

“We Are the Scene”: Alternative Art Economies in Bushwick

Mary Kosut

Artists and art communities are essential to the cultural life of cities. In New York City, artists have created networks of artist-run galleries in unlikely spaces that are outside the corporate gallery system. Sociologist Mary Kosut explores how artists generate alternative urban art economies within the contemporary New York art world.



Anti-gentrification graffiti in Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2015 © Mary Kosut

Art scenes are integral to urban cultural centers—Berlin, Paris, London, and New York are defined by vibrant artist communities. As an art capital, New York City is home to more commercial galleries and arts institutions than any other. However, as industrialized cities undergo the process of super-gentrification, and are restructured by elite global financiers and neoliberal urban policies, New York artists are among the evicted and displaced.¹ A fortyish Brooklyn-based

¹ Although most working artists do not have high incomes, artists are identified as white and middle-class people who choose to live in poverty for their art. Megan Ashlin Rich explains the tensions and misconceptions between artists and longtime residents in neighborhood arts districts that are in flux here: www.metropolitiques.eu/Arts-Districts-Without-Artists.html.

painter who works full-time to support his studio practice told me, “in the 1970s it was dangerous, now it’s just dangerous economically.” Even employed artists cannot afford to live and work here.²

If creative production anchors urbanity, the city’s “soul” is being sold to a rising consumer class (Zukin 2011). Musician David Byrne, a New York City resident, penned a now infamous 2013 *Creative Time Reports* editorial arguing that the economic 1% had crushed the city’s artistic life.³ He lamented the dull, monochromatic corporate art for sale in blue-chip Chelsea galleries, and an increase in the cost of living that has led to the end of authentic art cultures. Another 1970s stalwart, East Village documentarian and street photographer Clayton Patterson, recently became an expat, protesting that New York had betrayed anyone who cares more about art than a stunning condo view with all of the amenities.⁴ Patterson’s last exhibition was titled “The \$16 Burger Show.”



Painter’s studio in converted factory building, Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2015 © Mary Kosut

² According to an online report based on US census data, only 15% of people with art degrees in New York City make a living from their work. Those who do have median earnings of \$25,000 per year. Source: <http://bfamfaphd.com/#artists-report-back>.

³ See: <http://creativetimereports.org/2013/10/07/david-byrne-will-work-for-inspiration>.

⁴ See: www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/nyregion/clayton-patterson-rebel-and-photographer-plans-to-leave-the-lower-east-side-for-europe.html?_r=0.

I've spent three years looking at art scenes on the edges of the corporate market-driven art world, or what I describe as the art world 1%. Within the upper echelons of the fine art world, buying art is an investment and, for a subset of super-rich collectors, art is the ultimate luxury consumer good (Thompson 2008). This stratum of the art world is well documented inside and outside of academia, and as sociologist Sarah Thornton has shown, populated by tabloid-friendly personalities including cloying celebrity art stars, eccentric dealers, and billionaire collectors (2009, 2014). I'm interested in the hundreds of thousands of artists in the city who are not supported by the market economy through selling their work—the creative 99% who comprise an under-recognized, artist reserve army.⁵ How do the masses of educated and under-funded artists survive in a city that is less and less artist-friendly?⁶

Finding space in New York

The pre-gentrified New York of the 1960s and '70s is permanently captured in an idyllic visual archive. Images of Studio 54, Warhol's factory, and the Chelsea Hotel illustrate that New York City was the center of an iconically creative universe. Films like *Downtown 81* and *Basquiat* make being young, broke and even homeless sexy. The famed urban jungle—that is, the emptied-out and financially bankrupt city that fertilized young artists—is extinct. In 21st-century New York City, you can't squat in an abandoned building in the East Village because there are none. And even college grads—artists and otherwise—with a reliable paycheck and a lease are vulnerable to escalating rents and swift eviction.

However, unsupported and undersupported artists have not given up on New York. Artists describe how New York City is imbued with a historic sense of place that they still feel connected to despite current political and economic realities. It is an umbilical cord that tethers the past and present. A painter who works as an art handler in a gallery told me:

New York City itself is an institution. In New York, the canon is not rhetoric, it's physical and you can feel it. It's not like church, where you are being told this was this and this is that... here, you are standing in front of the building that was Warhol's last studio. Maybe the urban thing has to do with how tight space is. You go to gallery openings and you are in the room with people who are in MOMA's permanent collection... if you are an artist, you feel like you are at home in that room. To be honest, I've told people that if I didn't live in the city I probably wouldn't make art—and they are like, really? But it's true. I can go see new art on the walls every night and it energizes me. In the suburbs or small cities, there is not enough to look at. The looking perpetuates you wanting to make your own shows.

