

The Other Art World: Alternative Spaces and the New Model of Sustainability for the  
Future of Cultural, Economical, and Community Growth

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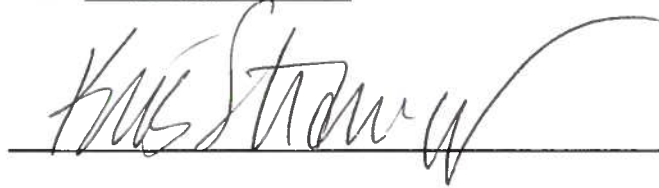
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**To the Faculty of The University of the Arts**


The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Rob Hassler find it satisfactory and recommend to be accepted.

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## Nomenclature:

Alternative Space - a space that exhibits art other than a traditional museum or commercial gallery. Often comprising a place converted from a previous use such as an abandoned building, warehouse, storefront, it is then established a place to display art by individual artists or groups of artists. Historically, an alternative space was categorized a place that exhibited art that had no commercial value, and was seen as underground, avant-garde art that often times had a political or anti-mainstream position. (Note: for the purpose of this paper, the term alternative space will be used, however, it is important to acknowledge the other names for such spaces which include but are not limited to artist-run spaces, collective spaces, collective galleries, etc.)

Traditional Museum - a large museum often situated in a larger city, and houses a collection of objects and artifacts, while producing broad exhibits that are interesting to an array of audiences. Consisting of a hierarchical structure, made of a large number of employees, and serving the general population through programming, events, etc. Examples are the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Relational Aesthetics - the idea that the viewer experience of the constructed social environment becomes the art. An example of this could be a museum hosting a public barbecue. The experience of attending the barbecue, interacting with people, and interacting with the space then becomes the art, rather than simply coming to a space to look at art hung on the wall.

New Informality - a new term to describe the shift in how people wish to interact with art. Rather than the strict, stuffy, and church-like feel of many traditional museums, this term emphasizes the role of the less stodgy, less formal environments where people are engaging with art.

Hierarchical Museum Structure - this structure is used to define the ways in which most traditional museums are structured regarding staff and organization. For example, the hierarchical structure usually begins with volunteers and staff, then continues on to highly regarded employees, and finally reaches the board members of the museum.

Artist Collective Structure - this structure begins with a group of artists that choose to work together, usually having a shared interest, and working under their own management. Rather than a hierarchy of ownership, the collective structure attempts to provide an equal structure by which everything is shared between those that make up the collective, including supplies, ownership, risk, and benefits.

Blockbuster Exhibitions - categorized as an exhibition, usually hosted by large traditional museums, is a contemporary exhibit style established in the late 20th century. The idea of the blockbuster exhibition is often times a large scale exhibition including major loans, that the general public who does not usually attend museums is willing to see. The model of the blockbuster exhibition has proven to be a financial benefactor of many institutions, while raising expectations.

## **Symbols & Abbreviations**

SIAP - Social Impact of the Arts Project

NEA - National Endowment for the Arts

IMLS - Institute of Museum and Library Services

ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art

WPA - Washington Projects for the Arts

501(c)(3) - the American tax exemption code for museums and non-profit organizations

PEI - The Philadelphia Exhibits Initiative

AAM - American Alliance of Museums

**ABSTRACT:**

The aim of the present paper is to examine the history and present state of alternative art spaces within our society in order to demonstrate the importance and influence of these types of spaces in a greater context amid the art world. This thesis discusses the relationship between alternative spaces and traditional museums, giving insight into the history of alternative spaces, the structure of alternative spaces in comparison to traditional museums, the perceptions surrounding alternative spaces, and the impact of alternative spaces on culture, community, and the economy. The subject of this study involved several interviews, case studies, and a wide range of current events articles, including the influence of the city in which the thesis has been written, Philadelphia. The results reveal that despite the academically recorded influence of alternative spaces within the current artistic climate, these types of spaces provide models of structure, engagement, and sustainability that can be utilized and examined by traditional museums as well as other arts organizations.



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

The author wishes to thank his professors in the Museum Communication Program at The University of the Arts, Joseph Gonzales, Kristine Strawser, and David Kyu, for their expert advice and feedback throughout the research and writing of this paper. He is also grateful to the many people who shared their time, knowledge, and experiences with him in the process of exploring this subject.

## ***Chapter I: Introduction***

Beginning in the 1960's, the United States was introduced to what would then be considered the home of our nation's artistic life, the alternative space. The flourishing of what were then called "alternative spaces" was due to the changing artistic landscape of our country, in which artists wished to disconnect themselves from the then-strict cultural confines of the traditional commercial gallery and museum landscape. By all accounts, the emergence of alternative spaces in the mid-to-late 1960's was part of a radical, utopian effort to circumvent the commercial gallery system, especially its social exclusivity and economic prerequisites.<sup>1</sup> These alternative spaces were most often defined simply as any space that was not a traditional commercial venue used for the public exhibition of art. In nature, these spaces were established through the conversion of places used at one time for a completely different purpose, for example a storefront, abandoned building, or renovated loft, and would be very inexpensive to use. Those who filled these alternative spaces were groups of artists who mostly considered themselves 'collectives', and focused on the creation of art that was both too difficult for cultural acceptance at that time, and had little potential for economic profitability.

As the art world of the 1970's and 1980's established formal structures defining what could and could not be done in terms of economic and cultural standards, artists needed to find a way to break free. The ways in which people talked about these spaces expressed a need to showcase art that was not exhibited

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Wallis, *Public Funding and Alternative Spaces* in Julie Ault, *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 165.

in galleries because it wasn't commercial and had no market; art that was still underground, and considered avant-garde. This political and anti-materialistic position, which was characteristic of the art and artists of the time, had different connotations for each space.<sup>2</sup> As young, unaffiliated artists who were creating non-commercial art underground established a presence for themselves, they also drew attention from the then recently established agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), created in 1968. Despite the fact that these alternative spaces were established to exhibit work outside of the accepted mainstream, the fact remained, mainstream people were interested. As 'outsiders', alternative spaces were faced with limited funding, often times running their spaces from private grants or their own pockets. However, the archetype was upheld by the NEA, which established a category in which alternative art spaces could apply to receive funding.<sup>3</sup>

As funding from the NEA grew immensely under Richard Nixon in the 1970's, so too did the influence of the NEA over the ways in which alternative spaces functioned. By the late 1980's, alternative spaces were well established within the international art world, and their ability to foster the bold challenges to social and political ideas within that world became appealing to the NEA. As alternative spaces began to rely more and more on funding in the 1980's and 1990's, the NEA began to strategically alter alternative spaces to become more institutional and mainstream through imposing strict artistic and administrative standards. Evidence of this shift

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<sup>2</sup> *Circa 1970: the evolution of the alternative art scene*, Artweek; December 1999, Vol. 30 Issue 12, page 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Circa 1970: the evolution of the alternative art scene*, Artweek; December 1999, Vol. 30 Issue 12, page 2

came when both the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) and the Washington Projects for the Arts (WPA) were essentially cut off from NEA funding when they exhibited the highly controversial Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. Historically, research on the alternative space movement which thrived in the 1970's and 1980's, puts a gravestone on the movement's climax by the 1990's. Most of the research and writing that exists on alternative spaces, ends something like this, "Structurally, artists' organizations today have come to resemble museums, the consensual anarchy of the early years having by necessity faded away to a more traditionally hierarchic form."<sup>4</sup> Like all cultural and artistic movements, eventually their moment fades, and we move on. However, little has been written regarding the fact that alternative spaces are still thriving, and still have an incredible amount of artistic and cultural significance now, if not more significance than 40 years ago. Although the anarchical aura of alternative spaces has diminished within mainstream culture, alternative spaces are still alive and well in our society.

