

SAND

IN

AL

It doesn't seem like a good time to start an art space right now. At this moment of rising nationalism, economic austerity, and imminent climate catastrophe, the contrast between those who can afford to imagine a future and those who cannot is stark. Images of excess and scarcity proliferate across media, proposing pasts, presents and futures that never appear solid. The commercial art market dictates a narrowing base of who afford to participate, with disastrous consequences for art communities. Globalized biennials and art fairs multiply while individual artists, galleries, and non-profits are forced into a retreat. What possibilities for the future remain? What strategies remain effective at this moment of acute uncertainty and turmoil?

The two of us are starting a space for showing art in Phoenix, Arizona. It is named SAND. There is no space and may not be for a while yet. Nonetheless, this document is an opening statement for our project. From the beginning, our goal is to form SAND as a specific, purpose-made response to this desert city—a particularly challenging location. We want SAND to be meaningful to its local community while addressing issues and supporting work that are challenging to our peers elsewhere. We start by using our own observations and research to critically examine the history and cultural context of Phoenix. As a recent transplant and a returning Arizona native, we acknowledge that our insight into this place lacks the depth of long-time residents. Nonetheless we have endeavored to form an understanding of Phoenix that takes into account this place's history and community to inform our projects. Following these relevant histories and current situations compiled here, we describe our values and goals for showing art, and trace a provisional action plan for SAND.

PHOENIX

Images of the American Southwest evoke romantic attitudes of unfettered freedom. The myths of the old West and the American cowboy are sustained in old Hollywood films, adventurer screeds, and libertarian manifestoes. The abundance of open desert facilitates a fantasy of uninhibited movement.

The automobile inherits American mythologies of freedom and individuality in the desert, replacing the cowboy's horse. Car owner-

ship is a virtual requirement for participation in adult life here, where public transportation is limited and outdoor daytime temperatures are the lethal from May through October. Both urban and rural landscapes in Arizona are primarily experienced through driving. Much of rural Arizona is composed of scrubby plains interrupted by rugged mountains and riparian canyons. The relatively uniform, un-vegetated desert floor encourages your vision to travel further and further outwards. As you enter the urban sprawl, the eye's travel is interrupted by the uniform repetition of muted brown-tan-grey color buildings. The horizon line is obscured and the glaring sun bears down on you. The result is a feeling of isolation in a low labyrinth.

Phoenix's seemingly endless low-density suburban expansion was enabled by the abundance of flat desert land that could be cheaply obtained and developed. From 1945 on, Phoenix's population grew from a town to a city through building neighborhoods of single family homes—entirely enabled by air conditioning and personal automobiles. There was no built legacy of dense urbanism for new homeowners or real estate developers to repurpose or demolish and no political resistance to speculative development. With these new neighborhoods, Phoenix became an affordable city for military families, and an inexpensive but warm retiree destination.

Wikipedia says: Sun City [AZ, an outer-ring suburb of Phoenix catering to the elderly] was opened January 1, 1960, with five home models, a shopping center, a recreation center, and a golf course. The opening weekend drew 100,000 people, ten times more than expected, and resulted in a Time magazine cover story.

In 1948, most of the streetcars run by the Phoenix Street Railway were destroyed in a fire. This forced a referendum on the mode of public transportation and by inference the urban boundaries of the city. The city chose to abandon streetcars and fund bus and highway systems that could carry cars far from the city center, supporting the growth of suburbs. While this is not a unique pattern, the resulting outward growth is notable for its speed and size. These decisions also effectively joined Phoenix's economic engine to a regular cycle of real estate enthusiasm and collapse, with

little resilience against the intentions of real estate developers.

Now, Phoenix is the 11th most populous metro area in the United States, with an area population around 4.7 million. There are art museums, commercial galleries, and independent non-profit art spaces here. There are public arts events, funding bodies, and art journalism. Phoenix has an abundance of art. But this abundance, like other forms of abundance in Phoenix, should be understood within the rubric of the city's suburban development and current structure. This abundance of the arts also is formed by historical and structural factors that displace many alternative forms of art production and discourse. What then is the abundance of art in Phoenix— what kinds of art practices, discourses, ways of showing and distributing exist here?

We've located three foci within the art community in Phoenix: the Arts districts of Old Town Scottsdale and Roosevelt Row, and the Arizona State University BFA/MFA programs. They provide case studies of the different practices, different constituencies, and different models of forming careers and communities around art. Together, they describe the context of art practice and discourse within the greater Phoenix art community.

