also mark the beginning of the “culture wars.” Amidst growing opposition to the work of the NEA, “Christian conservatives saw the arts and popular culture as opponents that foisted antireligious, sexual, and pro-gay images on society.”²⁴ But the tipping point came in the form of \$45,000 in grants awarded to two projects in 1989. The first of these grants went to the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, which then re-granted some of the NEA funds to Andres Serrano to exhibit his artwork *Piss Christ*.²⁵ The second controversial grant from the NEA involved Robert Mapplethorpe and an exhibition at the Institute of

²⁰ *1992 Annual Report*, National Endowment for the Arts.

²¹ *The National Endowment for the Arts 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts*.

²² Lewis and Brooks, "A Question of Morality," *Public Administration Review*.

²³ See note 21 above.

²⁴ See note 22 above.

²⁵ See note 22 above.

Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. The exhibition included some work that was described as “homoerotic,” and at times, “explicitly sadomasochistic.”²⁶ These NEA grants and the work they funded were not well received by conservatives.

By this time, these conservatives, according to Lewis and Brooks, “had emerged as a political force.” They acted “largely in defense of traditional family values and in opposition to the secularization of society and to the women’s and gay liberation movements.” Accusing the NEA of “funding blasphemy and indecency,” they insisted that the NEA had been supporting “filth that insulted the taxpaying public at its own expense.”²⁷ In response, the NEA’s budget was cut, and new criteria were established upon which to evaluate and select grantees. The new “decency clause” made clear that “general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American Public,” must be considered in addition to “Artistic excellence and artistic merit.”²⁸ But the seed of change was planted and the NEA began to evolve towards different goals and procedures.

In 1992, President Bush fired NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer after Patrick Buchanan called to “close, padlock, and fumigate” the NEA. Frohnmayer was replaced with Anne-Imelda Radice, who immediately intervened in the NEA’s advisory panel’s decision-making process.²⁹ This act signaled a significant change in the way grants were funded through the NEA, from a process which involved little government control to a process that was usurped by government authority. As Micheal Dorf describes, this act was “a radical shift in NEA policy, which [had] been that arts grants are to be judged by artists and art historians, not government officials.”³⁰ This change in policy came with a change in numbers. By 1996, the NEA’s budget had been

²⁶ Lewis and Brooks, "A Question of Morality," *Public Administration Review*.

²⁷ See note 26 above.

²⁸ See note 26 above.

²⁹ Dorf, "Artifacts," *The Brookings Review*.

³⁰ See note 29 above.

reduced by 39 percent to \$99.5 million.³¹ Additionally, the NEA stopped funding individual artists and artist-run organizations, instead, granting primarily to larger institutions.³² Lewis and Brooks suggest grants to individuals and artist-run organizations disappeared, “largely because, in the words of Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, artists were too likely to ‘offend the conscience of mainstream America.’”³³ Thus, according to Dorf, “the new ‘safe’ NEA has been born, committed to the support of inoffensive programming. The premise of the incubator for ‘more daring things’ than the private sector will risk appears to have ended.”³⁴

These dramatic changes from within the NEA severely impacted experimental, artist-run spaces like Randolph Street Gallery. According to Kathryn Hixson, the new limitations of the NEA “impaired RSG’s ability to take risks in support of local artists.”³⁵ Without funding from the NEA, RSG continued to receive some support from private foundations like the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust. However, this new funding structure required RSG to re-think its work. According to Hixson, “In order to conform to granting organizational guidelines, RSG applied for project-specific grants that involved long-term planning.”³⁶ RSG was able to use the grant funds to pursue specific projects, but not for basic operating costs. The absence of funding from the NEA made it difficult for Randolph Street Gallery to continue the work at its core, and it closed in 1998.

Through the story of Randolph Street Gallery, we see directly how the evolution of the National Endowment for the Arts and its declining support of experimentation for artists impacted alternative, artist-run organizations. Because the NEA stopped funding artist-run

³¹ *The National Endowment for the Arts 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts.*

³² Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse.*

³³ Lewis and Brooks, "A Question of Morality," *Public Administration Review.*

³⁴ Dorf, "Artifacts," *The Brookings Review.*

³⁵ Hixson, "Randolph Street Gallery," *New Art Examiner.*

³⁶ See note 35 above.

organizations, and because the decision-making process evolved in the favor of increasing governmental input, its priorities changed. The original vision for the NEA, which sought to promote “a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry,” and provide “the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent,”³⁷ supported organizations like Randolph Street Gallery. Now, without the government’s commitment to the NEA’s original vision, there is less support for research and development for artists. The similarities between alternative, artist-run spaces like Randolph Street Gallery and today’s pop-up galleries, however, suggest that perhaps a new model could fill some of this void.

³⁷ *The National Endowment for the Arts 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts.*

Three Models of Support for Art in Vacant Storefronts

The trend of placing art in vacant storefronts has been touted as a multipurpose solution for various interest groups. Proponents of the trend claim pop-up galleries can energize commercial areas, fill vacant storefronts and provide artists with workspace and exposure. This overlapping of interests has inspired different kinds of organizations, including municipal agencies, chambers of commerce, and non-profit organizations, to experiment with the pop-up gallery trend. In order to determine if this kind of practice is effective in providing sites for research and development for artists, however, it is important to understand the various models of support for this kind of practice, and to determine which benefits and limitations are afforded the artist. I intend to discuss three different structures: Art in Storefronts, organized by the San Francisco Arts Commission, a government entity; Pop-Up Art Loop, a program of the Chicago Loop Alliance, the chamber of commerce for Chicago's Loop district; and No Longer Empty, a New York City-based non-profit organization. Each organizing entity has a unique set of policies, procedures and goals which greatly impacts the participating artists' experiences.

