It's Time for Recess: A Unique Nonprofit You Need to Know About

by Hrag Vartanian on May 16, 2012

Artists Andy Meerow and Rose Marcus and Recess's Maia Murphy and Allison Weisberg in front of the Soho storefront (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

It's hard to believe that Recess, the Soho-based nonprofit, is only three years old and has already made significant waves in the city's art scene as a place where artists are free to explore process in every which way. "It's a space where you realize projects you can't realize anywhere else," founder and executive director Allison Weisberg says, and she really means it.

Situated in a short block and slightly removed from the commercial chaos of Soho, Recess seems to thrive on redefining its complicated role as an incubator of artistic ideas, no matter how seemingly incomplete or conceptual at first. "In the same way that the role of the artist is complicated in this space ... they take on the role of curator, art handler, art writer (in terms of press releases) ... we wear those many hats too," Weisberg says. "Our biggest strength is simultaneous clarity in our purpose but openness to stretch and fit the goals of each artist."
While the clarity of Recess’s mission is apparent when you talk to Weisberg, this is not a nonprofit that can easily be reduced to a blurb. There’s no one-liner that will unlock the door to what the organization does, and that complexity is part of its beauty. Recess is, I’ve learned, a place for conversations and ideas; it doesn’t privilege objects and doesn’t pretend to critique the market as its purpose. Everyone’s initiation into Recess — and don’t call them Recess Art — usually starts by asking the important question, “what exactly is going on here?”

“Recess isn’t a critique of the market or replacement of it but a complement. We want artists to work parallel to the market rather than in it,” she says. “If an artist makes an object — it’s not something we prioritize — and sells it, we don’t take a cut,” Weisberg says. She makes it clear that their goals are creative, not monetary.

I remember my first complicated — of course — experience at the storefront space a few years ago. I walked up to the door and felt confused by what was going on inside. The space seemed in the process of installation, so I assumed it wasn’t ready for visitors and walked away. Only a few days later during a conversation with a friend did I realize that Recess, in many ways, is always in the process of installation: that’s where the art lies, in the process.

Weisberg explains that Recess was born during her time working as an educator in museums. There she witnessed the difficulty of mounting process-based art for the public in a museum context. She worked as an educator in the 2008 Whitney Biennial and fell in love with the part of the show at the Park Avenue Armory, because of the art’s need to negotiate space. When she decided to open Recess, she chose a Soho location partly for her desire to give emerging and more established artists a place in one of the city’s most commercial districts, while also allowing them to negotiate with a New York streetscape in a direct way.

A year after its founding, Recess brought on Maia Murphy as project manager. Murphy is as committed to the mission as Weisberg: “I didn’t know any other space like this because ... [many spaces] are usually about preparing for the unveiling of opening night. Here we don’t have openings or closings but middlings,” she says, echoing Recess’s love of process. “It’s when the artist is halfway there,” Murphy explains.
Artists in Residence

During my visit I met with current artists in residence Rose Marcus and Andy Meerow. They had just started their project, which involves them exploring their friendship, their art and their collaborative impulses in an a way they’re still figuring out.

“Both of us are coming to the end of a chapter and the beginning of a new one,” Marcus said. “We both talk a lot via email, we talk on the phone and we’re classic artist friends. But we’re both shifting a little bit, and we are also asking, ‘what is collaboration?’”

During my visit, the duo were chatting in a space that looked like a cross between a studio and a work room. They had just finished painting the title of Twyla Tharp’s *The Collaborative Habit* on the window of the storefront, and Meerow said that he had brought in stacks of large, colorless paintings dominated by stark forms.

“We’re aware of the complexity of us making work about us making work. We’re aware of the possible pretentiousness, but we want to play with that,” he said.

Marcus brings to the collaboration her background in art history and her love of conceptual projects. I first met her when she was manning “Booooooth,” a site-specific project in the Napoleon Hall of the 2010 Nada art fair in Miami. It was an exploration of the art fair booth without reducing it into a cliché.
“[At Recess,] we're available to be observed as an artist, but that begs the question, ‘what's observable activity?’,” Marcus said. “The private doesn't exist much [here] unless you plan it.”

In the past, Recess has invited artists to build a water slide in the space or transform it into an artistic version of a hair salon. More recently, they are thinking of ways to accommodate an artist who is interested in the issue of access, so they may have to remodel their bathroom as part of the project. That openness is apparent as soon as you step inside. Anything is possible. It’s that embrace of the new, without the need for novelty and packaging, that makes the whole Recess Art project so very appealing.

Hyperallergic is proud to be the exclusive media partner of this year’s Recess Benefit, which will take place on Thursday, May 31 at The Salon at the Tribeca Grand Hotel.

More information and tickets are available now at recessart.org/benefit. You can also support Recess through an online auction launched yesterday on Paddle 8 featuring works by LaToya Ruby Frazier, Terence Koh, A.L. Steiner, Spencer Tunick, Liz Magic Lazer and many others.

Tagged as: Allison Weilsberg, Andy Meerow, Maia Murphy, Recess gallery, Rose Marcus