Academically, much has been written about the history of the alternative space movement, and specific alternative space endeavors, predominantly in New York. What's been written, has also almost always separated alternative spaces and traditional museums (large mainstream non-profit institutions). What the academic research on alternative spaces is missing is a cohesive examination of the role alternative spaces play now and for the future; artistically, culturally, socially, and economically. Along with this, is the need to emphasize and understand the ways in which the structures of both alternative spaces and traditional museums can learn

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Wallis, *Public Funding and Alternative Spaces* in Julie Ault, *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 165.

from each other, and perhaps, even work together. As the movement that brought on alternative spaces in the 1970's stemmed from the need to exhibit art outside of the commercial structure, the movement that has allowed alternative spaces to continue to thrive stems from the need to create and provide social engagement around the making, display, and promotion of art and artistic ideas.

In a pressing economy where visitors are paying upwards of twenty-five dollars to visit museums, homegrown artistic spaces are beginning to flourish. In particular, Philadelphia has become a unique example of a city that has grown into a flourishing location for alternative spaces. For example, In 2012, Philadelphia saw an art and cultural organization impact of 3.3 billion dollars which generated jobs, household income, and tax revenue.<sup>5</sup> In particular, communities which were once tough to live places such as Fishtown, Northern Liberties, and Kensington are now the founding locations for storefront spaces, pop-up shops, and small alternative spaces. The redevelopment of these locations, can be attributed to Philadelphia being a city with dynamic art schools and relatively cheap rents, at a buffering distance from New York and its market machinery,<sup>6</sup> and these once depleted locations now have incredibly strong and rising communities thanks to the incorporation of art. As we see the prosperity of these smaller, stronger community based alternative art spaces, we can not only learn how they help influence our

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<sup>5</sup> "Arts, Culture & Economic Prosperity in Greater Philadelphia (2012)." *Philaculture.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 August. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Cotter, Holland. "Collective Creation, in Philadelphia and Beyond." *New York Times*. N.p., 27 Mar. 2007. Web.

society, but also how larger institutions can use their tactics in creating a more relationship based experience rather than a solely transactional one.

One project that has emphasized the impact of the arts on the cultural climate of Philadelphia was the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) conducted by the University of Pennsylvania from 2010 to 2012. This project undertook a study that focused on understanding the impact of cultural engagement on social and economic change in Philadelphia. For example, the report shows clear examples of how the arts, in particular homegrown artists' spaces and cultural initiatives have impacted places like Chinatown and South Philadelphia. SIAP explains, "Asian Arts Initiative, which during our field work has been able to buy its building and develop it as a multi-user facility, stands out as a hopeful sign that the arts can serve as a bridge across the many divisions within the neighborhood."<sup>7</sup> Another prominent area of Philadelphia's landscape that has been affected by artist's workspaces and industrial spaces is South Philadelphia. Here, although the archetypal rowhouse may not be as well adapted for use as an artist's workspace as are the industrial lofts of Chinatown North, they impose a scale that remains attractive to artists as living and social spaces.<sup>8</sup> Philadelphia's physical landscape has become, without a doubt, an evidential case study as to how a city can adjust entirely in part due to its artistic multifariousness.

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<sup>7</sup> Stern, Mark J., and Susan C. Seifert. "'Natural' Cultural Districts: A Three-City Study Report Summary." University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project, Feb. 2013. Web, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Stern, Mark J., and Susan C. Seifert. "'Natural' Cultural Districts: A Three-City Study Report Summary." University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project, Feb. 2013. Web, 9.

By examining the successes and failures, including the positives and negatives on a smaller, less commercialized level, larger institutions will be able to in turn learn and utilize different tactics related to community building, attendance, and participation. Rather than focus extensively on the history of alternative spaces, the objective of this paper will be to establish an understanding of how different elements of alternative spaces will shape and influence the future of our artistic climate, and how alternative spaces are both different and related to larger non-profit institutions, using Philadelphia as an evidential landscape.

Alternative art spaces live outside of the commercial art world for a reason. They are able to be unrestricted in their exploration, control their functionality both artistically and organizationally, and are able to build a structure in which every object is driven by group participation, not individuality, therefore preferring their separation from commercial art spaces and mainstream institutions while remaining open to potential collaborations. This notion, does not mean that collaboration with large-non profit institutions is impossible or not beneficial, but rather points to the understanding that alternative spaces remain outside of the ways in which museums have traditionally presented art.

In order to cohesively explore the ways in which alternative spaces and large non-profit institutions can survive in the same art ecosphere, the potential relationship is separated and will be explored on the basis of three key components; structure & architecture, perceptions & strategies for sustainability, and impact. The first key component will focus on the ways in which both alternative spaces and traditional museums are structured from the ground up. This section will examine the

ways in which the less hierarchical structure of alternative spaces compares to the more traditional framework of the standard museum. It will also focus on the ways in which the actual architectural design and feel can influence how people relate to both types of structural models. The second key component will focus on the ways in which both alternative spaces and traditional museums are perceived in the public eye. The final component will focus on the influence of alternative spaces within the art world both now and for the future, and the examination of how alternative spaces and traditional museums use different tactics to engage their visitors and adapt to a changing society.

There is a potential relationship between alternative spaces and traditional museums, but if one is not established, how each type of institution is run will be still be of beneficial knowledge for the overall spectrum of the arts. The exploration of these potential relationships would be impossible without physically visiting each type of institution and speaking with professionals in the field. These conversations will subsequently support any evidence provided throughout the entire extent of the arguments given. This thesis, will provide an understanding of the possible approaches to creating spaces that are viable to build stronger arts communities, provide an insight into the climate of alternative art spaces today, and help give an understanding of how alternative space strategies can translate into museum practices to create new relationship with non-traditional audiences. The ultimate goal is to help create a formula and framework by which larger institutions can utilize some of the same practices “alternative spaces” use in order to broaden their



institutions in terms of building their audiences, as well as creating more dynamic atmospheres by engaging in compelling experiences.

## **Chapter 2: Architecture, Attractiveness, & Structure**

### **Architecture:**

Stated beautifully by McManus: Dundee's Galleries and Museum, "Museum buildings have a significant impact on the visitor experience. Visually absorbing the external and internal architecture is often the first stage of this experience..."

Museums come in all different shapes and sizes, but as "icons" they are deemed as sacred locations of art that must be respected as such upon entering.<sup>9</sup> Whether we as visitors like it or not, traditional museums as we know them come with the territory of upholding certain aesthetic and cultural standards upon entrance. Most of us, if not all of us as museums visitors, have shared several experiences that can often influence how we feel and interact with them. It is the standard, that at most traditional museum spaces visitors are not allowed to use photography (this has slowly been changing to the use of photography without flash), they are not encouraged to talk amongst themselves about the art but rather directed to stay quiet and focused on the artwork, and are often times not directed to interact with other visitors while viewing the art, but use the space as a moment of introspection, contemplation, and escape. To the credit of traditional museums, many have made efforts in recent years to transition into a less static environment through the

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<sup>9</sup> "The Mcmanus | Dundee's Art Gallery & Museum." *The Mcmanus | Dundee's Art Gallery & Museum*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Sept. 2013.

inclusion of special events, staying open after hours, or having more participatory content.

On August 3, 2010, the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative invited Adam Lerner and Mark Allen to participate in a curatorial roundtable on audience engagement, both of whom come from outside the mainstream art world, perhaps supporting their efforts to create interesting programs within the mainstream museum environment. As the Director and Chief Animator in the Department of Structures and Fictions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, Lerner has engaged the Denver arts community with programming such as “Mixed Taste,” a series of tag-team lectures from experts on seemingly unrelated subjects.<sup>10</sup> As two of the forefront thinkers of work being done outside of the traditional museum space, they were able to give great insight into what makes the foundational structure of museums different than other collaboratively driven alternative spaces. In particular, Lerner stated, “The art world [is] very, very forgiving in its definition of what an artist is but extremely unforgiving and conservative in the definition of what a [museum] is.”<sup>11</sup> This statement hits at one of the root differences between alternative spaces and traditional museums, the ways in which we view and interact with the interior and exterior spaces of our surroundings.

