

The Dis-Located Gallery:

Effects of 2020 on Philly's Gallery Scene

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“What’s happening with galleries?” That is the question which, more than any other, has landed in Philly Steward’s inbox and DMs over the past several months. Some people have heard that Gross McCleaf has changed hands, that Bluestone is waiting until the spring to see if they will reopen, that members of High Tide have opened a new LA space, that Tiona McClodden is organizing a new gallery and that the futures of quite a few OG artist-run spaces are somewhat uncertain. This question was repeatedly delivered tinged with the anxiety that when quarantine rules are lifted, the Philadelphia gallery scene that had existed before the tumult of 2020 won’t exist with the same vivacity and sense of purpose that it had before.

The truth is that the PS team has had the same questions. Like everybody else, we've been siloed in our homes for the past nine months, walking the tightrope of work/life balance, health, and sanity. We had all heard the stories making their way through the grapevine of Philly art gossip, but no one seemed to have any genuine sense of where things were at.

So to find out, PS decided to go back to basics. We started with the gallery map we released in the Winter of 2019/20. At that time, PS could count 87 Philly galleries that each met the following criteria:

- 1) Hosting at least three exhibitions a year.
- 2) Regularly open to the public for a set number of hours — at the very least, on a monthly basis.
- 3) Located within the tax map of Philadelphia.

This past December, PS reached out to all 87 galleries to ask them to participate in a short, anonymous survey to help us get a better sense of what's happening now. Twenty galleries responded. To bolster the quantitative input, we conducted three in-depth interviews with gallery directors across the three major gallery sectors — commercial, nonprofit and artist-run — to gain a more qualitative sense of how this past year has felt to those on the ground.

From all this, some basic threads emerged that we believe can be seen as reflective of Philadelphia's gallery scene as we head deeper into 2021.

The good news is, it's not all bad. The bad news is, it's not all good.

The digital divide

Like every other industry, the world of galleries had to quickly adapt to a virtual existence during the early days of lockdown (non-sequitur: did anyone else notice this all began around the Ides of March or just us?) While 75% of galleries that completed our survey had been open to the public on a weekly or monthly basis as of January 1st, 2020, only 5% continued to be so as of this past December 1st. Yet surprisingly, given the larger economic hit of the pandemic, 70% of galleries reported overall sales either stayed the same or increased from previous years.

The reason was online business. While 45% of responding galleries reported a decrease in brick-and-mortar sales, no gallery reported a decrease in online sales, and 70% reported that their online sales had grown. In our interview, Liz Spungen, Executive Director of The Print Center in Rittenhouse, echoed this theme: for online sales, 2020 "hasn't been quiet at all, it's been very, very busy. Sales through the Gallery Store have been very strong... The [annual Print Center] auction did go really well. It was the best year ever."

In our interview with Sara McCorrison, co-director of Paradigm Gallery in Queen Village, she told us that in the first few weeks of pandemic quarantine, it felt as if "the actual floor [was] falling out from under you." At the same time, she saw the opportunities in translating her brick-and-mortar gallery into a digital space: "It leveled the playing field... it was this moment that, if we could do virtual events better than other galleries internationally, we're going to stand out, even amongst some we

can't usually be seen ahead of." McCorriston spent the first several weeks attending as many virtual events as she could, both to see what was working for others and where she thought she could improve upon emerging tactics. She organized non-art virtual events for friends and family to hone her skillsets. And in addition to developing its own approach to virtual gallery space, Paradigm participated in a virtual art fair, something that prior to this year 0% of survey respondents had done, but which 20% acknowledged participating in during 2020.

As the year progressed, many commercial and non-profit galleries seem to have seen the support that used to walk in through their front door translate to support via their evolving online platforms. Stuck at home, forced to focus on their space, Philadelphians appear to have been moved to improve their psychological or domestic experience through the addition of art. According to Spungen, the design consultants that The Print Center works with saw a steady increase during the third and fourth quarters of 2020, in residential projects.

Galleries are responding to the limitations of quarantine and the potential for new audiences with new efforts to reach out online: 50% of galleries reported that over the past year they've increased their focus on virtual programs or events, and 35% noted they've increased their engagement with social media. At the same time, the jump to the digital space can hit real obstacles.

