
KEYING IN: GETTING CLOSE TO 186 CARPENTER, CREATIVE PLACEMAKING, AND THE ARTIST ENTREPRENEUR

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Abstract

This article describes 186 Carpenter, a co-work and gallery space in Providence, RI, and considers its praxis of nonparticipation in Creative Placemaking efforts and artist entrepreneurship models. I develop the category of the “not-not-for-profit” organization as a mode of organizing, which intentionally resists the legibility afforded by these discourses. By outlining the cultural circumstances that inform why some arts organizers chose to not participate in Creative Placemaking and artist entrepreneurship schemes, this ethnographically informed analysis can nuance their critiques and affirmations. My central question is: why are artists opting out of the resources Creative Placemaking provides, particularly in a city such as Providence RI that has been a prime example of successful Creative Placemaking efforts? Entering these discourses from the humanities and utilizing ethnographic gestures may present an alternative methodology for understanding how artists may still be mobilizing to make places, while also failing to reproduce funder-determined models of support found in the Creative Placemaking enterprise and artist entrepreneurship discourses.

Keywords: cultural studies; arts management; creative placemaking

“I like to have people try it out with me first. It can be a little tricky and I find people learn it better when we do it together,” Jori Ketten told me and two event organizers as she handed us a set of keys to 186 Carpenter, a community gallery and co-working space in Providence, RI’s West End neighborhood. I added the three keys to my key ring as Ketten walked us through the steps to open and close the space, demonstrating the nuances of each procedure. “The front door lock might seem like its locked, but it really isn’t,” she said as she jiggled the handle, then fully tugged, to pop the door open with a resonant clang. “And it might seem like it’s closed, but sometimes it doesn’t. You really have to push it.”

The two event organizers did the first trial run, arming the alarms, setting the thermostat, turning off the lights, and locking the doors without any troubles. I repeated their steps, striding from the alarm panel in the back of the space to the front door confidently, spinning on my heel while locating the correct key, turning it in the lock before fully stopping my spin.

“Is it closed?” Ketten asked. I rotated the handle and it didn’t move, but the door swung back from the frame. I had locked the door, but hadn’t closed it, leaving the space vulnerable.

“Just push it closed.” I pressed my right hand against the frame, put my body into it, leaning in with my shoulder to seal the space.

186 Carpenter and its Providence Context

Jori Ketten is the primary organizer of 186 Carpenter and maintains the space with an amorphous cadre of co-organizers, whose engagements with the space include renting a desk in the shared office to presenting artistic work, organizing fundraising events for a range of groups and causes, and programming community-based arts activities in the gallery. As a recent addition to this cadre of co-organizers, I was surprised to find 186 Carpenter missing from the multiple Providence arts and culture maps developed by the city’s Department of Art, Culture + Tourism.

These maps are informed by the Americans for the Arts Creative Industries report, which provides a framework to understand and quantify the economic impact of creative industries in each state, including both nonprofit and for-profit organizations in its measures (“Americans for the Arts”, 2015). 186 Carpenter slips outside of these measures, being neither a nonprofit nor a for-profit organization, while sharing organizational practices of each structure of incorporation and appearing to many outside of the circle of co-organizers to be one or the other. 186 Carpenter, and similar spaces in Providence and across the country, escape how governmental, philanthropic, and advocacy players support, make use of, and measure arts and cultural activities. These modes of organizing to support arts and cultural activities have been previously illuminated in the 2002 report *The Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places* (Wali et al, 2002). The report importantly highlights the various connections between informal and formal arts and cultural spaces and activities. The maps of formal spaces and activities in Providence inform and demonstrate the profitability of arts and culture in making a Creative Capital, the branding campaign adopted by the city in 2009. According to Gadwa’s case study (2012) about this campaign, the Department of Art Culture + Tourism leveraged the city’s investments in this brand to gain support for developing “Creative Providence,” a planning document currently guiding arts and cultural strategies throughout the city. Spaces for informal arts activities are tied to, yet escape full cooption by, the Creative Capital branding campaign. They also fail to directly and financially benefit from avenues of support mobilized by the Creative Providence cultural plan. While 186 Carpenter is absent from the official maps of the Creative Capital and unable to participate directly in the Creative Providence plan, it interfaces with, networks, and supplements the various formal arts and cultural activities measured by the city and supported in the Creative Placemaking funding paradigm.

I would like to offer another way to consider these informal spaces and activities, a way of looking that removes the questions of formality and informality from *The Informal Arts* report, while continuing to highlight the connections and blurred edges separating these designations and demonstrating what 186 Carpenter and spaces like it uniquely facilitate. Rather than incorporating as a nonprofit organization, 186 Carpenter employs another mode of organizing, combining elements of sharing economy models, art gallery practices, and privately rented co-working spaces. In this article I refer to 186 Carpenter as a “not-not-for-profit” to signal how its organizers participate in similar financial constraints as nonprofit art organizations, but at a much different scale and through different earned income mechanisms and cultures of support.

