

**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



field of artists' spaces. In an era when specialists coming between people and important matters in their lives was being widely challenged, artists declared themselves their own curators, cutting out the middle men between their art and its audience, and some found employment that was politically acceptable. The students of SDS had stated, with regard to their educational subculture, "With administrators ordering the institution, and faculty the curriculum, the student learns by his isolation to accept elite rule..."

There were other notions proffered by *The Port Huron Statement* that anticipated developments in these arts organizations soon after. For example, both movements have been hostile to corporate influence, whether in foreign affairs or the conservative influence of corporate collections and blockbuster exhibition sponsorship. Both articulated concern over the real estate speculation that harmed the urban poor and later the artist population. Of course, much can be written about artists' complicity -- unwitting or not -- in the gentrification of so many central cities over the last twenty years.

Finally, one of the most evocative issues still with us from that era is that of decentralization. In the arts, this came to mean in the United States an attempt to create conditions in which every region might take itself seriously as an art producer for its communities, rather than seek to follow New York's lead or validation. "Our monster cities...might now be humanized,[if] broken into smaller communities,...arranged according to community decisions," said Port Huron.

Given the range of concerns inherent in their organizations, how have artists' organizations fared in dealing with their own agenda? For example, how well has the field enabled communities outside New York to nurture their own art institutions? The answer is not clear. Data from the 1987 NEA grant program for artists' organizations offers mixed evidence. On one hand, funded spaces were spread over twenty-five states, but spaces in New York received an average grant of \$20,400 compared to \$14,614 for the rest of the country, on funds assigned by peer panels from the field. Apparently even within the field, residing in New York still carries a cachet that translates to cash credibility identical programs elsewhere don't have, except increasingly in California. On the other hand, lively artists' organizations now exist in almost every city in the United States, tremendously enhancing the services offered to local artists.

The establishment of spaces in the spirit of parallel economies and parallel organizations also led to an insistence that as professionals, artists must be paid for their services. While not uniformly applied or feasible, a great majority of spaces attempt to provide artists with honoraria. How significant is this financial support in terms of meaningful impact on artists' lives? Artists' organizations seem to pass through several stages of maturation as organizations along these lines. At first, of course, is the inability to pay any fees, followed by the payment of at first token, and then more substantial, honoraria. At the next level of sophistication comes the awareness that on top of the honorarium, an artist needs a materials budget, and if necessary, the underwriting of transportation. The most mature artists' spaces are now also offering grants programs to supply even more substantial amounts of cash underpinnings to artists' projects, and some organizations feel that extended residencies are an appropriate next step.

This is all considerable progress, especially considering the options available to artists fifteen



years ago. However, it seems inversely true that as often as not artists are just breaking even. And in some cases, looked at in the most negative light, artists are still underwriting their own exhibitions and the efforts of the host institution by absorbing the difference between what the space can pay them and what the work actually costs. Museums and galleries are not concerned with such issues because they hold out carrots that artists' organizations can not. Shows at spaces can be unfavorably compared with shows at such institutions by artists more concerned with career than with community because spaces generally cannot offer the validation of a museum nor the prospects for financial gain that a gallery can -- to the lucky few.

Artists' control of these organizations, significant decision-effecting authority is the legacy of the self-determination movement. Though differences between artists' organizations and Institutes of Contemporary Art are many, perhaps the final indivisible distinction is this notion of artist power. Many ICA's and other visual arts organizations are vital contributors, but those which do not allow artists a pivotal role in the administration of the organization fail to comprehend the radical legacy of the field. As the leading visual artists' organizations pass through their second decades, and the magic wand of professionalization of board and staff passes over them almost unnoticed in the night, their definitive characteristics may be lost.

What remains unspoken is the impact all this alienation from twenty-five years ago has had on the mainstream society it intended to leave behind. In the larger culture, we see those elements that can be marketed still highly visible on main street while the political reforms of the time are taken apart in the alley. In the arts, storefront commercial galleries that claimed to be the artists' spaces of the '80s are already extinct, their ignorance of any of the issues discussed here gone with them. Finally, there is the impact on museums. In the May 1987 issue of *Art in America*, the chief curator of L.A. MOCA, Mary Jane Jacob, is quoted as stating: "We can think of ourselves as a resource center as well as a museum. If we deal directly with the artist, then we can find a way of working the art into the museum. If an artist has a proposal, we don't say, 'Well, you can't mess up this wall.' If it's interesting to the institution, we want the artist to use [MOCA] as a laboratory, like a studio. After we as curators make a certain choice [of artist], we then become facilitators in bringing [the proposal] about."

Such a radical redefinition of the role of a major museum -- reading as though lifted out of some artists' space brochure -- will no doubt stand as one of the major influences of this field, and in its own sideroad sort of way of the sixties themselves. For the balance of the century, art professionals will be sorting out the influences, roles and meaning of their various presenting institutions, if not exactly down on all fours trying to put together the china shop, then at least looking at the art world through a large cracked glass.