The difference between alternative spaces and traditional museums, is that alternative spaces are much more similar to houses or places where friends go

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<sup>10</sup> "The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage." *Audience Engagement: Adam Lerner & Mark Allen* .: N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2013.

<sup>11</sup> "The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage." *Audience Engagement: Adam Lerner & Mark Allen* .: N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2013.

to hang out on the weekends, leaving all pretentious ideologies at the door. Museums, as many have noted, are more like temples or cathedrals, where we are to be on our best behavior, or following prescribed behaviors (Duncan and others). The structure of alternative spaces are less like museums, and more like the familiarity of your own home. As your home serves as a place to return to for more intimate experiences and social relaxation, it also serves as a location to spend time with your closest friends and family. The structure of alternative spaces located in abandoned warehouses, storefronts, small gallery spaces, and even living rooms, provides the privacy needed to create, while offering visitors the experience to feel a sense of newness and immediacy amongst that which has been created. This idea aims to answer the question of what can alternative spaces do that museums and commercial galleries can't do? Alternative spaces may not have the same overall cultural and economic capital as other types of spaces, but you can make people feel wanted and relaxed. Rather than having people feel like they are in art church, the architecture and dynamic of alternative spaces actually supports the ways visitors become engaged. Often times, the ultimate difference between the physical structure of a traditional museum and an alternative space is the pressure a space imposes, whether one realizes it or not. An example of this pressure, from personal experience, stems from visiting an alternative space one day, followed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art the following day. As an avid art seeker, the familiarity with many different kinds of spaces was not lacking.

Upon entering Vox Populi for the first time, I had no idea what to expect. Despite knowing little about the space before entering, I found myself at ease, and

felt very little pressure regarding my ability to understand the space and artwork alike. However, the following day, I went to visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a museum that I also happened to work at previously. Having been there too many times to count, I still felt the pressure of feeling like I had to have an art historian's mind and wanted to make sure I fit in as I climbed the always intimidating staircase leading to the main entrance. Mark Allen pinpointed the understanding of this relationship with museums when he took over the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with his alternative arts organization Machine Project. Allen stated, "Visiting a museum can be like visiting a very rich person's house, where you feel pressure to admire the furniture...We wanted this to feel more like hanging out with friends...Once you start to move into the space that the museum constructs its identity and brand in, which is public engagement, how signage is constructed, how things are messaged -- then [...] the voice of the artist and the voice of the institution...the distinction between them becomes unclear."<sup>12</sup>

### ***Attractiveness:***

Allen's remarks regarding the differences between alternative spaces and traditional museums emphasized something that was recurring within the ideology of how spaces are received. After talking to several people within the alternative art space world, one similar theme came up in conversation. Among the things that made alternative spaces unique and attractive, was the notion of being less stuffy and more accessible. In other words, traditional museums have to be cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Finkel, Jori. "Arty Subversives Storm the Museum." *The New York Times*. N.p., 28 Nov. 2008. Web.

authorities, and alternative spaces do not. Have you ever entered a museum and felt that you had to have knowledge about the art in order to be there? What about the feeling that unless you were an expert on the subject, you shouldn't *really* voice your opinion? These are the walls that are often broken down when it comes to alternative spaces. Those living within the alternative space world agree, that one of the major reasons visitors find it so easy to return is that they do in fact feel a sense of newness and the ability to be more accommodating. This notion can be attributed to the fact that often times alternative spaces are free to attend, events often involve friends of those exhibiting art, and spaces often times stay within close proximity of each other.

If alternative spaces, which remain outside of mainstream artistic culture, do not have to rely on certain standards of obtaining and adhering to the needs of cultural capital, the overhanging cloud of failure is less present. For example, exhibitions within traditional museums are often planned on a strict schedule that can extend for years in advance. The efforts a museum puts into making these exhibitions successful are great, but the expectations of its visitors are greater, as they come to expect several major exhibitions a year. Alternative spaces however, have the ability to do an infinite amount of shows in any given period of time, and not be held to the same expectations that traditional museums often face through big name shows such as blockbuster exhibitions. What this means in turn, is alternative spaces are granted a plethora of options, options that include new, raw, and emerging up close experiences that other types of institutions don't often have. As museums are forced into creating specific departments such as "community

outreach” to allocate a specific amount of time and effort reaching new audiences, alternative spaces have the freedom from their foundation to create stronger levels of accessibility for visitors through programming and participation.

An early article by Brian Wallis on the alternative space movement defined them as “neutral, nonjudgmental, non-authenticating, openly experimental and sympathetic places to house new ideas, unconcerned with traditional amenities like engraved invitations and plaques on the walls, or trustees with connections to IBM or Xerox.”<sup>13</sup> Where traditional museums are often founded through specific objectives such as housing a special collection, or focusing on a specific subject, alternative spaces on a foundational level, remain more experimental and unrestrictive. The origins of alternative spaces were to showcase art that had otherwise been marginalized from mainstream culture. Therefore, the art and spaces themselves were rooted in the communities and people for whom they were established, and to whom they spoke. Where traditional museums create/curate exhibitions in which you should walk away with an overarching theme, alternative spaces encouraged those who interacted with them to influence whatever that overarching theme may be. If alternative spaces were established with the understanding that outsiders can come together to find a place of collectiveness, then so too could visitors come together to create something, anything. One way this idea can be emphasized, is by looking at the Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills Report produced by the Institute of Museums and Library Services (IMLS) in 2009. In the report, IMLS offers up a number of different ways the Museum/Library must shift from the 20th century to the

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<sup>13</sup> Brian Wallis, *Public Funding and Alternative Spaces* in Julie Ault, *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 168.

21st. Some of these ways IMLS believes these types of institutions will shift, includes: multi-directional (co-created experiences involving institutions, audiences, and others), focus on audience engagement and experiences, and acts in highly collaborative partnerships.<sup>14</sup>

Today, one of the greatest ways in which our society has changed, is through tools which have been made available for interaction, and how people utilize these tools to interact with content. One thing people seek through these forms of interaction, are relationships, something museums are keen on establishing. This trend within the art world has been attributed to relational aesthetics<sup>15</sup>, the idea that the viewer experience of the constructed social environment becomes the art. Unfortunately, there has been a gap, or more specifically, a disregard by traditional museums and commercial galleries to attempt to adapt to these societal changes at a constant rate, often times keeping a highly indifferent atmosphere. In fact, According to the National Endowment for the Arts' 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, American adults' participation in key activities such as attending live performances and visiting museums is at its lowest levels since the survey began tracking it in 1982.<sup>16</sup> Alternative spaces thus provide a point of brightness regarding the statistics on public participation in the arts. The appeal of

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<sup>14</sup> "Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills." Institute of Museums and Library Services, July 2009. Web.

<sup>15</sup> "WTF Is... Relational Aesthetics?" *Hyperallergic RSS*. N.p., 8 Feb. 2011. Web.

<sup>16</sup> Harlow, Bob, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field. "More Than Just A Party: How the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Boosted Participation by Young Adults." The Wallace Foundation, 2011. Web.

these spaces is a result of their ability to provide new, familiar, and interactive environments for people to engage in art.

Important to alternative spaces, is the idea to create something that can be accessible. Unlike a traditional museums efforts to be accessible to everyone, alternative spaces work more closely with specialized audiences. For alternative spaces, attempting to be overly accessible like their traditional counterparts would be a failure. Although the history of alternative spaces is connected with art that was deemed inaccessible, today, these spaces rely on the interaction with their surrounding communities to remain progressive. The term interaction must not be confused with the idea of participation. As we have seen the rise and influence of books like Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum*, alternative spaces often offer a greater presence of participation than most traditional museums, but many times the notion of participation may come as an afterthought to a project or performance. The idea of interaction within alternative spaces that differs from traditional museums, lies in the ability to more intimately provide a location in which people can experience art. This type of interaction can thus be called the *new informality* of artistic spaces, defining the influence of the less stodgy, less formal environment by which to engage with art. Thus, this new informality helps bring audiences closer to both the art and the artist. Also important to note, is that alternative spaces work with living artists, allowing the artist to be wholly involved in both the creation of the art being shown, and attendance at any event or party.