Throughout I consider the potential benefits and deficits of 186 Carpenter’s use of the “not-not-for-profit” mode of organizing and propose a methodology for considering the impacts of its cultural “what,” by following the bodies that animate the space (including my own) through various activities not accounted for in economic terms. Although this paper will not take up Creative Placemaking’s critics and champions, I hope by outlining the cultural circumstances that inform why some arts organizers choose to not participate in Creative Placemaking schemes, this analysis can provide nuance to its critiques and affirmations. My central question is: why are artists opting out of the resources Creative Placemaking provides, particularly in a city that has been a prime example of successful Creative Placemaking efforts? What cultural values and interactions are being missed in these success stories and/or critiques? How do these spaces close the door to researchers relying solely upon economic profitability as their metrics? By entering these discourses through the humanities, and relying upon ethnographic gestures as evidence of

alternative cultures of support, this article presents one way of slowing down to take stock of the “profits” that this funder-generated discourse produces and what it misses within less legible “places” and cultures of support.

Methodology

In the discussion that follows, I pull from ethnographic observations of 186 Carpenter and interviews with Jori Ketten in order to highlight the deeply collaborative and social nature of how the space is made. Informed by what performance scholar Shannon Jackson terms proximate epistemologies, I show how 186 Carpenter and its co-organizers offer a counterexample to the model of the artist entrepreneur currently at work in the city of Providence and within the funder-instituted Creative Placemaking enterprise (Jackson, 2000). Practicing proximate epistemologies, being close and attending to the activities bodies enact in spaces may obscure my ability as a researcher to make claims beyond the proximate, beyond the doors of 186 Carpenter. What this way of looking and writing offers is a window into understanding deeply nuanced cultural values and profits that escape the registers of how researchers may reproduce narratives that shore up funder-determined strategies, governmental uses of arts and cultural activities, and discourse of arts entrepreneurship. Ethnographic methods rely on and foreground the subjectivity of the researcher and is vulnerable to critiques of preciousness, the potentialities and risks of which I will take up in the conclusion. By foregrounding how I am choosing to look at 186 Carpenter, I may be able to show some of the culturally-specific activities which animate the space at the expense of fully knowing how they interface with broader structural issues.

To be clear, this study is not merely an argument to make 186 Carpenter, and the multitude of spaces like it, legible to and viable for increased avenues of support. I am more interested in tracing its politics of non-participation as a counterexample to funder-generated case studies and attending to what its “not-not-for-profit” model of co-organization mobilizes. Looking at the ways that people belong to 186 Carpenter as a “not-not-for-profit” can allow us to hold off, for a moment at least, questions of economic profit. To explore these questions, I consider AS220, a formal arts organization in Providence that, at a point in its 30-plus year history, chose to incorporate and has since become a featured organization in Creative Placemaking discourses. I will also briefly discuss the Ghost Ship fire as an example of the risks of leaving unexamined alternative modes of organizing in funder-generated discourses of supporting arts and cultural activities. By starting somewhere other than the question of economic returns, deliverables, and imperatives, and by taking seriously how “not-not-for-profit” organizing has historically been and continues to be a mode of supporting arts and cultural activities, I hope to show how competing definitions of value factor into the making of local creative places. This line of questioning may allow us to understand why some artists may resist being cast as entrepreneurs making places, and how we choose to look at their laboring in turn reveals our own interests and answerabilities as researchers.

Interviewing Jori Ketten

Prior to interviewing Jori Ketten in the fall of 2016, I had heard her name often repeated by other arts and cultural workers around Providence. She had worked for and with a number of the arts and cultural organizations in the city in various capacities, including curating visual art shows, taking photographs of events, and playing in one of the local brass bands. I can’t recall exactly when or how we met: our spheres of circulation share many overlaps, as do the majority of cultural workers in Providence. Depending on your viewpoint, Providence is a small city with

vigorous arts and cultural programming, or a big town with a cast of central, reoccurring characters. She makes an appearance at as many arts and cultural events as she is able, a shock of short-cut, bleached hair, a warm laugh, and a sincere, “how are you doing?” marking her arrival.

Only a few months prior to our interview, Ketten started working in Brown University’s Swearer Center, which connects students, faculty, and partners outside of the university through community engagement, engaged scholarship, and social innovation programs. As a graduate student at Brown and cultural worker in Providence, I wanted to interview her to hear more about her history working with local arts and cultural organizations, how 186 Carpenter came to be, and how she characterizes her labor organizing the space. I had interacted with the space as a patron and performer before our interview. I had attended multiple art show openings, evening music events, and performed a poetry set as part of a mixed bill. During these evening events, the track lights warm the gallery space at 186 Carpenter, invoking a living room that has become public, spilling out through the large windows on chilly Providence evenings. 186 Carpenter feels public and private simultaneously; each program seems to bring together a different circle of friends while also pulling in those who happen to walk by on any given evening. I was already personally invested in the space, the people it brings together, and the activities by which they animate the space before our interview, before becoming one of the co-organizers and before writing this article.