The San Francisco Arts Commission's Art in Storefronts program began in October of 2009. As "the City agency that champions the arts in San Francisco," the San Francisco Arts Commission (SFAC) oversees programs that, according to its website, "integrate the arts into all aspects of City life." Specifically, Art in Storefronts is an initiative of Community Arts and Education Programs, which "invigorate neighborhoods through innovative arts programs that support economic revitalization and community engagement."¹ In its first iteration, Art in Storefronts took over vacant properties in five San Francisco neighborhoods, including Central Market, Tenderloin, Bayview, Lower 24th Street in the Mission, and Chinatown. This phase of the project was funded by the Office of Economic and Workforce Development, which also

¹ *San Francisco Arts Commission*, <http://www.sfartscommission.org/>.

provided assistance in connecting with local property owners and securing vacant space. As the SFAC prepares for a second round of Art in Storefronts, the Office of Economic and Workforce Development continues to provide non-monetary assistance. The financial support for this year's program comes primarily from the National Endowment for the Arts as part of The ARtery Project, which the SFAC describes on its website as "a series of art events, fairs, installations, and performances"² in the Central Market neighborhood.

Art in Storefronts, according to the SFAC's *District Report 2010*, is a response to Mayor Gavin Newsom's challenge to "engage San Francisco artists in reinvigorating neighborhoods that have been hard-hit by the economic downturn."³ The City believes the storefront displays have the potential to populate otherwise inactive neighborhoods, in turn increasing demand among potential tenants. However, as Rachel Gordon notes in a 2009 article for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "this is not a Potemkin-village project in which blemishes are simply covered up with facades."⁴ Director of cultural affairs for SFAC Luis R. Cancel suggests instead, "It's a way to have art confront long-standing and stubborn problems to create change."⁵ In an interview with Robynn Takayama, Program Manager for Community Arts and Education Programs for the SFAC, she similarly suggests that the program is about more than aesthetic improvements. She sees her work for SFAC as "building consciousness around ethnic and neighborhood pride," and sees Art in Storefronts as a "gift to the community."⁶ The aim is to beautify neighborhoods and make them more desirable places to live.

The San Francisco Arts Commission's desire for long-lasting results from Art in Storefronts is evident from the application and selection processes. The SFAC recently put out a

² *San Francisco Arts Commission*, <http://www.sfartscommission.org/>.

³ *San Francisco Arts Commission District Report 2010*, San Francisco Arts Commission.

⁴ Gordon, "Artwork to Aid San Francisco's Blighted Streets," *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁵ See note 4 above.

⁶ Takayama, Telephone interview.

call for artists for the next phase of Art in Storefronts, which will take place May through August of this year. The application guidelines make clear that Art in Storefront projects should connect to their respective neighborhoods and consider their locations as part of their proposals.

Proposals must outline work that is created specifically for Art in Storefronts. Additionally, the guidelines explicitly ask the artist to “tailor [his or her] proposal to the Central Market community,” and to think about “the existing businesses, overall feel of the neighborhood, and surrounding points of interest.” Furthermore, “Proposals should respond to the history, unique character, or celebratory nature of Central Market,” and, “The strongest submissions will be the ones that employ inventive media and engage the neighborhood in an innovative and dynamic way.”⁷ Clearly, the SFAC is looking for projects which engage the community despite their temporary nature.

Christopher Simmons’ and Tim Belonax’s installation, *Everything is OK*, is an example of a project that was very much connected to its location within San Francisco. As graphic designers, Simmons and Belonax were interested in the intersection of art and commerce. Their project, a neon sign that read “Everything is OK” and a display of cans that depicted the same phrase, was particularly relevant in the “no man’s land” that describes the Central Market neighborhood. Once a thriving shopping area, Central Market’s streets are now full of vacant storefronts and all but void of pedestrian traffic. Simmons and Belonax, according to their project’s description on the Art in Storefronts website, intended to “encourage the public to reevaluate their relationship to the status quo. Is everything ok?”⁸ In an interview with Simmons, he defined the neon mantra as commentary intended to react to its placement, a “public or interactive caption to the space.” The project could be interpreted in a number of ways; one of

⁷ *Art in Storefronts: Central Market*, Guidelines and Application, San Francisco Arts Commission.

⁸ *San Francisco Arts Commission*, <http://www.sfartscommission.org/>.

which, Simmons suggests, “can you make things ok by dressing up a storefront?”⁹ Regardless of the answer to that question, the self-aware installation is a response to its location. Its meaning is tied to the neighborhood and its history and almost demands a reaction from the audience.

This and other Art in Storefronts projects were selected by a committee comprised of a range of community figures. For the upcoming program, Takayama outlines, this committee includes representatives from the San Francisco Arts Commission; community organizations, like the Central Market Community Benefits District and the Mid-Market Project Area Committee; and artists who have participated in Art in Storefronts in the past.¹⁰ Of the selection process, the application states there will be “an emphasis on high-quality presentations that celebrate the neighborhood, draw new audiences to the commercial corridor, and add another layer of cultural attraction to The ARTery Project.”¹¹ Takayama says the committee evaluates proposals for Art in Storefronts based on aesthetic appeal and quality, innovation, relationship to neighborhood, and diversity of content and media.¹²

The San Francisco Arts Commission provides a number of incentives for participating artists. First, participating artists are compensated for their work. In its first year, participating artists received \$500. Takayama found that many artists were spending more than that on materials for their projects, however, and this year, she promises, each artist will receive \$1500. Also, SFAC provides liability insurance for artists working in vacant storefronts. Because many of the spaces are “raw” or in the process of being renovated, only the artists are allowed into the

⁹ Simmons, Telephone interview.

¹⁰ Takayama, Telephone interview.

¹¹ *Art in Storefronts: Central Market*, Guidelines and Application, San Francisco Arts Commission.

¹² See note 10 above.

vacant storefronts to install and maintain their work. These insurance and liability issues, Takayama says, prevents the public from entering the spaces.¹³

While there is no formal evaluation in place for the Art in Storefronts program, anecdotal feedback was good enough to inspire the San Francisco Arts Commission to restage the initiative. Takayama believes that many tourists came to San Francisco specifically to see the art in vacant storefronts. She also attributes the program with decreasing vandalism in participating neighborhoods, and motivating residents to keep their neighborhoods in better shape.¹⁴ “By selecting areas hard hit by the economic downturn and filling vacant storefronts with attention-grabbing art installations,” the 2011 application touts, “the program instilled community pride, supported local merchants with increased foot traffic, and improved streetscape conditions and safety.”¹⁵ Organizers felt the program was effective in achieving its goals and will continue to attain good results in the coming year.

