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Reviews, profiles and news about art in Chicago

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At Zeroes End: Art in Chicago, 2000-2009

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By Jason Foumberg

Art is long, but institutional memory is short. In many ways, Chicago's art history is written as it occurs, in situ, by the people who produce it. Artists toil in their studios, heads-down. Apartment galleries open and close as briskly as the seasons change. We consume one-night-only events by the half-dozen, like so many bottles of free Grolsch beer. Even as new art blogs proliferate, with more scenes being represented than ever before, the snapshot commentary and weekly content often feels dated by week's end. And yet, paintings aren't bubblegum summer jams; they're codified slabs of culture, philosophy and style. We seek dialogue, inspiration and long-term change. In short, we seek longevity, with lasting importance for our work and our peers'—but who has time to write contemporary history while we're in the midst of making it?



Jin Lee, "Ice 2," 2008. Courtesy devening projects + editions, Chicago

That said, Chicago loves its art history. Outsiders, Imagists, Modernists and firebrands—memorize their precepts and you're halfway to an MFA degree (however, please don't leave Chicago once you earn the other half). Our traditions always feel in danger of becoming tinder for the next great fire, so we hand-cobble our history and share the stories orally like a rite of passage. This is to our strength and our detriment. History is our bind. We don't trash Paschke or cold-shoulder Mies because we've worked so hard to carry their legacies. In many global art centers, successive generations of artists break with the past like rebellious teenagers, but Chicagoans do not. Here, innovation comes from influence and education. Doing otherwise, it would feel as if the whole thing could unravel.

As we approach the end of the century's first decade, it's time to take census of our situation. Sure, it's an arbitrary range of numbered years, but such evocative images transpire when we speak of eras, like the twenties or the sixties, and although it's undecided how we'll finally refer to this special decade (the naughts? the zeroes? the twenty-first century's toilet-training years?)

), the task of reflection is at hand. Somehow we survived the Y2K catastrophe (perhaps belatedly realized on 9/11), and thankfully computer art didn't take hold in the ways that it threatened (my avatar didn't sell a single pixelated painting in his Second Life apartment gallery) so where are we now? Ten years older, who are we? Are we struggling with a new -ism? Does a collective yearning animate our desires?



Jason Lazarus, "Self portrait as an artist burning down the Museum of Contemporary Art," 2008. Courtesy of the artist

It's impossible to speak of the last ten years of art without discussing the last fifty, especially in Chicago, where history tends to repeat itself. Unfortunately, the perennial question is the problem of the second city. Each time it seems resolved and our pride restored, self-doubt sprouts back like a plucked nipple hair. Just as we can't forget our city's artistic progenitors, we can't slough the self-pity. If not frustrating, the question is motivating. To answer it, one must be productive. "The most significant change" of the last decade, writes Gallery 400 director Lorelei Stewart, "has been the disappearance of the need for discussions about what's wrong with Chicago." She continues, "These seemed almost pervasive in 2000/2001." But it does persist. A panel discussion titled "Is there such a thing as a Chicago artist?" convened at the Renaissance Society in January 2009 quickly devolved into the second-city conundrum. Yes, we're proficient makers, the panelists agreed, and yes we have a strong DIY spirit, but the close-knit community feels so alone together.

The 1980s were promising, with the art fair on Navy Pier being the first of its kind in North America. The international market reared its head. Although the fair framework continues here uninterrupted every spring, the ghost in its machine now haunts sunnier climes. In the fallout, the nineties was a period of re-grouping and self-appraisal. We strengthened from within. Non-commercial spaces flourished, and collectives and community educational movements popped up in unexpected areas, such as the Stockyard Institute in Back of the Yards and then in Austin, and later Mess Hall in Rogers Park. The 2000s, then, is a combination of these two efforts, meaning that our self-critical nature forced us to look inward and march ahead with no step unchecked. Now, we're proceeding with both thrusters on high, emerging from reconstructive isolationism and flirting with international acclaim. This is, after all (we've heard it a million times), a world-class city. We fattened up on local crop like a thing that hibernates in winter. A fortified self-image peeks its head out, not without a little hesitation. We squint, and see the horizon line stretch over the globe. Can we make a run for it this time?