We start at the beginning: in 2010, after finding a shared work space in Providence unable to meet her needs, Ketten began looking for alternatives. Upon opening the door to 186 Carpenter St., she knew immediately that was the space she wanted. The building had been recently renovated by new owners in 2009, belying none of its former features of a demolished deli. At the corner of Carpenter and Battey streets, the building has a large and open first floor and separate second- and third-floors apartment units. The large windows front the Carpenter St. side and wrap half way around the corner. Ketten and co-organizers rented the first floor, which has an open front room connecting to the back space (which became the office) through a wide, short hallway. Off of the hallway is a bathroom, stairs to the basement, and a small storage space they transformed into a “kitchen.”

One of the primary inspirations for the creation of 186 Carpenter is AS220, a nonprofit community arts organization with exhibition and performance spaces, live/work studios, youth programming, and a restaurant and bar. Similar to the majority of cultural workers in Providence, Ketten and the 186 Carpenter co-organizers had worked at AS220, exhibited in their galleries, and attended countless events and performances in the organization’s various spaces. I focus in on this particular organization in Providence because the energy behind the AS220 collective’s founding in 1982, and its resulting mythology, mirror in many ways the founding energy of 186 Carpenter. AS220 has since become an exemplar of Creative Placemaking strategies, serving as a force of redevelopment in downtown Providence. In contrast, although 186 Carpenter emerged with the ascendancy of Creative Placemaking, its lasting organizational status as a “not-not-for-profit” constrains its ability to directly profit from the avenues of funding this strategy has opened up for arts and cultural activities animating a geographically-defined place.

My interview with Ketten pauses here, for a brief detour into the history of Creative Placemaking, the potential problems it shares with arts entrepreneurship discourses, and AS220’s history, which serves as a prophetic glimpse into the ascendancy of this funding strategy. This detour might allow us to examine how Ketten and co-organizers simultaneously participate in and

benefit from the Creative Placemaking enterprise while desiring a space that continues to operate off its maps.

The Creative Placemaking Context

According to the National Endowment for the Art's first sustained look at the strategy (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010), Creative Placemaking requires cross-sector, private-public partnerships, working to shape the physical and social character of a place, to, in their conclusion of the definition, bring "diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired" (p. 3). The next sentence immediately turns to economic deliverables, where these places may "foster entrepreneurs and creative industries that generate jobs and income, spin off new products and services, and attract and retain unrelated businesses and skilled workers" (p. 3). Creative Placemaking efforts align temporally and conceptually with the articulation of the "artist entrepreneur," a kind of artist who, according to Chang and Wyszomirski's (2015) literature review, "seek(s) to support their creativity and autonomy, advance their capacity for adaptability, and create artistic as well as economic and social value" (p. 25). Both discourses slip between social and economic value. Gadwa (2013) in a later article, "Fuzzy Vibrancy: Creative Placemaking as Ascendant U.S. Cultural Policy," argues Creative Placemaking (and I would argue arts entrepreneurship) is a "fuzzy concept," because of this sliding between these different kinds of profit. The fuzziness of Creative Placemaking produces its critiques as well as the potential for directing resources to historically under-resourced places; it enables the rapid utilization of the strategy, but to many different ends. The tension between policy and practice Gadwa highlights, is the tension between "gentrification and social-equity agendas" (p. 4). The term houses both capitalistic growth and social equity under the same rubric of "creativity," its fuzziness asking these two camps to sit uncomfortably close. Pulling together community-based arts activities, social practice artists, tourism bureaus, government agencies, and major funders, both private and public, does not automatically horizontalize the existent and historically-informed relationships between each of these players. Creative Placemaking and arts entrepreneurship can be put to radically different uses and its critiques should not get in the way of resourcing historically under-resourced places and continued funding of projects with social equity at the center of their metrics of success. By not participating in these schemes, but existing alongside them, 186 Carpenter may sidestep the strategy's pitfalls (while also reproducing them, if not faithfully). Continuing this investigation into the activities that animate 186 Carpenter and other "not-not-for-profits" like it, we may be able to better understand what is denied when opting into Creative Placemaking and the attendant risks of this fuzzy funder-driven paradigm's collapsing of social and economic profitability as well as a reading of the labor performed in the making of such spaces as entrepreneurial.

