

Philly Field Conversation #1 - Notes

[Ulises](#) | 6.11.18

Facilitated by Ulises co-founders with an introduction by Common Field

Ulises co-founders invite discussion on a constellation of issues close to self organized spaces and arts initiatives: burnout, viability, and sustainability. Arts workers across the field, working at a range of scales, and perhaps with and for multiple organizations, are invited to take part in this round-table session, which touches on labor, institutions, and the values that drive self organization. This event is designed to be productive and goal-oriented, generating ideas and strategies that we can activate in our work as arts organizers.

Common Field and the Philly Field Conversations Series:

[Common Field](#) is a national network of independent visual arts organizations and organizers that connects, supports, and advocates for the artist-centered field. Philly Field Conversations was initiated by Common Field to engage with the core concerns of the local arts landscape. The series has been developed through partnership with local arts leaders: [Taller Puertorriqueño](#), [Philadelphia Contemporary](#), [Asian Arts Initiative](#), and [Ulises](#). Through these gatherings, Common Field aims to articulate and activate a local network of arts organizers that will inform both the themes and programs for the [Common Field 2019 Convening](#) in Philadelphia, and the goals for local arts organizing ahead.

NOTES:

Conversation Prompt: Prescriptions for improving the work that we're doing, getting beyond a diagnosis, alone, of the issues that currently face our work.

A few considerations about the context of organizing in Philadelphia to help guide conversation:

- Lack of Intergenerational dialogue
- Lack of collaboration between grassroots arts organizing and larger institutions
- Broader context of the city, work of self-organized spaces reflecting, demographically, the city, for instance
- Inter-city dialogues, beyond the scope of New York, including other cities and regions

What ways can things change on these issues of self-organizing? For example: perhaps organizations seeking to be inclusive, diverse, challenging, experimental are best scaled up rather than down in order to have the capacity for that work:

- Organizing models: detailing complexities of pay-to-play models with monthly membership fees, which are prevalent in Philadelphia
 - Presents issues with limiting access to membership
 - Membership-based organizations face financial projection difficulty with shifting membership base, especially if sole income stream, or primary income stream

- Labor burden of fundraising within the membership model if seeking grants. Becomes another job, and one you pay to do
- Not only how dues are paid, but also a question of how responsibilities are distributed, the housekeeping on top of just showing work. If it were paid work, different responsibilities would be “valued” differently, and perhaps too aligned with day job
- Capacity building goal of collective spaces can be in tension with the needs of completing necessary operational and fundraising work
- “Effortocracy” and doing what you have the inclination to do has the potential to replicate existing patterns of inequitable labor distribution
- Artists / not artists divide, potential for organizational responsibilities to conflict with creative practice
- Opportunities of collective organization:
 - Networking among peers to know what's happening, where the opportunities are, how to access them and make them work, eg. Ulises using [Vox Populi](#) as fiscal sponsor, or informally sharing news of grant opportunities
 - Direct decision-making in how and who to support. eg. [Grizzly Grizzly](#) doesn't show member work, but operates as a collective of people who have resources and are putting them to work to engage in dialogue with other artists and serve the local arts ecosystem
 - Tangible support network, eg. In the wake of [319 building fire](#), all the ways folks looked out for one another, hosted and supported. A basis for continuing to collaborate
 - Transferability of membership: rather than projects or organizations being attached to individuals who retire a project when they move on, which is more typical in many other cities, many Philadelphia collectives continue with new members
 - Sustainability as transferability? Perhaps both in the spaces and between generations, legacy knowledge passed on, and transferable organizing and institution-building becomes a form cross-generational dialogue, more of a confluence of past and present than supplanting what's already there
 - Transferability and mission change: as membership passes on it shifts the culture of the organization, including opportunities for mission updates to reflect changes and stay relevant. A model of flexibility, resilience, renewable energy
 - Transferability and sunseting: some projects serve an important role in local arts ecosystem, and are worth holding onto, or resurrecting, eg. [Title Magazine's](#) complete editorial change in order to maintain the art writing there

What does good sunseting look like? How can things end gracefully and without leaving a void in a local arts ecosystem, or potentially live on and continue to do service as an archive, for instance?

- Sunseting projects and organizations:

- Scale and service: question about when things fold, especially once built and with institutional presence, is known and has established community, serves several cities, and has physical infrastructure – what's left if it closes? How do those voids get refilled, or not?
- Resurrecting instead of sunseting

How can institutions, projects, or organizations participate in building a healthy and supportive arts ecosystem in Philadelphia? Identifying organizational goals and priorities, internally, and assessing what vital pieces are missing in Philadelphia that can be fostered:

- What are you building? If a project is your size, then sustainability is you. If goals, aspiration, and scale goes beyond an individual, it's a bigger question and touches a larger framework for organizing, as well as responsibility to that larger context
- Make connections between adjacent fields, eg. Arts writing and broader literary communities
- Internally: What do you prioritize in organizational capacity building? In your fundraising? eg. Get rid of member dues? Or hire more staff? Maintain facilities?
- What about programmatic priorities? If have scale larger than just exhibition program, how does that integrate with art education, publishing, symposia, public art programs, and generally other ways of exploring creative practice beyond the gallery?
- What artists need: space, access to resources for doing work – both as gallery-driven and itinerant projects
- Buildings and galleries serve as containers for practice – an economic decision, and geared toward working collaboratively, relying on one another
- What kind of sustenance is first and best for us? Each other? Space? Time and place in history and authoring that history? Strategies – what kind of sustainability?
- Shifting power dynamics and priorities with funders: artists advocating to funders, re-positioning artists in this dynamic in order to frame the funding conversation
- How do we talk back to funders? Invite them into these kinds of conversations?
- Collective voice, gathering into affinity groups to talk with funders and advocate for arts equity and other priorities that reflect the plurality of contemporary artist practices