Simmons and Belonax were also pleased with the results. They received an enormous amount of publicity for their project, including mentions in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times*. The property owner liked the project so much he offered to buy it; although the deal never materialized, Simmons still keeps in touch with him. Simmons also keeps in contact with the San Francisco Arts Commission, which he cites as a valuable outcome of the project. Most importantly, however, Simmons believes the project challenged him as an artist. It enabled him to discover a new context in which to convey a specific message and a new method of expressing that message.¹⁶

¹³ Takayama, Telephone interview.

¹⁴ See note 13 above.

¹⁵ *Art in Storefronts: Central Market*, Guidelines and Application, San Francisco Arts Commission.

¹⁶ Simmons, Telephone interview.

Overall, the San Francisco Arts Commission’s Art in Storefronts initiative is unique in that it asks artists to develop projects specifically for the program that respond to its location. It is also one of the few of such programs that compensate artists for their work. From its application which poses specific challenges to artists, to its democratic selection process that involves a range of voices from within the city, Art in Storefronts is a community-minded effort.

Pop-Up Art Loop is an initiative of the Chicago Loop Alliance that places art in vacant storefronts. The Chicago Loop Alliance (CLA), a 501 (c)(6) organization, functions as the membership-based chamber of commerce for the city’s downtown Loop neighborhood. CLA, according to its website, aims “to strengthen the Loop’s competitive position as a mixed-use destination and to promote economic development and tourism in the Loop.” The Pop-Up Art Loop program falls within the parameters of the Chicago Loop Alliance Foundation, a 501 (c)(3) organization affiliated with CLA whose mission, according to its website, “is to develop, support and promote artistic, cultural, and public events that benefit businesses, individuals and stakeholders within in the service area of Chicago Loop Alliance.”¹⁷

Like San Francisco’s Art in Storefronts program, Pop-Up Art Loop was created in response to the plethora of vacant storefronts in the area. Michael Perry, Programming Project Coordinator for CLA, credits Lou Raizin, Board President, with observing this trend in other cities. In an interview published on Sydney, Australia’s Empty Spaces website, Perry says CLA was interested in bringing this kind of programming to Chicago because “art often leads to progress and development in a neighbourhood.” Thus, as Perry describes, the main aim of Pop-

¹⁷ Chicago Loop Alliance, <http://www.chicagoloopalliance.com/>.

Up Art Loop is “to enhance the street level by showcasing art and artists and otherwise bringing light to dark spaces.”¹⁸ Implicit in its intentions is its commercial-oriented priority.

The application and selection processes for Pop-Up Art Loop reflect its mission to boost the aesthetic appeal of the Loop commercial district. While artists are encouraged to apply to participate in Pop-Up Art Loop on an ongoing basis through its website, CLA also works with various partner organizations, like the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Hyde Park Art Center, and the Chicago Urban Art Society, to curate spaces. According to its online application page, Pop-Up Art Loop solicits artwork “in a variety of media from individuals and groups,”¹⁹ including 2D visual art, sculpture, video or new media, installations and live art. In a recent interview with Michael Perry, he describes that CLA looks for submissions that engage passers-by and bring color and light to the neighborhood. Artists’ projects are matched with available spaces by CLA as they become available, and projects are selected by CLA staff with the help of a design consultant. Once CLA selects a project for a particular space, it is shown to the property owner for approval.²⁰ CLA claims it does not censor art projects, but warns artists on its website that they “should abide by the content restrictions that apply to public art,” and that “If an artist’s work is not consistent with what had been discussed and agreed upon, the exhibition will be terminated at CLA’s sole discretion.” So property owners can benefit from their participation in Pop-Up Art Loop by renting their vacant storefronts, CLA advises artists to “be prepared to remove [their] work within 30 days should the space be rented,” and that artists “must agree to leave each location in the same or better condition” than it was found.²¹ Pop-Up Art Loop

¹⁸ “In the Loop: Pop-up Art Transforms and Enlivens Chicago.” *Empty Spaces*, <www.emptyspaces.culturemap.org>.

¹⁹ Pop-Up Art Loop Transforms Empty Storefronts, <http://www.popupartloop.com/>.

²⁰ Perry, Telephone interview.

²¹ See note 19 above.

operates on an as-needed basis, filling storefronts with artwork as they become vacant, honoring and respecting the needs of the property owners throughout the process.

Artist Sara Schnadt participated in the pilot phase for Pop-Up Art Loop and exhibited an installation titled *Network* in an empty storefront from November 2009 to January 2010.

Interested in “visualizing how virtual space co-exists with ordinary space,” Schnadt said in a recent interview that she had an installation concept already developed when the Chicago Loop Alliance approached her about Pop-Up Art Loop. She was, in her own words, “primed for a space to try these ideas out.”²² Schnadt’s work for Pop-Up Art Loop had evolved from a performance at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), as part of the UBS 12 x 12: New Artists/New Work program. Like her performance at the MCA, Schnadt’s installation for Pop-Up Art Loop involved fiber material that represented an internet network. Describing *Network* on her website, Schnadt explains:

Visualizing the idea that we simultaneously live in a real and virtual world, and that the virtual is infinitely expansive, *Network* uses large quantities of electric yellow twine (tied in patterns based on both social network structures and Internet network infrastructure) to suggest a virtual network landscape cutting through an otherwise ordinary space.²³

The space itself, then, played an integral role in Schnadt’s work, and its availability enabled her to create a version of the work to a scale that was previously beyond her imagination. Overall, Schnadt believes the project was worthwhile for the space that was provided, the artistic stimulation of creating a work for a storefront site, the exposure she received, and the opportunities that followed participating in Pop-Up Art Loop. After *Network*, Schnadt was invited to exhibit a similar project at the Hyde Park Art Center, as part of *Spatial City: An Architecture of Idealism*, which later traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.²⁴

²² Schnadt, Personal interview.

