



## **Common Field St. Louis Meet-Up**

Location: Treffpunkt

2/21/2019

### ***Event Information:***

You are invited to join together for a conversation, gathering and program for artist-centered spaces, projects and organizers. The Common Field St Louis Meet-Up aims to bring together arts organizers to discuss challenges, opportunities, and ideas relevant to their local context. Attendees will also have an opportunity to learn more about how Common Field serves as a national resource to connect a broader field of artist-centric spaces and projects across the country.

The goals of the Meet-Up are to connect St. Louis arts organizers and small-scale arts organizations with one another and build dialogue among communities; talk about our shared opportunities and challenges, what we need, and what role Common Field might play to amplify our work and ideas to a national network; share and identify if and how we are sharing resources with each other and encourage deeper collaboration among our artist spaces; and learn about Common Field, the upcoming April 25 - 28, 2019 Philadelphia Convening and opportunities for support.

### ***Event Agenda:***

6:30 - 7:00: Reception with food + drinks and Idea Sharing

7:00: Welcome and Introductions

-Organizing Partners: The Luminary

-Common Field: Courtney Fink

7:15: Group Conversation

Common Field and The Luminary will lead a group discussion on ways our arts communities can better collaborate, how we can connect with conversations happening nationally, and how to proactively imagine more equitable and innovative ways of working together.

### ***Goals of the Meeting:***

- To connect St. Louis arts organizers and small-scale arts organizations with one another and build dialogue among communities
- To talk about our shared opportunities and challenges, what we need, and what role Common Field might play to amplify our work and ideas to a national network
- To share/identify if and how we are sharing resources with each other
- To learn about Common Field, the Common Field Convening and opportunities for support

## ***Meeting Notes:***

### ***Welcome and Introductions***

- Introduce the organizing partner James McAnally, Co-Founder of The Luminary, and introduce Courtney Fink, Co-Founder of Common Field. Thank you all for making time to be here for this conversation, and thank you to our hosts at Treffpunkt.

### ***Why are we doing this? What is Common Field?***

- We had one Common Field Meet-Up in St. Louis a few years ago, but the local scene has changed a lot in the past few years. We wanted to examine the energy of bottom-up organizing, and of collectives and small spaces. We wanted to be talking in a room together so we may all know what opportunities exist and think through intentional ways to support one another and make us a field.
- Artists often spend most of their careers and lives operating in small scale spaces, and these spaces dominate the activity of art world. But it is museums and highly commercial spaces that take dominance in the conversation of the art world. So Common Field became an answer to address how to organize those small spaces, and talk about them within larger networks to become a more national coalition.
- We hope to speak truthfully tonight to find true opportunities of supporting one another.
- James has been involved with Common Field for four years and is on the board of Common Field. Both Courtney and Common Field are based in LA.
- Courtney used to work at Southern Exposure, a non-profit art space, and felt the lack of connection among people who do similar work. We need each other as peers, especially as our organizations grow, and we want to be able to call each other for advice. The field was invisible—there was not a lot of clarity about who it was for.
- We wanted a simple understanding. We wanted to map out what's going on around the country and build the network—a membership network—that organizations or individual organizers can join. We understand that many of us are connected to many roles and projects, so you can join as an individual.
- We are currently building a map of about 700 groups and people in almost every state in the US, but this is only a small percentage of the spaces that actually exist. We think it would be around 5,000-10,000 organizations if everyone was registered.
- At Common Field, we are rebuilding the systems we want to see change.

### ***Extending an invitation to join the Network, and more information about Common Field:***

- We encourage everyone to sign in so we can email you information about how to become a member, which is free for the first year. Our membership allows you to access concrete resources and tools, join a social network, review opportunities like stipends and

honorariums, view and post jobs, and participate in discussion boards to post ideas and threads to start dialogue. We are also creating an information sharing hub almost like a giant Google Drive for people to share what they have developed (like artist contracts and other documents) that you think other people would find useful.