According to Micah Salkind, (2013), the relationship between Providence's arts organizations and city government can be characterized as symbiotic, where each strategically embrace "the often reductive logics of creative city building to foster citywide civic engagement and more equitable access to art and culture" (p. 33). Providence looms large in many of the best practice reports of Creative Placemaking, where local arts nonprofits have received national grants from an array of federal, state, private, and municipal sources to promote this activity, fueled by organizations like AS220, as well as Waterfire and the Steel Yard, among others ("ArtPlace Providence," 2017). The city's use of these organizations demonstrates the legacy of the older philanthropic strategies Gadwa outlines, which further contribute to the fuzziness of Creative

Placemaking (Gadwa, 2013). Unlike Creative Placemaking though, these older strategies do not so easily conceal their economic motivations. While the bulk of these place-based projects that were at work prior to the coining of the term, organizational participation in these funding strategies cast the artist-leaders of these nonprofit arts organizations as artist entrepreneurs. The discourse of entrepreneurialism champions the original organizers for “making do” with their creativity amidst scarce economic resources. According to the case studies, these artists-now-leaders were able to transform their initially “not-not for profit” co-ops and squatting spaces into nonprofit organizations. Through their entrepreneurial labor, they were able to make themselves into sustainable and sustaining institutions, not only for the artists they support, but also the city in which they are situated.

At a point in the histories of these Providence-based collaboratives, co-ops, and illegally-maintained spaces, the original organizers decided to, or were in some respects forced to, incorporate and participate in the development schemes Salkind outlines (2013). In the original Creative Placemaking report, Markusen and Gadwa cite Providence as a case study, highlighting the city government’s 30-year legacy of supporting arts and cultural in general and AS220 in particular (2010, p. 53-54). Their histories problematize the narratives produced in case studies, which are not able to consider what may have shifted for their original organizers in their choices to incorporate and participate in the city’s development schemes. What are the terms of these decisions and what may be foreclosed upon becoming a partner in urban development that has since been called Creative Placemaking? By briefly getting closer to the founding energies of AS220, assisted by Salkind’s ethnographically-informed study, we may be able to trouble the reproductive logics housed in Creative Placemaking narratives, to consider the initial energies swirling around AS220, before returning to 186 Carpenter.

The AS220 Collective semi-legally inhabited a space before incorporating as a nonprofit, producing work through an earned-revenue model and relying on their “sweat equity” to power the space (Salkind, 2013, pp. 43). The mythos of AS220’s founding punks, radical theater producers, and multi-genre artists may be best summarized by their creative reworking of their semi-legally inhabited space to meet building code. In order to pass inhabitation inspection, they painted the exposed PVC pipes with copper paint, enabling them to continue making and presenting art in this space, animating what has been dually characterized as both a sleepy and dangerous downtown. The ingenuity, trickery, and laboring, without (immediate) desire of economic profit, of AS220’s founding collective as a “not-not-for-profit” enabled their then sustainable support of arts and cultural activities. I cannot pretend to know the original organizers’ desires for incorporation and will not reduce these desires to only the desiring of access to economic resources. I invoke the mythos here as a contrast to the path currently being tread by Jori Ketten and 186 Carpenter organizers, and to briefly demonstrate the complexity that is missed by case studies whose answerabilities to funders and stakeholders in Creative Placemaking efforts only start at the moment of incorporation. Looking at a “not-not-for-profit” space, such as 186 Carpenter, may allow us to uncover informal cultures of support that also function within nonprofit organizations, although teasing out an incorporated entity’s economic answerabilities and motivations may prove to be more difficult.

In 2010, with AS220 anchoring both arts and economic activity downtown, 186 Carpenter began to take shape. Although Ketten was the driving force behind the start of 186 Carpenter, she invited others to join in her efforts to shape the space, pulling together friends who wanted a space

to serve both their shared and diverse needs. They crafted 186 Carpenter out of their experiences in formal and informal arts organizing across the city, including work at some of the organizations mentioned above. Ketten cites formal galleries, museums, artists' studios, nonprofit organizations, and basement and factory music shows as work experiences that provided inspiration for 186 Carpenter. She says they wanted to "play off of those norms and take advantages of what's good about them and also push boundaries" (J. Ketten, personal communication, November 4, 2016). A hairstylist friend bought a chair, but moved away before it could be installed and a corner of the front room transformed into a salon. In order to satisfy health code regulations before opening a coffee shop, Ketten worked with the landlord to install a three-basin sink in the small storage space (effectively creating the "kitchen"). She said she made "very tiny cups of coffee in special pour over cups, and had an espresso situation," for about six weeks. When I ask about the early flexibility of the space, she reminds me that they "never had a business plan." The original organizers and their friends had different arts and non-arts interests; 186 Carpenter became a space to enact those interests. As the founding excitement around the space began to fade, certain organizers left, leaving room for other activities. It was then that Ketten and co-organizers started curating performances and art shows in the gallery space.