The 2000-2009 decade affirmed the importance of art institutions in Chicago. Our institutions—the museums and art centers, but also the commercial galleries, the art fairs, artist collectives and the critical establishment—stepped up their game in this decade, and artists realized the weight they bear on the cultural health of the city, perhaps because they are in danger of ceasing, but also because they can accomplish so much. Some artists are institutions in themselves, serving a bundled role as maker, gallerist, promoter, curator and critic, but these artists tend to spin too fast on their own axes. When apartment galleries close, their websites disappear, and exhibition histories are lost. Certainly the DIY, independent streak still runs strong, but it was the conglomeration of the independents that structured our well-being and pushed us through the past ten years.

In 2005, artists Tony Fitzpatrick and Wesley Kimler, with the promotional help of art consultant Paul Klein, floated the idea of founding a museum strictly catered to Chicago art. The trio was enraged when, in 2004 at Ed Paschke's death, no local museum hung a single work by the beloved master (a fact that is now disputed). "Missing: An Authentic Chicago Museum," ran the headline of Klein's feature article in Chicago Life Magazine. But the concept soon fizzled. Perhaps potential financial backers were tapped out from the recently opened, over-budget Millennium Park. Or perhaps they were already committed to the Art Institute's new building project, the 264,000 square-foot Modern Wing. One year after Klein's rally cry, in 2006, The Hyde Park Art Center opened an expansive new building with tons of gallery space, and quickly proved to be the premier spot for local exposure. Besides, didn't Chicago already have a contemporary art museum? At the turn of the decade, in 2001, the MCA initiated its 12x12 exhibition series, thereby guaranteeing that a living Chicago artist would be on view in the museum at all times.

Although the Chicago-only art museum was not realized, it might have looked something



like “Big Picture,” a retrospective of painting in Chicago from the late-nineteenth century to 2004. Curated by dealers John Corbett and Jim Dempsey, and hosted by the Chicago History Museum in 2007, the show spun a continuous narrative thread of Chicago art history. Social realism, satire, the gritty city and the even grittier body were positioned as dominant themes. The history lesson proved refreshing because it is rarely, if ever, experienced in sum. Likewise, the MCA solidified sculptor H.C. Westermann’s legacy in 2001, and positioned Kerry James Marshall as a world-renowned painter in his own city, in a 2003 touring retrospective. In 2004 they promoted Dan Peterman’s hybrid environmental-art vision, the gesture a recognition that some of Chicago’s best artists aren’t bound by gallery walls.

Did we fortify the community base or simply buttress the walls of insularity? It can be argued, on one hand, that a single, continuous voice will, like a beam of light, draw attention to Chicago, whereas on the other hand, attempts to unify the party into a single, globular mass produces an incestuous offspring, with its attendant retardations, like a cock-wielding troglodyte from a Jim Nutt painting. In spite of pressures to form a niche community, the door to internationalism was left ajar. The Art Institute’s Focus program, founded this decade, imports artists from farflung locales to Chicago that we might have known only through art magazine ads. While Chicago artists are always hurting for more real estate in our major venues, the Focus series exposes us to international channels and trends. Love ‘em or hate ‘em, we’re no longer in the dark.

Sometimes attempts at an international education result in a misstep, or a marathon of missteps. In this decade we saw no less than six major museum exhibitions of contemporary art from China. There was one at the MCA, two at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, one at the Chicago Cultural Center, and two at the Smart Museum. Unfortunately, the bulk of the art in these group shows resembled the familiar bleeding-heart conceptual experiments brewed Stateside, in New York in the 1970s—the exception being “Displacement” at the Smart Museum, which banked on a specific, topical premise, rather than market-savvy exoticism.

Swinging back to the local, dozens, if not a hundred alternative art spaces opened and closed in this decade. It’s clear why they open, but why are they so short-lived? Wicker Park’s Green Lantern Gallery met its end, in 2009, in the form of a city zoning ordinance. It’s fine if you have the entrepreneurial drive to exhibit, promote and write about art in your home, but the city likes a kickback, a permit. Most apartment spaces don’t close on such technicalities. They disappear quietly, the project room easily reverted to a living room.