SITE 1: SCOTTSDALE

Scottsdale is a city about 10 miles east from Phoenix city center, comprising the north-eastern quadrant of the Phoenix metro area. The arts district of Old Town Scottsdale grew in response to the seasonal influx of "snow birds". These were predominantly wealthy white retirees from the northern US and Canada who came to Phoenix during the winter months, fueling the resort and vacation home markets. Old Town Scottsdale was developed as an ersatz "Old West" cowboy-style town center, and is one of the few dense and walkable areas in the metro area. Arts galleries opened to serve these leisure-class visitors, selling cowboy bronzes, works in Native American traditions, and all variety of "traditional" decorator-friendly art— from gold-en-age Hollywood posters to Picasso prints. A minority of galleries here self represent as showing contemporary art, but the work they display is firmly entrenched in 20th century discourses of formal experimentation.

These establishments continue to this day, though the snowbird demographic has diminished as an economic engine. Scottsdale is one of the wealthiest cities in the greater Phoenix area and the cultural institutions and art spaces here are entirely dominated by entrenched older white demographics. On the basis of revenue and sheer number of individual galleries, Old Town Scottsdale overshadows arts activity in the rest of the metro area. However, this abundance of activity is entirely dependent on catering to the taste of a diminishing and reactionary audience. The abundance of activity in reality reflects a practice which is contained, incommensurable with other communities, and doesn't foster new growth. The only practices that thrive here are ones that exist as comfortably in tourist attractions and gift shops as in the gallery.

SITE 2: ROOSEVELT ROW

Although Old Town Scottsdale is the Phoenix metro area's oldest concentration of galleries, the Roosevelt Row emerged as an art destination in the early 2000s and has largely overshadowed Scottsdale as Phoenix's prototype for integrating art into the urban fabric. Its galleries, public art walks, murals and small businesses, as well as its real estate-friendly pattern of redevelopment and gentrification have been a reference point for arts boosterism here.

Growing up in the Phoenix area before the mid-2000s, there were very few opportunities to experience a kind of dense, varied pedestrian-friendly public space common in older, temperate cities. When Roosevelt Row began hosting First and Third Friday art walks, the community responded in kind, enthusiastically turning out for the social aspect of car-free streets, outdoor performances and vendors as much as for actually viewing art. The community of arts spaces along Roosevelt street grew and developed alongside the art walk event. Thus their audience was defined as much by this social environment as it was by people specifically interested in art.

On a typical art walk night, the active shows will be diverse but almost always wall or shelf-friendly. Prices are clearly marked and salon-style show hangs are common. In order to survive in an area that is Phoenix's most name-checked arts district and adjacent to

a massive recent ASU campus expansion, the galleries here have made themselves into boutiques. This is an understandable decision when one considers that in a city where there is little hospitable public, non-commercial space, people spend leisure time in malls, stores and restaurants. Retail space is legible and familiar and likely draws more visitors in the door during the art walk than a space that cannot be immediately classified from the street. The amount of gallery closings alongside intensive construction and renovation for housing, restaurants and cafes suggest that even this strategy may not allow the remaining art spaces to hold on here. Art walk attendees can now take a shuttle to nearby Grand Avenue, where some art spaces have found cheaper real-estate as the cycle occurs again, vanguarding gentrification with consumer-friendly boutique spaces and "Arts District" branding.

While Roosevelt Row and Grand Avenue arts spaces self-define as demographically, culturally and aesthetically distinct from the staid Old Town Scottsdale galleries, under the stress of gentrification and real estate development they have shown little resistance to adopting an identical model of what an art space should be.

SITE 3: ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Arizona State University is the major academic institution in the Phoenix area with an enrollment of over 50,000 students. Their studio art programs are well funded, with massive facilities and hi-tech equipment. Many ASU students and recent graduates are active as artists, curators, and arts administrators in Phoenix. The work coming out of these programs typically has an emphasis on craft and either adheres to mediumistic and departmental boundaries— or responds to immediate boundaries so strongly as to constrain the scope of their concerns. There is a common sentiment among ASU graduates that they must move away from Phoenix to pursue a successful arts-related career.

There is nothing egregiously lacking in the ASU arts programs relative to other large BFA and MFA programs in the US. ASU students are given technical skills to produce well-crafted works and they are exposed to a theoretical and philosophical framework that

can articulate the concerns of their practice. There is an abundance of graduates ready to continue their practice in the city. However, once these students and graduates enter into Phoenix proper, the opportunities for exhibition offer a narrow model of showing art which minimizes critical discourse. Moreover, within the greater city there aren't visible independent artists, critics, or curators shaping critical discussions independent from academia. In Phoenix art discourse and critical theory—conversations largely received from distant globalized art centers—do not perform the same complementary role to an emerging artist's success as it would in New York or Berlin. There simply isn't the market or the social fabric of art practitioners to enable it. Collectively, these factors fail to raise the stakes of an arts career in Phoenix that young graduates would respond to, who in turn are rarely able to offer alternative modes of showing art in their own city.