186 Carpenter's Organizational Practices

Following my interview with Ketten, I joined the current cadre of co-organizers (including only one other founding member, besides Ketten) by agreeing to help with the space while receiving course credit for my degree. I wanted to become further enmeshed in this space that has provided me with energizing evenings during my time in Providence and Jori needed another set of hands to assist with programming, having less time to maintain the space since starting her full-time job. The organizational practices that allow 186 Carpenter to function, the politics of those practices, and the particularities of the space itself were not available to me for inquiry prior to my involvement as a co-organizer. My ability to comment on them following as a researcher requires my participation in the space, sweeping the floors, and locking up after events.

Ketten maintains 186 Carpenter by subleasing workspace in the back room and charging small fees to community groups who make reoccurring and significant use of the gallery space for public events and organizational meetings. She does not require artists or event organizers to pay to use the space for performances or gallery openings. If artists chose to sell work, 186 Carpenter retains a small percentage, significantly less than for-profit and even nonprofit galleries (Jori always remains open to conversations about the exact percentage, artist to artist, and does not charge youth or fundraising groups). All payments are made to the name of "186 Carpenter", an account held by one of the original co-organizers, but separate from his personal account. Ketten and co-organizers pay rent and utilities out of this account, without retaining additional funds or using it to make personal transactions.

If the various streams of income that month run short of rent, Jori's relatively new job at Brown University allows her to personally supply the remainder, an aspect of moderate economic privilege often occluded in both the case studies and mythos of similar arts and cultural spaces. Only since starting at Brown has Jori's personal income allowed her to continue to retain low subleasing fees while also weathering two significant rent increases for her lease of the building. Although many who visit the space for the first time cast 186 Carpenter as a nonprofit organization—asking if I am an employee, if we receive any grant funding, or if we are hiring—the organizational structure of 186 Carpenter is neither incorporated as a nonprofit, nor does it

make a profit for its organizers. 186 Carpenter is maintained through labor shared by the co-organizers, is not eligible to apply for grant funding, and does not provide economic benefits to its co-organizers.

Rather than tracking how money flows to keep the doors open, I want to follow how keys change hands to evidence the people who have made and continue to make the space, a view only available to those who participate. When someone leaves the body of co-organizers, they turn their keys back into the folder hanging in the office. These keys are more than a way to get into the space; they authorize care for and access to 186 Carpenter, framing its “sustainability” as a not-for-profit. This “sustainability” runs against the definition of sustainability linked to economic independence, those required by many funder-driven support, as an organization’s ability to sustain its work by making continuous, and growing economic gains. These keys also, importantly, authorize their holders to make use of the space and assemble new publics in this organizing. To give three brief examples of what this access enables: the two co-organizers I mention in the opening vignette hung a show of donated visual artwork from Providence-based artists as a fundraiser for the Women’s Health Education Fund; I assisted with multiple music shows ranging in genre from folk and hip-hop to noise-production; and Ketten has shown me photos of a project in which an artist covered the walls in charcoal and invited participants to “draw” back into them using an eraser. Granting keys continues the flexibility of the early organizing, sustaining 186 Carpenter as a space responsive to the needs of those who make use of it.

Ketten and I often discussed tensions revolving around the profitability and sustainability of 186 Carpenter, which relies upon more people making use of it, activating the gallery, and renting a desk in the office. She told me about a conversation she had with someone who was renting office space. This renter expressed interest in developing the 186 Carpenter brand and advertising the office space on more co-working websites to gain visibility. After telling me she promptly denied this renter’s request, Ketten then described her disappointment in the only journalistic article ever published about 186 Carpenter in the Providence Monthly (Goldman, 2015). Although Jori specifically requested the author of the article to not publish a photo with her in it, the journal ran a full body photo of her and cast her as the sole producer of 186 Carpenter. “It was written by a friend of a friend,” she told me, “the introduction of this person will manage this responsibly and that felt important to me” (J. Ketten, personal communication, November 4, 2016). There have been no other articles published about 186 Carpenter since. I mention this conversation to show how Ketten and other not-for-profit organizers themselves might resist standard processes—economic and symbolic—through which they or their spaces may become more legible. Whether by an ad, an article, or a pin on the map of the city, perhaps, dominant nonprofit and for-profit arts cultural organizations frequently rely on characterizations of their space and cultural practices that are not only inaccurate, but can counter the politics of belonging to the space itself. Despite being publicly hailed as an entrepreneur in the abovementioned article, Ketten’s organizational ethos and strategies fail to reproduce those logics, even when it means “losing” money to maintain the space without the hope of recuperating it as a profit at some deferred point. The only wanted publicity, the sustainability Ketten desires and requires to continue the operation of the space, is that which brings more organizers into the space by inviting others to make use of the space and, in turn, to make the space through their use.

The more time I spend “organizing” the space and the more time I spend with her, the more I have come to recognize the enormity of the labor Ketten enacts on behalf of the space while

consistently inviting others to labor beside her, if temporarily. Jori defines this labor ethos as “DIT”, or do-it-together, rather than the common designation attached to the labor of such spaces: DIY, or do-it-yourself. Ketten resists the autonomy supplied by Chang and Wyszomirski’s (2015) definition of arts entrepreneurship, and implied in the term DIY, by consistently making new sets of keys and granting them to co-organizers.

