

Inquiry into the Civic Role of Arts Organizations: Case Study of Art Hives

By the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, July 6th 2018

"Our western society separates out art from the everyday – so we bring it back together."

The first La Ruche d'Art, or Art Hive, was opened in March 2011 by Janis Timm-Bottos as part of her ongoing research at Concordia University in Montreal into the relationship between art-making and the health of communities. Since then, she has become founder and director of the Art Hives Initiative and Network – more than 120 similar open-access community art studios, mostly across Canada and the US – working alongside Rachel Chainey as the Network National Coordinator. Each Art Hive is created within a specific community context and is self-funding and -supporting, with Timm-Bottos estimating that a dedicated Art Hive, open one to two days a week, requires \$30,000 annually to run (as opposed to a pop-up art hive run by volunteers within an existing organisation, such as a library, or in the park).

Mission: building community through art

The story of the Art Hives network begins some 25 years ago, when Janis Timm-Bottos, a trained physical therapist who primarily worked with people experiencing poverty, became interested in the role art could play in rebuilding not only individual health but family health and community health. She returned to university to begin research into art therapies and, as part of her study, in 1994 collaborated with Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless to set up ArtStreet: a community art studio that welcomed anyone with an interest in making art, including homeless individuals and families. Says Timm-Bottos: "Everything we teach today about the Art Hives, the methodologies, the principles, are all from that time period. We had this very unusual mixture of people in a public home place setting – a third space, not home and not work, but somewhere in between, ripe with ambiguity and potential – and we hung out there to learn from each other." It was here that she became convinced that "third space is the key to community transformation. We must create places like this, especially in gentrifying neighbourhoods, to have any chance in keeping the fabric of the community intact."

Later she realised that third space is also the key to institutional transformation and innovation.

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Timm-Bottos went on to establish another similarly accessible art studio in Albuquerque, OFFCentre, in 2001, focusing more on economic development with homeless artists. On moving to Nelson, British Columbia, she also worked with a thrift shop to set up Kitchen Table Arts, which invited people to transform its surplus clothing destined for landfills into new fashions. And when she became an associate professor in the department of Creative Art Therapies at Concordia University in Montreal in 2010, these experiences came together in the shaping of the first La Ruche d’Art, a community art studio, science shop and “storefront classroom” run with her students, simultaneously as a site for research, training and community arts.

Since then, Art Hives have proliferated, with some 35 in Montreal alone, many set up by former students under the guidance of Timm-Bottos. Each one is autonomous, and existing social art projects can apply to join the network which is co-ordinated by another of Timm-Bottos’ students, Rachel Chainey. In 2015 the pair published a ‘How to’ guide to building an Art Hive, which lays out the concept’s fundamental beliefs: in sharing skills, sharing resources, and sharing space, as movements towards building community. “It’s not a franchise: it’s just an idea,” Timm-Bottos emphasises: a vision for arts-based social inclusion and the personal and communal satisfaction that comes of making art.

Each One Teach One

In the How To Guide, Timm-Bottos and Chainey lay out six guiding principles for Art Hive makers to consider: that their space should practice “radical hospitality”, which includes offering free food to those who attend; “positive kind regard”, which extends to non-judgemental appreciation of all making, such that when exhibitions are curated, no submission is excluded; and solidarity as opposed to charity, recognising social capital and that humans need to rely on each other to survive. This particularly applies to

teaching: rather than think of Art Hives as academic spaces in which knowledge is imparted top-down, Timm-Bottos believes in “sharing across differences” – an approach captured in the phrase “each one teach one”, learned from street artist and activist Ron Casanova. Timm-Bottos recalls feeling at ArtStreet: “a sense of embarrassment, after you’ve been teaching, to finally see the person sitting next to you: although homeless, they’re so well-skilled and know so much more than you do”. It encouraged her to think of the Art Hive as a facilitated rather than programmed space: “It’s really about holding a space to see what happens.”

The same principle applies to Art Hives themselves: the How To Guide offers advice but isn’t prescriptive, and the network regularly stages Art Hives meet-ups in different locations, as well as an annual gathering, where “we learn what’s working from Art Hives leaders. The creativity and knowledge shared is as diverse as the individual people working within each Art Hive, and much of the knowledge comes from lived experience. We like to call it ‘community-defined evidence’ of what works.”

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Shared economies

Most Art Hives are in urban environments, and Timm-Bottos believes “the best Art Hives are between neighbourhoods” – places where wealthy and working-class people live in volatile proximity, perhaps because of encroaching gentrification. And while acknowledging that art spaces can themselves be “part of the gentrification problem”, she also has years of sustained practice research to demonstrate “the necessity of public home places in urban revitalisation”.

