# Peripheral Vision

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You don't make it as an artist without a strong survival instinct.

I wrote these words intending them to lead the charge into my intended topic—how the need to scrap for survival leads to coalitions of artists, and where those coalitions are leading the Bay Area art world—but my charge skidded to a stop at "survival instinct." Do I know, I asked myself, what "survival instinct" really means? The phrase slipped easily onto paper, a common expression, but it might carry several layers of meaning. Digging through my mental encyclopedia, I guessed that it meant "reacting quickly when threatened." Turning to a more reliable (or at least more fixed) source—the American Heritage Dictionary—I came up with "an innate aptitude for continuing life or activity."

Moving between these two definitions gives you the storyline of artist organizations in the Bay Area. Reacting to various economic and social threats, artists have sustained a local art scene full of continuous activity since the late nineteenth century. Artists have backed each other up in their fight for survival in many different ways. The history of artist-run galleries in the Bay Area dates back at least to 1907, when the painter William Keith and other artists responded to the devastation of San Francisco's art world in the earthquake by starting a gallery in the ballroom of a Monterey hotel. In the 1920s, painters Yun Gee, Otis Oldfield and other artists established the Modern Gallery, combating prejudices against both Asian-American artists and modern styles. In the 1960s a market large enough to fuel a substantial contemporary art scene appeared in New York, but West Coast artists were still doing it for themselves. In the 1970s, Bay Area artists dealt with the threat of obscurity by founding all kinds of institutions to increase their visibility—*Artweek* for one, Open Studios for another, and a number of nonprofit organizations. One of these groups, New Langton Arts, even pays artists to exhibit, perhaps one of the reasons it exerts such influence to this day.

The 1980s were better for the economy overall and, while things were not cushy for most artists, they had a bit more breathing room. The 1990s, however, were difficult years. The National Endowment for the Arts stopped giving grants to individuals. The recession in the early 1990s sent the art market into a coma, then, as the economy picked up, a land rush charged the light industrial neighborhoods, quadrupling studio and gallery rents. Many of the organizations started in the 1970s were swept away. But the decade also brought a distinctive new wave of ventures. Marrying their need for studio space with idealism, artists mothered a new brood of cooperative art spaces such as CELLspace and Public Glass in San Francisco and The Crucible in Berkeley, all of which keep studio facilities viable by making them shared spaces at least partially open to the public. Although heightening the visibility of new art is still a concern, this wave of art organizations places the emphasis on interaction with the public rather than on the display of art.

CELLspace (Collectively Experimental Learning Labs), for example, offers classes and maintains a computer center with free Web surfing open to anyone in addition to hosting an exhibition space. Jonathan Youtts, one of the founders, described CELLspace to me as "a potluck of resources, tools and space." According to Youtts, "being open and receptive to working in a communal environment opens up more possibilities than working in a private studio."

The first glass facility in the Bay Area open to the community, Public Glass was started by a nonprofit group led by artist Bob Bellucci in 1997. Public Glass tackled the significant difficulties of training amateurs in the demanding, often dangerous medium at a time when glass studios which are enormously expensive to run, were disappearing even more quickly than other art facilities.

In part, the latest wave of collective survival strategies has been propelled by blasts of energy emanating from the yearly Burning Man Festival at Black Rock playa. The wild growth of Burning Man, which came close to doubling in size between 1997 and 1999, gave the artist collectives a patron more interested in their collective process than collecting their objects. And with the advent of Burning Man activities around the country, the "do-it-yourself" energy that has sustained the Bay Area art world for so long may radiate the rest of America.

From Burning Man's beginnings in 1986, participants came to the festival to "breathe art," but artistic production was strictly on a do-it-yourself basis. As the event began to draw thousands of people from around the world—last year's attendance was 23,000, including teams from Iceland, Vietnam, Japan and Europe; this year 28,000 people are expected—revenue from ticket sales increased to the point where a formal grant program could be started. I started thinking about the survival value of collective activity when I learned that Burning Man is now one of the largest funders of individual artists in the Bay Area, distributing a quarter of a million dollars a year.

