

Towards the Liminal...Night

Identifying the threshold, any threshold—the what, where and how of it all—begins with the challenge of identifying something other, something beyond what is current, what is *given*. Reaching that threshold, and furthermore crossing it, requires a certain...progression. Some say that a threshold—by its very nature—always remains just ahead, beyond, intangible and even attempting to cross it is irrelevant. There will always be naysayers...

In a recent panel talk titled *Towards the Liminal*, I had the chance to sit and speak along side some eminent intermediaries of the Bay Area visual arts: David Huff of Pro Arts Gallery, Anuradha Vikram of the Worth Rider Gallery, and Larry Rinder of BAM/PFA. Organized on Thursday, April 22nd by Theo Konrad Auer and the OakBook Gallery, the event was to bring some talking heads together with a talking audience and create a dialogue around some pertinent topics: What sets the Bay Area art world apart from NYC or LA, is there a Bay Area collecting base, and how do our museums and institutions lead the way towards the future?

My interest in participating in this event—seeing that I don't work with an institution nor have direct experience operating in NYC or LA, although I can speak to a European model and to DIY tactics in the visual arts field—was to “open up” a discussion between the panel and the audience around these topics, much more so than having just a few well educated opinions dominate the event...even if the opinions of my panel colleagues are influential, well thought out and undeniably valid. Furthermore, I came prepared to speak to an idea of the East Bay having actually crossed a threshold when it comes to finally laying a solid foundation for the visual arts, via the investment and organization of certain local individual emerging artists and DIY organizations, mainly formed out of the Oakland Art Murmur, but also in collaboration with those who function as satellite benefactors to the East Bay scene: writers, critics, bloggers, curators, DIY art-commerce entrepreneurs, etc. Not all who have contributed to “the rise” have lasted. But, all have been invaluable building blocks to what I consider a previously non-existent but now welcomed burgeoning contemporary art scene. Does working/living in the East Bay for over 18 years give me enough hindsight to make this claim? Go ahead, call me a cheerleader...

This panel discussion event, in my grandest wishes, would become a first-step in an ongoing conversation around how the younger, underground, grassroots, DIY, artist-run exhibition spaces and critical voices could join in a parallel progressive march with the older, established, funded, trusted and experienced institutions (read: museums), both groups that are currently benefitting from the influx of commerce and population to the East Bay, and namely, Oakland (is this a moment to thank once Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown and his planning to bring 10,000 young professionals into Oakland?).

Although the event *Towards the Liminal* brought to light similarities in thought between the panel and the audience regarding local history, there was just as much disappointment in finding any sort of organized purpose to the discussion. It was pointed out by panel members, astutely, that the topics themselves were grand and unwieldy, and combined together in one night's discussion...a near impossibility to generate final answers and closure. It was also pointed out by many in the audience, that the event lacked focus, and was weighed down by institutional-centric viewpoints. Still, hearing perspectives from the level of major museum director to independent curator to local gallery curator to independently minded artist, was actually worthwhile, if nothing but affirming: artists want answers to assist in making their practice grow; curators want to bring artists they find fascinating to the fore; exhibition directors look to advance the artists they have been assigned; museum directors function within the love of art and find reward working within the constraints of the institution they work for...and all are committed. The Bay Area art world playing field is still small, but we are all surviving/growing/learning together. No grand answers to the topics posed.

However, it was proposed and debated at the event that traditional hierarchical modes within the art world are shifting, that there is a desire if not already a real significant shift away from the top/bottom model—the “climbing the institutional ladder”—to a more horizontal model. I, for one, don't know what that horizontal model is exactly, but I feel its existence in my gut. Its existence was also evident in the faces of the event audience members: independent curators, professional non-gallery associated artists, independent editors, artist-run gallery owners, etc...all whom are working parallel to, if not completely outside, the institutional, hierarchical model.

As I myself exist in a position that has very little status within the greater art world, whatever intermediary role I can have seems to be (regarding the East Bay art scene), is to help promote and organize this “parallel movement,” where the more DIY, independent art workers continue to build a network of artists and events that have direct, critical influence on both regional and national art practices and our actual economic futures.,

In addition, assist the institutions—and workers within those institutions—that exist within the same East Bay/Bay Area framework to not just “dip” into the now existing art scene foundation, without reinvesting somehow through support and inclusive programming.

I'm talking about opening the doors a little wider, maybe even all the way. I'm talking about identifying multiple trajectories for the individual artist, curator or critic, besides the traditional institutional one. The independents, like myself, benefit greatly from the established, invested programming of institutions by way of their deep roots. The institutions benefit from the energy, variety and ingenuity coming out of the independent voices. No need to either co-opt each other nor fight against each other.

Small steps.

And, who will host the next dialogue session?

If you attended the event and have comments related to what happened—or didn't happen—during the talk, I more than welcome your comments on this post.

Thank you.

-SB, Oakland CA - 2010