### ***Hierarchical vs. Collective:***

On one hand, there is the examination of structure, relating to the physical architectural and structural differences and similarities between alternative spaces and traditional museums. On the other hand, there is the examination of the structure internally, regarding how each type of institution is organizationally run. In a traditional museum setting, the way in which the museum is run is often purely hierarchical. From the bottom, a museum has its volunteers and unpaid staff, moving up to part-time staff and full-time employees. From there, the museum moves forward with its most highly regarded employees such as Chief Operating Officer, or Director. Lastly, the museum relies on its board members, those who are affiliated but not employed, but help make decisions regarding the museums collections and finances. Traditional museums' hierarchical structure is governed by articles of incorporation, bylaws, and policies, a system that allows them to be compliance-oriented institutions rather than risk taking institutions. However, perhaps one of the biggest differences regarding traditional museums and alternative spaces, is the way in which they are organized.

As museums function in a systematic structure from volunteer to board member, the alternative space looks to level the playing field on all accounts, creating a model that looks like a collective rather than a group of individuals. A cohesive example of how this model was explained, can be found in the explanation of the organization of Vox Populi, an alternative non-profit (more on that later) that was founded in 1988 by Ann Karlen, and six others on the basis of creating a self-established collective for then non-existent artistic opportunities. Vox Populi

describes itself as the “CO-OP,” a term that reflected the core set of values typically associated with cooperative groups: self-help, self-responsibility, equity and solidarity, voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy, and independence.<sup>17</sup>

Today, the structure of Vox Populi consists of an Executive Director, with a collective of about 30 artists. Interestingly, although Andrew Suggs is the Executive Director, he does not make most of the artistic decisions. With the membership (consisting of mostly artists) meeting once a month to decide what happens, they are able to maintain a sound creative and organizational balance, one sometimes hard to come by in the alternative art space world. The way in which Vox Populi is structured, thus presents the key to understanding the structure of alternative spaces in general. While Vox Populi has its own ecosystem, almost every alternative space functions in a unique and different way than its counterparts. Another alternative space in Philadelphia, *Practice Gallery*, functions as a more pure collective, giving each member an equal say in the decisions being made on a day to day basis. What makes this aspect of alternative spaces so fascinating, is that today, an artists' organization may be as much a mind-set as anything else; and not necessarily an alternative space as history has come to understand.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the alternative space model of artistic organization is much more important

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<sup>17</sup> Suggs, Andrew. *Vox Populi: We're Working on It*. [Philadelphia, Pa.]: Vox Populi, 2010. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Atkins, *On Edge: Alternative Spaces Today Art in America: November 1998*, pp. 57-61

and apparent than the idea that an alternative space must intrinsically be against the mainstream.

What has become difficult, is to differentiate ways in which spaces outside of the traditional museum, have been able to remain “alternative”. Regarding the structure of these spaces, the alternative mindset has established an artistic environment that has remained intact since the movement’s formation in the 1960’s. Despite the fact that some alternative spaces today may not be working in the same artistic confines of their historic predecessors, the fact remains that the structure of their organization has been formulated to establish a collective environment, acknowledging their historic past. Another example from Philadelphia, is the newly founded Sculpture Gym. The Gym will be a first-of-its-kind facility in Philadelphia, including table and hand saws, a drill press, basic woodshop tools, and welding area, intended to give would-be or long-suffering sculptors a place to safely and affordably make their art.<sup>19</sup> The idea of an alternative space as a co-op collective has helped spaces that have in fact become co-ops. As alternative spaces continue to flourish, their foundational structure has helped establish a new wave of co-op working spaces.

The question to ask then, is what model works best for which purpose, the hierarchical structure of the traditional museum, or the more free flowing collective structure of the alternative space? In terms of traditional museums, they need the hierarchical structure for the multiple tasks at hand, while the alternative space prefers the free flowing collective approach allowing them to be more agile. Perhaps

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<sup>19</sup> "Features." *Philadelphia*. N.p., n.d. 15 July. 2013.

the best example of a mix between the two types of structures, can be found in Vox Populi. As most alternative spaces stay, by choice, completely away from anything conventional, Vox Populi's move into the non-profit world and becoming a certified 501(c)(3) allowed them to more closely align themselves with mainstream non-profits thus creating the opportunity to work with places like the ICA. Despite this being a major positive, a move like this also pushes an organization to hold themselves to more formal standards, establishing expectations, and perhaps prohibiting elements of a fully artistic spectrum. Regardless, Vox Populi's ability to mold itself closely to the likeness of larger institutions while maintaining very personal long-lasting relationships is something rarely seen. Rather than choosing the best model between the hierarchical versus the collective, Vox Populi proves that alternative spaces have the ability to collaborate and coincide within the same artistic ecosphere as larger mainstream non-profits.

In an interview with *whitehot magazine of contemporary art* in 2010, Suggs was asked if the underground art scene in Philadelphia had changed since he moved there 5 years ago. Suggs stated, "I'm not sure, though, what impact this growth has on the feeling of an "underground." I don't really think of Vox as an "underground" venue. It is an established gallery with solid funding that follows a very professional model, and while I think we can bring voice to certain under-represented endeavors, I don't think we operate against or outside the "art world" in very many ways. I tend to think of "underground" activity as that which is hidden, outside, obscured...and I'm not sure that growth of a more professional art scene

necessarily means more underground activity.”<sup>20</sup> Through Suggs description of Vox’s relationship to the underground, one can see that the model of functioning professionally while attempting to serve under-represented endeavors creates a unique instance of malleability within the alternative space climate of Philadelphia.

### ***Chapter III, Perceptions of the Alternative Space:***

As traditional museums often provide the national standard for how art is exhibited and viewed, we as onlookers have come to formulate certain ideas and criteria as to how things within the museum world should look and feel. As visitors to these types of institutions, we have certain expectations, such as the longer a museum is open the greater the contribution to the community, expansion equals success, and the more money the better off an institution may be. These ideas, which are undoubtedly true for traditional museums and the like, do not have a direct correlation with alternative spaces. As alternative spaces can often seem “outside” or unusual to traditional museum goers, the viewer establishes a *perception* as to how alternative spaces function. But isn’t perception everything? There will always be fundamental differences between traditional museums, and alternative spaces, and these fundamental differences also consist of fundamental perceptions. That being said, there are a few key perceptions that stand out, and are important to highlight and emphasize.

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<sup>20</sup> "WM I Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art | November 2010, Interview with Andrew Suggs." N.p., Nov. 2010. Web.

### ***Life of a Space:***

The first key fundamental *perception* between traditional museums and alternative spaces, is that every institution's goal is to remain open for as long as possible, and remaining open, is a translation into success. Fundamentally, has there ever been a traditional museum that voluntarily wanted to no-longer exist? It is one of, if not *the* priority for traditional museums to stay alive. You often hear it as the term "keeping the doors open". The issue with this however, is that "keeping the doors open" as an objective does not apply to every space. In particular, when it comes to alternative spaces, often times they do indeed die. As Dave Kyu from *Practice Gallery* put it, "some artist's work, and some artistic spaces are simply *meant* to die."<sup>21</sup> Take a look at Philadelphia's *FLUXspace* for example, proving that fundamentally, these perceptions are different. After only a short period, *FLUXspace* closed its doors, unable to qualify for strict grant-making guidelines. The Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative (PEI), a program of the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, is a major grant-maker for alternative spaces in Philadelphia. Unfortunately, although there is no minimum operating budget required of applicants' organizations, PEI expects an arts organization to have completed two full years of programming and to have at least one full-time staff member in place in order to be eligible for funding.<sup>22</sup>

What makes PEI a difficult funder for alternative spaces, is that some alternative spaces are often only meant to exist for a given period of time. Perhaps a

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<sup>21</sup> Kyu, Dave. "Thesis Interview." Personal interview. 11 July 2013.

