

**The Port Huron Statement
and the Origin of Artists' Organizations**

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In June of 1962, the newly born Students for a Democratic Society met at a United Auto Workers country retreat to draft a manifesto to serve what was clearly beginning to emerge from the civil rights movement: a new left in the United States. This document, now largely forgotten, was titled *The Port Huron Statement*, and it galvanized many activists of that generation. Though not perfect -- women's issues, for example, were not yet in vogue and are not mentioned, and there were ingenuous calls for increased use of nuclear power -- it outlines many of the concerns of the time about social organization that later came to be instrumental in the founding of artists' organizations.

"As a social system we seek the establishment of a participatory democracy governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation." [This and all succeeding quotes are from *The Port Huron Statement* unless otherwise noted.]

Neatly summarized by the catch phrase participatory democracy, the goal and attitudes revealed above came to be much more readily of use in small action groups of like-minded individuals than on any mass scale. Thus when artists came together to lament the lack of opportunity for themselves, their friends from school and their friends' friends, the concept of collective decision-making was in the air. The means utilized was consensus: "Its [the new left's] experiments in democracy ... demonstrated the incompatibility of rule-by-consensus... in a large organization -- or even a small group of people with divergent interests." But it was a powerful tool for homogeneous groups such as idealistic and politicized artists. Robert McDonald, current Director of the DeSaisset Museum and then board member of 80 Langton Street in San Francisco, wrote on leaving that board in 1979, "As an institution it is neither the projection of one dominant person's ego nor the tool of an art clique. An appropriate definition of its nature might be consensually coordinated anarchy." The objective was self-determination. Artists took this rhetoric, originally intended to address disenfranchisement from political decision-making processes, and applied it to the microcosm of an art world that had effectively placed artists in a passive and victimized role, identifying that condition as a political one. As an alternative to such a condition, artists proposed to create their own ground for displaying their works both for their peers and any interested audience.

"I began the space in 1969 in order to provide an independent and experimental alternative for the presentation of my work and the work of other artists." (Billy Apple, founder of Apple, in October of 1969, as quoted in *Alternatives in Retrospect* by the New Museum.

"It was a time of great distress when everything seemed to be falling apart,... and opening the space [98 Greene St., December 1969] was a political statement." (Holly Solomon, same source).

"112 [Greene Street] had no political interests. It was a free space where an artist could come in unknown..." (Jeffrey Lew, founder in October 1970; same source.)

The founding of artists' organizations took place in an era of populist, grass roots parallel institutions in American life, as many (mostly younger) people found themselves unable to accept the prospects for life and career that the culture offered them. This phenomenon accelerated as people became aware that previous perceptions of social structures as monolithic and intimidating could be successfully challenged. ("The dominant institutions are complex enough to blunt the minds of their potential critics.") In education, so-called free universities sprung up around most major college towns, offering alternative curricula; in consumer affairs, people chose to form food cooperatives, bypassing normal and more expensive distribution systems. Alternative newspapers were common. In the arts, for reasons that need to be examined, these alternative institutions not only took root nationwide, but have continued to both prosper and be born until the present day, while their contemporary movements by and large have developed into objects for nostalgic exploitation by the entertainment industry.

Another aspect of the founding principles of the field can be found in the renewed respect for Asian, African, and Latin influences, places where "the impulse to life and creation is superbly manifest," according to *Port Huron*, and for the representation of those cultures in the minorities of America. Artists' spaces have been primary presenters of a pluralistic notion of what art can be, with multi-cultural, women's, political, non-objective and innovative forms being continually embraced. Similarly, when *The Port Huron Statement* called for a post-McCarthy "open discussion of all issues -- otherwise [society] will be in fact promoting real subversion as the only means of implementing ideas," it was anticipating the feminist and politically inspired work frequently offered by artists' organizations. The art world shift to non-objective art works and introduction of a rougher and less polished look that occurred at the time, effectively removing many of the decade's leading artists from the marketplace, might well have been as politically motivated as aesthetically motivated. However the common assertion in revisionist history that artists' spaces were an outgrowth solely of either one of these developments is a tempting but inaccurate simplification, especially given the added fact that many spaces showed conservative work throughout the period, and almost every space came into being amid and served a particular community's needs. It also is unfortunate that it is rarely mentioned that careers were made both for administrators and for artists by this strategy and that out-groups were often constantly transformed into in-groups. It is a fact, however, that the field was born just a few years after SDS stated that, "The arts, too, are organized substantially according to their commercial appeal; aesthetic values are subordinated to exchange values, and writers swiftly learn to consider the commercial market as much as the humanistic market place of ideas."

Further on, it is added, "These contemporary social movements...have in common certain values and goals...[including] freedom of economic, political and cultural organization."

Clearly the dual goals of a new form of cultural organization and a renewed emphasis on ideas over market possibilities were very much a part of the thinking of those artists who began the

