

Anytime Dept.

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Anytime Dept. is a curatorial collaborative founded in 2017 by artists Rebecca Steele and Lydia Rosenberg in Cincinnati, Ohio. They first met in Portland, OR sometime between 2009 and 2013. Steele was a graduate student in the Visual Studies MFA program at Pacific Northwest College of Art where Rosenberg was enrolled in the undergraduate BFA program. This paper serves as an in progress portrait of the project and examines creative survival as it is built through relationships formed in institutions. Anytime Dept. explores the possibility that these relationships can become the foundation for a more expansive model of creative community building that expands through shared experiences.



Fig. 1 Laura Bernstein and Daniel Glendening, the barometric pressure is all over the place, 2017 (image courtesy Anytime Dept.)

CONCEPT OF ANYTIME DEPT.

Ideation for Anytime Department came from our mutual sense of displacement after Rebecca and I recently, and separately, relocated to Cincinnati. Finding ourselves missing friends and discovering shared admiration for artists whose work we had been watching blossom over the years, we were motivated to bring the distant closer, to increase our own visibility and our sense of connectivity to a growing community of experimental contemporary practices. Our initial planning centered on what a

project space in the Midwest could offer artists attempting to make their way into larger commercial markets and what it would bring to the local community.

Knowing that our project would be short term, we focused on developing an identity that would address the transience of our brick and mortar location, and we agreed to define the project as a curatorial collaborative operating out of “anywhere” and at “any time.” The uncertainty of the conditions of the project, and a tongue and cheek nod to the No Parking Anytime signs that lined the limited parking spots surrounding our first home, we called the project, Anytime Dept a name that we felt allowed for a certain amount of unpredictability and experimentation through the exploration of a variety of possible formats and allows us to evolve the project as changes in circumstance require.

While considering the transient nature of the space we did not want limit ourselves as curators who would be running an “Art Gallery,” instead we envisioned being active organizers of “an artist-run curatorial and event programming collaborative.” Curatorial project does imply that there is “curating” occurring however we kept circling the word organizer as a more apt description of our role to play in the project. Organizing a project is a different task from curating a gallery. For us, “curator” and “gallery” have implications to the professionalized, commercial facets of the art world we did not see ourselves as attempting to approach. Being that we are artists first, our primary motivation came from a desire to support a growing community of artists and experimental practitioners in a part of the country for which an art market doesn’t properly exist. Not to say that there are not ties to the commercial market here or that artists here are not seeking representation, rather to say, one of the great advantages of living outside of the major art centers is the ability to support experimental programming without having sales as a defining pressure of the project. We started to think about our project as offering an opportunity to enrich artist’s practices by encouraging experimentation over neatly packaged, market-ready shows. Through the organizing of our exhibitions we were able to connect artists whose work shared similar concerns or attitudes about their visions for the future of art. We are attempting to expand ideas and networks from different artists who circulate in different ‘art worlds’ across the country. We work to consider how can we support risk taking, engender trust, explore failure, and imagine a space to think together about what art is by reinforcing and validating what artists need, what our priorities need to be in order to ensure the advancement of the field, and to make space for emerging voices.

STRUCTURE OF PROGRAMMING

The initial statement for Anytime Dept. outlined several goals in terms of how we would support the artists we work with and how we would push the limitations of the exhibition format beyond putting work up and having it live there in its vacuum until the show ends. One of our major goals was to create an exhibition format with multiple points of entry. The original statement read as follows:

“Anytime Dept. is an artist-run curatorial and event programming collaborative opened in a storefront of the Hoffner Masonic Lodge (The Hoffner Gallery) in the Northside neighborhood of Cincinnati, Ohio in June, 2017.

The curatorial projects will emphasize the importance of local exposure to the experimental practices of a national artistic community, while providing artists a space to produce work outside of the immediate pressures of a market.

Working in short exhibition timelines Anytime Dept. will invite emerging and mid career contemporary artists to exhibit work and engage in experimental projects. Anytime Dept. is looking to support and produce thoughtful dialogues between artists and intellectual communities. Invited artists and participants will be asked to mount an exhibition and to work with the organizers to produce ephemera and events that will record and extend the dialogues generated in the gallery context.

The night before each opening Anytime Dept. will orchestrate a dinner in honor of the visiting artists where relevant local community members and volunteers will be invited to share a meal and discussion with the artists and organizers in an intimate setting.

Artists will collaborate with the organizers along with local presses and print shops to produce ephemera relating to their exhibition that will be made available to the public the night of the opening. Anytime Dept. will collect and organize the ephemera into archival packets for each season, which will be available for purchase.

Participating artists will work with Anytime Dept. to develop a public interaction in the form of a lecture, gallery talk, performance, or workshop.

Working with local academics and thinkers, special events will be developed as a way to activate the “dead space” of an art exhibition--the time between opening and closing of the show--and will take experimental approaches to the development of dialogues between community members and the artist’s work.”

