

Philly Field Conversation #2 - Notes

[Taller Puertorriqueño](#) | 7.17.18

Facilitated by Rafael Damast & José Ortiz Pagán with an introduction by Common Field

What does it mean for longstanding and established organizations to continue to advance their programming and impact as the communities they serve and artist practices change? Arts organizers Rafael Damast (Taller Puertorriqueño) and José Ortiz Pagán (Fleisher Art Memorial), whose respective organizations serve as cultural hubs to artists and local communities, invite discussion prompted by these questions: What ways can larger institutions be a resource to smaller organizations that do the essential work of providing initial support to artists' experimentation? What is their role in connecting these processes and practices with broad audiences? How do we hold space for artists and enable creative expression to flourish outside of the mainstream?

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:

Introduction from Rafael Damast, Exhibitions Program Manager at Taller Puertorriqueño and José Ortiz Pagán, Exhibitions Manager at the [Fleisher Art Memorial](#).

- Taller Puertorriqueño in 1974 first focused on printmaking, later developed programming for children and teens. When its new building opened in 2016, it was the largest Latino arts organization in Pennsylvania. This growth raised questions about how Taller should engage in its neighborhood; how does Taller engage with local community, support arts here and abroad, and maintain its residential connection?
- Fleisher Art Memorial started as a graphic sketch club in 1898. Samuel Fleisher believed art was a basic human right, regardless of background. Recently we received a grant to research if Fleisher was actually engaging its local community—it was not. We were told by local community members to do more outreach, show they were trustworthy, and to welcome them in the space. We questioned, how can an exhibition program facilitate someone else's aesthetic?

How do you manage change in the face of an evolving community and artist practice?

- The executive director and the front door have gotten further and further as Taller grows. It's important to think about what's new and what's resonating with audiences. Art isn't existing only in white boxes. Considering advertising as a medium (social media).
- One challenge is how quickly information is growing today versus 20 years ago. With quick access to information, art institutions should come out with more questions than answers. Art institutions develop the model of a grocery store but, they should be focused more on exchange. People want to know everything about the art and the artists because that engagement is part of the experience. How do we build the exhibition and artistic model based on the people, who are wiser than we are?
- Thinking a lot about place; we live in a global space both in our minds and in our phones. However, even with this change, we still intuitively desire to turn space into place and to take care of that place collectively.
- Small institutions have the opportunity to show relevant work to specific audiences

How can larger institutions be a resource to smaller organizations that do the essential work of providing initial support to artist experimentation?

- Larger institutions with patron groups and collectors could be introduced to smaller organizations through outreach efforts. Museums and larger organizations can introduce smaller organizations to larger art audiences.
- Small organizations are founded to provide exhibitions opportunities but, start without any plan for audience outreach or education initiatives. Education is an inroad, especially for young audiences. In the digital age, they refuse to be passive in art spaces. How do artist respond to that? They must create community beyond their community of artists, they can't make work hermetically, they must answer to a broader context.
- Artists believe large organizations and large museums legitimize art. But small institutions can connect to the communities that otherwise don't have access to art. Communities can exchange with other communities and give each other recognition.
- I think about an ecosystem of arts. Flesher is an organization and the Philadelphia Museum of Art is their feeder. It makes sense to have a circular relationship.
- People think museums are immune to change and that is a problem. Their visitorship is down, they are losing money. People like the idea of having a nearby art institution but they rarely go. Art museums are not going away tomorrow but, they don't see what's threatening them right now.

What responsibilities do smaller art organizations have to their community?

- It's important for grassroots organizers to actively listen to their community and to pay attention to the political undertones of what is going on. We are in a moment of political flux. As an organizer I don't see a lot of art events that are speaking directly to these experiences and events. If you're trying to build trust, you have to expand the definition of an art institution. Political bravery is required. You can not do the standard in the face of turmoil, when you do, it shows how insular the arts community is. Where is the limit of our bravery? Creative programming should use art as a tool for social change.

- Each of us is a gatekeeper to something. Who are the communities the “we” are talking about? That specificity is important. You can’t be everything to everyone. Who do you want to be with whom? Artists have privilege in the communities, they define the aesthetic. Where is the struggle there? The dynamic of a larger institution and smaller institution is relative. Change really impacts the small institution. Big museum don’t deal with gentrification. If gentrification comes in for us, you lose your constituency.
- World is changing. Practices are changing. What people consider art is changing. Our approach to show varied artists has grown but, it is defined by an intentional mission. As our gatekeeper role we think not just about art for the sake of art but, what can art do? Because there are issues affecting the community, Taller thinks of ways in which we create programming or attract work or make strategies that will change how we move forward.

