



Deep Cuts, Episode 30: “Fragile beasts”
May 25, 2017



Today we're with curator Betti-Sue Hertz in discussion of Common Field, a national "visual arts organizing network connecting contemporary, experimental, noncommercial artist-run and artist centered spaces and initiatives." For those less knowledgeable of their mission, what exactly do they do?

Common Field is a national membership association, which advocates for artist-centered organizations presenting works by and about contemporary art and related fields, often with an emphasis on social change. It includes many forms of support for art: studio collectives, exhibition spaces, publications, festivals, community education programs and more. Most of these noncommercial organizations are relatively modest in scale, and are also important as social hubs for the visual and interdisciplinary arts, broadly speaking.

When did you first come in contact with Common Field? How have they grown since that time?

Common Field is a very young association that was in development for a couple of years before it launched in 2015. Its director and co-founder, Courtney Fink, was formerly the director of Southern Exposure, one of San Francisco's premier visual arts organizations. The association grew out of conversations about the need "to bring visibility and regular connection to the broad spectrum of independent, experimental, contemporary visual artist projects and spaces." I've watched Common Field quickly evolve over the past couple of years into a resource for gathering people together through their annual convening event and as a platform for grappling with urgent issues that affect the arts community including diversity, gentrification and economic survival.

You described them "as an example of the new energy that drives art organizations." Can you describe how exactly they help sustain the arts?

Arts organizations are fragile beasts. They are often initiated by a few artists who want to create a space, whether physical, virtual or psychic, for a particular art or idea, or constituency. It may be a magazine that reviews art exhibitions in Texas, or an artist residency program in rural Wisconsin, an archive project focused on creative thinkers, a mobile art truck in Santa Fe, or an exhibition space in Chicago. Common Field brings the directors, programmers, artists and aesthetic activists together. It's still early to tell how they will help strengthen this little known sector of the national arts community. However, they are clearly determined to represent a particularly adventurous strata of creative and innovative advocates for social change in the arts and amplify the voices of their members.

You listed some of their members which you know more intimately, including Headlands, The Lab, Southern Exposure, and Aggregate Gallery. What is it about these organizations and galleries that you found especially noteworthy? Can you expound a bit on the mission of each?

We are lucky to have a very dynamic arts scene in the San Francisco Bay Area that has a long history and yet still remains open to new ventures. Many of the non-profit visual arts organizations, with their varied personalities and styles, have been shaped by their unique locations, whether in the middle of an urban neighborhood or set into the rural landscape of a national park. From providing spaces for exhibition to organizing nomadic performance art events, from commissioning programs to artmaking workshops, they are important gathering places for local artists and a diverse cultural community. Aggregate Space Gallery (ASG) in West Oakland, was founded in 2011. It fuels dialogue and community through exhibitions of immersive experimental video, installation, and performance by emerging artists. Co-directors Conrad M. Meyers and Sarah D. Willis are also active players in Art Murmur, the popular monthly neighborhood-wide gallery crawl. The other three have been around for over thirty years, which is quite remarkable in a city that has gone through its cycles of booms and busts. Southern Exposure (SoEx), founded in 1974, is in San Francisco's Mission District. It has long supported local artists as well as important contemporary artists from elsewhere through exhibitions and commissions. They also manage an incubator regranteeing program for new artistic ideas and an arts education department. With the leadership of their relatively new director, Patricia Maloney, SoEx is solidifying their mission while identifying new ways to widen the circle and broaden their reach to new audiences. The Lab, also in the Mission District, was founded in 1984, but was barely surviving when Dena Beard began her tenure as director in 2014 as the organization's sole paid employee. She now runs a thriving experimental multidisciplinary space, which supports and features artists at the radical edges of the performing arts, media and visual arts as well as lectures and conversations, which attract an audience of mostly younger in-the-know members of the Bay Area's art scene. On the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, in Marin County, Headlands Center for the Arts, a multidisciplinary artist residency program housed in several former military buildings, attracts applicants from around the world. In recent years, director Sharon Maidenberg has been working to strike a balance between providing space, time and money to artists so that they can create new work and opportunities for those artists to share their work publicly. As you can see, the collective impact of these and similar organizations extends far beyond the original actions of their founders.

Would you say that, in the Bay Area, arts organizations like those who are members of Common Field are especially prone to thrive? Why is that?

All four of these organizations were started by artists compelled to share their art and ideas with a public. And trust me, many organizations like the ones we are talking about have not survived. It's hard to balance administrative, financial and artistic needs while prioritizing art—its making and presentation. This is where Common Field comes in. How can we assure that more artist-run organizations are successful and thrive? By working to create a supportive platform for dialogue and exchange among its members, their constituencies and a broader public; and by celebrating exemplary contributions to the field while adroitly facing the challenges, is a good start. Most of these organizations have deep commitments to their local communities and up until now few ways of connecting with so many others across the country with a shared sense of purpose. If we can agree that art is an essential ingredient to a healthy and vibrant civic society, then the value of Common Field will be easily understood.

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