Chris Hammes and Olivia Williams, a team of artists who run Pilot+Projects in Kensington, carefully created a virtual 3D model of their gallery space — right down to the tables, the bathroom shelving, and the zines displayed for sale —allowing viewers to “travel through” the gallery while the physical space was off-limits. The problem was, when they put out an open call for 3D modeled artworks, the response wasn't strong enough to go forward. Reassessing, they suspended programming and postponed shows into the unforeseeable future. Hammes is now using the gallery space as his studio, an experience which he is enjoying: “I've gotten back in to the studio to work on projects that I haven't had a chance to for a while.”

Community reach

Hammes and Williams hope to continue in virtual space a core idea of Pilot+Projects: small, focused exhibitions that “show more of what an artist is up to” and also enhance the ability of audiences to interact with the artist — rather than simply seeing “just one piece by an artist in a large group exhibition” (Hammes). In addition, “we want shows to be experimental, we want to be good activists and good neighbors, and build community around us. To be able to do projects where we help the community has been important” (Williams). Before the pandemic, this purpose was reflected in hosting an Occupy ICE fundraiser, staging a major exhibit organized by Jennie Shanker on the Norris Homes housing project (which were demolished), and more.

However, Pilot+Projects, like most artist-run galleries, must be privately funded by Hammes and Williams through their other work. Such resources, along with the rare small grant and occasional sale, are the financial safety net of most non-commercial, artist-run galleries. 2020 severely tested this economic model. Williams, for example, was furloughed in March from her job at Wonderspaces; Hammes was furloughed from one of his two university teaching jobs. In this economic climate, their ability to support their enterprise, their artists, and their community has had to go temporarily dormant, waiting for a return to some sense of economic normalcy before they can feel confident about the future.

In contrast, 2020 has allowed the Paradigm Gallery, a commercial space, to expand its connections to community. Over the past several years, with a robust online shop and through the use of various platforms such as 1stDibs, their vision had been expanding nationally and internationally. 2020 seems to be the year it also came home. Focusing on the gallery's large front windows McCorrison and her colleagues created mini-exhibitions for display, and left the lights on all night. This move helped the gallery reach people who have been escaping the monotony of indoor isolation by taking night-time walks to clear their heads. On multiple occasions people have told McCorrison that the revolving displays have become "a really important part of my night-time walk". As recently as the weekend before our interview, three Philadelphians who had never stepped foot in the gallery came in and purchased works of art, each mentioning how the window displays had captured their attention.

The result of the window exhibitions, McCorrison believes, is that "Philadelphia is the place where [Paradigm] got the most new collectors this year." Over all, 600 people collected from Paradigm this year, purchasing more than 127 different artists' work. "We learned about our support system; what we can do when we have nothing to work with", McCorrison adds. In discussing her changing relationship with collectors, McCorrison reports that the sense of community has increased and the conversations she had with collectors were "of much higher quality and value. I've gotten to know people better."

For The Print Center, the use of windows has played an equally important role in engagement with their neighborhood. *Windows on Latimer* is the name of a series of small exhibitions placed in TPC's front windows, designed to share the talent typically on view within the gallery space. As a response to the raising of political consciousness in society at large, resulting from the Black Lives Matter movement protesting the systemic and systematic oppression of black people in America, it was decided that starting the series of exhibitions with Philly/LA photographer Shawn Theodore's work would both reflect the moment and add to the conversation. "It seemed like the perfect thing at that time, though we didn't anticipate more than 2-3 [exhibitions]", Spungen remarked. Because of the positive response to this initiative from their community, the *Windows on Latimer* programming is planned to continue through this upcoming summer.

The community outside the Print Center, of course, was not the only one Spungen was concerned with. Within her own organization, those early days of uncertainty resulted in some early and decisive decisions that had to be made about the staffing and operational capacity of their organization. "The most important thing to me from the very beginning has been making sure my staff was taken care of. No one knew what was going on," Spungen said. The decision was made to maintain the jobs of all permanent staff. "It was the right thing to do and for our organization it meant that when all this was over we could continue on like we didn't miss a beat. It gave the staff an underlying sense of appreciation and security that then allowed them the ability to do their very best work during this time."

2021: An Art Odyssey

It is often a fools' errand to engage in prognostication, but we invited survey respondents to do so. Only 15% reported that they felt more pessimistic at the end of 2020 than they had in March. Unsurprisingly, those more pessimistic galleries — one of which was artist-run; two commercial — also reported that they had decided to cease operations. To an open-ended question about expectations in 2021, many respondents offered their thoughts regarding when they expected to be

able to welcome guests back into their spaces, with the most hopeful offering March or April and the more cautious anticipating late 2021.