This statement described an ideal scenario for how Anytime Dept. would be able to operate in a way that includes the artists in all aspects of the exhibitions. Instead of simply being in control of the work being shown and communicating with the other artists being exhibited, the exhibiting artists would be integral in titling the shows, press documents, organizing events, collaborating with us and Jared Miller, our chef in residence, to conceptualize the dinners. We felt the participation of the artists beyond making the work would enhance the overall goals of the programming and space. This was significant because it allowed the artists the opportunity to come to Cincinnati for a few days, share a meal with the community as well as engage with them through a form of public interface, and have a comfortable place to stay. Perhaps a more detailed vision of the ideal would look like this:

1. Artists get flown in and put up in a comfortable residence with private rooms and a kitchen so they can cook and make coffee in the morning. The residence should be near the gallery and the organizers so everyone can be together and not together easily.
2. Artwork is shipped by us and the artists get some kind of stipend to help them make the work and maybe make up for the time they have to take off of hired jobs in order to come here from Tuesday-Sunday.
3. Installation is collaboration and the artists don’t defer to us but work with us and we collectively expand our vision of the works and exhibition structure based on this process.
4. Dinner is held in close proximity to the gallery and is a communal feast where various members of local communities can come together and have a meal where there is no fuss from a wait staff and there is plenty to eat and drink and people mingle and sit and meet and argue and hug and exchange email addresses and phone numbers and start following each other and start working on new ideas that may or may not come to pass.
5. The visiting artists draw inspired crowds who participate in an exchange and we as the organizers of the project help to coordinate events throughout the run of the show that come out of these new interactions . The gallery gets to be a space for local minds to explore the ideas and ideals of our out-of-town visitors. Local artists and educators and students and organizers start to see the space as a space they can use to make formal expressions of experiments.
6. People buy works from our shows and not just investment collectors or academics but people are buying work because they want to live with the reminder that aesthetic experiences can be formational and lead in some cases to tender intellectual connections and new visions.

Design identity of the space

Rebecca grew up with a family of artists named the Kelley’s who had recently bought an historic Masonic Lodge in the Northside neighborhood. The Kelly family turned the three-story “Hoffner Lodge” building into a mixed-use space, with artist studios, non-western medicinal businesses like a

yoga and reiki business, a Dharma center, a theater and ballroom for rentals and a small but beautiful gallery in the storefront space on the first floor. The building is fascinating in and of itself, erected in 1885 complete with remnants from Masonic rituals and some hints of its most recent life as a post office branch for the neighborhood.

The first floor gallery space was set and ready for exhibitions, a dream scenario to walk into and required little preparation. The Kelly's generously let us rent the gallery space at a cost below market value, allowing us to consume the identity of the location for 6 months without much financial burden.

The gallery is small, but beautiful, and we developed our first six months of programming around a series of artist pairings, taking advantage of the intimacy of the space with focused, two person exhibitions. Our first and last exhibitions for the first season broke the two-person format, yet fulfilled the rest of our mandate in serving as a way to form and expand our identity through our distinct networks.



Fig. 2 Derek Franklin standing around waiting to inhale, 2017 (image courtesy Anytime Dept.)



Fig. 3 image courtesy Anytime Dept.

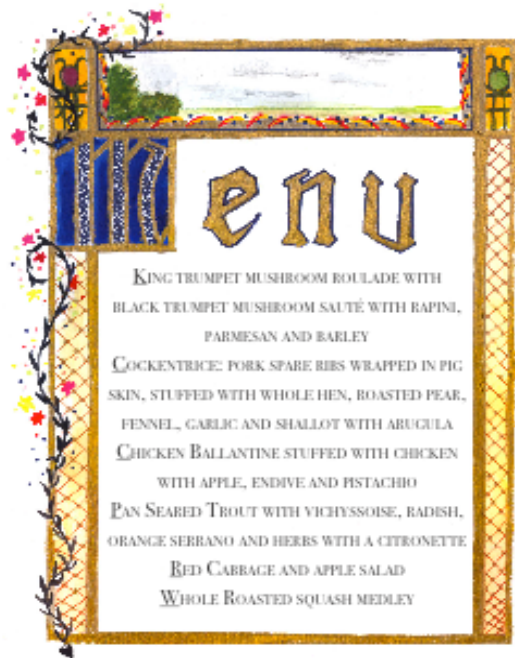


Fig. 4 Menu by Jared Miller for Bernstein and Glendening, illustration by Brandon Benitez, (images courtesy Anytime Dept.)

The Hoffner Lodge provided many opportunities that may not have been possible in another venue. The primary opportunity beyond the gallery space itself being the ballroom and theatre space on the second floor above the gallery, with a small kitchen just off the ballroom. The Kelly family granted us access to the space for hosting dinners, events, and performances related to our programming. The dinners did not remain the night before the opening as stated in the initial statement, but have become a signature facet of our project. We continue to look for other modes of interaction and engagement with the exhibitions, yet the dinner projects have been the most fulfilling example of interpretation and extension of what happens in the gallery. Hosting the dinners is intense work, usually feeding between twenty and forty guests each time. The collaborations surrounding the meal started to replace the idea of ephemera. With many exhibition timelines running from 3-4 weeks apart, it became clear that some elements had to be naturally waned out. Dinners being the most ephemeral performance, chef Jared Miller communicates with the artists and us to interpret some of the ideas behind the work into a conceptually focused dining experience. Rebecca and Megan Kelley (of the Hoffner Lodge family) worked to design the dining experience, making props and transforming the ballroom for these one-night experiences.

