

Common Field Meet-Up Houston

Location: Aurora Picture Show

Date: 1/22/2019

Introductions

Thank you to everyone involved, over 20 people were involved. Houston has a very robust, involved arts community.

What's going on in Houston and how we can we get involved?

What is Common Field? Why are we in Houston? What do we do?

- Common Field is a national network of artist organizations.
- It started from the Warhol Foundation where many organizations currently involved met. In 2011, the initiative ended, however many organizations wanted stay connected. The founders met at Oxbow and in 2015 Common Field was launched.
- The first convening was in Minneapolis, MN in 2015.
 - This founding retreat has turned into an annual gathering with Minneapolis, Miami, Los Angeles and the 2019 convening in Philadelphia from April 25 – 28
 - Over 500 people come to communicate, various sessions, food, tours, and artist commissions to bring people together to talk about the work they do.
 - Deadline for the scholarship is this Friday (1/25/2019) which is about \$1,000 to help pay for travel, support, etc.
- Common Field as a variety of resources including a project which is the resource publishing section.
 - The goal is to redistribute resources way more broadly than any one person or city can do.
- Common Field is also still forming and wants to continue to form through conversations and learning what people want and need.
 - The meeting program is a fundamental part of this to hear a variety of voices in various cities and help to create connections. Everyone is an expert and they need to be connected and supported.
- Ultimately the questions Common Field are asking are:
 - What are arts organizing?
 - What do people need in their work?
 - What resources do they need?
- **Ultimately the goal is to build understanding, connection, and what the art field is.**

Who can be a part of the network?

- Anyone can be a part of the network. People who are thriving and those who are outside the center, who are independent, and are looking for community.
- There are around 600 -700 members.
- On the website, you have a public profile which you can post your work, post listings, post open calls, or share something to bring to everyone's attention.

- There is also a listing section that promotes various opportunities including member-only opportunities.
- It is also a great resource to see what is going around the United States.
- Memberships are \$50 annually and follow on social media sites (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) and sign-up for newsletters to keep up with Common Field.

Why Houston?

- Common Field has been wanting to come to Houston for years. Houston has one of the most exciting and alive art communities, along with having the most non-profits in the country.
- Also considering bring the Convening here.

Before we start the dialogue, we want to create a space to ensure that people feel welcomed and that they can be honest without fear of past assumptions or persecution. Make space for each other.

- Today is a new day!
- Step forward and step back.
- Write first, talk second.
- People can change; it's OK to be wrong.
- 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 are new here.

Dennis Nance from the Galveston Arts Center and Ashley DeHoyos from DiverseWorks are the facilitators for the conversation.

Discussion

What makes the Houston field unique, compelling, inspiring, vibrant, accessible, and nurturing? What are the conditions that we can foster together that will catalyze further productive community growth?

- Houston is a large city, but it is accessible and fairly easy to get places in about 15 minutes. The landscape of Houston such as our no-zoning laws which allows for artists to intervene in public spaces or start an art space in their backyard.
- The art community overall – everyone is open and supports each other. People are willing to collaborate or just help one another. Also, the direct support for artists through the city and organizations such as grants programs.
- There are a ton of multidisciplinary artists who are pushing literary, performing, and visual boundaries in the city.

- There is a willingness to think outside of the market. There isn't a concern with what is happening in the gallery scene. Also, artist-initiated spaces come from the spirit that artists can do what's outside the normal, institutional and gallery spaces.
- The smaller art institutions are what have helped strengthen the community especially during changing times.
- Dumplings, noodles, empanadas, and a large number of consulates. There are so many ways to connect with international artists and diversity is one of Houston's biggest strengths.

What are the key opportunities and challenges you face in your life and work?

