

I WANT A NEW PLUG

ONE THAT WON'T GO AWAY BY EMILY COX

In the face of rising rents and gentrification, amplified by disconnection and strained resources during a pandemic, Kansas City lost some vital arts spaces. But one is being reborn.

Plug—formerly known as Plug Projects—has been around since 2011, originally in a space in the West Bottoms. After a complete turnover of their board and ending their lease in the West Bottoms, they are set to open a new gallery space in a newly developed arts building on the east side, called Agnes Arts.

“Artist-run and DIY collectives are rapidly disappearing from the Kansas City region,” reads Plug’s website. “Because of this, opportunities for artists to exhibit their work outside of restrictive commercial gallery venues are becoming increasingly scarce. Plug seeks to contribute to the reinvigoration of the arts ecosystem both locally and regionally.”

Five local artists collaboratively run Plug: Ariana Chaivaranon, CJ Charbonneau, Mary Clara Hutchison, Melanie Johnson, and Marco Rosichelli.

“Spaces where people can show their work outside of a commercial consideration is getting rarer and rarer in this town,” says CJ Charbonneau. “There’s not that many independent spaces that are in existence.”

Plug’s purpose is different from a commercial gallery that represents artists and facilitates sale of their work with art buyers and collectors.

“If you’re going to a commercial gallery,” continues Charbonneau, “their aim is to sell the work. So they’re looking for artists whose work is commercially viable, and is going to appeal to the tastes of the people who regularly come there.”

While commercial galleries have an important role to play in the arts ecosystem, independent spaces like Plug seek to support artists unconditionally.

“We’re looking to expand conversations or have those safe spaces, if you will, where someone can do some really weird shit, and we can talk about it, and they can get feedback,” says Charbonneau.

Places like Plug are essential for artists to be freely creative, to make the work that speaks to them, and be able to share it with others, without market concerns hanging over them.

“Plug is a space that’s not afraid to take

risks,” says Ariana Chaivaranon. “We have a really strong history of showing artists who are experimenting, who are emerging, who are at the forefront of trying things, who are at the cross sections of different media.”

And artists are hungry for it. On the day Plug board put out an open call for artists, they received multiple submissions within the hour. (The open call closed May 31. Their first exhibition will open in June.)

“It’s so clear that there’s a deep need for a space, and for a gallery that is really committed to serving artist visions and is financially beneficial for artists,” says Chaivaranon. “Our last fundraising campaign, the average donation was less than \$50. So knowing that folks want this space, that we’re here because the community supports us, and normal people are willing to chip in for the space to exist, is so incredibly exciting and something that sets up a system of accountability to artists, to audiences, in a way that is rare in other spaces in the city.”

Plug’s fundraising campaign—which set them up financially through at least this year—was amazingly successful despite being in the midst of a pandemic, when they did not have a physical space, and when they were an entirely new board. The community still showed up for Plug.

Three out of five of the board members grew up in Kansas City, left and lived elsewhere for several years, and then found their way back here. (The other two are transplants.) Hutchison moved back here “for six months,” she says, laughing, because that was seven years ago. “What made me decide to stay was the arts community,” she says. “Man, this is the place to be! Totally different than when I grew up here.”

Kansas City’s interconnectedness is one benefit to being an artist in Kansas City. “The size of the community is really nice, in terms of being an artist and feeling supported. It is a really visible community, and it seems like even if you don’t know someone, you know them,” says Johnson. “Like with our fundraising campaign, we are largely artist-supported. It was the arts community coming in and helping us. So there’s that kind of reciprocity and mutual support that can happen at this scale in Kansas City that maybe can’t happen in larger cities.”

“That might be what it comes down to,” adds Hutchison, “doubling down as a community, linking elbows, and saying, we’re



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still going to do it.”

Chaivaranon, who was raised in Washington DC and Thailand and moved to Kansas City two years ago for a job at the Nelson-Atkins, gives some perspective on the perks of the Midwest.