Making Spaces and “Cultural Kitchens”

Gratefully, Jori Ketten and her co-organizers are not alone in rejecting fixed or fixing discourses that can entrap local culture workers. In the report “Building Community: Making Space for Art”, urban planner and researcher Maria Rosario Jackson (2011) and her partners at Urban Institute meaningfully call attention to how funders often overlook certain forms of arts, modes of organizing, and kinds of artists who fall outside their contemporaneous funding paradigms or are marked by other forms of marginalization. According to this report, artists’ motivations stand at frequent odds with funder priorities, such alternative aspirations include wanting “to be of service to communities or to pursue social justice-related issues; to connect to multiple and nontraditional publics and markets in different way...and to deal with problems outside the arts...” (p. 6). But rather than collapse these terms into economic entrepreneurialism, I have sought to show how Providence not-not-for-profit organizers build spaces serving communities and artists prior to and outside of participation in Creative Placemaking initiatives.

In this report Jackson also provides the term “cultural kitchens,” as places where “people sort through and create identities and forms of representation that they share with each other and offer the rest of the world” (p. 11). I am pulled to the term and hesitate to overdetermine the metaphor, but cannot help recall 186 Carpenter’s actual “kitchen” and what describing in detail this closet-turned-kitchen might show about 186 Carpenter’s unique infrastructure. The closet off of the hallway connecting the front and back rooms only became the “kitchen” because one of the co-organizers wanted to have a space to make and sell coffee. Getting close to the sink, we can see the impracticality of having three basins in such a small space; two to three coffee mugs fit in each basin (perhaps that’s why his cups of coffee were so small...). The sink meets minimum infrastructural requirements of partaking in such an activity as making and serving coffee. In the six years since 186 Carpenter has been open, the people making use of the space continue to define the activities that happen inside while also physically producing the contours of the space itself. While it may be easy to romanticize the workings of the kitchen at 186 Carpenter, to do so would obscure the labor it takes to maintain the space as a place for others to produce and consume art, gather together, and perhaps take part in an entrepreneurial scheme of their own, as the barista described above did. 186 Carpenter’s “kitchen” embodies the flexibility of the space’s infrastructure, which allows for creative expression and its sharing described by Rosario Jackson’s “cultural kitchen.”

Yet these pieced-together spaces, ones that appear impractical to those outside, and their non-participation in formal organizing structures can produce increased liabilities for cultural workers, the most recent and tragic example being the fire on December 2, 2016 at Ghost Ship, a housing and arts space in Oakland, CA. The tragedy fueled existent anxieties for Ketten, as the holder of the lease and authorizer of activities at 186 Carpenter. Although Ghost Ship served a very different purpose from 186 Carpenter and operated under a different mode of organizing, their statuses as “not-not-for-profits” may open up similar questions of liability and risk, not

mitigated by insurance protecting incorporated entities or the resources to address infrastructural concerns, if identified. What kinds of protection may be available for those who wish to organize intentionally around something other than economic gain, and what does “support” look like for them? How are artists maneuvering in these in-between spaces to find support and support each other against the economic grain of this rapidly expanding philanthropic discourse? How might the “nonprofit” designation actually conceal those who make economic gains from place-based cultural work in the urban contexts of Oakland and Providence? And, how might highlighting the activity generated by and at 186 Carpenter legitimize alternative modes of arts organizing that do not principally move together out of a desire for constant economic growth, an assumed aspiration of arts entrepreneurial discourses? The discourse surrounding Ghost Ship highlights the economic desirability of living in such a space, in a surrounding place that is experiencing rapid development and a rocketing price of housing. Importantly, Liam Dillon’s (2016) article in the LA Times quotes at length Sam Code, a tenant of Ghost Ship, who speaks about the desirability of living in a building he knew was not safe and the cultural values embedded in co-operatively creating a space, beyond solely a desire for lower rent. Although the article foregrounds the economic desirability of choosing to live in a space like Ghost Ship, particularly for artists living in urban spaces experiencing rapidly increasing housing costs, Dillon’s quoting of Code reveals a glimpse of motivations that lie beyond solely economic desires.

186 Carpenter has never made Ketten or her co-organizers any economic profit. Yet in some ways, 186 Carpenter would be well positioned to take advantage of the support offered through Creative Placemaking initiatives and produce incomes for its organizers and expand its programmatic capacity. It generates activity in this neighborhood, is a place-based supporter of artists and other creative laborers, and serves as a container of arts production and consumption. The question remains, why would Ketten and co-organizers opt out of these resources? Might this politics of non-participation signal a desire for invisibility or illegibility? If the space remains illegible for use by intentional urban development (not to say that it is not already indirectly participating in these processes) and unprofitable for its organizers in the economic sense, how does it continue to exist? We may be able to tease out answers to these questions by attending an event at 186 Carpenter.