How can a coalition be built, and strategy developed, to prevent broad displacement? Arts economies and Philadelphia, arts and development, gentrification, accountability:

- [Development Without Displacement](#): seeks to hold developers accountable, redirect funds toward maintaining existing residents. This bill is up for a vote soon, developers would pay into a fund that would supplement housing expenses for lower income residents. Role of artists in gentrification processes, rooting in and staying open and being engaged in these conversations in the political sphere that are going to effect spaces for Philadelphians, both artists and not.
- [The Rail Park](#) example for gentrification processes. Capitalist nexus in the heart of [Chinatown North](#), and all the arts organizations in that neighborhood like [Asian Arts Initiative](#), [Space 1026](#), 319 building projects, etc. How can a coalition be built, and strategy developed, to prevent broad displacement? Asian Arts owns their building and

has done proactive organizing and advocacy work. 319 building, however, is rented. Will building owners sell, and when? How can development unfold in ways that feed existing communities and sustain local arts rather than package them as a commodity to leverage and then push them out?

- Scales of sustainability: How do you sustain an organization? And how do you sustain a broader arts ecosystem? Sustain each other and cultivate creative practices?
- What is Philadelphia? What are the limits of the city? Eg. [Street Road](#), how do the suburbs and rural areas enter into the conversation, as part of metro Philadelphia? Between the binary of rural and urban, there's a field of work between those geographic spaces

How can we build resources locally to sustain the arts?

- Documentation and archiving: there is a lack of documentation, which results in a lack of visibility and testament to the vibrancy of Philadelphia's arts. What happened to the long-term history building that so many organizations have done? What's lost when no one remembers?
- Documentation as a form of access to work beyond events, openings, and limited gallery hours
- How can we assert ourselves in existing resources, eg. National arts writing, broader listing services, in order to activate a larger community, both within and beyond Philadelphia?
- National arts writing and documentation can also both serve to activate art collectors by showing work, providing context, and cataloguing what's occurred
- Resources and wealth: the conundrum of money and support for the arts, and the attending issues like gentrification. The metaphor of magazines, which only become sustainable via advertising, which makes it work and gets folks paid, but at its own cost. How do you negotiate this dynamic?
- Limited wealth, collectors, and commercial galleries to go between in Philadelphia. How are commercial galleries accessed, and then by extension, collectors and others with wealth?

Sustainability for whom? Re-framing the questions, taking a critical look at access and organizing models, and developing radical methods of organizing that explicitly aim to build an equitable future:

- Who gets to make, show work, and who doesn't? How do organizations take on responsibility for access to a privileged field, and finding more avenues to entry and broader support? What kinds of work gets considered part of the field, or not?
- Where radicality meets the road: though many artists and organizations have claims to radical politics, arts institutions and organizations are replicating oppressive dynamics not only in their presenting program and the makeup of the artists supported, but also in their organizing structures, which are modeled on oppressive ones. Eg. Make-up of this room is majority white and white-passing, a failure of presenting organizations.

- How do conversations engaging with racism, settler colonialism, and the way these structures inform contemporary arts organizing unfold? Who's initiating them and holding responsibility for them? Who is funding them?
- How do we build a future that isn't based on the present, that doesn't rely on broken tools or inequitable models that limit the potential for change to compromise and reform? But instead develop new tools and methods that emerge through an institutional critique? Who's initiating the institutional critique?
- Beyond sustainability, reimagining the question itself. Akin to: What is a body? What is a body that matters?
- Projects like [Philly Stewards](#) are doing an artist census – seeking more information on who artists are in the city, which also begs questions about who is considered an artist, how the census circulates to capture data, how the data will be used, by whom, etc.
- In seeking inclusive programming and attendance, what are the right questions to be asking? And of whom? Digging into structural issues beyond asking why POC artists aren't showing up to white organization events. Specifically finding ways of confronting the ostracization, risk, and insecurity for POC artists in confronting institutional issues.
- How will this surface and become part of the structure of accountability within the organizations and programming itself? Potential for the investment of energy to go nowhere, to not be addressed or incorporated, is a threat to intersectional organizing
- Who are Philadelphia artists? Transience of artists in the city continues to pull in new folks, and potentially also risk losing some of the unique aspects of Philadelphia's artist communities. How do we best support local artists, both old and new?
- What are the dialogues shaping contemporary practice? And by whom? Reconsidering what artists are offering, how situated in broader social and political contexts, and challenging the ways that art world thinks of itself as rethinking society
- Perhaps there is some hope in the potential for some organizations that aren't producing equitable work to sunset, and for organizations doing better work to be amplified. There is potential for change, incremental if not immediate and radical.
- Curating in support of movements that reflect political issues of communities at large, challenging a perceived risk—for instance, in funding—in making space for these dialogues.
- In addition to amplifying the great work that smaller organizations are doing to support many artists of color, women, and queer artists, eg. [40thSt AIR](#), also finding ways to encourage organizations with more resources to step up and do more of the work of being inclusive and brave, even if confronted by a question of funding. Not letting the larger organizations off the hook, pulling them in, pushing for accountability.
- Collective organizing to activate collective power and voice.

What can a network platform like Common Field do to not only amplify what's going on locally with a national peer group, but also to serve local goals for organizing beyond the Convening itself?