Partly this is achieved through the partnership model ingrained in the Art Hive structure. The first La Ruche d’Art was created as part of Timm-Bottos’ research work with Concordia University, and so is also a partnership with her students. Since then Art Hives have been established in collaboration with other universities, museums, places of worship, community centres, libraries and social housing neighbourhoods, often with the

space provided in exchange for setting up an Art Hive. As much as possible, a principle of shared resources applies: in the How To Guide, Timm-Bottos recommends not buying art materials but seeking donations from the neighbourhood; in Montreal this led to the creation of "the honeypot", a "creative reuse centre from the household perspective. People give us their unwanted things, and these donations are then shared across the network, becoming raw material for art-making." The university has since started Concordia's Centre for Creative Reuse, through which students and staff, as well as the Montreal Art Hives network, access institutional material waste. The Art Hive run by her student and colleague Rachel Chainey, meanwhile, operates on a cooperative basis: artists offer paying workshops in the evening, which subsidises the free Art Hive activities during the day.

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Through Concordia University, Timm-Bottos has also been forming more high-profile partnerships, in particular with the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. Doing so, she says, has required from the Museum "a readiness to take a risk: because the third space requires a lot of vulnerability, especially when it's activated with people. These spaces may be the last stop for people with mental health issues, who aren't invited anywhere else in town." It also required an aesthetic compromise: "We discussed the possibility of creating an Art Hive over a period of two years, and the main shifts they had to agree on was changing how the space would be accessed and disrupting the traditional white walls. We explained how at the Art Hive the space becomes layered with the community work that's being made there, and that we strive for people to come back and feel they've been there before, maybe re-find something they contributed. Layering spaces like this creates a sense of belonging and adds meaning to community life. It's going to develop over time through relationships, and it will not be like a traditional art education model. The space should remain unprogrammed and expectant, with the spontaneity associated with art therapy."

Challenges?

When thinking about the Art Hives both conceptually and as physical spaces in which she herself is involved, Timm-Bottos identifies two key challenges:

The relationship with funding

Funding has been essential to Timm-Bottos to make possible the evidence-based research supporting her belief in third spaces and public home places as transformational for community engagement. But when it comes to individual Art Hives, she believes: "Necessity is the mother of invention. We really like the fact that people are doing this because they believe in their social responsibility." She has been involved in setting up a non-profit organisation before, and found that, even with 25% of the board made up of people experiencing homelessness – "those who were the most engaged in the practices of the space" – she still found that most of her time was spent managing the other 75% of the board: "You'd have to re-educate them every time, because they were stuck in a charity mindset and didn't consider getting involved personally in the day-to-day working relationships." And while some of her students have gone on to set up Art Hives as non-profit organisations, including one dedicated to music therapy, she prefers to focus on building a "social 'sharing' economy, without the traditional non-profit structures to weigh down the nimble changes that are inherent in the model".

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This preference is underscored by the challenge of current funding structures. Timm-Bottos sees this work "as lifelong: it's very long term" – whereas funders, she argues, are "product-oriented, and interested in the art that makes the most temporary buzz. I find this thinking very exclusive." She also rejects "the charity model: it's not about charity, it's about we're in it together, and we each have a role to play. If you're the guy with the money, then crack it out – not necessarily to the organisation that creates art for the marketplace, but where something is happening that's transforming something, with the help of the people."

2: A false sense of competition

Timm-Bottos' belief in partnership and collaboration extends to her relationship with social practice artists and art therapists, even though some of them "are threatened by what I do. It takes a lot of education and money to become a professional artist or

therapist, and of course they want to have jobs. But I'm not taking anything away by promoting everyone as an artist, everyone a therapist: this is about abundance. As soon as their clients hook in to an Art Hive, they're going to be doing better therapy. The more people develop their inner artist, the more they will want to help social artists bring their vision to fruition. We have to work together."

What next?

As part of her historical research, Timm-Bottos has also been studying community art practices that predate Art Hives: from 100 community art studios set up across Depression-era America in the mid-1930s, to the educational missions of the Second Republic in Spain, which loaned out holdings from the Prado to inspire communities, to the work of art critic John Ruskin in the UK. She wants to revive these histories because "there is still so much inspiration in them – for instance, the Art Hive slogan 'make art, reclaim the power of your hands' comes from Ruskin's hands, heart and mind philosophy. Our western society separates out art from the everyday – so we bring it back together." Gradually she intends to build an online map of these precedents, to encourage and support present and future Art Hive makers.

As for the network: **"Our vision is an Art Hive in every neighbourhood. It's really about empowering the neighbourhood. Express yourself, explore your creativity, become an innovator, break isolation, build meaningful community relationships, share skills and ideas. It is through discovering diverse materials and each other that neighbours can create, and solve problems together."**