

4

On Forever Becoming What You Might Be

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This document is part of a larger series of PDFs organized and published by Bodega on the occasion of *First Among Equals*, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia that considers the various modes contemporary artists have developed to work with their peers. Contributors to the series offer various perspectives on the social, political, and economic relationships that inform contemporary artistic practice. All PDFs from this series are available at bodegaphiladelphia.org.

Shannon Stratton is a founder and current Executive and Creative Director of threewalls Chicago, a not-for-profit residency and exhibition space. Founded in 2003, threewalls has grown from a start-up exhibition space to a vital visual arts organization that supports contemporary visual arts in Chicago through solo exhibitions for regional artists, residencies, grants to artists, publications, conferences and commissioning programs. Founded on the mission of better supporting visual arts in Chicago, threewalls aims to provide a stable base of support to the extensive community of artists who call Chicago and greater Illinois home. Programmed in collaboration with a rotating committee of local artists, threewalls was modeled after the classic Canadian artist-run-center model, a program that Stratton was inspired by growing up in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

When We Were Young

threewalls was a *group* project when it started. I don't think any of us would describe it as a "collaborative" (although we were indeed collaborating). There was Jon, who was going to University at state school in Art History. He was interested in starting a small not-for-profit as a "civic project." He'd been going to NYC and checking out all of the classic spaces, like Art in General and The Kitchen. He was looking at the Manhattan Cultural Council residencies. He was also interning at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and came across an old publication on Chicago's not-for-profits. The two big, notable spaces, Randolph Street and NAME had recently closed. He had this vision, he wanted to start an urban residency, but was honestly more interested in the process of creating a 501(c)(3). He did the paper work and registered threewalls on Friday, June 13th, 2003. Later that night he came to The Pond, a storefront project that Jeff Ward, David Coyle, Howard Fonda and Pete Fagundo had opened and committed to program for 2 years. The Pond was one of a number of project spaces in town at the time – Standard, NFA Space, 1/Quarterly – these were a few others. My friend Duncan Mackenzie (who ended up creating Bad At Sports podcast a few years later) and I had curated a show at The Pond. We were collaborating on exhibitions after going to graduate school together and this one, *The Impotent Landscape*, was one of the last shows The Pond would host before their strict commitment to 2 years was up.

I met Jon at this opening. He had already met Jeff and our mutual friend Sonia Yoon. Although Jon had registered threewalls with himself and two other people as board members (Van Harrison and Marc Leblanc who at the time ran an apartment gallery called 1R), he didn't have programming sorted out. Another Chicagoan, Ruba Katrib (who is now a curator at The Sculpture Center), was also involved. Sonia was doing some graphic design work for threewalls. Jeff and I had been talking about doing something together – we weren't sure what. He knew he didn't want to create another storefront space. In a kind of perfect storm we decided that rather than work at cross-purposes, we would join forces. That decision took a few months, but by early fall of 2003, the four of us had "signed up", so to speak, to build a "sustainable not-for-profit." We were going to open in January of 2004.

From the beginning we assigned everyone roles of equal importance with the idea that we would trust and support each other's expertise and vision while creating actual "job descriptions" in case the "sustainable not-for-profit" part came to fruition and there was a day when someone else would fill those positions. A crabby writer from *The Chicago Journal* came by and interviewed us after we opened our doors, condescendingly describing us as fresh-faced and implying

that we were just another crop of recent graduates too naïve to see the error of our hope.

Jon had raised \$5000 for threewalls before Sonia, Jeff and I became involved. This is what we had in the bank when we started our programming in the 119 N. Peoria building in Chicago. Our space was about 1100 sq. feet and was slated to be a residency 4 times a year, and host 4 group shows or other exhibitions the other times. Short on cash, Jon and I (who ended up in a relationship that lasted until 2007) ended up living in what was basically threewalls' closet until May.

We were given a fair bit of flack in the beginning from other Chicagoans who distrusted not-for-profits. I heard them then, I hear them now. They range from believing that the only way through is to invent a new model and a belief that foundations end up dictating programming. At the time there were no remaining small 501(c)(3)s in the city. We were not comparable to the museums and university galleries, and the way we saw it, as a not-for-profit we could generate income and redistribute it to artists. In a city where there was only one grant to artists, worth up to \$1000 but a whole mess of paperwork, creating another way to provide resources seemed like the vital mission of the organization. The other was getting people into Chicago to make new work and build a network that included our city. We had some stellar resident artists in the first few years: Daniel Barrow, David Noonan, Luanne Martineau, William Cordova, Michael Jones McKean.

Rounding The Bend

At the 5-year mark, things were a little rough. We were still all volunteer, but had always maintained a Tuesday-Saturday 11-5 schedule. Sonia and Jeff had moved on. Jon was in law school. I was crushed under student loan debt and stringing together teaching jobs. Jon and I were breaking up and I'd hear rumors that people wondered what would happen to threewalls. The thing is, we were not sustainable like we had hoped, because we couldn't sustain the people involved. We were always able to raise enough money to do our programs, but we were running on empty personally and spiritually.