²³ Sara Schnadt, <http://saraschnadt.com/home.html>.

²⁴ Schnadt, Personal interview.

Also, after seeing Schnadt's Pop-Up Art Loop project, curators Holly Holmes and Tom Burtonwood invited her to create a version of the work to take over their entire house and project space, What It Is in Oak Park. Schnadt's participation in Pop-Up Art Loop led to specific opportunities for her to exhibit in prestigious institutions. All the versions of *Network*, according to Schnadt, pushed her work in new and spatially-ambitious directions.²⁵

The Chicago Loop Alliance in fact provides several services to participating artists. They play an important role in identifying properties and encouraging landlords to donate their spaces. In the aforementioned interview on the Empty Spaces website, Michael Perry cites this part of the project as a major challenge for the organization. He says, "The downtown neighbourhood has a lot of property owners who are primarily investors and don't necessarily see the non-monetary benefits of participating in Pop-Up Art Loop."²⁶ As the local chamber of commerce for the area, CLA is in a unique position to develop the relationships it already has with property owners and members and convince them of the merits to donating their space. Along with locating space for artists' projects, Perry mentioned to Empty Spaces, CLA covers the expenses for a limited amount of installation materials and supplies.²⁷ And, CLA facilitates permitting and insurance processes. When possible, Perry said, CLA works with property owners to use occupancy permits already secured for the spaces. Without an occupancy permit, however, the public cannot enter the space.²⁸

The Chicago Loop Alliance believes both property owners and artists benefit from participating in Pop-Up Art Loop. According to Michael Perry, "The pedestrian experience is enhanced. Residents and visitors feel safer and are more likely to have a strong take-away image

²⁵ Schnadt, Personal interview.

²⁶ "In the Loop: Pop-up Art Transforms and Enlivens Chicago." *Empty Spaces*, <www.emptyspaces.culturemap.org>.

²⁷ See note 26 above.

²⁸ Perry, Telephone interview.

of downtown Chicago as a vibrant and exciting destination.”²⁹ Also, Pop-Up Art Loop helps attract prospective tenants to empty storefronts, and is pitched to property owners on its website “an almost daily open house,” that increases the vacant spaces’ appeal because “An occupied space is often able to attract a more lucrative end-user.”³⁰ And, the Chicago Loop Alliance believes the program has had a significant effect on improving the general atmosphere of the neighborhood by repelling, for example, undesirable panhandlers. Additionally, the CLA website promises several publicity opportunities to property owners who donate space as part of “an ongoing PR campaign”, including a prominent listing on CLA websites and recognition in the Annual Report. Lastly, CLA suggests on its website that property owners who participate in Pop-Up Art Loop benefit from helping to “create good will that the public and media will embrace.”³¹

For artists who participate in Pop-Up Art Loop, the Chicago Loop Alliance sees this as a unique prospect for publicity and attention. The CLA website advertizes the program to artists as an “opportunity to showcase your work in exciting, unique new exhibition sites in the heart of Chicago’s Loop.” CLA promises artists that it is their responsibility to publicize the exhibitions, which includes “media alerts, web site presence, links to artist sites, press release, signage, etc.”³² Indeed, Sara Schnadt received much media attention, both in print and on television.

The Chicago Loop Alliance clearly presents its Pop-Up Art Loop initiative as a solution to a nagging problem facing many of its constituents. At the same time, CLA capitalizes on artists’ need for exhibition space and publicity, touting the campaign as a multipurpose solution. While in many ways Pop-Up Art Loop fulfils the needs of both property owners and artists, CLA’s policies and procedures in executing the program reveal more commercially-minded

²⁹ Schnadt, Personal interview.

³⁰ Pop-Up Art Loop Transforms Empty Storefronts, <http://www.popupartloop.com/>.

³¹ See note 30 above.

³² See note 30 above.

priorities than San Francisco's Art in Storefronts. Without knowledgeable art world figures involved in selection processes, and without guidelines that encourage artists to think creatively about the spaces they intend to exhibit in, Pop-Up Loop lacks a certain artistic credibility. As an organization dedicated to promoting its member businesses, its priorities certainly lie in solving their problems first and foremost.

No Longer Empty is a New York-based not-for-profit organization that is specifically dedicated to placing art in vacant storefronts. Founded in 2009 by a group of curators, its mission, according to its website, is to create "public art exhibitions in vacated storefronts and properties in New York City," in order to "revitalize empty spaces and areas around the venues by bringing thoughtful, high-caliber art installations with accompanying programs to the public."³³ To date, No Longer Empty has curated more than 12 exhibitions and has commissioned 40 new works in spaces ranging from the Chelsea Hotel to a vacant storefront once occupied by Tower Records.³⁴

No Longer Empty (NLE) offers sites for exhibition outside the traditional realm of galleries and museums. This approach is intended to link artwork with its location, much like San Francisco's Art in Storefronts program. As its website claims, "Locating art in unexpected places in the public domain suggests new models of community art that are different from major institutions and galleries." Exhibitions are site-specific and "reflect such issues as the former use or history of the site, the nature of the neighborhood and, of course, the specific features of the space." NLE presents panel discussions, performances and workshops along with exhibitions in order to "contribute meaningfully [to the community] and bolster the local businesses through

³³ No Longer Empty, <http://nolongerempty.com/>.

³⁴ Heresson-Ringskog, Telephone interview.

the increased flow of visitors that these exhibitions attract.”³⁵ Although founded in the midst of financial turmoil, and like Pop-Up Art Loop and Art in Storefronts its motivation is reactionary, NLE believes its work is inherently meaningful, regardless of the economic climate. Diane Cardwell mentions NLE in a 2009 article for the *New York Times*. She quotes Manon Slome, Chief Curator: “I see [art in vacant storefronts] as a great way for the public to interact with art in a different way. And it does provide a great platform for artists because they can do things that are maybe more experimental or larger than they could in a gallery space.”³⁶ In this way, No Longer Empty facilitates the creation of work that could not happen anywhere else.