Juan Angel Chavez, "Muscle Guts and Luck," 2005



Takashi Murakami, "Wink," 2001

But if Chicago artists require such spaces for exhibition, collaboration and conversation, why can’t they be sustained? Three Walls is a good micro-example of the struggle between local and national, traditional and alternative. It was founded in 2003 as a non-profit residency program for visiting artists to live, work and exhibit—like the AIC’s Focus series, in a smaller venue but with no less effort exerted. Later, Three Walls doubled its gallery space and initiated a program called SOLO for the purpose of supporting local artists. Now it was the Focus series combined with the 12×12. In 2008, though, Three Walls folded the two programs back into the single space, and the exhibition schedule currently rotates between visiting artists and natives. This advancement, followed by retreat, marks the uneasy compromises required to maintain an institutional role in the city.

It’s hard to keep track of all the alternative spaces in Chicago. For several years the Stray Show, a satellite fair of Art Chicago, rented booths for \$300 to art collectives and alt-spaces. Now vanished, it’s difficult to conjure its energy. If we crave a lasting impact, why is impermanence built in to our scene? If you were there, that’s great; if you weren’t, you’ll have to ask the elders. Recently, an attempt to write the public record was made in “Artists Run Chicago,” a massive show installed at the Hyde Park Art Center, in 2009, that collected three dozen alt-spaces from the last ten years. The exhibition itself was structured like a

nightmare of art memories, all clashing together like a party full of party crashers. The resulting publication, though—The Artists Run Chicago Digest—is a treasured anomaly. It is a written record of these fleeting spaces, with rare interviews and first-hand impressions. Hopefully startups will be inspired to draw from this well of wisdom.

Small publication efforts like the Artists Run Chicago Digest, produced by the Green Lantern Press, have taken off in the recent decade in reaction to the New Art Examiner calling it quits, in 2002, after twenty-nine years of being the go-to guide for Chicago art news, reviews and debate. The collective wail still resonates. Several years later the Chicago Reader reduced its regular art coverage (i.e., Fred Camper's revered column) to a smattering of listings and pictures. The final blow to art criticism publishing in Chicago was the Tribune's firing of longtime critic Alan Artner, in 2009, after thirty-something years of reporting on art here. Combined, these endings meant the ceasing of a rarefied perspective, the long view. But also, they sounded like opportunity to many new enterprises. Art journals popped up en masse, and ended at the rate of apartment galleries: Ten by Ten, Bridge, Blunt Art Text and, after much fanfare but little return, Prompt. Other paper rags continue: Lumpen, Proximity, Chicago Artists Coalition newspaper, AREA newspaper, the Temporary Services imprint, Critical Inquiry, sporadic issues of White Walls, SAIC's student-run F News, and two volumes of Phonebook, an alt-space directory put out by Green Lantern, not to mention your devoted neighborhood publication, Newcity, covering the visual arts since 1986. In the paperless realm, Art or Idiocy?, Panel House, Iconoduel and Leisure Arts published rapid-fire art criticism online, then ceased too fast, and the tireless podcast Bad at Sports, begun in late 2005, reinvigorating the talk-radio format with artist interviews and commentary.

All of this—the galleries, the exhibitions, the critics, curators and publications—seem to be dancing around the actual art. But I'm hesitant to say that our best artists are working in the same style or toward the same goal. Previously, it's been said that Chicago painters were known for their figures, then abstraction, but since both are now equally possible, we value distinct practices, not products. These practices, filtered through a shared history, are best understood through the institutions that support them.

Pressured, I would say our artists are good multi-taskers, but many do it for “the wrong reasons,” said Michelle Grabner in a 2006 Bad at Sports interview. Grabner, an alt-space proprietor, educator, critic and artist warned against taking on too many token practices. Is it better to leave altruism to the experts? Do pure spirits thrive on hunger hallucinations? Like Grabner, I have also wondered if a multi-tasker can ever become really, really good at just one of their tasks, yet I don't often witness the inflated careerism that Grabner dislikes. Rather, I do see that people love doing what they do. If an artist such as Cody Hudson wants to be a painter and an installation artist and a graphic designer, then the work should add up to a consistent quality—and it does.