An Evening at 186 Carpenter

One blustery evening this past winter, Ketten and I tucked ourselves away in the corner of the gallery space (we keep the heat low and the windows are thin). That evening, the gallery belonged to F., a youth artist who now presided over his first ever solo art show. When his friends and mentors stopped by, they flung the right side of the double doors open and made a quick, straight line to his table on the other side of the gallery. The door would swing wildly around its hinges before smacking into outer wall and settling back, close to the latch, but not fully closed. I watched as Ketten stood after each visitor to pull the door completely shut, to keep the cold out and the noise in. After the third or fourth time of the door not being closed, she started to remind the visitors to go back and close the door completely. If they didn’t hear her reminder, she would again stand, but to follow them, lightly touch them on the arm or shoulder and ask, “would you go back and close the door please?”

After replaying this scene, rewriting multiple versions from field notes, my memory, and reflecting on my witnessing of similar scenes during my time at 186 Carpenter, I returned to my

original interview with Ketten. In my audio documentation, she was talking about a youth artist, D., who she collaborated with on a handful of events and who lives in the neighborhood:

So there was a lot of awesomeness for me around D. using the space with his friends, and bringing another group of people in, some of whom had been to the space for other events run by, I'll just say, young people, young adults, and some of them had never been before. Then the kind of unfortunate thing was that people were really respectful about not smoking inside, for example, but it meant that they were hanging out outside and around the space. They're mostly young people of color, and some of them are smoking, and maybe it's hard to tell what they're smoking. Someone called the landlord. And another interesting cycle of this is that the landlord's grandchild is a child that D.'s mom takes care of as a caretaker or babysitter, so when the landlord called me and says, 'What's going on? I hear that there's all these kids there and they're smoking weed and playing rap music.' And I was like, "Oh, I'm sitting outside right now and I'm hosting an event for D., you know D,?" And he was like "D.?" And I was like "Yeah, D.?" And he was like, "Oh, ok." And I was like, "Everything's fine, thanks for calling, I'll tell them to turn it down a little bit." I was so mad and frustrated...I try not to make it really loud because I respect a lot that the space is in a residential area and I always end things by 10:00 and even by 9:00, it's an early show and event space. And if anyone is smoking cigarettes or drinking outside or spilling into the street, I'm really probably kind of annoying about, "Hey, stay on the sidewalk," or, "The thing's done you got to disperse." And I've never ever, ever had any calls or anything, you know? So it was just kind of a bummer to me. So that's a kind of neighborhood story in a way. (personal communication, November 4, 2016)

This selection from my interview with Ketten helped me understand why she was so intent on keeping the door closed during F.'s opening and the complexity of it swinging on its hinges. The surrounding neighborhood in part enables and constrains the activities that take place at 186 Carpenter. D. lives in the neighborhood and has collaborated with Ketten on a number of programs. Attentive to both the desires of D. and the youth participating in his music shows, as well as her neighbors, Ketten puts forth certain compromises by ending shows early in the evening and asking that all event participants disperse promptly after closing down the space. It is important to notice the culturally-specific elements that mark this singular incident when her compromise failed. The landlord heard "there's all these kids there and they're smoking weed and playing rap music." The failed compromise is marked by youthfulness, a specific musical genre, and presumed illegal activity. By ensuring the door remained closed during F.'s opening, Ketten attempted to avoid another failed compromise between the space she and F. had made and the place in which it was situated.

I've started watching users interacting with other double doors entering "public" spaces. Many enact the same physical motions of entering 186 Carpenter, flinging the door open, releasing the handle when there is enough space for them to walk through, and surging through that now open space. They move quickly over the threshold to avoid an overzealous door closing mechanism. Visitors to 186 Carpenter enter expecting the door to close automatically behind them.

They expect a closing mechanism that is not materially there, which is not to say that there are zero protections in “place.”

Ketten, or someone else has to get up and close the door behind them or invite them to return and close the door themselves. This closing of the door, particularly for the youth artists using the space, serves as a gesture of protection: it protects the artists from getting the cops called on them and it protects the space from the potential liabilities of hosting underage youth. By touching their arm and inviting them to go back and close the door, Ketten is inviting visitors to participate in the care of the space.

Although there are a handful of nationally-recognized youth arts nonprofit organizations in Providence, 186 Carpenter’s illegibility as a “not-not-for-profit” may have certain affordances for the unique protection it offers. At 186 Carpenter, “youth” is not defined by a strict, post-graduation cut off point as it might be by nonprofit organizations offering (K-12) youth programming. Ketten makes space for youth to become tenuously hidden from the “place” (the surrounding geographic area) that would be quick to criminalize them, youth just out of high school, in particular. By closing the door, youth co-organizers help to retain the productive illegibility of 186 Carpenter to those who don’t know where the door is or how to get in.