Knowing that we had not received funding, and that we were not ready to attempt to define our status as either non-profit or for-profit, we decided to move forward with our ideal scenario and set out to program a six month term where we could test the feasibility of our intentions. We had to sacrifice as artists do and instead of expensive nights out, weekends away, studio costs etc., we funneled our spare money into the project. Artists contributed with their own funds, found project grants, shipped via Amtrak instead of Fed Ex; we all contributed to try and realize the ideal. This of course became a task too big for adjunct budgets, and many of the goals we set out are now being revised to reflect a reality we were not initially willing to accept. What we lacked in finances we tried to make up for with energy. We ran everything out of pocket and with the help of former students who were willing to work with us for college credit, reinforcing the project as an extension of their education, we were able to pull off events, gallery hours, and still hold classes at the universities 5 days a week.

We organized a tightly packed first season, bringing together artists whose works and ideas seemed to intersect with one another, in spite of being largely unfamiliar with the other's work. We were looking at unintentional parallels in the work of artists we believed in, we saw an opportunity to tie together a diverse series of communities, to communicate a vision of art and its concerns today. We held student poetry readings, invited artists to our classrooms, had the university invite some of our visitors to lecture, held projects by other adjunct faculty, and used our space for workshops and one night performances from local artists and artists who were just passing through. Trust is one of the most essential resources that has enabled this project to function and new forms of trust cannot be developed without sometimes being loose and letting things happen.

ON FRIENDSHIP

In his blog, *Humor and the Object*, a former classmate of Rebecca's, Sean J. Patrick Carney, wrote a piece titled, [Curating as Social Praxis at Anytime Dept. in Cincinnati](#), wherein he addresses this issue:

"To some outsiders, the insular appearance of artistic communities smacks of nepotism. But I'd argue that's hardly the case; rather, artists with similar interests, politics, and shared experiences tend to develop bonds of intimacy and go to great lengths to support and amplify one another's work. Programming one's peer group isn't an exclusionary tactic, it's a reaffirming one. In the United States, there's little economic support for anybody who wants to fill up a room with effectively useless objects that are meant almost entirely to stoke discourse. To fill that void, artists create spaces for one another

and foster communities where the audiences are primarily made up of active participants. Increasingly, these spaces are political in nature and explicitly designed to legitimize and give space to marginalized voices. At the same time, other spaces are less specific-by-design and casually--even subconsciously--feature primarily artists with overlapping orbits that result from a variety of factors. The good thing is, there's room for both approaches and each is important. "

Carney, S. 2017, Humor and the Abject

In the two models of project spaces that Carney sets up, our programming certainly begins with the "less-specific-by-design" and "feature primarily artists with overlapping orbits that result from a variety of factors." Our goal, if we can respond to this dichotomy, is to generate a growing orbit and to increase that "variety of factors" by taking an active role in the extension of the network. The first series of artists we worked with only skimmed the surface of our shared communities, and we look to our peer groups as a source of new information, as the people who determine what art needs from us and what we need from art. We have already seen the power of this in recommendations from our circles, which lead us to an ever-expanding pool of artists to learn about and hopefully come to know and support. The important thing is that the network is never closed. Just as the only useful definition of art is that it is an ever growing and self-defining organism, we hope that our project can continue to expand openly, to form trust and develop new terminology based on the changing needs of the work we do.

In celebration of our next venue, a former bar and corner store, and in thinking about the topics reflected on in this paper, we invited fifty artists we know to all invite one artist we don't know to send one small work to us for a group show with over one hundred works. We can test our theory here, and will continue to push ourselves and our communities to reach, support and build out an art world with its own sense of power and priority.

And perhaps this notion of community building is the best way to explore how our work can be a form of scholarship. We start with what we know, what we want to know more of, and invite others to show us, and to teach us what we need to be. There are many ways in which our project fails, in which our collaboration doesn't meet our ideals, but we can continue to learn and adjust, connecting and reinforcing the need for our existence and the existence of the artists we see something vital in, whose work is willing to take leaps, to fail, to explore and experiment with us.

"For friendship is community, and as we are in relation to ourselves, so we are in relation to a friend. And, since the perception of our own existence (aisthesis oti estin) is desirable, so too is that of the existence of a friend." Aristotle, trans. Christopher Rowe, 2002, p.238

References

1. Carney, S. 2017 'Curating as Social Praxis at Anytime Dept. in Cincinnati, Humor and the Abject, Blog November 28, 2017 [online]. Available at: <https://www.humorandtheabject.com/blog/2017/11/21/curating-as-social-praxis-at-anytime-dept-in-cincinnati?rq=anytime> (Accessed: 2.4. 2018)
2. Aristotle, trans. Christopher Rowe (2002) Nicomachean Ethics, ed.2, Oxford: Oxford University Press.