<sup>22</sup> "Philadelphia Weekly." *Why Are So Many Philly Art Galleries Closing?* N.p., n.d. Web. 18, July 2013.

group of artists want to create a certain number of projects, or there is a certain subject in the media that a group of artists wish to explore, that once it ends, so too does the space. Regardless, the result is the inability to receive funding due to a lack of longevity as a space. There is a general understanding then, not only by the public, but by funders as well, that like traditional museums, alternative spaces are always alive for an extended period of time. *FLUXspace's* organizer, Angela Jerardi summarizes her efforts by stating, "...I'm proud and happy that we ended when we did, because I think that you should be able to make changes and be a small, swift moving boat. To the detriment of the current contemporary art field, that's not something that is traditionally valued within funding streams."<sup>23</sup> Although *Fluxspace* wanted to survive but couldn't, some spaces and their founding members might not seek longevity.

Not all alternative spaces have faced the same consequences as *FLUXspace*, as a number of other alternative spaces within Philadelphia have been able to maintain longevity and have utilized grant-makers. However, the perception that all institutions and spaces should exist for as long as possible is something that cannot be overlooked. One example of a space that deliberately set out to exist for only a given period of time was Orchard Gallery in New York which was established in 1995, but made it clear that it would only be a three year project. Orchard Gallery was comprised of a group of individuals with different backgrounds, who set out to make an argument, articulate it, and enact or support a position within a given

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<sup>23</sup> "Philadelphia Weekly." *Why Are So Many Philly Art Galleries Closing?* N.p., n.d. Web. 18, July 2013.

period of time.<sup>24</sup> There is beauty in the idea that spaces may only exist for certain periods of time before the artists move on to new endeavors, and the space fades away. As alternative spaces are more adaptable to fading in and out, museums are not. Duration and longevity is key to their survival, but there is power in understanding the way in which other types of spaces work. Obviously, a museum will never attempt to intentionally close its doors, but what it can learn, is that risk-taking can at times pay off.

It may be true, that today, the mass media has little attention span for news that no longer seems new, and the administrators of publicly-funded exhibition spaces now have a financial interest in avoiding controversy.<sup>25</sup> However, this model of existence for a short period time may be an opportunity that traditional museums can take advantage of. As visitors, we see museums closing as a sure sign of failure, but the alternative space model has proven this perception wrong. There is no expectation for museums to wholeheartedly adopt this type of functional model, but why not adopt certain concepts? Traditional museums have the ability to exist as an institution, while creating separate entities that can still be of affiliation and serve a more malleable function. If traditional museums are willing to become risk-takers, they will have the ability to attempt new models of exhibiting art, spaces, etc., without the pressure of finality. Perhaps this means the incorporation of a unique program that is more experimental in terms of the museum's mission, and only lasts for a given period of time.

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<sup>24</sup> "Orchard47." *Orchard47*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Nov. 2013.

<sup>25</sup> (Robert Atkins, *On Edge: Alternative Spaces Today Art in America: November 1998*, 59.



If the program is unsuccessful, it fades away. However, if the program is successful, it still disappears but draws in an entirely new audience that is then invested into the museum itself, not just its programs. A great example of this can be seen in the recent summer program at the Philadelphia Museum of Art titled *Art Splash*. This summer, the Philadelphia Museum of Art chose to fill their Perelman Building, which usually consists of a multi-story gallery space, with exhibits, activities, and crafts focused on families. *Art Splash* drew in thousands of new visitors to the Perelman Building, and brought a completely new atmosphere to the museum. As a summer program, this served as an example of a museum attempting something completely new, while not instilling anything permanent.

### ***More Money, More Problems:***

The second key perception pertaining to traditional museums and alternative spaces is the notion that the more money an organization has, the better off that organization will be. There is no denying the relationship between money and success. With museums, the more money and funding they have, the greater experience they can provide to their audiences. Over the past 20 years, total public funding for the arts by federal, state, and local governments increased by 12 percent.<sup>26</sup> As much as money can be beneficial and a necessity to one's organization, it can also be the greatest of all evils, plaguing a number of museums each year. Who wouldn't want more money? Well one thing is for sure, any mainstream non-profit that has an opportunity to get money through donations,

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<sup>26</sup> "Public Funding for the Arts: 2012 Update." *Grantmakers in the Arts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Oct. 2013.

funding, etc., will do it. The more money you have, the better your organization can be, the more programs you can have, and the less you have to worry about budget cuts.

Practice gallery in Philadelphia is a good example of how more money, is not always a good thing. Obviously everyone wants funding, and Practice gallery, according to Dave Kyu, receives it through a yearly fundraising and membership dues<sup>27</sup>, but they admit, the more funding you have the more overhead you have to pay for including maintenance, staff, and even phone lines. By limiting funding, alternative spaces have more opportunities to utilize money for workspace and artistic endeavors. Fundamentally, the perception of more money equals better functionality, is not always true. Often times, the need for money stems from the need to support facets of the museum that are already in place. For example, many museums that function in historic old buildings, have to pay large amounts of operating and overhead costs each year. If the need for constant financial support can haunt traditional institutions, but alternative spaces can survive on low-level financial support, herein lies the perception that all institutions need a large influx of money to function. The amount of money an institution has depends heavily on funding through donations. In other words, the financing mechanisms that have developed to support the arts in this country have resulted in an arts infrastructure in which decisions are largely made by and for those with the money to support that structure.

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<sup>27</sup> Kyu, Dave. "Thesis Interview." Personal interview. 11 July 2013.

"Inner City Insights." *Initiative For a Competitive Inner City*. University of Pennsylvania, n.d. Web.

All alternative spaces are unique in some way, but their financial model often looks as if its on the brink of falling apart, and can sometimes result in spaces only living for a short period of time. The understanding that the more money an alternative space has, the better off it will be is an inaccuracy. As collectives, alternative spaces construct themselves through a business model that may prohibit an annual increase in financial stability, but allows the increase in creativity through a less restrictive funding model, i.e., they don't have to be accountable to a grant maker if they don't get the grants. As traditional museums are faced with the issues of allocated finances towards building maintenance, accessibility codes, etc., alternative spaces have the ability to focus their funds towards artistic creativity without the weight of a number of outside expenses. In traditional museums, the importance of money has resulted in a transition into a new model, one where the incorporation of experts from the business field have begun to cross over into the art world. Unlike traditional museums, as alternative spaces are able to remain generally unobstructed by constant financial pressures, they have the ability to maintain a more creative engineering through a less restrictive funding model. This less restrictive funding model can also be attributed to a lack of collection management, an aspect of traditional museums that do not affect alternative spaces.

### ***The Bigger, The Better:***

Similar in relationship with the perception that the more money your institution has the more successful it will be, is the perception that the growth of an institution exemplifies signs of its success. The motto for traditional museums if they are able

and willing, is grow baby grow. Generally speaking, when it's time for your space or museum to expand, that means you are doing something right. For mainstream non-profits, the bigger is indeed, the better. The ability to expand helps reach new audiences and communities, as well as allow for a greater expansion of all you can do. For alternative spaces on the other hand, popularity and expansion can sometimes become a curse. Thriving on the notion that there are little to no artistic restrictions, often times with popularity comes the burden of having to give the people what they want. When you grow, you also create expectations, and sometimes, the ability to stay small, is actually better. Among visitors, the signs of an institution's success also creates new expectations. Growing museums are expected to provide new and exciting ways of visitor experience.