Most artists, including those with art degrees, have no formal institutional support within the gallery system. Many earn a living working for a small handful of artists who are backed by galleries or through installing artwork for the art world 1%, rather than by selling their own art. In the words of an artist-curator in his thirties, "Everyone I know is an active participant in the city—they work for famous artists, in galleries and museums. They have to work to live here and they work extra hard to find time to do their own work. There is nothing romantic about it."

Artists have always worked these kinds of jobs because the commercial art world has never been able to accommodate even a fraction of the artists seeking representation on their rosters. What has changed is that many artists, up until the late 20th century, could manage to cover their studio and apartment rent by working behind the scenes. In addition to a lack of affordable housing, the professionalization of artists adds more financial strain. The push towards earning advanced degrees

⁵ Since the 1970s, art schools have expanded their BFA and MFA programs so that there are now more college-educated people, ostensibly trained to make art, than at any other time in history. And many are in New York; US Census data shows the number of people who self-identify as artists in the five boroughs—including painters, sculptors, musicians and dancers—reached 141,000 at the end of 2012, the most recent data available, up from 109,000 in 2000.

⁶ See: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/03/leave-new-york-for-los-angeles.

has left a new generation of artists with massive, unmanageable student-loan debt in a field with grim job prospects.⁷

With no funding and few opportunities to show their work publicly, artists have adapted by creating another art world. They transform unlikely spots—any place they can afford—into temporary and sometimes permanent exhibition spaces. There is a long history of artist-run spaces in New York City dating back to the 1950 and '60s. Many of these historic spaces focused on experimental programming, such as the 10th Street Galleries (a cooperative of artist-run galleries including the Tanager and Hansa Gallery) and Judson Church, an interdisciplinary non-profit hybrid that was home to the Fluxus movement and avant-garde dance. Contemporary artist-run spaces share the same spirit and are ideologically linked to this tradition, but studio and gallery space was cheap and plentiful at that time. Today a 400-square-foot (37 m²) storefront in the Lower East Side or Chinatown, where many smaller and less-established commercial galleries are located, costs \$5,000 a month to rent.

Despite the draconian real-estate market, artist-driven events and happenings mushroom all over the city. Sometimes shows are one night only pop-ups held in rented hotel rooms and Airbnb apartments. Even though most of these exhibitions are not listed by prestigious art publications, they are announced on social media (Instagram and Facebook) and are attended by fellow artists interested in shows that are unbound by the restrictions of professional gallerists and curators. And even if you didn't make the opening, there is typically some kind of documentation online.

Beyond pop-up shows, permanent and semi-permanent non-profit artist-run spaces with regular curatorial programs also fill a need for artists. They provide an opportunity to share work beyond the studio, and they generate their own informal reviews and conversations between artists. These spaces are usually called galleries even though they are not driven by profit and most are precariously funded out of pocket. Within these informal urban art economies, cultural capital is the currency that matters. It's earned through participation; accumulated through regularly producing work, curating shows, attending openings, participating in social media, going on studio visits, and showing work publicly.

Other art worlds: Bushwick, Brooklyn

Bushwick, Brooklyn is a culturally and aesthetically schizophrenic neighborhood that has undergone rapid gentrification in the past 10 years. Media stories about how Brooklyn is the new Manhattan often cite the neighborhood to verify the claim. In September 2014, Bushwick was touted as one of the 15 “coolest neighborhoods in the world” by *Vogue* magazine. Bushwick has been branded well and its industrial brown zones are tagged with graffiti that looks like it was commissioned by a stylist. But it's more than a backdrop. Bushwick is home to studio buildings, galleries and converted warehouses, housing projects, an enormous concrete factory, a waste transfer station, and a notorious rat problem. As Paul Parkhill (2015) shows, there is a symbiotic dynamic between art spaces and manufacturing businesses—both seek affordable and long-term solutions with minimal disruption to mixed-use urban neighborhoods. Bushwick has over 65 galleries now, but this does not include spaces in building basements, loading docks of warehouses, and hallways that escape media attention. There had been a recent trend of artists turning their apartments into temporary galleries out of necessity and desire.⁸

⁷ See: www.vulture.com/2014/12/we-need-to-reconsider-art-school.html.

⁸ See: www.nytimes.com/2016/07/04/arts/design/its-an-art-gallery-no-a-living-room-ok-both.html.



Art studio building and concrete factory in Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2015 © Mary Kosut

Sister,⁹ a miniature 30-inch (76 cm) window gallery facing a well-trafficked sidewalk, is the smallest apartment gallery in Bushwick and the smallest one I’ve ever seen. It was founded in 2015 by artist-curators Jenny Lee and Zuriel Waters, who also live together in the apartment. When Sister has an opening, people wander around their place—they hang out in the kitchen and sit on Lee and Waters’ bed. But to view the art, you have to walk outside onto the sidewalk and look into the window which is lit at night. By transforming the only window in the bedroom (which is also Lee’s studio) into a gallery, the distinctions most of us make between public and private life erode quickly.

