

ARTIST RESIDENCIES AND THE FIGHT AGAINST RISING RENTS

BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER

In the face of a rising cost of living, it is becoming more and more difficult for artists across the US to find an affordable space to create their artwork. Like many other places, rent is on the rise in the place that I live (Chicago), and so having a studio space outside of my apartment is pretty much out of the question. I feel fortunate enough just to have a small spare bedroom dedicated to creating artwork. Interestingly enough, Chicago being the third largest city in the U.S., it is not even in the top ten most expensive cities to live. So how is it that the two main artistic hubs in the country, NYC and L.A., have such a high cost of living? Artists often flock to these coasts, but with Brooklyn quickly becoming the hot spot in NYC for creatives, and L.A. art communities becoming increasingly gentrified, how can this really be sustainable for artists?

I spoke with two art organizations that are fortunately trying to turn the tides, who are dedicated to not only providing free and low-cost studio space (the dream!) specifically to local artists, but also offer a plethora of other resources. Many other residency programs offer a living and working studio space—but let's face it. How many of us can just get up and go live somewhere full-time for a while to create artwork? Sometimes what an artist needs is to have support in their own community, to feel like they can lay down roots, that their day-to-day practice is sustainable. And these two organizations are taking huge steps to make that happen—to give members of their community a supportive hand, to offer opportunities for artists to focus on their practice in their own space and community.

The 18th Street Art Center, located in L.A.'s west side, was founded in 1988 by a group of artists seeking space to live, work, and present their works. On top of hosting public events and exhibitions, they have three residency programs, which include the visiting artist program that provides live/work spaces to international artists, the Labs commissioning programs, which supports artists in creating new work, and the local studio resident program that specifically serves artists and organizations on the west side of L.A.

Artistic Director Anuradha Vikram discusses the local studio residency program, "The benefits of the program here go far beyond the use of physical space. Access to a community of thought, artist peers, critical conversations, and experimental practices promoted through our exhibitions and events are as much or more a part of the value that artists experience at 18th Street. The residency experience often changes an artist's working methods as well as their mentality."

A change in mentality is huge in the creation process. Even if you have space and time to create your artwork, if you feel discouraged or stuck in a certain way of thinking, it can be hard to break free of that headspace. The residency program at 18th Street Arts Center gives local artists breathing room to physically make the artwork, and they integrate the experience into their other programs, allowing opportunity for collaboration and experimentation in a cross-disciplinary environment. The diversity of the Center's participants range from artist-collectives and non-profits as well as artists that focus on non-traditional approaches like performance and video art.

In New York City, or more specifically, Brooklyn, BRIC has been bringing people together through contemporary arts, performing arts, and community media since 1979. With a huge roster of programming they produce the BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn! Festival, offer artist fellowships, host solo and group exhibitions, and also showcase Brooklyn media makers on their public access television network. In 2014, they launched their BRIC Workspace Residency, which offers studio space to five Brooklyn-based artists each summer. This program acts as a platform and incubator for Brooklyn-based emerging and mid-career artists.



COURTESY 18TH STREET ARTS CENTER

BRIC's Chief Curator of Contemporary Art Elizabeth Ferrer discusses what inspired the decision for such a hyper-local program:

"The reason we started the program was because we realized that this was one of the most critical needs for our artist community – numerous artists, especially emerging artists and artists who do not create work for the commercial art market – simply cannot afford workspace in New York. This can make a world of difference for an artist who can only make the next step in their creative development with proper space. For example, one of our first residents, Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze was working out of her apartment when we gave her a large space to work in. She told us that thanks to this space, she was able to produce some of the largest works she had ever made, leading to her inclusion in art fairs and now, in major art exhibitions. That space was one of the key factors in her being able to move forward with her career – the talent was already there!"

Both organizations are well aware of the overwhelming problem of the increasing cost of living in their cities. I spoke with both BRIC and 18th Street Art Center on the state of crisis that property cost is putting many residents in and how it is affecting the art community.

"Artists once moved to Brooklyn because it was affordable; they now move here because it is a major creative capital," explains Elizabeth Ferrer at BRIC. "Nevertheless, it has also become very expensive and so the need is definitely here for more affordable studio space. Downtown Brooklyn is currently going through a lot of growth, which is evident in the changing skyline. This transition uncovered opportunities for us including an off-site residency in a space that was not being used while it was transitioning into a new development. It's important to be nimble and to support each other's practices, as art is often what creates positive change in communities."

Anuradha Vikram says that the goal of the programs at 18th Street Arts Center are to, "Allow artists to stay in the area despite the rise in property cost. Real estate in LA has spiked recently but it has been out of sync with people's incomes for quite a lot longer."

It is clear that the rising cost of living is affecting local artists as well as nonprofit art organizations. It is a wonder that there is not a large exodus of artists from these expensive cities in search of more affordable space to create their work. However, artists do not give up so easily—it is a labor of love. They persist, and thankfully organizations like 18th Street Arts Center and BRIC persist as well. They continuously work hard to offer opportunities for artists in an effort to create an environment where artists have the resources to work towards a sustainable practice—ensuring a future for these art communities in the face of an unpredictable economy.

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