- We host a national convening every year to gather the field of these independent spaces and think about and debate the work we want to do.
- This year's conference is April 25-28 in Philadelphia. More than 500 people come for four days of sessions, programs, and meals. It is a unique gathering, sourced entirely from our network. We ask them to propose session ideas, and this year we have 30 sessions with 100 different presenters. We try to keep everything very affordable, tickets are \$125 with all meals included, plus we offer a scholarship program. The scholarship deadline has passed for this year but we encourage you to apply in 2020.
- We also accessibly document the convening to share all the information online and publish it in writing, so you can have access to the knowledge that comes out of each convening.
- And with this Meet-Up in St. Louis, we are hoping to start the conversation to shine a national light on St. Louis.
- Common Field also has a program called [Projects](#) in which we do a number of things. We partner with members to [commission texts](#), usually around 20 essays. We also receive grants to commission research to develop models and knowledge that will be useful to a lot of people. For instance, we are currently developing an accessibility guide that will be available in the spring. We also host field conversations online, where we meet on a Zoom channel for discussions. We host Meet-Ups traveling along the US to connect people together, and to connect the geographies of the US that are typically underrepresented or not connected. We were just in Las Vegas and are hoping to visit Salt Lake City and Atlanta soon.
- We are in a time of growing Common Field and are looking for ideas to understand what's going on around the US. We want to understand what people need to provide resources.
- This growing network of people has a loud voice, and we want to capture the power of people who have a lot to say, and use Common Field to amplify that. The work we are doing as organizations is so important but it's hard to get recognition, and we want to represent that through Common Field.
- This is Courtney's first time in St. Louis in many years and she hopes to learn more about the subtle nuances within the community.
- If you do not feel comfortable speaking out, or have questions you want to leave with us, you may write them on the index cards on your seat.

### ***Ground Rules for the Conversation***

- *Today is a new day!* Come into this space and let go of whatever else is going on.

- *Step forward and step back.* Speak up if you usually don't, and step back if you talk often at conversations like this.
- *Write first, talk second.* Think it through for a moment before you comment.
- *People can change; it's OK to be wrong.* People may have different perspectives from what you once knew.
- *Give everyone a voice.*
- *Listen with an open mind.*
- *Raise your hand.*
- *Share name, and name of project before you speak.*
- *Keep comments brief.*
- *Speak for yourself using "I" statements.*
- *Remember that some people here are new.* Don't make any assumptions.

*James and Courtney will pose questions for everyone to think about.*

***What makes the St. Louis field unique, compelling, inspiring, vibrant, accessible, and nurturing? What conditions are making things possible for you, giving you life, or make you want to expand your own work? What are conditions that we can foster together that will catalyze further productive community growth?***

- St. Louis for a lot of us has been challenging ground to organize, but the fact that so many people have organized gives me so much energy. To self organize and collectively make things happen without resources is inspiring.
- I am a native of St. Louis and went away for bit, but something I have always experienced is that people are thinking and looking. They're engaged and concerned, and using creativity to do these things.
- I make paintings with inspiring messages and put them on abandoned buildings to inspire the community. That opportunity to reach out to those communities exists. There are resources available to artists. In Gravois Park, I saw a need and created a position for myself, because I had the space and time to do so. Midwesterners are strong and earthy and ready to handle what other people might be afraid of. It takes audacity to move into places with abandoned buildings. It's a tragedy but a creative opportunity. It could go one direction or the other, but the artists are making things more vibrant.
- There is opportunity here. As vibrant as St. Louis is, the arts community is suffering from fragmentation of the city-county divide. Artists moving into Gravois Park is the next step in gentrification. And then those property prices will go up. What we need to come up with is a sense of, "We are St. Louis. We our own art scene," and make ourselves into an entity.
- I'm thinking about our unique positions within the country. There's a unique opportunity where we are because there are not other cities like us. We have a unique geographic location—the center of the country, the confluence of the rivers. We see this

at Paul Artspace. Artists from Europe, and from other places outside the country want to come to the middle of the US, and we need to embrace that.

- There are multiple funding sources here that give money directly to artists, not just to institutions. And we work together volunteering each other's spaces and staff to support things, which doesn't really exist in other cities.
- Also the funding opportunities that go directly to artists. Five to seven artists each year can get \$20,000 from the Regional Arts Commission, and that is very important to community here. Does it need to scale? Hell yes. But sparks are started from funding sources, and also individual artists. Damon Davis and Basil Kincaid started Black Bag because there aren't as many funding opportunities for black artists. As a region we have been through so much struggle. Artistry meets political activism here, and people from outside of St. Louis have been studying that, which sometimes feels voyeuristic, but the attention is important.
- When comparing the different disciplines I work across, the arts community here is much better networked than other disciplines, and people like each other and are friends with each other. People here know each other, and we can pick up the phone and make phone calls if we need to.
- I'm thinking about Black Skillet as crowdfunding resource. It is foundational to thank black women. They think about how we will feed people, how we will pull resources. That's the spirit that underpins so many spaces: UrbArts, Yeho Arts Collective, WORD UP! Poetry Slam—the poetry scene too. People are coming together for the love of it. It's not just money and capital first. And as for what separates us from other regions and scenes of art, that's when things become just about the capital value versus what are the deep roots that people are bringing and what ancestralism are they trying to pass on?
- How might we foster new things from this energy?