How can we change how we interact and think about large institutions?

- Thinking about change; time and representation. When you look at larger, older institutions you just don’t even think that historically you have anything to do with this space. Then you find out [a Black man designed the Philadelphia Art Museum](#). Representation of how our communities were and putting those stories in the forefront is important.
- I was just at [RISD](#) and I’m new to Philly. RISD went through a huge racial uprising and we got a new president because the school was doing so bad. We got change to happen because we were very loud and in public. We got a more diverse campus and solid programming to reach out to minorities. We’re working with local organizations in the city. Saying looking at art is good for people is very vague. There are statistics about viewing art and how its good for healthy lifestyles. That’s important conversation to be having.

How does the mission of smaller art organizations interact with larger institutions?

- How do you readapt a mission to a changing situations, conditions, people? Is the mission being sustained or is it transformable? There needs to be a space for those changes. We think of organizations and groups as entities in it of itself but, they represent a collection of people. Fleisher had a big mission but, wasn’t doing it. They rewrote their statement and it wasn’t that they did things very differently, they just better knew what they wanted to do. Organizations can’t be afraid to look at their mission.
- It is really hard to do anything other than serving. What we can benefit from is if larger organizations helped us by providing infrastructure and funding. It’s a conundrum, we want to prioritize cultural proگرامing but cannot afford it. We host peoples’ first shows and we support bigger intuitions but, how can we gain from working with curators who work with bigger institutes?
- I’m not sure about mission. What is relevant is what they want to communicate and what they expect to get back. Big institutions are not going to get concerned about small institutions. They have their own problems, it’s about the collector and art fair. They can not and will not comment on politics the way small organizations do. I’m not optimistic

about larger institutions working with us. Networking between organizations is better.

- I'm concerned about how we give first shows and opportunities to people. It's vulnerable for a young artists and our space is seen as a stepping stone to "art world stability." There is a lack of commitment from art schools to stimulate the professional development market. We should think about institutions beyond just the museum. Who can we demand from?
- We have problem with getting stuff out there. We had ten small grants for people to get professional development. No one applied and we had to return the money. Everybody is struggling for audiences.

What does trust look like between large and small organizations?

- I was thinking about trust. I think artists and organizers often are the most creative sites and they want to protect their creativity. They are vulnerable when they engage with larger institutions. How do you create a trusting relationship? Mutuality is critical. We establish mutuality by having a shared need. As [The Colored Girls Museum](#), we want to understand the history of the colored girl. Other organizations have that need, too. Is that trust? I don't know but, it is mutual and ideally that would lead to a trusting relationship.
- Trust is a good question. When we were preparing for this conversation, when we said large institutions, we meant large small institutions. Taller for example.
- Trust is a weird word when we think about institutions. Larger institutions soften boundaries by trusting the people that come in. We came to Taller and there wasn't a hard requirement of "deliverables." This idea of deliverables is the heavy burden that institutions put on the creative group that they are supporting. When we were working with Taller we could use the space as we needed. That was really beneficial because the requirement of what was to come out of the project wasn't so heavy or hard. That trust let us trust them. Trust is something that larger institutions can take on.
- Mutual need, trust, we're on the frontier of this change. When we used to have [First Friday](#) everyone who ran organizations were at their own event and couldn't go see other organizations! Small organizations are connected to what's happening because they are what's happening.

Concluding thoughts

- It's about how we're being taught what art is, what is the role of the artist, how these roles are spread in the community. Question generation is important and dialogue is key.
- How do we support each other? Maybe that means concentrating on outreach.
- Thinking about, "smaller organization are what's happening," I wanted to finish that sentence. The smaller organizations are what's happening in their realm. You can be on the slippery slope of the moral high ground.
- In my experience, working with different audiences, people are self identifying as artists and cultural produces. When I see high school kids they ask, "Why does this person have to be an artist?" Who gets to be an artist is something is a foundational question that everyone is going to have to grapple with in the near future.
- Closing quote shared by José Ortiz-Pagán: "**Somos comunalidad, lo opuesto a la**

individualidad, somos territorio comunal, no propiedad privada; somos compartencia, no competencia; somos politeísmo, no monoteísmo. Somos intercambio, no negocio; diversidad, no igualdad, aunque a nombre de la igualdad también se nos oprima. Somos interdependientes, no libres.” –Jaime Martínez Luna (teacher, musician and Zapoteco historic researcher)