With alternative spaces, the relationship with expansion can often mean the obstruction of having to give the people what they want, compared to being able to do what the space wants. For example, if a space receives grant money, that specific winning proposal will drive programming for a while and perhaps curatorial decisions, therefore forcing the organization to follow through and be more predictable and less agile. The notion of giving the people what they want, is not solely directed at the visitor, but extends to relationships with funding and outside resources. Earlier, Vox Populi's shift to a non-profit was shown as an example of how an alternative space can transition into a more collaborative role with traditional museums. However, their growth as a non-profit organization rather than a free formed collective, demonstrated the hardships of growth alternative spaces can face. In 1988, Vox opened its doors, began operating as a non-profit in 1997, and

received 501c3 status in 1999 from the federal government. After several years of unqualified freedom, Vox now had to answer to both a Board of Directors and the IRS, and had to grapple with a new set of expectations, both internal and external.<sup>28</sup> These internal and external expectations resulting from an institution's growth, can often have a negative effect on alternative spaces.

When it comes to traditional museums, many of them are run on the basis that they are businesses. Despite being in the not-for-profit sector, the occupational roles within museums are often quite similar to their for-profit counterparts, and the correlation between an institutions' growth and the need for stronger organization is simple. The larger an institution gets, the more organizational roles there are, the greater the expectations get. Perhaps the greatest issue in relationship to alternative space growth, is that organizationally, they are run by artists, a group that would have to become somewhat professionalized in order to manage a space's expansion. While there are a number of spaces that cease to exist on purpose, many of the spaces that fail within the first few years face a similar problem. Those spaces that have come and gone, have likely fallen prey to the lack of organization that plagues spaces run by people who are not traditionally administrators, archivists, or writers...but artists.<sup>29</sup>

Obviously, the need to grow as artists is always present, but the foundational structure of alternative spaces is often designed to avoid the pressures of

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<sup>28</sup> Suggs, Andrew. *Vox Populi: We're Working on It*. [Philadelphia, Pa.]: Vox Populi, 2010, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Suggs, Andrew. *Vox Populi: We're Working on It*. [Philadelphia, Pa.]: Vox Populi, 2010, 4.

administrative and institutionalized needs. Ultimately, this ability to remain small has resulted in the increase of creativity. Take for example, the large blockbuster exhibitions larger traditional museums often have. While the exhibitions provide many benefits in terms of revenue and publicity, once a museum enters that cycle, it is hard to escape. The expectations from these exhibitions can result in issues such as the wear and tear on artifacts and on curators, who often argue that they are unable to concentrate on their permanent collections because of the demands of temporary displays.<sup>30</sup> For alternative spaces, staying small means avoiding many of the issues larger traditional museums can face. By remaining small, alternative spaces have the ability to expand creatively, resulting in an enhanced environment which allows them to have a cultural and economic impact without surrendering to the constraints of a more organized art world.

#### ***Chapter IV: The Impact of Alternative Spaces***

In today's society, things are changing more rapidly than ever before, proving that the ways in which we interact socially, culturally, and economically have drastically changed from twenty years ago. As we live through these changes, one thing has remained constant, that the arts have always proven to be an integral part of our daily lives. The arts are fundamental to our humanity. They ennoble and inspire us—fostering creativity, goodness, and beauty. The arts help us express our values, build bridges between cultures, and bring us together regardless of ethnicity,

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<sup>30</sup> "Blockbusters: Too Big to Fail?" *The Art Newspaper*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11, April. 2013.

religion, or age. When times are tough, art is salve for the ache.<sup>31</sup> As our society remains ever changing, so too does the way in which we engage in art. Regarding the history of museums in this country, traditional museums have remained stagnant and conservative in how they engage with audiences.

Most traditional museums, have constructed themselves with the idea that they must be a jack-of-all-trades type organization, having the ability to please all who walk through their doors. This model, helps museums make their visitors happy, allows them to have sustained revenue, and upholds their mission without trying to step on anyone's toes. The issue however, is that this model of sustainability has not shifted with societal changes. Today, we live in an experience economy<sup>32</sup>, an economy in which people care more about receiving a valuable experience than they do about the cost of the monetary transaction. As traditional museums acknowledge this shift, their conservative environment often makes it difficult to make significant changes. Luckily, the art world is at its healthiest when it remains dynamic in the ways people engage in art, and the variety of types of institutions that exist. As museums struggle to change as rapidly as their surroundings, the new model in which they are striving to achieve looks more and more like that of an alternative space. Despite alternative spaces remaining outside the conservative mainstream, there is evidence culturally, economically, and within their communities that they stand on the forefront of the changing artistic climate in our country.

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<sup>31</sup> "10 Reasons To Support The Arts." *Americans For The Arts*. N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>32</sup> Pine, J. and Gilmore, J. (1999) *The Experience Economy*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1999.

### ***Cultural Impact:***

Artist Astrid Bowlby proclaimed, “The pulse of an art scene can be taken by assessing the health of its alternative galleries compared to its commercial ones.”<sup>33</sup> Bowlby’s statement is actually quite profound in terms of understanding the cultural dynamism within an artistic ecosystem. Culturally, the development of a society through art is of invaluable importance. Each year the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) holds a museum advocacy day, a day in which hundreds of people visit Capitol Hill to advance the causes of museums, and more generally emphasize the importance of funding the arts. Advocacy day also allows government officials to speak and lobby on behalf of the arts. For example, Maxine Waters, a California Congresswoman stated, “If they have an opportunity to visit the museums, and to have interaction with the kind of exhibits that you have, then they can learn better. That their minds can be opened up, and that art and culture is important to a civilized nation.”<sup>34</sup>

Maxine Waters makes a great point, art and culture are without a doubt important to a civilized nation. However, traditional museums can not be the sole source through which we as a society obtain our artistic experiences. As stated before, traditional museums have often times attempted to create exhibits that are broad, lacking the nuances of a more personal experience. Culturally, society has shifted from the transactional experience, to the personal experience. One of the

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<sup>33</sup> Suggs, Andrew. *Vox Populi: We're Working on It*. [Philadelphia, Pa.]: Vox Populi, 2010, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Silberglied, Gail Ravnitzky, and Michael Balderrama. *Speak up for Museums: The AAM Guide to Advocacy*. Washington, DC: AAM, 2011, 62



leading resources in understanding this shift within the museum world is the book *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Cultural Institutions*. Written by John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, the book emphasizes the cultural shift that has influenced the ways in which museums must change.

Acknowledging that the real currency in the 21st century is time, not money, Falk states, "So museum professionals are happy to say "we need to do things differently, and we know there are problems with numbers, blockbusters, etc" but the rhetoric exceeds the reality at this point. But it must be acknowledged that a leap into an unknown future is daunting and nobody knows exactly what that future should look like."<sup>35</sup>

Falk is right, no one knows *exactly* what the future should look like, but what is out there that can help ease us into this unknown future rather than have it slap us in the face? Although *Thriving in the Knowledge Age* predicts and demonstrates what the future business model of museums should look like, it fails to recognize the types of organizations, e.g. alternative spaces, that have already adopted a more personal, intimate, and culturally enriching relationship with their audience. Culturally speaking, alternative spaces are left to do what their traditional counterparts cannot. Looking back to a space like Vox Populi, in a city where commercial galleries are few, the artist-run cooperative performs the double role of cultivating debutants and furnishing the public with the kind of art museums are not yet ready or willing to

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<sup>35</sup> "Museum 2.0: Thriving in the Knowledge Age: Interview with John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, Part 1." *Museum 2.0: Thriving in the Knowledge Age: Interview with John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, Part 2*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 July 2013

exhibit.<sup>36</sup> If alternative spaces have the ability to cater to the public in a less culturally regulated environment, they then in turn become a cultural driver within their environment beyond the level of traditional museums.