Never Can Say Goodbye, an installation organized by No Longer Empty in 2010, occupied a former Tower Records store in New York City. Tower Records closed in 2006, an event that Zach Baron, in an article for the *Village Voice*, identifies as “a symbol of the decline and fall of music retailing in NYC.”³⁷ More than 10 artists contributed to the installation, all of which commented on the state of the music industry and the evolving role of this specific Tower Records building in the distribution of music. NLE describes the exhibition on its website:

Never Can Say Goodbye illuminates the economic and social changes caused by the emergence of the Internet as the dominant means of music distribution. In its heyday, Tower Records was sales central for indie and contemporary music, as well as a gathering place for musicians and music lovers. Today, in its place, is a virtual landscape without architecture, sales staff, and community traffic. Freely downloading selected songs have created an empty space where a music store once thrived.³⁸

Thus, NLE’s installation was more than a simple matching of artist to space. *Never Can Say Goodbye* was deeply connected to its placement, using its site to comment on and invoke discussion of a significant change taking place in the music industry.

³⁵ Pop-Up Art Loop Transforms Empty Storefronts, <http://www.popupartloop.com/>.

³⁶ Cardwell, "Luring Artists to Lend Life to Empty Storefronts," *The New York Times*.

³⁷ Baron, "Next Up For the Vacated Tower Records Store on East 4th Street?!" *Village Voice*.

³⁸ No Longer Empty, <http://nolongerempty.com/>.

Artist Ryan Brennan's "Bling Box Orchestra" exhibited as part of *Never Can Say Goodbye*. In a recent interview with the artist, Brennan said he was solicited by No Longer Empty to visit the former Tower Records space and propose a project in response.³⁹ Brennan describes "Bling Box Orchestra" on his website: "Eight customized retro boom boxes play in synchronization, an amalgam of historically prominent Hip Hop songs." The sound that comes from the "orchestra" of boom boxes is, in Brennan's words, "a survey of the genre's nearly forty-year history, examining the many off shoots and sub-genres spawned over the years." In this work, Brennan is "Exploring the sample/appropriation phenomenon first advocated by Hip Hop,"⁴⁰ and thus commenting on the evolution of the music industry in an exhibition and space that does the same.

Since site-specificity is an integral part of No Longer Empty's work, its process is curatorial-based. In a recent interview with Executive Director Naomi Hersson-Ringskog, she suggests that Chief Curator Manon Slome researches artists and makes studio visits just as a curator would do for a museum or gallery. From there, however, the process is more collaborative than it might be in a traditional exhibition setting. Typically, and as was the case with Ryan Brennan, NLE invites specific artists to send proposals to Slome, who then works with them to develop the projects.⁴¹ In a 2009 interview for *Bad at Sports*, Slome describes her process in curating NLE's first project at the Chelsea Hotel. She says she encouraged artists to develop work upon two directives: respond physically to the space, and/or respond to the theme, "no longer empty." Slome strongly believes that "the art [leads] the way," in determining its

³⁹ Brennan, Telephone interview.

⁴⁰ Brennan, "Bling Box Orchestra, Tower Records 2010," <http://ryanvbrennan.com/boom-box-orchestra-tower-records/>.

⁴¹ Hersson-Ringskog, Telephone interview.

placement, and that the artist's freedom to "respond to the space," is essential to the program's success.⁴²

Because the space itself is so important to the content of their exhibitions, all of No Longer Empty's projects take place within interior spaces. Part of what distinguishes NLE from both Pop-Up Art Loop and Art in Storefronts, where most if not all exhibitions are only visible from the street, this aspect of the operation requires volunteers to staff the galleries while open. Although exhibitions are on display for relatively short periods of time- *Never Can Say Goodbye* was up for about a month- this practice nevertheless requires both administrative staff and artists to volunteer their time and effort. Artists do not receive compensation for participating, but from time to time do receive support for materials, transportation and installation. For example, NLE paid for the computer Brennan used as part of "Bling Box Orchestra." NLE also provides general liability insurance for all artists and projects.⁴³

Like other efforts to place art in vacant storefronts, NLE finds that its work benefits property owners. Andrew Goldstein chronicles NLE and the pop-up gallery trend in a 2009 article for the *Art Newspaper*. Of NLE's projects, Goldstein says "realtors are happy to offer vacant properties for shows which can attract up to 3,000 visitors at openings." He quotes Manon Slome: "One realtor said to me they couldn't get as many people through the door with a \$5,000 ad as we bring in."⁴⁴ As is the case for both Art in Storefronts and Pop-Up Art Loop, NLE finds that the participating property owners prefer art exhibitions to emptiness.

Unlike other pop-up projects, however, No Longer Empty has received attention from more critical art world media outlets. For example, David Deitcher references NLE in a summer

⁴² Slome, "Bad at Sports Episode 202: Manon Slome," Interview by Amanda Browder and Tom, http://badatsports.libsyn.com/index.php?post_id=502058.

⁴³ Hersson-Ringskog, Telephone interview.

⁴⁴ Goldstein, "Non-profit Galleries Pop-up in Vacant Sites," *Art Newspaper*.

2010 article for *Art Forum*, “Alternate Realities.” Deitcher describes NLE as an “artist-run venture” that

demonstrate[s] the persistence, particularly among young artists, of the independent model, and its continuing capacity for reshaping contemporary art, its spaces, and its publics...Here, in keeping with a noble and perhaps timeless artistic impulse, young artists are shaping spaces of exception, and in small, symbolic ways, remodeling cultural practices and social relations, to change the art world, if not the world, as we know it.⁴⁵

An essential point here is that Deitcher evaluates No Longer Empty’s practice from within the critical art world, and not as a separate, trending phenomenon. NLE’s work is notable not just because it displays in vacant properties, but because the work itself is meaningful as contemporary art practice. Its curatorial-minded approach prioritizes art and ideas first, while expecting community and commercial development to follow.