- ***A lot of our strengths are also our challenges – we need structure, but everything great about us comes to no-zoning. We need press but we have learned not to rely on press. We need competition but how great is that we can collaborate?***
- Even though we are an extremely diverse city, that is not represented in our institutions and board rooms. Often times, diversity is just a talking point and seems to be taboo when bringing in artists who are people of color, female, members of the LGBTIA+ community or a combination of all three.
 - Often times, institutions will do group shows with these groups to “prove” that they are diverse which is not true at all – the diversity is not coming from within the institutional foundation itself.
 - Latinx art institutions have a severe lack of funding – less than 1% of funding goes to Latinx artists, despite making up 44% of the population.
- The arts community is founded on gas and oil and there seems to be a fear of offending oil and gas-based donors in fear of losing funding. Also, typically, these donors lean more conservative which also has a big influence on the work that gets shown and in general with environmental art.
- Often decisions involving the arts, don't involve the artists themselves. Our urban cores are being redeveloped thus stripping us of our rights and voices – we need to be at the table. On that note, artists are having their own conversations but not inviting people who are making those changes. There needs to be a merging of two different groups so we can take action and engage the city.
- Young artists lack the support in academia. Even within the academic setting, it is still an insular community with young artists being unaware of how to organize. Educational institutions and artist organizations have a hard time meeting up without stepping on each other's toes.
- There is a lack of critical writing in Houston. We are not able to advocate for artists from a national perspective. There is no strong representation from our local outlets, so we have a lack of local press. We need more critical writing outside of a blog format.
- A lot of artists who want to get recognition often find themselves leaving the city or having exhibitions in New York or Los Angeles to gain that respect. If you want to compete, you have to find a different platform somewhere else.

- Overall there seems to be a lack of support.
- **However, even with these challenges, we are refreshing our minds and turning the wheel – every time we connect, something more gets done. Having these conversations are extremely valuable even if it does not seem like things are moving quickly.**

What are some opportunities that will allow for resolve in Houston?

- Taking advantage of the grants and opportunities that are present.
 - In 2018, the Houston Arts Alliance, they gave out 34 in grants – in 2019, they tripled funds and gave out 109 grants thanks to artists vocalizing how important the funding was for them.
 - Midtown Management is a non-arts specific body that also provides grants.
- Ensuring that we move in a direction that artists are getting paid because exposure, although nice, is not payment and artists deserve to make a living.
- There are a lot of opportunities in the healthcare industry along with the city government. Consider places and opportunities that are not traditionally in the arts.
- Some older retirees are looking to donate to smaller, grassroots organizations instead of larger institutions.
- Helping each other to organize or revitalize organizations.

What does change mean? How do we foster new leadership, new ideas, and growth?

- We need more ways of connecting different artists and art organizations across the city and its surrounding neighborhoods.
 - There is also a huge disconnect and lack of accessibility in Houston, so we need to really connect more with what we have.
- More hubs or affinity groups that aren't connected to a funding organization or at an art opening.
- Affordable work spaces
- A mentorship program between older artists and younger or emerging artists.
 - Also, more opportunities for emerging artists in general
- Artist exchanges with other cities so more artists can explore cities outside of Houston, but we can also bring in new artists.
- How to balance work/life practice which is something that is often overlooked: self-care is important.

What tools, advice, activities, supports, shout-outs, or other interactions or resources would help you in organizing in this community? Be as specific as possible. All ideas welcome.

- National Association of Latino Arts and Culture– you don't have to be of Spanish-speaking origin as long as you believe and support the cause.
- Houston Arts Alliance offers grants to artists in the city.
- The Mitchell Center has incredible workshops that need more attention.

COMMON FIELD

- A convening of feminist filmmakers that was organized by Aurora Picture Show gave Houston filmmakers and national filmmakers an opportunity to connect with each other. This helps bring people all together on a local and national level.
- The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, created MN Artists (mnavartists.org) which allows for artists, organizations, etc. to connect and become a part of a bigger community. Houston could benefit from a digital space like this – FreshArts and Glasstire have something similar, but it is not the same.
- Donor Houston in which you can submit your non-profit so donors can see what organizations are in the city (<https://donorhouston.guidestar.org>) and donate to them.

Final Thoughts

We should attempt to do all the things that we have talked about. There seems to be a continued interest in doing all of these ideas and just to keep working towards everything. We will see the changes we want to.

There is such a collaborative spirit in the arts community in Houston and it would be amazing to show this to the rest of the country (such as having the next Common Field Convening in Houston).