We had started running a second gallery space to accommodate the SOLO program. A pretty straightforward project: local and regional focus, solo exhibitions, stipends, exhibition support. The program was juried by a committee of 17 artists, critics and independent curators in town from emerging to established. Between the residency and the SOLO program we were hosting 16 shows a year along with a number of public discussions. Clearly that was too much, but one of the silver linings would prove to be SOLO.

In June 2008, the first year of SOLO, we featured painter Stacie Johnson

who exhibited a series of paintings based on a combination of threewalls staff numerology, astrology, and some Feng Shui. At our greatest turning point our gallery was filled with strange talismans. The totem pole of astrological signs hangs to this day in the residency bedroom by the bed.

At 5 years we had still failed to build a real “Executive Board” – probably the most difficult thing to manage when starting a 501(c)(3). The thing with boards is that they are hard to build, manage and engage, but they are the thing that will ensure your survival – both in the now, in terms of attracting donors and sponsors, but also in the future, say, if you get hit by a bus. At 5 years it was definitely sink-or-swim time. Had we put in all of this work to close and move on? It would be fine if the answer were yes. Or were there other things we wanted to do? What was the point anyway?

At this point, there was a strong network of small artist-run spaces that had re-emerged in Chicago after about a 4-year interval with little activity. A few people who had been involved in threewalls were doing new projects – Green Lantern for one, was a project Caroline Picard started who had volunteered at threewalls when she first located to Chicago from Pittsburgh. Green Lantern and threewalls published the first PHONEBOOK together, our nascent directory of DIY spaces, both old and new.

To be honest this time is a bit of a blur. These were kind of the dark days. But there were some important developments that ensured threewalls didn’t close-up shop. SOLO was one – the committee that programmed it meant that the gallery now had 17 more people who felt deeply attached to its survival. Second was The Andy Warhol Foundation. They swooped in when we needed them the most – identifying us for their initiative funding, a capacity building program that supported small not-for-profits. Their support meant that we could hire our first paid staff person, who is the third reason we survived.

Elizabeth Chodos had started out as our intern while she finished graduate school at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. When Jon and I severed ties, leaving me the sole remaining founder of threewalls, Elizabeth stepped in. At a meeting with our Warhol-provided consultant she spoke frankly: we weren’t sustainable without paid staff.

This is where I have to be frank. The visual arts are home to a lot of romantic people who want to sever themselves from commerce. Collectively supporting the weight of a project will keep everyone going for a while, but the cost of healthcare, too many part-time jobs or the desire to start a family wears out spirits quickly. Keeping a space open, the lights on, the heat warm, the Internet flowing, the walls painted, the artists paid...well, it’s actual work. And while we believed artists should be paid, it was time to believe that threewalls was valuable enough to

Chicago to pay its administrators. Elizabeth pointed this out at the make-or-break moment that might have been the peak of stress for the organization. The investment was worth it.

Not Coasting, But at Least Rolling

It is 2012. We will be 10 next year. We have 3 paid staff now, a board with 11 dedicated members and a SOLO advisory board of 7. We made it over the hump and in the 3-4 years that followed the tight curve that was 2008, we started The Propeller Fund (a re-granting program for artist-organizers) with Gallery 400 at University of Illinois at Chicago; The Hand-in-Glove conference (an assembly of artists working in grass roots arts administration); Community Supported Art Chicago (an art subscription program); and published the third edition of PHONEBOOK. This summer and fall we will launch The General Studies League and Makeshift. We are increasing artist stipends and paying writers for small publications on each show. The residency is back on track with a dedicated project space for residents to exhibit in or host other projects with public hours.

How did we get from dire straights to the straightaway? There definitely was something to be said for building a real staff. Elizabeth was only on board for 2 years, but moving away from the messiness that was my co-founder Jon and I, and into less personal territory, was pivotal. Elizabeth provided objectivity but also a real faith in the organization that restored my confidence. After her departure to take a position at Oxbow, we hired Abigail Satinsky.

We were lucky to get her – she almost moved back East. Abby had run a project called InCUBATE in Chicago for a few years, sort of famous now I'd reckon, for introducing the Soup Grant model. She and her InCUBATE crew had been some of those 501(c)(3) naysayers when we first met, which she confesses now was out of ignorance. The idea that 501(c)(3)s somehow plague the community with outdated fundraising models was put to rest when we took up the Community Supported Art project, a model borrowed from Springboard for the Arts in Minneapolis that Abby had intended to initiate at her previous job. The focus of the CSA is on commissioning limited edition multiples and distributing them through a subscription model to collectors. The program acts as an opportunity to market local work, attract and educate new collectors and raise valuable earned income for the organization. The thing we realized was that threewalls had the capacity to make it work. The CSA needed our history to sell itself, and it sold. We are on round three, and have increased stipends to commissioned artists. The work we're getting is amazing, and the subscribers are impressed. We might actually be creating new art collectors in a city where artists often complain there are not enough that take risks

on new art.