## **What are the key challenges you face in your life and work? What makes this work hard?**

- It's hard to get people to be hands-on, to be part of the process instead of just showing up at the event for entertainment. So for those who do site specific work, or work with kids or activist art, there are a few people bearing a lot of weight. This is not just in St. Louis but in general as a maker, bringing a lot of people in for a shared experience can be difficult.
- To go back to the point about how some of our challenges are opportunities, hyper segregation is something we all are aware of and there are these initiatives that can help create opportunities, but it depends on our willingness to be hands-on and all-in more frequently. A few Friday's ago, the Regional Arts Commission had a gathering about an arts and planning process. Someone presenting the St. Louis Arts Ecology study kept emphasizing that in our city, even though we are 48% black, there's isn't a single black

lead or black focused arts organization that has a budget over \$500,000. Part of the challenge is taking an equitable lens to our whole ecosystem here and really seeing how we can shift things so there is greater balance to who we are as we identify with our culture and who we are as to where funding comes from.

- I've run FarFetched for the past four or five years and I've sat in a lot of rooms where I could possibly be funded but I know that my skin color affects how much money I get.
- I wanted to second and third those points and recognize that when we talk about those opportunities, we must also recognize that those were lost opportunities for the people who previously existed in these neighborhoods. So we need to think about how to stop this cycle. And as a person of color, there is a tension of needing to take up space and be in the system and the spaces that we recognize as part of the problem, and also how to make a difference. And as an artist it becomes: do I perform with this producer knowing they don't cast that many people of color—do I take up that space and become that, or do I recognize that and not participate?
- And I want to note this is not a personal observation, but an issue of systematic racism. It's a challenge but also an opportunity to do something about it.
- This is a challenge in most cities across the US, but from recognizing it and the efforts of grassroots organizations, it can change.
- I run an initiative to connect Filipino artists across the country, and some of our work is centered on engaging and addressing the history of the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis where hundreds of Filipinos were brought to St. Louis and put on display. It's been challenging to engage the St. Louis community with this history, so thank you all for being here to get this message out.
- We are trying to do the work of bringing people and organizations together for strength for all, but I feel like we are all in constant start-up mode, introducing ourselves and talking about the future. How can we get to the next step? Can we weave together in certain ways?
- I always think this field is the last undefined field. It is so disparate, we must examine how it hangs together. How do we claim common ground? There are shared value systems: we want change, we keep artists at the center, and we value experimentation.
- There is a lot of inexpensive real estate available here. I've never had a problem finding vacant lots and buildings to put work in. Our location is strong in that it's been a center for outside influences to come in because of the river.
- At the same St. Louis Arts Ecology meeting, they reported there are a lot of very small arts organizations and many massive ones, but not a lot in the middle. And all of the small organizations are competing for the same limited funding opportunities. The presenter made a conclusion that there are too many small organizations—they all can't survive. There might be a very good reason to give some serious consideration to merging, to get past the talking phase and into action. There are still reasons to think about why pulling our efforts together might be beneficial.

- Is Regional Arts Commission able to operate in that in-between?
- The Regional Arts Commission is a quasi-governmental organization, and I am looking for something different for funding. What can happen outside of that structure?
- There is a disaggregation that happens in St. Louis because spaces are spread out around the region and spread out organizationally. There are a lot of issues many collectives and smaller groups passionately pursue, but we are all over extended. Things bubble up and go away. As the study released by RAC noted, there are a lot of small organizations that are not making it in any meaningful sense, and then just a handful of massive organizations. This gap is more dramatic than in other comparable cities. Our perspective is so skewed that we think small organizations are making it when they are almost entirely volunteer run, and what is considered ‘mid-sized’ are actually very small. The mid-size gap is much larger and more profound than we think.
- It would be great if SLAM or CAM or the History Museum could pool their resources to collaborate with smaller organizations, so that the money is not concentrated in just a few places. It can feel like they think anything happening outside of their walls is not art.
- Those larger places might have their own funding problems, it would be interesting to collaborate instead with places like The Cortex and Monsanto. But it seems like artists don’t know how to reach them and they don’t know how to reach us.
- There should be an entity where we could go to make demands. CAM has made changes because of the loud voices from people in this room. Things change from speaking up.
- When thinking about systemic racism and interacting with institutions to try to acknowledge the lack of balance, we must work on this in our own lives—in our work and art—to nudge folks we have influence with to distribute funds more equally, and be intentional about how we share things.
- Large institutions versus small institutions is a common problem in many cities, as well as our economic situation as a country. Big institutions don’t recognize that without the small organizations, the city is not an interesting place. So how do we advocate that? Their success relies on your ability to be there. We hope that being connected to a much larger national dialogue will give us leverage to address this.
- When I moved to the east coast, I noticed that everyone is working several jobs with no space to make anything, and the opportunities for funding are very competitive. The amount of money we’re not spending by being here is funding. I’m trying to work out a model for myself that allows me to live here while still being in contact with other people outside of St. Louis, and bring work in and out St. Louis. The hardest thing about running a space is paying for the transport of the work. You risk stretching yourself thin to make something happen, until it runs out.
- I think St. Louis has an underdog complex. The city is largely affordable and accessible with space to experiment more freely than on the coasts.
- I think it’s difficult to get people to value the arts. We are categorized as “arts and entertainment” so that it has a suggested disposable sound to it. Artists get exploited

