



Spaces Together: Alternative Sites for Bay Area Arts

by *Sophia Wang*

I moved to the Bay Area from New York City in 2000, and went straight to the places producing underground music as entry points into arts communities where I'd feel most at home. In New York in the '90s, I'd found these communities at techno parties downtown, escaping the New Jersey suburb where I'd lived as a teen and the Morningside Heights dorms where I'd spent my years at Columbia. Here in the Bay, I found friends in the noise, punk, and garage rock scenes, and going to shows at warehouses and repurposed lots was a way of intimately connecting with the area through its robust, self-organized networks of artists, musicians, and promoters.

What's distinct about an art scene can be found at its spatial and social margins, because the further you get from institutional spaces, the closer you get to what's emergent and locally resourced. Oakland's underground music scene was my entry into performance, having never had a dance practice prior to my thirties. I'd been taking drop-in ballet classes at a school in Oakland, and ended up in class one day with Brontez Purnell, a local punk musician. He proposed starting a dance company with artists, musicians, and kids from the punk and party scenes, and I was 100% down.

Our first performance in 2010 was at Lobot Gallery, a West Oakland warehouse that was a hub for underground music and art, and we shot scenes for a 16mm dance film at 21 Grand, another Oakland artist-run space. Both spaces have since shut down, and after last year's Ghost Ship warehouse fire in which thirty-six members of this community died, many more sites that provide affordable space for artists have been shuttered across the country. As we continue to grieve the loss of so many friends, this community also has had to organize against encroachments of a real estate market increasingly hostile to anyone living and working at the margins.

So one way to gauge the Bay Area's arts environment is through the places and projects operating outside frameworks of commercial viability. I recently attended a week of art shows at a range of sites that remind



Speakers at the inaugural salon of Living Room Light Exchange's fourth season included Christy Chan (left) and members of The Black Aesthetic: Leila Weefur (second to the right) and Ryanaustin Dennis (right). Oakland, September 19, 2017. Photo by Sophia Wang.

me of the resilience of the Bay Area's artist-organizers. The first of these events, an opening of work by Los Angeles-based artist Olivia Mole, took place at Cloaca Projects, a recently launched project space in the backyard of Hunt Projects, a warehouse in San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point district which provides studios and workspace for a community of around twenty artists. Cloaca's organizers, curator Marcella Faustini and Hunt Projects co-founder Charlie Leese, started the space this summer as a way to expand the field of artists being shown in the Bay Area.

Making my way through Hunt Projects' fabrication shop to the backyard where Cloaca occupies a compact, prefab structure, I felt echoes of an earlier era when I more frequently attended shows in spaces like this, because there were more of them around. A few nights later, I joined the fourth season launch of the Living Room Light Exchange (LRLX) new media art salon at the Oakland home of musician Andrew Maguire. Addressing the tightly packed living room of guests, LRLX co-founder Elia Vargas shared that locating the series in private living rooms stemmed from his and co-founder Liat Berdugo's interest in the connections made possible by the intimacy of these spaces. Tucked in together, we listened to Christy Chan's presentation on her performance and film works, to April Glaser's research on white supremacist efforts to create alternate media platforms, and to The Black Aesthetic's reflections on charting a self-determined, Black visual culture.

The power of embodied proximity to constitute a group was evident, and I brought that activation with me to an experimental sound show I attended the next night. Resipiscent Records founder James Decker and musician Dania Luck co-organized a lineup of electronic musicians in the back room of the Peacock Lounge, a bar in San Francisco's Haight district that operates as the lodge for the local chapter of Black Masons. Between the four performing acts—Famous Techno (Kim West), LEXAGON (Alexa Burrell), WOE (JaMile Jackson and Brian Tester), and TypeB (Luka Romel)—there were musicians I've seen playing in the Bay for the last decade, and others whom I was seeing for the first time. The intent, Luck says, was to bring together musicians who had not yet met, to build stronger community ties and, as a principle for this long-running sound series, to gather small audiences for work that, in Decker's words, "might fail spectacularly one minute and then blow your mind the next." No wonder it's these environments of shared risk, experimentation, and generosity that support the most provocative works in the Bay Area arts scene.

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SOPHIA WANG creates and performs movement-based works in collaboration with performance artists, writers, and visual and sound artists. She earned a PhD in English from U.C. Berkeley, and integrates her research and performance practices through writing and curatorial projects focused on critical somatics: thinking with and as bodies.

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