In describing how she works with youth artists and others making use of the space, Ketten characterizes her role as a “spotter,” calling to mind gymnastic or cheerleading studios. The “spotter” moves behind and around the laboring body, hands up and weight dropped, ready to catch only if that body looks like it is about to fall. Her do-it-together ethos warns against any assumptions that she is doing it herself, even though in many ways she takes on the majority of the labor it takes to run the space. By spotting youth artists, or working with them to produce the space together, Ketten positions these youth as co-authors of the cultural “what” of 186 Carpenter. By giving them keys, on however temporary and contingent terms, she fills a need for youth cultural kitchens.

Conclusion

186 Carpenter’s not-not-for-profit status fends off, at least for a moment, pressures of economic profit instituted by funders invested in “place-based” philanthropy. It does so by constructing and transforming the social and physical components of a place, as it is both practiced and theorized by Jori Ketten and the 186 Carpenter co-organizers. The co-organizers here make no money, and yet their labor, from farther away, looks like that of many other organizations that do. Saying the main deliverable of the space is a social one is not to say *how* it socially co-operates, to participate in its co-operation by showing up, watching, and writing about it here. The not-not-for-profit, as this example shows, produces alternative culture of support that works against the grain of a place and a discourse that is quick to criminalize or entrepreneurialize any of its members.

Participating directly in how the space is made, patching the walls myself with Ketten, making sure the door is closed and locked, has allowed me to consider how further resources may push the space in unwanted directions. 186 Carpenter tactically belongs to the arts economy in Providence with a mobility granted by its illegibility. Even as a not-not-for-profit space that cannot be put to use by city agencies, it is pressured in other directions by other forces and certainly affected by shifts in the arts economy in the city, while also indirectly participating in development schemes. Attending here to the space’s culture of supporting arts and cultural activities, and getting

close to the praxis by which 186 Carpenter co-operates, acknowledges its particularities and how it may not be easily or authentically reproduced elsewhere.

Practicing a proximate epistemology (witnessing the touch on the arm, the size of the three-basin sink, the door that appears to be closed but actually isn't) requires a closeness of my body, as a researcher, to the spaces that I examine. Putting into practice a proximate epistemology through ethnographic field work and interviews has allowed me to understand how 186 Carpenter may both function alongside and participate in tenets of Creative Placemaking (or willfully fail to do so) and maintain heterogeneous and dynamic responses to structural forces, which would want to reduce how we understand its profitability.

Future research

Teasing out the designation of a “not-not-for-profit” status allows us to doubly trouble “profit” as both economically and socially determined, where the discourses of Creative Placemaking and arts entrepreneurship sometimes conflate the two. The labor may look the same, but the particularities of the ways in which 186 Carpenter interfaces with infrastructures of support, highlighted through the lenses of ethnographic research and cultural studies, reformulate creative labor to align with and expand Jackson's (2011) cultural kitchens. In this regard 186 Carpenter and other not-not-for-profit arts and cultural organization may authorize others to create identities, form representations, and share them with others. Getting closer to 186 Carpenter allows us to see profitability beyond economic gain and render the “not-not-for-profit” a mode of organizing worth further research. What would it mean to focus on the creative laboring of the founding AS220 collective, to ask what was forgone in their incorporation as a not-for-profit, rather than automatically cast incorporation as always desirable? Could this mode of research both hold accountable the structural failures that had a hand in producing the Ghost Ship fire and the desire of cultural workers to sidestep the structural “solutions” that is quick to condemn similar spaces?

This essay may also be a call for more inquiries into spaces that opt out, or sidestep Creative Placemaking. Rather than more “case studies,” further research could participate in the activities of other spaces, create new narratives of how artists produce alternative cultures of support, or fail to reproduce funder-determined models. Perhaps this kind of defaulting on best practices is also at work within nonprofit organizations participating in Creative Placemaking initiatives, obscured by the ways in which we are choosing to look at them. Capturing the embodied textures of creative labor through proximate epistemologies may allow us to rough up the fuzziness between the policy and practice of Creative Placemaking and reconsider the role of the artist entrepreneur in making places.

As of this writing, the future of 186 Carpenter is unsure. The landlord has once again increased the rent, two significant users of the space have moved to other spaces in the city, and another cannot reliably secure their fee for using the space. I am brought back to 186 Carpenter's beginnings, a kind of lore about creative types finding, making, and making use of a space to fit their specific needs. As Jori Ketten has moved to fuller-time employment, losing the flexibility that once afforded her to be more present at 186 Carpenter, as other previous co-organizers either advance in their careers, move away, as I am wondering if I will stay in Providence since finishing my studies, the question remains: who, if anyone, needs to take over? If the energies for such a space to be used in such a way have dissipated, and its current use does not justify the actual price at which it is being maintained, what would it mean for it to just stop?

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