"The purpose of the funding is not just for people to do their work," says Burning Man's art curator, Lady Bee. "We give the grants to encourage people who will use the resources of the community." For example, in 2000 a team led by sculptor Michael Sturtz, founder of The Crucible, was awarded a grant to cast an enormous iron wishbone for the Man in a fiery ceremony. "The ceremony will begin with a rain of liquid metal as an operating team pours molten iron into the heart of the mold from 30 feet in the air," wrote Sturtz. "The finale will introduce molten metal into small amounts of standing water, producing dramatic steam explosions, hurling molten iron 100 feet into the air. The next day, when the wishbone has cooled, we will dig it out and erect it, creating a spectacular thirty-foot tall archway."

Earlier this summer, the Burning Man organization took a major step by incorporating the art program as a nonprofit. Larry Harvey, one of Burning Man's co-founders, sees this as the first step towards amplifying the organization's national influence. According to Harvey, "Burning Man is not just an event. It has become a movement. The nonprofit will help us link with art organizations in other places. The artist Tod Dworkin is managing the creation of a maze, a kind of portable art gallery. We've invested a bit of money in making it durable and modular so it can be transported across the country and set up, with co-sponsorship by other nonprofits, with the provision that they draw the art that would fill it from the extended community of artists that we've cultivated."

At times, partisans of the collective movement like Youtts and Harvey sound like populist politicians inveighing against a ruling elite. "We hope to influence other nonprofits to pay more attention to the artists in their own backyards, rather than trying to snag stars from the international circuit in the art world," Harvey continues. "Often nonprofits hope to gain prestige and donors by catering to the relatively small world that Tom Wolfe used to call 'Cultureberg.' It's a very hierarchical system."

Critic Mark Van Proyen, veteran of five Burning Man camps and author of many articles on the subject, agrees that the values Burning Man promotes offer an alternative to the mainstream of contemporary art. "In a community anybody can earn an identity for what they do. In an institution you earn an identity by appealing to a hierarchy," he explains. "Burning Man calls the snobbery of the art world into question. There, works of art exist essentially as enhancements for a ceremonial moment. It's an architectonic structure, very much like a cathedral where the sculptures are not so much stand-alone objects as nodes of meditation within a larger schema."

But the power brokers of the contemporary art world started out as young people searching for freedom and creativity themselves, and now there are signs that the latest wave of collective efforts will receive a boost from local institutions. In 1998 the San Francisco Art Commission Gallery mounted an exhibition of art from Burning Man; in 2000 Larry Harvey was a finalist for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Experimental Design Award. SFMOMA curator of painting and sculpture and three-time Burning Man attendee Janet Bishop told me, "I am in general supportive of a broad range of creative expression and a broad range of contexts. The community building at an event like that translates into fruitful collaborations at other times of year."

It's no coincidence that artistic strategies based on "fruitful collaboration" emerged at about the same time the Internet became a household word. New media artist and Burning Man participant Ken Goldberg makes happenings that link participants through the Internet and have been shown at august venues like the Whitney Museum of American Art. He says "it's interesting that we have this one word 'art' that has to stretch to cover so many different experiences. Burning Man is more about sacrifice and generosity than it is about ego. I wish the art world were more like that."

Thinking over my conversation with Goldberg, it occurred to me that the art world is like that—when survival is an issue. Searching back through Bay Area art history, you'll find that most of the art institutions that seem powerful—even impregnable—today were started by artists in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Notions of art as part of a ceremonial moment or of art institutions as interactive sites between artists and the public may be institutionalized in ways that we cannot now imagine. But I'll bet that twenty-first century artists are still intent on discovering new ways to survive, still turning to each other for help and still drawing on their reserves of imagination and generosity to live and continue activity.