

ART SY

The Art World Needs to Ditch Its Big-City Snobbery

by Carolyn Ramo

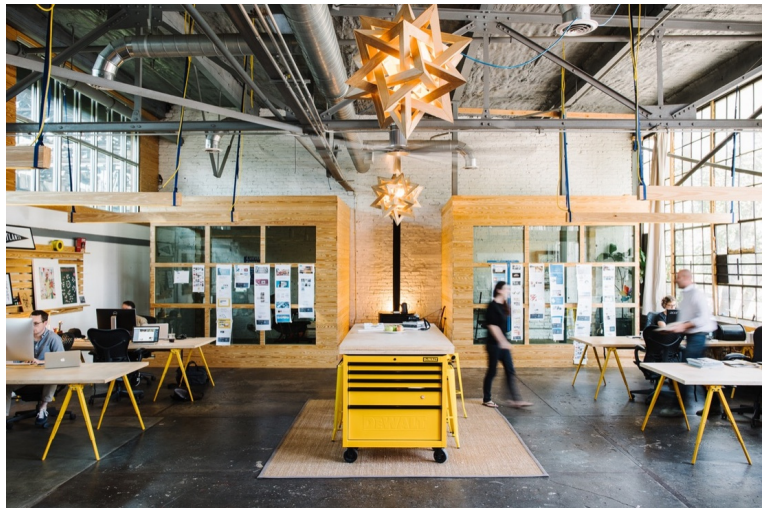
October 9, 2017

This is the first in a series of opinion pieces from contributors in positions across the art industry on how to create an art market that better serves artists. In this installment, Carolyn Ramo, executive director of the grantmaking organization Artadia, discusses how and why we must strengthen the relationship between the art world's center and its periphery. Please send feedback, or your own suggestions, to comments@artsy.net.

With each month bringing news of another celebrated mid-sized gallery's closure, much discussion has arisen about how to support galleries in the middle of the market. This is an important issue to address, but we must also consider how we can support emerging and mid-career artists themselves, given their sensitivity to market shifts.

For much of my career in the arts, I worked at commercial galleries in New York, and like many gallerists, I stayed abreast of the art offerings in New York, Los Angeles, and European cities like London and Berlin. That changed when I became executive director of Artadia in 2012, which took me from the commercial world to the non-profit one. Because Artadia awards unrestricted grants to artists in seven U.S. cities, I now travel widely throughout the country. One of the greatest joys of this job is discovering the large numbers of immensely talented artists living and working in cities beyond the major art market capitals.

This work that I see on studio visits and in smaller art spaces, despite flying under the radar for most of my colleagues on the



Digital Design and Brand Studio at The Goat Farm. Photo by Edgar Allan. Courtesy of The Goat Farm.



Installation view of Sita Bhaumik's 2016 exhibition at Southern Exposure, *Estamos contra el muro | We are against the wall*. Photo by Sana Javeri Kadri. Courtesy of Southern Exposure.

coasts, is frequently more compelling than 90 percent of what I see at New York galleries. In Atlanta, where there is limited commercial support, artists have created their own communities, such as at The Goat Farm, a massive complex of studios and work spaces (next to, yes, some roaming goats). Many of the Chicago Artadia Awardees are part of the large network of teachers at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an environment filled with discourse and collegial encouragement, and consider teaching to be part of their practice. In Houston, I've witnessed artists transform their garages into studio workspaces filled with intricate props and sets; others have created multi-building compounds where collectives gather to work on ambitious projects.

These artists are thriving because of the opportunities afforded to them by their city—where affordable space is in far greater abundance than in, say, Brooklyn or Hackney. In Atlanta, I once found myself in the attic studio of an artist who had been quietly creating stunningly abstract films—even building his own projectors—for many years. He was relatively unaware that his breathtaking work was so deeply original, and while he was happy to learn of other artists working in the experimental film medium today, he wasn't distracted by comparison or competition.

Through this process of learning about gifted artists outside the central core of the art market, I've recognized my own snobbery and my prior attachment to mainstream markers of achievement.

Truthfully, five years ago, even I had a hard time paying attention to art fairs that I considered too peripheral. Similarly, it should not be necessary for artists to pursue an MFA degree from a prestigious art school (saddling themselves with six-figure student debt loads) so they can be considered for studio visits.

It would be exciting to think these artists could have a chance at national and international success, and that we might see more than the same 300 familiar names being auctioned at Phillips, year in and year out. The strong 2017 Whitney Biennial was diverse in many respects, but geographically, not so much. Only two participating artists currently live in the South; most hailed from Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago.

We need to ensure that a greater number of talented artists can make a living from their work, and can do it while living outside of America's art centers. That entails strengthening the relationship between the core and peripheral art worlds, and it presents both a challenge and opportunity for art world participants of many stripes. Anyone engaged with the art market (such as curators, advisors, critics, artists, and collectors) should start by checking out



Installation view of Agnieszka Polska at Atlanta Contemporary. Courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary.



DiverseWorks at Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston. Photo by Paul Hester. Courtesy of DiverseWorks.

S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

the programs of small museums, artist-run spaces, and exhibiting non-profits (analogous to New York's White Columns, Artists Space, or Art in General) that focus on local talent in cities outside of their own. Even if you can't get there, it's worth knowing what they're exhibiting and what sorts of local talent exists that has not (yet) made it to the coasts.

A few examples are Diverseworks in Houston, The Lab and Southern Exposure in San Francisco, PICA in Portland, the Atlanta Contemporary, Threewalls in Chicago, and anyone participating in the arts network Common Field; these spaces have reputations for showing work of merit. Subscribe to their mailing lists so you'll have a steady inflow of information and names from different geographic regions. Consider getting involved in these spaces, as your membership dollars there can have a much larger impact than at bigger institutions in major cities. Use Artadia's Awardee artist registry and registries of other notable local and national grantmakers as a starting point to learn about artist-grantees from all over the country. For instance, check out the recent finalists for the Hudgens Prize in Georgia or the Chicago artists who just received 3Arts grants. These promising artists may be coming soon to a city near you, but this is a way to learn about them first.

For collectors and the advisors who help them build collections, understand that buying work is more than just owning a loved object that may appreciate in value; it can sometimes be an act of philanthropy. As you consider your purchases, set aside market data and an artist's CV, and become part of the network that supports the artists whose work you admire. Once you have the privilege of getting to know an artist, their work, and their goals, think about how you could make a game-changing introduction on their behalf.

More mutually beneficial and inclusive partnerships are another way to bridge the gap. While it is difficult to manage with shrinking budgets, art critics should consider coverage outside of the city centers, possibly through syndicating work by local news organizations—perhaps the excellent stories regarding local artists in *Bad at Sports* or *Glasstire*, for example, could be published online in international periodicals. The exhibition exchange platform Condo brought smaller galleries from abroad to New York, giving them the chance to showcase highlights from their roster and gain exposure at some of New York's most interesting gallery spaces. It would be great to see more impactful programs that facilitate introductions like the Curatorial Forum, hosted and arranged by EXPO Chicago, where curators from collecting institutions get to know Chicago and its artists, and can engage with the participating galleries at the fair.

Wherever they choose to live and work, most artists share one fundamental definition of success: to have the ability to continually create work, make a living off that work, and have that work be part of a larger conversation. Those of us who live in service of art should broaden our perspectives to include artists beyond our zip codes. That will require from us more curiosity and less snobbery—both worthy aims in and of themselves. If we succeed, the reward is a more diverse, vibrant, and inclusive art world.