An analysis of the three models of support above- the municipal, chamber of commerce, and non-profit models- reveal several similarities in the benefits and limitations for the artists involved. All three models offer artists the availability of space, exposure and publicity, and a creative challenge. In some cases, participating in pop-up gallery programs led to the sale of artwork or other exhibition opportunities. However, all three models also limit participating artists in similar ways: they offer little time for artists to familiarize themselves with the space and install their work; they often provide artists with less administrative, financial and production support than is needed; and ultimately, the parameters of their projects are defined by the commercial market, not by the artists or even the organizing entities.

Many artists are excited to display their work in vacant storefronts, and in some cases, they are motivated to participate simply by the availability of space. For artists in urban areas,

⁴⁵ Deitcher, "Alternate Realities," *ArtForum*.

open space is often difficult to come by. Lauren Pacheco, who worked with the Chicago Loop Alliance on behalf of the Chicago Urban Arts Society to exhibit in a vacant storefront on State Street, says of the trend: “They’re amazing spaces, even if they’ve been shut down for 10 years, and the artists are so eager and hungry and, in some ways, just desperate to show their artwork, these are amazing opportunities whether they have a budget or not.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Sara Schnadt said in a recent interview that Pop-Up Art Loop provided a unique opportunity because “no one ever gives you a space like that to work with.”⁴⁷ Schnadt was at a particular point in the development of her ideas where an empty space, such as the one she was provided by the Chicago Loop Alliance, was exactly what she needed to execute her ideas. And, as part of Art in Storefronts in San Francisco, artist Niana Liu exhibited “Three Entrée Restaurant,” a fake restaurant installation in an empty Chinatown storefront. In a recent interview with the artist, Liu appreciated the space dedicated for art on a street where rent is so expensive. She saw this as a gesture from the city declaring space for artists to be important, regardless of the cost of rent.⁴⁸

Artists are also drawn to vacant storefronts as venues to exhibit their work because of the opportunity for exposure and publicity. Sara Schnadt wrote an artist story about her experience participating in Pop-Up Art Loop for the Chicago Artists Resource website. She enjoyed an impressive amount of publicity, especially as part of the pilot phase of the project. She writes, “the press has been amazing, with features in *Time Out*, *The Sun Times*, and a spot on WTTW’s *Chicago Tonight*. They even made a short film about my piece!”⁴⁹ Like Schnadt, Christopher Simmons, who participated in San Francisco’s Art in Storefronts project, was pleasantly surprised by the publicity his work generated. In fact, he found “an increase in visitors to his

⁴⁶ Viera, "Art Pops Into Place in Loop," *Chicago Tribune*.

⁴⁷ Schnadt, Personal interview.

⁴⁸ Liu, Telephone interview.

⁴⁹ Schnadt, "Artist Story: Sara Schnadt," *Chicago Artists Resource*.

Facebook page since the unveiling of his installation,” and following his participation in the project, he “was in talks with galleries about future commissions.”⁵⁰ Also, some artists find that participating in these projects enables their work to be seen by a wider audience. For example, Niana Liu observed a wide-reaching audience that might not have been the usual gallery-going crowd for her *Art in Storefronts* installation.⁵¹ These artists saw their projects as opportunities to get their work seen and talked about by a wide range of people.

Some artists believe their participation in pop-up galleries not only impacts how their work is seen, but it also positively affects their creative processes and the work that develops in response to the challenges posed. Christopher Simmons, a graphic designer, had never done a public installation before, let alone one in three dimensions. *Art in Storefronts* challenged him to push himself as an artist to think about his work in a new way. In a recent interview, he says this kind of thinking “makes you better at what you do.”⁵² Although *Art in Storefronts* application guidelines could be perceived as limitations- for example, artists are advised to consider the neighborhood and its history in designing their proposals- Simmons saw this process as generative. Likewise, Ryan Brennan saw his participation in *No Longer Empty’s* 2009 *Invisible Dogs* exhibition as an opportunity to “explore new territory.”⁵³ Brennan’s project, titled “Artist in Bathroom Residency,” is described on the artist’s website:

Spectators are presented with the illusion that the artist has confined himself inside the gallery’s bathroom with a months rationing of food and water. Viewers can watch him via a “live” video and audio feed routed from the bathroom into the gallery space. In an array of emotionally charged performances the solitary artist critiques the art world in a fanatical and existential whirlwind of crazed romanticism, tragedy and humor.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Veltman, "When Businesses Move Out, Art Moves In," *The New York Times*.

⁵¹ Liu, Telephone interview.

⁵² Simmons, Telephone interview.

⁵³ Brennan, Telephone interview.

⁵⁴ Brennan, "Artist in Bathroom Residency 2009-10," <http://ryanvbrennan.com/artist-in-bathroom-residency/>.

This project encouraged Brennan to think about the notion of using video as medium to communicate with the audience in a new way. In developing the project, Brennan considered how the audience would perceive what is real and what is not real. In this way, Brennan pushed himself in a new direction to develop work that ultimately benefitted his practice as an artist.⁵⁵ This benefit, along with the availability of space and opportunity for publicity and exposure, functions as an important advantage afforded the artist in exhibiting in vacant storefronts.

Often because of the exposure and the interesting work that results from exhibiting in vacant storefronts, artists find this practice to positively impact their careers. Many of the artists who participated in the San Francisco, Chicago and New York programs either sold their work or were involved in discussions about the sale of their work. Ryan Brennan sold his “Bling Box Orchestra,”⁵⁶ and Niana Liu sold a piece from her installation to a passerby.⁵⁷ Also, just as Randolph Street Gallery served as a “launchpad” for certain artists and administrators into more prestigious art world circles, some artists found their participation in these programs led to further exhibition opportunities. Sara Schnadt’s work from her Pop-Up Art Loop exhibition, for example, went on to be displayed at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit.

On the other hand, these programs that offer such opportunities to artists are not without fault. In fact, this practice can often limit exhibiting artists by leaving them unfamiliar with their assigned space and little time to install their work; by not providing them adequate financial, administrative and production support; and enabling the commercial market to dictate their work.