easily because people often think, “They like to do this! They like to show their work.” We must recognize that if we say we value the arts and say that they matter, that has to be more than just lip service.

- I struggle with getting people to show up to events and actually buy the art.
- I think some people consider art a luxury instead of a necessity, so we need to reeducate people that art is not a frivolous thing, but something to bring joy into your life.
- There are people here willing to spend a ton of money on art, but it’s on art from places that are not St. Louis. I see real quality that could get artists thousands of dollars on the coasts sell for only hundreds here. People don’t recognize the value of the work here. I know some artists will get a P.O. box in New York and find they are contacted more, the value of local artist is so warped.
- In St. Louis there is a greater validation of an artist’s value if you did something elsewhere and then returned to focus on the local. What are the motivations people have for buying art? Do they ignore incredible work to be connected to clout, or it is possible some artists don’t have the necessary marketing skills. It’s important for artists to recommend and refer other artists as well when given the chance.
- St. Louis is second only to San Francisco as having the most inherited wealth from generation to generation. People have the money to buy things here, but they want the validation of it being from somewhere else. I think playing the game and being in contact with people is the only way to change that—if your work is in the same shows as coastal artists, you are now on their radar and they can refer you to other people. I am trying to make as many friends as possible outside of the city.

## **What does an attainable, concrete shift look like? What are specific ways to feel like things can move forward?**

- When you’re given an opportunity, share it with someone else
- Spaces should consider joining forces, or merging
- Try collaborating with other humanities divisions. Support writers and get funding from cross-discipline organizations instead of just art funding sources. Consider what things we can share and learn from other disciplines.
- Get out there and see the art and go to places you wouldn’t normally go to. Talk to people you wouldn’t normally talk to and see what other people are doing and what responses they’re getting. Also, St. Louis art groups need to get together and put on their own art fair enclosed in a building.
- We need to create a mastermind of multiple organizations, so that one person from each organization can attend meetings to share information and report back. Smaller organizations can be mentored by medium ones, and we can strategize together to ask larger institutions for support. This is teambuilding and sharing information across

disciplines—artists, real estate owners, lawyers, etc. The meeting can occur monthly or bi-monthly, and then we can get people engaged about what went on in the meeting

- Pay attention to county as well as the city.
- Socialist revolution!
- Is there a town or city that you feel has an ideal model?
  - Philadelphia has a great model because there is a lot of cross collaboration happening—both cross discipline and within disciplines who recognize their style calls a specific audience. There was an initiative started by their poet laureate and many poetry artists to organize events that combine both spoken word and written poetry. There was an evident class and racial in who came to what events, so they joined events. They both increased their audiences and retained that mission beyond the one year initiative. It also brought in people who were not interested in poetry but excited about the initiative. Go find the people who are doing work completely different than what you're used to and work with them.
- The city of St. Louis has no money for art, so get involved with local government.
- Consider how we make art intrinsic to the city.
- Clearly identify what your assets are and what you want to see happen.
- Common Field is working to locate what's happening, to clearly map out what happens so we know how to find things.
- Think about futures and imaginations. The now is heavy. Bring more criticality to discussions. Be critical with one another, and attribute criticality to the scene, as well as accountability and follow-through.

## Conclusions

- We didn't get to touch on how St. Louis connects to the national field, but being rooted in St. Louis, it's easy to think our problems and limitations are unique. But it's such a moment of solidarity to realize how many of us there are, even if it's not a solution or an answer to a localized need. But just to be part of a larger field or practice is powerful.
- We encourage everyone to become a member of Common Field. There is value in being nationally legible.
- Thank you to James and Brea of The Luminary, and get in touch with Courtney at Common Field for any further questions or comments.