Perhaps one of the biggest influencers of alternative spaces cultural impact lies in the hands of what audience these types of spaces are appealing to. While museums hold vetted and acknowledged, quality-based works that are beloved, in many cases they are not cutting edge and their makers are dead or no longer unknown. On the other hand, alternative spaces offer experiences that seek to achieve the next wave of fresh ideas and newest events. The difference between traditional museums and alternative spaces thus separates what types of audiences each space is catering too. Alternative spaces appeal to a much younger audience, one that is seeking unique artistic experiences, and consists of what could be considered the “creative crowd”, a crowd made up of artists, makers, and urban pioneers. As this “creative crowd” ages, they are more likely to align themselves with the “cultural crowd”, a crowd made up of professionals (potentially more affluent), who look more like consumers of a product than someone who wishes to engage in an experimental experience. For museums, the understanding of these types of audiences can culturally influence the ways in which they engage their visitors, as well as establish new programming.

Essentially, the ways in which traditional museums are attempting to provide our society with an elevated culture, is something alternative spaces are already currently doing. While traditional museums begin to understand the changes

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<sup>36</sup> Suggs, Andrew. *Vox Populi: We're Working on It*. [Philadelphia, Pa.]: Vox Populi, 2010, 22.

culturally that need to be made yet remain unwilling to do so, alternative spaces, not confined to a conservative mainstream model, have the ability to adapt rapidly, providing more culturally beneficial opportunities in a shorter amount of time. The problem then, is that as traditional museums receive more and more funding to simply keep their doors open, the more culturally exuberant alternative spaces fall to the wayside. The wealth culture of this country has recently become a hot debate topic, and the creative class has also felt the brunt of this shift. Recently, David Byrne published an article via *Creative Times Reports*, about this issue in New York City. "There is no room for fresh creative types." He wrote: "Middle-class people can barely afford to live here anymore, so forget about emerging artists, musicians, actors, dancers, writers, journalists and small business people. Bit by bit, the resources that keep the city vibrant are being eliminated."<sup>37</sup> Culturally, alternative spaces demonstrate the need for creative variety, and provide an existing cultural model for traditional museums to utilize.

### ***Community Impact:***

Whether an alternative space or a traditional museum, one of the ultimate goals of any art related organization is to have people not only buy into a specific exhibition or program, but buy into the organization itself. The success and progress of the art sector in this country relies a great deal on what it is doing and giving to the community. As Beverly Sheppard stated, "I think sometimes we focus too much on the creative things we are making--the programs or the exhibits--and we forget

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<sup>37</sup> "More Arts Groups Face Upheaval." *Online.wsj.com*. N.p., 11 Oct. 2013. Web.

that the recipients of these programs want a personal, special experience. Members really want a special relationship--that's why they join."<sup>38</sup> Sheppard's understanding resonates awareness not only of a cultural shift, but a shift in how museums must focus more heavily on the communities they exist in. One of the hardest things for museums to do, is to draw in a completely diversified audience. Traditional museums and alternative spaces may have entirely different expectations, however, those expectations demonstrate alternative space's ability to engage more intimately with their communities.

Take for example, the Philadelphia Museum of Art in comparison to Tiger Strikes Asteroid, an artist-run space in the same building as Vox Populi. Each organization should have different expectations according to their communities, but a major difference is that alternative spaces often live within the communities they are providing for. As the Philadelphia Museum of Art fosters an entire city as its community, it does not have the ability to construct itself around community specific issues. Alternative spaces on the other hand, are often situated directly within a specific neighborhood, and are more inclined to assist in communications regarding community concerns or mobilization. Alternative spaces also differ from their traditional counterparts in serving as a two-fold for community engagement, serving both artist and visitor alike. As an institution like the Philadelphia Museum of Art that predominantly consists of artworks created by those who are no longer living,

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<sup>38</sup> "Museum 2.0: Thriving in the Knowledge Age: Interview with John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, Part 1." *Museum 2.0: Thriving in the Knowledge Age: Interview with John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, Part 2*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 July 2013.

alternative spaces can also improve the lives of artists within the community, often times those creating the collective of the space itself.

In reality, the differences in community engagement between alternative spaces and larger traditional museums sheds light on the relationship between a different type of institution and alternative spaces, the small museum. As alternative spaces exist within the community and don't have community outreach departments like large museums, they are more closely related to small museums. Like most cultural institutions, even small museums have begun to understand that they must be more flexible and adaptable when it comes to community. As small museums begin to advocate for their neighbors, they soon discover the museum mission and the community mission are one and the same.<sup>39</sup> Also similar to alternative spaces, are smaller museum's struggles with longevity compared to larger traditional museums. In a way, the situation becomes a catch-22. Alternative spaces and smaller museums have the intrinsic ability to engage with their communities on a more intimate level, but are also delegated to the end of the line when it comes to importance in funding.

As *Thriving in the Knowledge Age* gives recommendations in regards to a new business model that promotes stronger cultural ties, there are also movements to help small museums survive through new ideas. In 2007, the Kyuit Summit, a conference focusing on the sustainability of historic sites, came up with a list of findings that would better help historic sites exist. One of these findings was, "Sustainability begins with each historic site's engagement with its community and its

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<sup>39</sup> Catlin-Legutko, Cinnamon, and Stacy Klingler. *The Small Museum Toolkit*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2012, 75.

willingness to change its structure, programs, and services in response to the changing needs of that community.”<sup>40</sup> If this sounds familiar, that’s because it resonates with what alternative spaces are *already doing*. Just recently, Nina Simon, author of *The Participatory Museum*, featured a blogpost regarding the idea that underperforming non-profits should be killed off. While this is indeed a radical idea, it focuses on the understanding that if institutions no longer provide a usefulness to their community, should they exist? In Simons words, “I’m pissed off that well-capitalized organizations that engage a narrowing constituency can raise millions while young organizations struggle to be viable even as they produce powerful work for growing communities.”<sup>41</sup>

Nina Simon’s point is valid, and shows an ongoing and immediate problem related to the diversity of our art environment. If someone like Simon can point out a very present and current issue, why can’t something be done about it? Alternative spaces are the exact spaces that Simon speaks of, the young organizations that fight for their existence while they produce quality community benefits while other less effective organizations soak up the resources. Perhaps one of the most revealing aspects of the difference in community engagement with alternative spaces and large traditional museums is the hierarchical structure versus the smaller collective. As alternative spaces consist of a smaller group of people that take on a larger role with community and visitor interaction, those who fulfill the same role in

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<sup>40</sup> "The Kyuit II Summit: The Sustainability of Historic Sites." N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>41</sup> "Museum 2.0: What Should Happen to Underperforming Nonprofit Organizations?" *Museum 2.0: What Should Happen to Underperforming Nonprofit Organizations?* N.p., 23 Oct. 2013.

larger institutions are floor staff and volunteers, people who have no say in any major decisions. While the structure of community engagement for large institutions will not change overnight, we can not ignore the alternative space model as a successful community-focused enterprise.

### ***Economic Impact:***

As the economy has just been hit yet again by a government shutdown and the threat of the debt ceiling looming, it's hard to see the positives. In terms of funding in this country, when it comes to making cuts, the arts and humanities are often the first to go. That funding can even be examined further when it comes to what types of institutions within the art sector are deemed necessities to keep alive. When we look at that pecking order, funding for alternative spaces has historically not remained high on the list of types of spaces to fund heavily. With a lack of funding, some spaces like *Practice Gallery* have opted to receive no funding at all, giving themselves operational freedom without having to report finances, etc. However, with proof of economic impact, alternative spaces can prove that they should remain on the list of institutions that do in fact deserve to be sustainably funded. It is important for people to think about supporting the culture they participate in, especially when so many artistic projects, museums, and spaces are losing money and funding everyday. According to the 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 21 percent of adults nationwide, or 49.3 million, visit an art museum, gallery, or related space at least once a year.<sup>42</sup> With an increase in

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<sup>42</sup> "How A Nation Engages With Art." *Arts.gov*. N.p., Sept. 2013. Web. <<http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/highlights-from-2012-SPPA.pdf>>.

visitation to these types of spaces, evidence should show that the gamut of artistic spaces are having similar funding successes or problems.