The very nature of exhibiting in vacant storefronts can be limiting for many artists because of its transitory nature. Because storefronts often become empty without much notice,

⁵⁵ Brennan, Telephone interview.

⁵⁶ See note 55 above.

⁵⁷ Liu, Telephone interview.

and on the other end, can be rented very quickly, it is difficult for organizing entities to secure space for artists with enough notice for them to get acquainted and properly install their work. As Sara Schnadt writes in an article for Chicago Artists Resource, “Confirming a space for my piece took several false starts due to potential spaces getting leads on permanent renters.” Then, “due to [the] extended timeline securing a space,” she only had six days to complete her project before it opened to the public.⁵⁸ Overall, Schnadt said in a recent interview, it took her 40 hours to install with the help of two friends, who volunteered their time.⁵⁹ Similarly, Niana Liu had limited time to set up and was surprised at the enormity of her assigned space, which she did not see until it was time to begin installing. When asked about her biggest challenge in participating in Art in Storefronts, she responded that it was difficult to fill such a large space with such a short period of time. And while the San Francisco Arts Commission provided some production support, for the most part Liu had to do everything herself or with the help of friends who were willing to volunteer their time.⁶⁰

On a similar note, there seems to be a lack of overall support for artists who participate in these kinds of programs. In 2010, Sara Schnadt was invited to participate in Pop-Up Art Loop for a second time, but instead “passed on the opportunity of space” and co-curated a vacant storefront in Chicago’s Loop.⁶¹ She and curator Mark Jeffrey re-purposed the storefront as kind of incubator space, featuring recent MFA graduates Clover Morell and Chris Cuelar. This project, “IN>TIME Incubation,” was part of an ongoing collaboration between Schnadt and Jeffrey, one of whose goals is to “stimulate and nurture new experimental local work, and

⁵⁸ Schnadt, "Artist Story: Sara Schnadt," *Chicago Artists Resource*.

⁵⁹ Schnadt, Personal interview.

⁶⁰ Liu, Telephone interview.

⁶¹ See note 58 above.

provide a vehicle for local artists to find national exposure.”⁶² In her role as curator of a pop-up project, Schnadt felt that there was not enough administrative or production support for experimental work. In another example, Christopher Simmons’ window display was tagged by graffiti the night before it was scheduled to open to the public. The property owner refused to replace the glass because it would likely be replaced by the next tenant, so Simmons had no other option but to clean the window himself in the middle of the night.⁶³ Also, money is an issue. Currently all artists who participate in Pop-Up Art Loop and No Longer Empty’s exhibitions do not receive compensation. And while the San Francisco Arts Commission did offer \$500 stipends to artists in the program’s first phase, Christopher Simmons said this price cap influenced the outcome of his project, ultimately dictating what he was able to accomplish.⁶⁴

Lastly, this practice is limiting in that it is dependent on the commercial market. Only when the property owners have no other option is art factored into the improvement plans. Chloe Veltman of the *New York Times* worries about this “placeholder mentality,” of employing artists under contingent terms and cautions that care “should be taken to preserve these artworks and prevent commerce from dictating all the rules.”⁶⁵ At the end of the day, as Veltman suggests, the goal is to fill these empty storefronts with prosperous businesses, not artists. In fact, all three programs in San Francisco, Chicago and New York City involve an agreement to vacate the properties within a specified amount of time after they are leased.

Overall, most artists interviewed as part of this research were grateful for the opportunities to participate in art in vacant storefront projects. These artists enjoyed benefits including the availability of space, exposure and publicity, an atmosphere of creative challenge,

⁶² "Mark Jeffery – Curatorial," <http://www.markjefferyartist.org/intime.html>.

⁶³ Simmons, Telephone interview.

⁶⁴ See note 63 above.

⁶⁵ Veltman, "When Businesses Move Out, Art Moves In," *The New York Times*.

and in some cases, opportunities to sell or exhibit their work. However, some artists expressed hesitation when asked if they would participate in such a program a second time. Despite its merits, there are several challenges to this kind of practice, such as limited time to familiarize with the space and install work, inadequate administrative, financial and production support, and a commercial market that dictates the rules. Exhibiting artwork in vacant storefronts can play an important role and in the growth and development of artists' work, but these experiences do not exist without limitations.

Conclusion

The practice of placing art in vacant storefronts is clearly promising as a solution to multiple problems. As demonstrated, pop-up galleries can fulfill the needs of property owners and community stakeholders who might otherwise face emptiness, vandalism or neglect, while beautifying neighborhoods, drawing pedestrian traffic to commercial areas, and attracting new tenants. This strategy has also been proven effective in providing much needed exhibition space for artists, particularly for younger, emerging artists eager for experience and exposure. These benefits alone certainly validate the use of empty storefronts for art exhibitions or displays in today's economy. However, as temporary solutions, one can't help but wonder if they will no longer be needed in more prosperous economic times. As the recession begins to fade, it is important to consider that vacant storefronts have the potential to go beyond solving the immediate problems at hand, and to recognize they are capable of supporting research and development for artists, a long-standing need.

As discussed earlier, artists have always needed space to test new ideas and for a long while, the National Endowment for the Arts addressed this need by granting funds to artist-run, experimental spaces. With the freedom to experiment and the opportunity to gain exhibition and administrative experience before entering the commercial market or the larger institutional world, artists developed viable careers in supportive environments. Without this support structure, artists struggle, and it is this argument that strengthens the case for sustaining the temporary, informal art practice of exhibition in vacant storefronts. When framed as an answer to an enduring need that impacts the cultural life of a city and its artists, pop-up galleries can no longer be touted as temporary solutions to temporary problems.

However, pop-up galleries do not achieve these high-reaching goals without seriously evaluating its practice. Artists do not fully reap the benefits of this practice when their work is thoughtlessly plopped in a random storefront window. Rather, the organizations discussed above provide meaningful experiences for artists involved when they strategically considered who was involved in the decision-making process, how the venue related to the exhibition, and which partnerships best served all involved in achieving their goals. Therefore, in order for this practice to fulfill its expanded purpose, organizers should ask themselves these questions:

1. Who should make decisions and how will this impact results?

In programs that place art in vacant storefronts, administrators should consider how the decision-making process will impact what it is they aim to achieve. For example, in San Francisco, projects are selected for Art in Storefronts by a committee of representatives from the community. Like the National Council of the Arts that made granting decisions for the National Endowment for the Arts, this committee provided credibility for the program. Also, the program achieved its goal of improving certain neighborhoods and making them more desirable places to live by obtaining input from residents and community stakeholders.