The Propeller Fund was launched just before Elizabeth left. The Andy Warhol Foundation had started a re-granting program in San Francisco with Southern Exposure. We were intent on getting one in Chicago, knowing that one thing the city had in spades was idealists with a lack of sustainability. By 2009 when we were negotiating the program, there was a surge in artist-run spaces, festivals, publications, businesses and independent curators. With Gallery 400 at UIC we got the program up and running, distributing 50K to artists working collaboratively in the city on public projects. This is the only other grant, other than the money the city distributes, for Chicago artists. It's the only grant that recognizes working as a group. It is the only grant that recognizes "organizing" or "producing" as an art-form outside of incorporation as a for or not-for profit business. We started Propeller with the stated intention of cultivating a culture of trust. We have minimal hoops for grantees – we just want the project to happen and being on the ground ourselves, know full well that artists want to see the projects through that they propose.

These are definitely some of our prouder moments – we needed to stick it out, be patient, be serious, to really succeed at the thing that mattered to us at the beginning: to create new resources for artists. It's not sexy, but threewalls took a very pragmatic approach to its longevity, even if somewhere in the middle it got messy. And I stand by our decision to incorporate from the beginning. Our objective was never to be an art practice, but to be a reliable resource for practice. But while I stand by our decision, it would be unlikely that I would do it again. While I have always been able to find the freedom in our structure, that structure can also be a formidable responsibility.

Does it really take 10 years to achieve stability? Most pundits will estimate that it takes 5 years for a for-profit business to sink or swim. It was around year 5 that we knew we were finally floating. But stability is a generalization at best. Financial stability is certainly the first concern, and if someone bestows a major gift on an organization at a young age, that might ensure financial stability sooner. However, programmatic and management stability are of equal importance, and people's divergent interests (not to mention their audiences) can have a powerful and immediate effect on the longevity of an organization. This is often described as having all of the table legs securely in place and of equal length, since money is no guarantee of quality programs, and good programs do not necessarily imply excellent management.

Co-ordinates

There are certainly a number of people working at the crossroads of administration and studio for whom programming is an art practice, artists who are finding ways to describe business as form, and I'm interested in their approach. But personally, there are no blurred boundaries here. On one hand, I have no desire to collude business with art in such a way that an art practice is diluted of its chance, by way of the structure necessary to do business well. On the other, it's a matter of comfort. I don't feel any pressure, personally or socially, to describe my work at threewalls as an art practice, nor do I feel any express need to define myself as a curator for sake of clarity. I'm a Director. I am conducting this set of events in order to make things flow smoothly.

Titles or terms are something people in the arts debate with frequency. Am I a curator or an artist? Can a person be both? Is this an art practice? I think terms and conditions for work and creativity must be defined by the participants and their clarity in defining those terms, or their roles, are what is key to sustainability. In a not-for-profit structure, objective distance (not defining the work as a singular or collaborative art practice) makes it somewhat easier to pass the project along to new stewards, including an executive board. At the same time, any founder determined to act as Director, even with objective distance, still runs the risk of struggling to cede what feels like ownership, but is in fact only custodial.

Being pragmatic can be difficult at times. Our model might be akin to a classic A-frame house. No frills. Sometimes it would be great to be a little wackier – but what it is, is a place to support other thinkers, and their wacky ideas, temporarily. We are reworking our residency to think about how to nurture creative administration practices, curators and other programmers who are thinking of structures a little more radical than an A-frame. There is something comforting in that, and I believe that is what keeps us going. We encounter and work with so many great minds that not having our frills get in the way can be very satisfying. We want artists to transform us if they can, so that the audience can temporarily forget that we are there at all.

Often people ask about the name threewalls – a name that I used to hate because it seemed too predictable. As I write this article, I think about this transformation I'm talking about, about wanting to disappear and let the work take over. I tell people that threewalls means that one wall is gone and it is open, like a diorama. So perhaps it's a good name after all, since what it might be is aspirational: a name that talks about the kind of openness and accessibility we believe in for the arts, for opportunities and for transformation. A stage.

But going forward I think we will give ourselves more permission. We are

creating more unusual projects, scrambling the coordinates a little bit for the sake of discovery. While the foundational projects remain the same, I've decided that after all of this time, it is acceptable to be visible on occasion. Acceptable to let the lines get a little blurry at times. While it may seem that growth might hinder agility, threewalls is intent on using its growth to underwrite bigger risks. Risks that still intend to respond, with some immediacy, to what's happening around us right now – not 5 years in the future.

We have figured out how to operate within the 501(c)(3) framework, and part of what we may have discovered, is that there is a sweet spot between the small and mid-sized organization, between no staff and too many, between just enough projects and too big a budget. At our size we are still nimble and still open to change, and if necessary, still able to contract or even close, gracefully.