Spungen had remarked that while The Print Center operates on a 2+ year programmatic outlook, she's hoping that they can welcome back guests sometime in the summer, when they are planning to hold an exhibition of Anastasia Samoylova's work entitled "FloodZone" — an event initially postponed in April 2020. "Usually we wouldn't present a prominent show in July, but we believe that people will be excited to come in when we can reopen safely, and we will draw a large audience," she remarked. How had they survived the long hiatus between real-world exhibitions? When I asked her initially how the Center's non-profit model affected the gallery's resilience during these tough times, she replied that, for her, what seemed to help the organization survive was not necessarily its non-profit nature but its "longevity. We're so long-established that there was never a question [if] we could survive." Yet they asked themselves, "How long do we do nothing and still have a reason to exist?" That led her team to engage more heavily in social media, figuring out how to develop recorded and live video programming as well as engage in website development for a more robust digital presence. Spungen confirmed these new skillsets will continue to grow and become an important part of The Print Center's outreach and exhibition coordination moving forward, even after she and her team are able to welcome guests back in real life.

Williams and Hammes are less sure about the future of Pilot+Projects. Reflecting upon interventions that might offer some stabilization, Hammes shared that "not paying rent would be nice, which means owning property ... but we don't have those means." In addition, he feels that "more opportunities for grants for operational costs for artist-run spaces would be a very helpful thing." Williams mentioned that she had applied this past spring to Velocity's COVID-19 Artist Emergency Relief Grants, hoping to use some of the money to support the Pilot3D project mentioned earlier, but has yet to hear back. "I have a suspicion that we won't be able to do anything in the space for the next year. ... There is a chance that we might have to close our doors permanently if this keeps going on. ... I don't know how we'll make it through it, to be honest," Hammes added. Despite what seem like uncertain odds, this resilient team of two is still planning on a digital February auction of art to help support Disability Pride in order to help establish a scholarship for disabled artists to take art classes through the organization. They are also looking at producing editioned collaborative artworks, whose sale could help offset the cost of the gallery rent.

Like many artist-run spaces, Pilot+Projects had started as an idea — Hammes wrote a proposal to Temple for a grant while completing his education — before becoming a physical location. Williams reflected upon this by adding, "I think Chris and I would want to still do things with Pilot, even if the space ended... like a backyard show or little things." Though that doesn't mean that the physicality of a gallery is unimportant to their mission. As Chris made clear, "The pandemic is requiring us to consider ways in which we don't need the space... but I don't think if this went on for years that I could continue to get excited about only doing VR exhibitions. There's something about seeing art in person that I think I just don't believe that will ever be unimportant."

This importance of personal engagement with art is something that concerns McCorriston as well. She admits some anxiety in anticipating the pent-up wish for experiences as 2021 progresses. "The part of [2021] that I'm most worried about is whenever we as a society determine things can go 'back to normal.' I'm worried about when people start traveling again and maybe aren't as focused on supporting artists. How are we going to approach this? I'm strategizing with these artists and how we can pitch it to the press. Events, concerts — we're going to suddenly be competing with the return of all of that." Though the "future looks bright," McCorriston's goal for when the next major shift to social life comes is "to not be caught off-guard by that. To have something creative planned."

What does it all mean?

2020 was a difficult year across all sectors of the economy, and art galleries took a hit just like any other industry. A silver lining seems to have been that, with individuals stuck within their homes for prolonged periods of time, forced to confront blank walls that in previous days had been peripheral concerns, art and its use to decorate our domestic spaces gained a new sense of importance and urgency. But this promise has been most helpful to galleries that had both a history of and capacity for sales, and the ability to adapt and grow those capacities within the digital realm quickly. It is the artist-run space — typically reliant on the outside incomes of gallery owners, who were themselves often in service industries hit hard by the pandemic, and even before that had operated on a tenuous budget at best — that seem to be positioned on a knife's edge moving forward.

As we begin this new year it seems certain that the gallery community overall will survive. But difficult months are still ahead, when we might see a domino-like effect of closures, as individuals who have scraped and borrowed to keep their artist-run spaces operable conclude that it's just not worth the angst and uncertainty. Based upon a quick count of the master list that Philly Stewards maintains, it appears that approximately 24 galleries fall within this sector, a little more than a quarter of the overall community. The question now may be whether the larger gallery community has any stake in helping these more eclectic spaces, whose conceptual and programmatic diversity contribute just as strongly to what we describe when we use the term "the Philly gallery scene".

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