This intimate setup makes it possible for Lee and Waters to curate shows and make rent. Lee said: “I think that the first impulse for me to make Sister was actually humor, the old ‘New York real estate is so expensive we could rent out our window’ thing; like it could be a *New Yorker* cartoon or something. Now it has become much more than that, but the absurdity about it is still there, which is important.” Sister is more of a site of collaboration and connection between artists than a gallery *per se*. Even though it’s a micro-exhibition space, their curatorial program offers an important opportunity for artists to show their work and interact in a setting that’s arguably more interesting (and social) than most commercial galleries. “The fact that I can go on with Sister really without anyone’s permission and that I can offer shows to people who I think deserve them is amazing and genuinely uplifting,” explains Lee. Art needs an audience.

⁹ Website: <http://sistergallery.com>.



View of Sister window gallery from sidewalk at night, Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2016 © Mary Kosut

Hood Gallery, founded by artist-curator Tom Koehler in 2013, assiduously disrupts the staid white-cube paradigm. It is located in an alley off a traffic-clogged street surrounded by neighborhood businesses—bodegas, discount stores, and an army-recruiting center. Hood Gallery is a shipping container, a corrugated metal box used to store and transfer materials, that Koehler built and financed. It is dry-walled and wired with electricity, but the rectangular metal structure and plywood floor make it feel more like you are stepping into the back of a semi-trailer rather than a standard gallery. Hood is narrow—9 feet (2.7 m) wide by 20 feet (6 m) long—and people linger outside during openings, leaning against and resting their drinks on a garbage dumpster. There is no heat, so they light a fire in a trashcan during the winter.

Hood's indifference to gallery protocol and etiquette have made it a legendary artist-run space in Brooklyn. The gallery doesn't keep regular hours, has no official website, avoids press releases, and on the night of openings it's tricky to find—you enter behind a large black tarp suspended from a wire across the alley. Artists often use the gallery itself as another medium and make work with the space itself in mind. A Hood regular (who is a Brooklyn-based artist) told me that artists don't simply "dump their work into the space," as is common with many for-profit galleries. Hood is well respected as a springboard and testing ground for artists who have never shown their work before, in addition to artists represented by commercial galleries. As a site of production and sociality, Hood intersects professional art worlds, but generates a scene unto itself that challenges curatorial norms and aesthetics.



Hood Gallery, located in a shipping container in an alley between buildings, Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2016
© Mike Schreiber

An artist who runs an exhibition space in Brooklyn, said: “I like to think of these scenes as motorcycle chapters—certain crews are cool with each other and help each other out, like separate but connected gangs. But we’re friendly and they have my respect.” There is camaraderie among artists that make work, curate shows and regularly attend openings at artist-run spaces like Hood and Sister. They are a cohort of urban cultural producers with minimal financial support and little formal critical attention to buoy their work. As a practicing artist-curator who works seven days a week making art and making rent differentiates, “We are not part of the scene, we are the scene, and we carry it on our backs.”

Often escaping the public radar, artist-run spaces in unlikely locations exist within a floating urban art world that survives in spite of the market economy. This other art world illustrates philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault’s (1984) concept of “heterotopia,” as a heterogeneous space of networks, relationships and places that resist hegemonic cultural frameworks. Much like their historical predecessors, contemporary non-profit artist-run spaces are pockets of activity, temporary and permanent, that fulfill a need that the commercial gallery system doesn’t provide for. But their shrinking size and mutability reflect how artists have creatively adapted to the changing urban geography and scarcity of resources.

Through creating galleries in apartment windows and shipping containers, artists appropriate and assign new meanings to spaces that weren't intended to show art, without directly displacing residents or local businesses. They help to invigorate an art capital choked by gentrification and an oblivious consumer class, while redefining the idea of an art gallery itself. David Byrne's argument that New York is over—corporatized, generic and inhospitable to most artists—is defensible, but only partially true. Despite financial pressure and dislocation, artists make do and make their own scenes in whatever spaces they can commandeer. In basements and bedrooms in Brooklyn and elsewhere, contemporary artists continue to exhibit their work and generate networks of support and sociality. There is an alternative to the art world 1%, but it's not on any official gallery map.

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To cite this article:

Mary Kosut, "'We Are the Scene': Alternative Art Economies in Bushwick", *Metropolitiques*, 13 September 2016. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/We-Are-the-Scene-Alternative-Art.html>.