“You hustle,” writes Anthony Elms, of the Chicago work ethic. His latest screed, in a digital zine called May Revue, considers the legacy of the Chicago tradition. The city has a reputation as an “independent spirit,” a do-it-yourself, fuck-'em-all zest that's more grounded in myth, Elms reveals, than reality. Why does this reputation persist? From the outside, from other cities, our drive looks unique. But from within, it equals no market share, little critical impact and a consistently cutesy provincial caricaturism. Then Elms drops the bomb: “Independence here is defined through irrelevance.” Elbow grease may as well be snot. Broad shoulders are merely a platform for others to stand upon and get a better view abroad. Pre-dating Elms' essay, but almost in answer, artist Mike Wolf wrote in the 2007/08 edition of Phonebook, “How can we find ways of legitimizing alternative cultural work without falling back on the individualistic art star system?” For Wolf, who is part of the Mess Hall collective, the question is almost rhetorical—just work together.

Finally, the geography is still shifting. “Is River North dead?” asked Michael Workman in these pages in 2005, for the gallery district had taken a turn toward “crass commercialism,” while the “real,” edgier galleries headed for the West Loop frontier, out of Wicker Park, into Pilsen, away from commerce, into somebody's kitchen. There's the Chicago Arts District, on South Halsted, where artists can pay to play, and exclusive venues in the West Loop catering to a clientele who also pay to play. But these are not the final outposts of the Chicago art frontier. Derelict crawl spaces and exurbia beckons. The Gahlberg Gallery, in the unexpected suburban county of DuPage, celebrated the career of recently passed artist-activist Michael Piazza, and continues to produce locally relevant exhibitions. In July of 2010, look for “The Nomadic Studio,” Jim Duignan's latest Stockyard Institute adventure at the DePaul University Museum that will highlight abandoned, provisional and incidental settings for artistic production. We continue to strengthen from within, in an effort to break out.

RIP

2002 New Art Examiner

2003 Terra Museum

2004 Ed Paschke, Leon Golub

2005 Carlos Cortez

2006 Michael Piazza, Robert Heinecken

2008 Geraldine McCullough, Ben Schaafsma

2009 Contemporary Art Workshop, Beatrice Fisher, Ray Yoshida

Milestones

2001 Museum of Contemporary Art initiates 12×12 exhibition series

2003 Three Walls opens

2004 Millennium Park opens

2006 Hyde Park Art Center opens new building

2007 Spertus Museum opens new building, ambitious contemporary art exhibition program. Programming drastically reduced in 2009.

2009 Art Institute of Chicago opens the Modern Wing

2009 Around the Coyote moves out of the Flat Iron Building in Wicker Park

2009 Gregory Knight retires as chief curator at the Chicago Cultural Center after 20 years

Prominent Exhibitions

2001 H.C. Westermann retrospective, MCA

2003 Kerry James Marshall retrospective, MCA

2004 Dan Peterman retrospective, MCA

2006 Nick Cave: Soundsuits, Chicago Cultural Center

2007 Big Picture, Chicago History Museum

2008 Black Is, Black Ain't, Renaissance Society

2009 Artists Run Chicago, Hyde Park Art Center

2009 Heartland, Smart Museum of Art

Art Chicago attendance figures

2000 37,000

2002 35,000

2005 14,000

2006 21,600

2007 42,000

2008 50,000

2009 49,000

Notes from those who lived it:

Why a bridge to nowhere, a stale journey's fitting end,
With a fun-house mirror our city's fabric to distend?
And did you notice the lack of work done here by locals,
Do those crafty park fathers think we're only yokels?
—James Yood, from *"Millennium Park: An occasional ode,"* 2006

"Rethinking roles is important for anything new to be accomplished. Having fun is serious business." -Anthony Elms

"I have fought to remain a viable artist and in the art scene." —Phyllis Bramson

"Someday things will settle down and we will tell stories about the wild west we lived in when we were young, and the new world we helped shape." —Kathryn Born

"Like everything else that happens in Chicago, underground, by word of mouth and through who you know, the art scene is challenging." —Joyce Owens

"The most significant change to my mind has been the disappearance of the need for discussions about what's wrong with Chicago." —Lorelei Stewart

"There is always a sense of urgency to want to continue to be both challenged and challenging by providing diversity and exceptional quality" —Carl Hammer

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