

# A Tradition of Community in Non-traditional Spaces

By MARY ELIZABETH DEYOE

On one of the first truly cold days of what had been a mild fall, as people rushed to end their work days and the last daylight in the loop was fading, I was confused about where I was and certain I had the address completely wrong. Finally I noticed Tricia Van Eck sitting at a colorful desk behind a street level window at 23 E. Madison. Her gallery, I soon learned, was previously a Halloween party store. That explained the white paneled walls designed for instant shelving. When I walked inside, I saw that the perimeter of the room was lined with tap shoes, and Tricia, wearing a pair herself, invited me to put some on. Moments later, I had shed my jacket, gloves, hat and boots and was click-click-clicking across the tile floor. This was going to be fun.

The tap shoes (*Tapping into Happiness*, by Amber Ginsberg and Lia Rousett) and other artwork in this space—including an enormous group finger painting designed by Chelsea was part of a larger exhibition called *The Happiness Project* that Van Eck launched after leaving her long-time post as a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA). *The Happiness Project*, presented in empty storefronts throughout Chicago's neighborhoods in November 2011, asked 'What does happiness look like to you, and others in the city?' This type of alternative use of space, in spite of its ephemeral nature, is an extremely exciting and thriving practice in Chicago.

Alternative gallery spaces take many forms, though they are frequently non-commercial exhibition/performance spaces not driven by sales. In most cases, if any art is sold at all, it is secondary to the presentation and done directly between buyer and artist. Often run by artists themselves, spaces are repurposed from what the original architecture intended—for instance an apartment, a storefront, a garage, or even, as in the case of the Roxaboxen cooperative, a former funeral home—coffin chute still in tact.

For several years author, artist and Green Lantern Press founder, Caroline Picard, used her 1,500 square foot apartment as the site of the Green Lantern Gallery, which opened in 2005. Caroline lived in the back of the apartment and used the front 600 square feet as gallery space. In breaking down the typically strict boundaries between public and private or domestic and commercial space, "apartment galleries really play with people's expectations," Picard said. People behave differently when they are a guest in someone's house rather than in a traditional gallery. "In the space, art served as a vehicle for community,



Sophia Cara-dixon, Rachel Ertling, and Young Joon Kwak (AKA Lil Elote), *The Witches Cradle*, University of Chicago MFA group show, May 2010.

like food at a dinner party," she added, "and as a result people were almost always more relaxed and willing to talk with one another."

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At Roxaboxen in Pilsen, "there is a very strong sense of the communal," explained Liz McCarthy, a resident artist at the cooperative, which serves as a studio/exhibition/performance/program/living space. "We encourage and invite members from diverse communities outside of the cooperative to program in the space. Our model really cuts out the intimidation sense of a traditional gallery. It's very open and programming happens naturally — there could be a show going on upstairs, while artists are coming in and out of their basement studios covered in plaster."

When I visited the Roxaboxen residents were hosting an opening for *Mind and Reality*, an international print exchange between Chicago and Sydney, Australia. The only guidelines given to the 32 professional artists were that they had to produce an 11x15 inch print in an editionable medium on a stable archival ground. The results were a stunningly diverse set of images ranging in style from journalistic, to psychedelic to whimsical.

In talking to the people behind each gallery,

I could glean a sense of strong mutual support within this community. The people running these spaces want others like them to succeed as well. The more places I visited, I started to piece together an exciting web of projects going on throughout the city. But keeping track of all these spaces presents a problem. Some alternative spaces may be around for five years, or sometimes they appear for a month or, in other cases, only a day. An ephemeral nature is part of a space's energy. As Brian Gallagher of Roxaboxen explained, "we don't want to force the space to live on as something it isn't just to keep it going." That said, while a space does exist it's nice to know where to find it, and there are some excellent resources available to do just that—most notably *The Phonebook*\*, which is produced by threewalls. This exhaustive publication, now in its third edition, is a directory of independent art spaces, programming, and projects throughout the country, as well as a collection of essays written by the people who are involved in the creation and management of these evolving and innovative spaces.

Some alternative galleries are built on a platform intended to last for years. This is the case of Mary Croteau's Art on Armitage. Situated on the corner of Armitage and Kedvale (just west of Pulaski), Art on Armitage presents mini-exhibitions in a raised window box. Because Croteau owns the building (she lives upstairs and her studio is on the first floor) she can essentially keep the gallery running for as long as she has artists to show, and she is currently booked over a year in advance. The appeal for artists to show in her street gallery, Croteau explained, is in many ways, the same for the audience—they love it because it's unexpected. This particular corner is nowhere near a gallery or museum, so "it surprises people, and because the shows are often fun and engaging, they spark conversations among the people who walk by." One show by Kimmy Nunan took this idea further. She arranged a dining room table and chairs in the window and invited two people nightly to bring and eat their dinner there for one hour. Neighbors started to bring their own chairs to sit on the sidewalk and discuss the work, creating a twist on the tradition of the dinner-table conversation.

It would be a challenge to visit all of the city's alternative spaces, but in a way that is the beauty of them—the community expands and shifts organically. The constants are the support and collaboration between the creators, and the element of surprise for everyone else.

\*Order copies of *Phonebook 3* here: [www.three-walls.org/programs/phonebook/](http://www.three-walls.org/programs/phonebook/)