At this point in the essay, it's important to acknowledge the particular difficulty of bridging centralized discourses to specific and local contexts. Often as art practitioners, our assumed audience is not our local context but is instead international, vaguely external, and favors global centers. In contrast, "local" or "regional" usually evokes imagery of practice outside these centers, someplace downstream, where the same conversations don't translate to localisms. This assumes differentiation between the global and regional as mutually exclusive positions, but ultimately is unable to make specific, meaningful assertions about their relationship. Moreover, these governing centralized discourses proceed from a universalized position and are unprepared to parse out specifics. As abstractions, these concerns are incommensurable with the concerns and challenges on a local scale— further atomizing the greater community by splitting and marginalizing discourses. We cannot entirely overcome the inadequacy of received ideas and terms when conveying local challenges in a generalized language. What we can do is identify actions based on our immediate context. Planning an art space in Phoenix invites the opportunity to articulate abstract challenges in specific, actionable tasks. From the results, we can scavenge new, ad-hoc frameworks for communicating across contexts and building solidarity.

SAND

What then are our principles for SAND? And what alternative forms of art production and discourse should we aim for? Our research and observation have identified a few practical measures that we can implement as part of SAND. None of these are really new and none require much special knowledge to implement. We believe them to be efficacious no matter the size of the space, duration of the project, or budget.

I. Our background has connected us with people practicing in other cities and countries. We need to bring arts workers who practice under different contexts, with different challenges and values, to Phoenix. This is the simplest and most important thing we can do, as relative outsiders, to make new kinds of conversations and collaborations around art in Phoenix possible. When bringing people from outside, we need to facilitate conversations between our local audience and our visitors. This would include hosting dinners, studio visits, field trips, and residencies when possible.

II. We want to be a resource center and enabler for local artists to connect to other practitioners and show work in ways that are not possible within Phoenix's current art space ecosystem. Both making connections with spaces in other cities and providing the logistical and discursive support for local projects outside of commercial white cubes, within our limited capability.

III. Every show should have an opportunity for the artist to give a talk or publish work. Documentation and publications need to be preserved and available for people who don't have the ability to visit the space or attend an event. This basic standard is virtually never observed in shows held currently in Phoenix, and thus ongoing conversations and institutional memory are devalued.

IV. It is also important to proffer documentation and advice about our efforts to create SAND. This should be contextualized with testimonies and writing from other practitioners forming art spaces in other areas. The purpose is not only to share our blueprint for a space, but also

to articulate the relationship between our location and dominant global platforms. The purpose is to encourage and support the development of other spaces in the Phoenix area that do not conform to currently visible examples. Our objective for SAND is to be a nurse log— a small body whose purpose it to host and protect the exchanges necessary to form new solidarities and, ultimately, to germinate other alternative spaces within the Phoenix community. We embrace that all institutions work towards its own end and will measure success in large part by what future this eventual end enables.

* *
+

Under the duress created by this historical moment, we must critically examine the usefulness and viability of a localized curatorial practice. We aren't under the illusion that making or showing visual art is in itself an activist practice, or an adequate response to current conditions. Nor are we trying to create a prototype for all art spaces that may share values or ambitions with us, or all spaces in Phoenix. We are interested, not only in showing art in this city, but also in thinking critically of the mission and position of this art space in its community and how an art space can act to connect individuals and communities across geographic and discursive distance.

We want to craft a space that resists the centralization of the art world— a space that readdresses the struggle between regionalism and globalism. Ultimately, the moral imperative for creating this space originates in two complementary beliefs. First, that art production and discourse should resist consolidation and geographic centralization initiated by and for the forces of capital. Second, that we value artistic production and discourse that can only happen when new affinities and lines of communication are being opened. Spaces that hosts these interactions enable individuals and communities to form new solidarities. The imaginative acts of resistance and resilience made in the ruptures of an unexpected encounter reveal art's revelatory power.

Because our mission is to inspire...

Because the coffeehouse is a place to think and dream...

Because we have over 40 years of stories to tell...

Because we are creative, innovative and passionate...

Because we care about creating jobs in our communities...

Because we believe in doing things by hand...

Because we have the most walls for art in the world...

Starbucks Art

A facsimile of a motivational poster in the Starbucks corporate headquarters. As the most prolific coffee house chain worldwide, it may indeed have "the most walls for art in the world."
Image: Justen Waterhouse.



Composite image of Model of Arcosanti 5000 by Paul Soleri in the foreground and a GoogleEarth screenshot of suburban neighborhoods in Deer Valley, Arizona.



GoogleEarth image of suburban neighborhoods in Cave Creek, Arizona (1997).
Map Data: Google, USDA Farm Service Agency.



Daytime street view of Roosevelt Row. On the left is MonOrchid, a multi-use space that functions as a gallery, venue, and office space with an attached coffee shop. Behind it sits one of the newly developed condominiums with “art as decoration”. Photo: Ross Young.



Old Town Scottsdale Arts District. The American Fine Arts gallery replete with bronze statues of cowboys and a gold sign in the window that says “Picasso”. Photo: Ross Young.