2. How is the venue connected to what is exhibited within it?

It is generally more productive to address the venue's location than to ignore it. In fact, programs that consider its venue's location as part of the creative process often benefit from generating more meaningful and interesting work, and the experience of participating in such programs is often more productive for the artist. No Longer Empty focuses on creating site-specific installations where the location is integral to the meaning of the work. One of few such programs to achieve critical acclaim for their work in

vacant storefronts, each of No Longer Empty's projects functions as a commentary on contemporary life. The issue at stake is larger than an individual artist or even an individual space. And the artists who participate benefit from challenging themselves conceptually and physically. Since location and space are already unique aspects of exhibiting in vacant storefronts, they are ideas that are ripe for inspiration and creation.

2. What partnerships can ensure multiple interests and needs are best served through this practice?

Since these programs often address the needs of two or more interest groups, partnerships can be instrumental in balancing organizers' strengths and deficiencies. The Chicago Loop Alliance, for example, is proficient in creating and maintaining relationships with their member businesses. They are most familiar with the needs and interests of these member businesses and the best ways to persuade them to donate space for art exhibitions. However, they realize they do not have connections with artists, nor do they have curatorial experience, and so they partner with arts organizations such as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to recruit exhibitors. Additionally, the Chicago Loop Alliance is knowledgeable in terms of zoning, code, and insurance issues, and can provide assistance to artists in these more logistical concerns. The best way to guarantee everyone's needs are met is to include the "experts" in their respective fields in high-level decisions.

Asking the above questions can transition the practice of placing art in vacant storefronts into a viable strategy that supports the transitory interests of property owners, chambers of

comers and municipal agencies, and also the long-standing needs of artists looking for supportive environments which nurture experimentation and growth.

For artists, arts organizations, chambers of commerce, and cities interested in employing this strategy, this can lead to an argument for cultural policy that supports the economy. David Throsby discusses the trend in focus on creative industries and the shift from earlier arguments for the intrinsic value of the arts in his 2010 book, *The Economics of Cultural Policy*. According to Throsby, at the time of the 1967 UNESCO conference, and continuing into the 1970s and 80s, the debate on cultural policy focused on the importance of art and its implications for society, arts education, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Economics did not factor into this discussion, whereas now it is integral to the argument in support of the arts. Throsby attributes this shift in focus to two factors: first, the term “culture” no longer only applies only to the arts but now more generally to a “way of life”; and second, globalization.¹ Increased efficiency in the movement of resources, augmented commercial opportunities, and the facilitation of communication has greatly impacted the creative world by generating new forms of expression and new methods of distribution. Additionally, audiences who experience these new forms of expression through the internet and other digital media have been transformed “from passive recipients of cultural messages into active co-creators of cultural content.”² These changes have resulted in a new interpretation of cultural policy within the context of economic policy. Thus, the argument in support of utilizing vacant storefronts as exhibition and project space arguably fits into this contemporary vision for cultural policy that nurtures creative research and development for artists but also does its part to spur economic revitalization.

¹ Throsby, *The Economics of Cultural Policy*, 2.

² See note 1 above, 5.

This practice also aligns with Throsby's analysis of current interpretations of cultural policy as a model for innovative problem solving. According to Throsby, today's policy-makers see creativity as "a prerequisite for innovation, and innovation is the driver of technological change, which in turn boosts economic growth."³ Policy-makers, Throsby argues, are more likely to fund art programs if they are presented as creative problem solving, or means to economic ends. He says, "Now the arts can be seen as part of a wider and more dynamic sphere of economic activity, with links through to the information and knowledge economies, fostering creativity, embracing new technologies and feeding innovation."⁴ Pop-up galleries represent exactly the kind of inventive strategy today's policy-makers are looking for in contemporary cultural policy. In using available resources to provide project space for artists while simultaneously improving commercial districts, the practice of exhibiting artwork in vacant properties functions as a model in innovative thinking, resulting in creative challenges for artists, filled storefronts for property owners, and enhanced cultural and economic lives for cities.

If it seems like Throsby's conception of contemporary cultural policy "subordinate[s] the lofty purpose of culture to the sordid demands of the marketplace," he is quick to suggest otherwise.⁵ In fact, artists who participate in pop-up projects in the service of the economy could arguably be viewed as glorified window-dressers, receiving far less compensation (if any) than their advanced academic degrees demand. However, Throsby argues "there is an essential distinction between the economic value and the cultural value" of the activities in question and that "Governments have multiple objectives, including the creation of cultural value in society alongside the generation of economic value."⁶ Instead of suggesting that cultural activity must

³ See note 2 above, 6.

⁴ See note 2 above, 6.

⁵ Throsby, *The Economics of Cultural Policy*, 6.

⁶ See note 5 above, 7.

suffer in the service of the economic activity, Thorsby claims both can exist as valuable components to policy. Furthermore, by linking the arts with its economic potential, policy-makers previously unmoved by arguments for the intrinsic value of the arts are more likely to support cultural plans. In other words, policy-makers can potentially be persuaded to support creative research and development for artists if the plan is tied to economic revitalization, as it often is.

We know this can work because the National Endowment for the Arts is currently supporting the latest version of San Francisco's Art in Storefronts program, as part of a \$250,000 grant to the ARTery Project, which aims revitalize the Central Market neighborhood through the development of art projects. In a way, the discussion has come full circle, since through this project, the NEA is once again funding opportunities for artists to develop new ideas. And it is exactly this kind of argument- that two seemingly unrelated objectives, art and commerce, can be achieved through a single program- that has the potential to garner increased funding for creative research and development for artists in the future.

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