



Young Art Spaces Flourish Far From the Mainstream

Here are eight alternative arts destinations to explore in the city.

By Carmen Winant, September 27, 2011

In the era of the powerhouse Chelsea gallery, the demand for new alternative arts spaces is even greater and more urgent than it's ever been. Even with over 300 galleries in Chelsea, there is more supply than demand. Younger artists often struggle to have their work seen and promoted.

In addition, the educational model from which artists spring is shifting away from the white cube gallery system. With more degree programs that integrate curatorial studies, critical reading and writing, and art practice, the emerging creative voice is anything but fixed in the traditional, commercial mold.

Below, we've highlighted eight alternative arts destinations to explore in the city. But first, a little history...

Alt Arts Spaces Begin to Pop Up in NYC

Born from necessity and resistance, the history of creating an alternative to the standard gallery system has a long precedent.

In the particularly cold winter of 1961, the artist Claes Oldenburg opened a storefront gallery on 107 E. Second St. in the East Village. The space, called simply "The Store," was designed exclusively to sell Oldenburg's own work, blurring the lines between art and commodity, individual and market system. Exactly a decade later in 1971, the young Gordon Matta Clark opened his restaurant "Food" on the corner of Prince and Wooster in Soho. The restaurant functioned as a utopian performance space — catering to, and employing a staff of, artists. (Each week, a different artist was invited to serve as the guest chef.)

The current trend is no different for young artists. The alternative spaces come in many shapes and forms but what connects them is their drive to resist homogeneity in the art world — they tend away from the identical look of gallery Web sites, staff, and the general white cube — and cater to a ever hybridizing group of younger artists, writers and curators interested in diversifying the experience of art exhibition and community building.

Across these for-profit and non-profit spaces, which range from screening rooms to print shops, there is a general unrest with the uniform exclusivity of the mainstream art world. Because their overhead is lower than that of museums — many of non-profit spaces survive on grants and fundraisers — pressure to sell art is not as great. Shows run for short spurts; sometimes just for a night at a time. Homemade food is served at openings. While Chelsea galleries are often named in accordance with their single founding director or owner, the names of alternative spaces like the Public School New York in Greenpoint and Audio Visual Arts in the East Village reflect a collective philosophy at the helm. Cleopatra's in Greenpoint is run by a group of four women -- Bridget Donahue, Bridget Finn, Kate McNamara and Erin Somerville. Regina Rex in Bushwick is run by 13 people.

The city's alternative art spaces could never compete with the mainstream art market. But in the bold tradition of New York City artists, they are taking initiative to, in the words of Allison Weisberg of Recess (listed below) "fit the artists vision" by developing an infrastructure all their own. May we recommend the following...

Eight Alternative Arts Destinations to Explore

Stops 1 and 2: Recess Red Hook and Recess Soho Recess functions as a studio for artist residencies and an exhibition venue that caters to emerging artists. The gallery's street-level space at both its locations is open to the public and is visible to passers-by, and as the Recess Web site states, aims to "facilitate meaningful visual and intellectual interactions between artists and the community." Formed in May of 2009, Recess is like many spaces that are part of this tour, a non-profit.

Stop 3. The Public School New York in Greenpoint Begun in 2007, the Public School New York is a self-declared "school with no curriculum." Art, design, theory and culture classes are proposed by the public, who can in turn sign up. Current classes under consideration include "Creative writing as mediation," "Death Part 2" and "The Communist Horizon." Along with Silvershed and Cleopatra's (listed below), this is one of the few spaces featured on this list that has an international reach: the people who run the Public School New York operate eight other schools around the world. Not bad for beginning in an L.A. basement.

Sharing a building with the Public School New York (and Triple Canopy) is Light Industry in Greenpoint, which shows film and electronic art. Working with a different curator or artist each week, the space hosts screenings, lectures, or performances, all of which explore the possibilities of time-based media. The programming is diverse and experimental, aimed to foster a community and dialogue. Before moving into its new space in Greenpoint late this summer, Light Industry hosted events at the Dia: Chelsea, the New Museum and the Film Forum.

Stop 4. Ramiken Crucible on the Lower East Side Founded in September of 2009, Ramiken Crucible was started as an underground gallery space on East Broadway. The biggest obstacle for staying afloat, according to co-founder Mike Egan, has been dealing with collectors who want large discounts on work or who wait on buying art to see if a young artist's work "pans out." Fortunately, the overhead at Ramiken Crucible is low: "No crazy after parties, no inside cliques," said Egan. "Just a clear focus and commitment to supporting the art." The gallery shows just eight artists, Lucas Blalock and Andra Ursuta among them.

Stop 5. Silvershed in Chelsea This is the only space featured in this tour that is based in Chelsea. Launched in 2008, this non-profit gallery also screens films, prints books, and hosts artists' lectures and panels. Silvershed also operates spaces in Los Angeles and Berlin.

Stop 6. Regina Rex in Bushwick On the third-story building of a warehouse in Bushwick, Regina Rex is run by 13 artists. Since it opened in May of 2010, the group has already curated over 18 diverse shows, most recently a fantastic solo show by the artist Tracey Goodman.

Stop 7. Audio Visual Arts in the East Village Audio Visual Arts (A.V.A.) is a gallery in the East Village just north of Houston St. In addition to exhibitions, A.V.A. has been hosting "experimental theatre, music, dinners, film screenings, lectures, happenings, audio/film recordings, whittlings" since 2008. Yes, whittlings of the wood carving variety. The space has also created Exterior Sounds, a monthly audio project that interacts with unexpected passers-by outside the gallery.

Stop 8. Cleopatra's in Greenpoint This nonprofit gallery is run by a group of four female curators who met one another while working in Chelsea galleries. Upon opening in 2008, the group signed a 10-year lease in its Greenpoint space, which is good news since its shows have been consistently persuasive, interesting, and unorthodox. Since it opened, Cleopatra has opened another location in Berlin.