"We are going to see the big institutions get bigger and stronger, and the little organizations and projects continue to proliferate," he said. "I fear the midsized organizations are going to get squeezed,"<sup>43</sup> said Adam Huttler, executive director of Fractured Atlas, an arts service organization. Larger institutions are often in the spotlight, having the ability to advocate on a greater level, use resources to show their impact, and receive greater funding than their smaller counterparts. What is happening to smaller organizations then, is despite their creative impact, they are losing in the end. What alternative spaces have proven over time, is that they serve an impact economically as well. Look at the types of spaces alternative spaces inhabit for example, abandoned buildings, storefronts, warehouses etc. According to a University of Pennsylvania project focused on an Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, over the next ten years, nearly a billion square feet of building space in U.S. inner cities is expected to become available.<sup>44</sup> As many traditional museums and larger institutions occupy a historic building, or even have an entirely new building built, alternative spaces help occupy and revitalize buildings that are otherwise being unused. By occupying these spaces they are not only helping the city financially through the reuse of abandoned buildings, they are also boosting the surrounding community economically as well as drawing in outside crowds.

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<sup>43</sup> "More Arts Groups Face Upheaval." *Online.wsj.com*. N.p., 11 Oct. 2013. Web.

<sup>44</sup> "Inner City Insights." *Initiative For a Competitive Inner City*. University of Pennsylvania, n.d. Web.



Here in Philadelphia, alternative spaces in particular have demonstrated their strength of economic impact, especially when it comes to the revitalization of ailing communities. Take the neighborhood of Kensington as an example, which was briefly touched upon in the introduction. Like many other neighborhoods throughout the country, Kensington was hit with deindustrialization in the 1950's, which led to a number of significant losses in population, unemployment, the economy, and the abandonment of the neighborhood. With a suffering economy, many large industrial buildings were vacated and left sitting uninhabited. However, in the past decade, as center city priced out young artists and creative businesses, particularly in Old City, Kensington has become a hotbed of creative small businesses and contributed to a serious revitalization, one that brings positive effects (new coffee shops, galleries, restaurants) as well as increases in rent that slowly push artists further away in pursuit of lower rents.<sup>45</sup> As artists migrate to spaces that are cheap and accessible, the economic prosperity that may then push some artists away, will only mean the movement to yet another neighborhood beginning to revitalize itself, thus continuing the same pattern.

Philadelphia's artistic landscape creates a unique atmosphere that allows alternative spaces to thrive, including a surplus of alternative spaces, a large influx of graduate students focusing on the arts, and the city's affordability. But like a lot of other cities, the financing mechanisms that developed to support the arts in this country have resulted in an arts infrastructure in which decisions are largely made by and for those with the money to support that structure. This has inevitably insulated

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<sup>45</sup> "Viking Mill In Kensington Shut By L&I; Artists, Makers Out (Second Update)." *Hidden City Philadelphia RSS*. N.p., 21 Oct. 2013. Web. Fall 2013.

the arts from the broad populace and served to create a barrier between them and the arts.<sup>46</sup> This insulated infrastructure has made it difficult, and some could say almost impossible to measure the actual impact organizations like alternative spaces have on their economy. Despite the lack of concrete data proving the benefits of alternative spaces, we can physically see the ways in which alternative spaces are changing the economic landscape of Philadelphia.

### ***Conclusion:***

In the current state of our country, the arts provide a more important role than ever before. Arts organizations are responsible businesses, employers, and consumers. Nonprofit arts organizations generate \$135 billion in economic activity annually, supporting 4.1 million jobs and generating \$22.3 billion in government revenue. Investment in the arts supports jobs, generates tax revenues, promotes tourism, and advances our creativity-based economy.<sup>47</sup> Often times, only a small majority of the many types of arts organizations are put in the spotlight for their successes, shortcomings, positives and negatives. Of those types of organizations that receive this spotlight, most of them often consist of large, popular, traditional museums. But like a well-built machine, if one small part is removed or missing, the machine will not function properly or to its full capacity. The same, can be attributed to the art world as a whole. What happens then, if through lack of funding, understanding, or popularity, alternative spaces begin to fail? If you consider the art

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<sup>46</sup> "Inner City Insights." *Initiative For a Competitive Inner City*. University of Pennsylvania, n.d. Web, 100.

<sup>47</sup> 10 Reasons To Support The Arts." *Americans For The Arts*. N.p., n.d. Web.

world a cohesive ecosystem, then plenty. Such an outlook implies that the withering away of alternative spaces not only limits diversity--that is, the range of artistic visions presented to audiences--but impairs the vast majority of future artists who might develop their crafts at these art making laboratories.<sup>48</sup>

As technology changes every day, so too does the art world. The ways in which museums and arts organizations of all kinds engage with visitors, show art, construct programs, and evaluate their competition changes on a daily basis. As Robert Crane observed, "The entire ecology needs to be supported. The collapse of small organizations will have an effect, but probably not an immediate one. Everybody, funders included, have short visions when we need ten-to-twenty year horizons."<sup>49</sup> What Crane demonstrates, is precisely what this paper sets out to do, help build knowledge and prepare for the future. As traditional museums and large mainstream non-profits have been well researched and documented, small organizations and alternative spaces have proven to be much more difficult to cohesively understand and place in the puzzle that is the future of the art world. As traditional museums will remain an absolutely integral and influential part of the art culture in this country, it is important then to understand how the role of alternative spaces can help benefit and assist in the structure and change of these institutions in the future.

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Atkins, *On Edge: Alternative Spaces Today Art in America: November 1998*, pp. 57-61, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Atkins, *On Edge: Alternative Spaces Today Art in America: November 1998*, pp. 57-61, 58.

The applicability of this paper for the museum field serves as a key document to understanding not only the foundational structure and function of alternative spaces within the larger ecosystem of the art world, but also implicates the ways in which alternative spaces can serve as model institutions for the future. This work emphasizes the differences in architecture among alternative spaces and traditional museums and how that factors into a visitor's relation with an institution, the differences in the attractiveness and appeal of alternative spaces into comparison with traditional museums, and how the structure within each space differs. This work also goes deeper into the understanding of alternative spaces by examining the perceptions created by traditional museums. By discussing the life of a space, the financial structure, and the importance of size, the comparisons and ways in which traditional museums could be influenced by alternative spaces is pushed further. Finally, this work emphasizes the cultural, community, and economic impact of alternative spaces. By demonstrating the change in how we engage and interact with art, we see that alternative spaces play an important and intricate role in helping traditional museums change what their business and cultural model should look like.

What this work has set out to do, is provide a key resource to not only providing the history of alternative spaces within the long history of art in general, but to bring to light their current role within the changing art climate. As new reports regarding the impact of the arts within our society continue to surface on a daily basis, when it comes to museums, there is unfortunately no absolute measure of "large" and "small," not even if we focus on budget size (as opposed to physical size,

number of visitors, collection size, or any other potential measures of size).<sup>50</sup>

Although this document has set out to discuss the key differences between alternative spaces and traditional museums, including ways in which museums can utilize different aspects of alternative spaces, the ultimate goal is to help achieve a thriving, cohesive, and collaborative artistic ecosystem.

Ultimately, while traditional museums can learn from the more risk-tasking alternative spaces, they are subsequently trying to satisfy very different needs of their visitors. Museums are not expected, and should not attempt to become their alternative counterparts, however, by understanding the functioning structure of alternative spaces, traditional museums might move into a position of being able to associate their brand with more surprising and less predictably vetted work that would get at the welcoming and un-precious quality that alternatives have naturally. As this work is created to attempt to understand and place alternative spaces into the confines of the future art world, there is really no way to predict what may happen tomorrow. While this covers a wide spectrum of key points and topics, there is still much to be uncovered. As we continue to observe the changing environment of our societies artistic landscape, it will be essential to continue to research and understand the role of alternative spaces within the greater context of the art world.

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<sup>50</sup> Chang, Woong Jo. "How "Small" Are Small Arts Organizations?" *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 40.3 (2010): 217-34, 229

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