

Movers and Shakers: The Role of Artist-Run Spaces in Chicago

By Marla Seidell

Over the past decade, artist-run spaces (also called apartment galleries or alternative art spaces) have jump-started the careers of dozens of local emerging artists. Functioning as a midway point between art school and commercial gallery, the artist-run space has unleashed a spirit of do-it-yourself (DIY) and community-oriented collaboration unique to Chicago. Being the biggest breeding ground for art students, yet paradoxically, the city with relatively few opportunities for gallery placement has made the existence of the artist-run space a necessity. Over the past decade a subculture focused on art for art's sake has evolved into a tradition unique to Chicago that moves and shakes up the contemporary art scene.

Aiming to promote the important role artist-run spaces have played in moving and shaking up the art landscape, the Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) hosts "Artists Run Chicago," on view at HPAC from the 10th of this month through July 10. The exhibition showcases art (paintings, sculpture, mixed media, and drawings) inspired or recently created by the artists involved with the spaces. Among the spaces on display are Deluxe Projects and Polvo (no longer in operation), in addition to up-and-coming venues such as 65 Grand and Julius Caesar. In tandem with the exhibition, a series of events tied to *70 Days for 70 Years*, HPAC's 70th Anniversary, are planned. A kimchi demonstration, a bike tour of the spaces, a cookout with video screenings, a potluck, and a block party are among the eclectic DIY mix that reflect archetypal events associated with artist-run spaces.

HPAC's origins as an artist-run space bring the history full circle. "We're giving the floor back to artists pioneering in that front," curator Allison Peters Quinn told *CAN*. The goal is to expose to the public how these spaces have created opportunities for artists to experiment and expand their work. In contrast to commercial galleries, which are profit driven, the bottom line at artist-run spaces is the project of the moment. That's why certain artist-run spaces closing up shop can't be seen as a failure. "It's the completion of an idea and moving on to something else," explained Quinn. A good example of the rise and fall of the artist-space is Pilsen's Polvo, which after nine years closed in 2007. Artist Miguel Cortez, one of the Polvo founders, opened Antena in his Pilsen apartment in 2008. "Artists are doing DIY here; they're experimenting, which is something other than being in the commercial scene," Cortez told *CAN*. "But they're using it to launch their careers."

Harold Mendez, a graffiti artist turned conceptual, is an artist who has propelled his career via artist-run spaces. In addition to Polvo, he showed at Mess Hall, Contemporary Workshop, and Roots and Culture before his breakthrough last November, the MCA's *12 x 12*. While Mendez acknowledges the free reign granted at artist-run spaces, he notes that showing only at these small venues can be limiting. "An artist has to learn when to say yes, and when to say no," said Mendez, who is currently part of the group show, "Several Silences," on view at the Renaissance Society until June 7th. There's also the question of art vs. party (which, by the way, is one of panels at Artists Run Chicago). Openings at artist-run spaces tend to be alcohol soaked, often with



"Untitled (Chandelier)," Noelle Mason. Image courtesy Miguel Cortez (Antena).

friends DJ'ing for a dancing crowd. But regardless of the freewheeling factor, artist-run spaces help emerging artists flourish. "They [artists] create networks through showing," observes Cortez. "Maybe a curator stops by their show, and a whole chain of events happens." The party atmosphere at artist-run openings may be less traditional than the formal, wine-sipping affairs associated with commercial galleries, yet the opportunities for networking and development are far more fluid. "It's not art on a clean white wall, this is the opposite of it, because the artist is so much a part of it," explained Quinn.



"A Teenage Love that didn't feel no hurt yet," Harold Mendez (2008). Image courtesy the artist.

Since last June, Irene Perez has run Second Bedroom Project Space, an apartment gallery in Bridgeport that focuses on installations. The best part of the experience for fabric and media art-

ist Perez has been the opportunity to collaborate. "When you're out of school, dialogue among artists doesn't happen that often," said Perez, who founded Second Bedroom together with Chris Smith, a fellow UIC graduate student in the studio arts program. A recent installation at the space (which is actually the second bedroom in Smith's apartment), *Lesson Plan*, featured cardboard buildings from around the world, created by students in artist Edra Soto's art class at Noble Street College Prep School. Soto transformed the bedroom to align with the installation, draping pastel crepe paper over the ceiling and walls to create a waterfall of colors. For Perez, this type of unfiltered expression is precisely what she envisioned when she and Smith started discussing the idea of opening an apartment gallery together. "It's not about the art hanging on the walls, but to take from the space, be inspired by it, and create work that adds to or transforms the space, changes it into something else," Perez said. The artist-run spaces keeps artists going. "They [the artists] have come up with system to continue their work and to keep getting feedback on their work," noted Quinn.

In addition to the full plate of art, panel discussions, and DIY events planned for Artists Run Chicago, there will be games. One such game is a beanbag championship, which typifies the kind of oddball (read: inexpensive and creative) recreation taking place at artist-run spaces. "They're very inclusive and open to anyone participating, but nobody knows they're happening," Quinn said. The world of DIY artist-run spaces, a particularly Chicago thing, is coming out of its hiding place.

Marla Seidell is a Chicago-based lifestyle journalist and arts critic. Her writing has appeared in The Daily Herald, Timeout Chicago, The Onion A.V. Club, Newcity Chicago, Today's Chicago Woman, UR Chicago, and many other outlets. She blogs about local lifestyle and culture at The Latest and Greatest, and pens personal essays about love and loss.