“The way that folks settle down here or return here allows you to build really long term relationships. Because the population is so much less itinerant than places like DC, places like New York, where folks are moving in and out and coming from all over the world, you can really establish more and deeper connections with people, and grow with them over time to build something that’s truly collaborative.” Our deeper roots give us an advantage.

And while Kansas City is getting more expensive, and waves of gentrification continue to roll in, we still have opportunities that are obsolete in some coastal cities.

“This space it’s not something that is easy to come across in DC,” says Chaivaranon. “Because of the relative affordability of spaces, the willingness of artists to get together and try curatorial initiatives, it just is a possibility that wouldn’t exist in DC, or would be much harder to come across, much more expensive to run.”

Having this space is an asset for artists connecting to the wider arts world. “We have talked about how the space is insistent-ly local and grounded in the community,”

says Chaivaranon, at the same time that it is “a space to actively look to make connections between Kansas City and the broader national conversation in the arts. It’s clear there are these threads of connection in what people are thinking about [across the nation].” Plug intends to provide a platform to contribute to those broader developments in contemporary art.

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When the current board members applied and were accepted to join Plug a year and a half ago, they were surprised to learn that all the board members at the time were leaving en masse, and a whole new board was forming in their place.

“We had our first meeting as a board the week of the shutdown [in March 2020], so that was a really intense transition,” says Mary Clara Hutchison. “There were three other people who were selected to be on the board who immediately were like ‘can’t do it,’ ‘don’t have a job anymore,’ ‘not interested anymore,’ whatever.”

So their first meeting took place around dramatic organizational change, and huge cultural uncertainty. And their lease was up. The questions facing them, Hutchison said, “Oh this is going to look completely different. What do we do, do we still do it? Or do we let Plug die? That was a very real conver-

sation that we had.”

So why keep Plug alive?

“The last couple of years, a lot of places in Kansas City have been shifting and closing,” says Hutchison, “and heading into the whole COVID-19 situation, it was like, this is only going to get worse. To me it’s worth fighting through this and solving these problems in order to ensure that at least one space will come out on the other side.”

“There were moments,” says Marco Rosichelli, where they had to convince one another. “I think I’m about ready to back out,” someone would say at a meeting. “No, don’t, this is why this is going to be great! And then the next meeting was trying to convince one of the other ones to stay.”

Motivation continued to come through for them. “We’ve received a lot of encouragement from former board members who are still very much invested in the life of Plug, which makes it easier for us to say, we can do this, this is important,” Johnson says.

And they got some wins, including successfully wading through the paperwork to become an official 501(c)3 non-profit. “I think at every point when we got to that like ‘oh this isn’t going to work’, something came through. ‘Oh maybe we actually can have a space!’” says Johnson.

One of the immediate decisions the board had to make last spring was whether to leave their longtime space in the West Bottoms as their lease ended. With concerns about rent and other building issues already, and the pandemic to boot, they decided to let it go. And hoped they would be able to be in a space again.

“We had to vacate our West Bottoms spot so quickly, and had to make that decision in part of the COVID-19 whirlwind,” says Hutchison. In looking for a new building, she continues, “Part of it was just, where can we find affordable space with somebody who knows our needs and can accommodate us?”

At the same time, Davin Watne was

asking artists what they would like to see in a new space that a group of investors, led by Paul Migliazzo and including Watne, had bought on the east side of Kansas City.

“Davin put out a call to see what artists needed in the community as they were designing this space and we jumped in and said, ‘a gallery!’” says Johnson.

low him to advocate for more permanency.

“I just got tired of being chased out of every studio I’ve ever had in this city,” says Watne. “This time I’m going to invest in it. If gentrification comes, if 20 years from now some big pot company wants to come and gut it and grow purple haze or something, then yeah, we sell the building for \$5 mil-

tryway walls, or the communal space.

“There’s also the ability for them to branch out of that gallery,” says Agnes Arts’ Watne. “We’ve made it known to them that they are completely welcome to have exhibitions outside of that space, out in the parking lot, in the grounds, on the roof, we’re really open to those kinds of things.”

“We love this dead end street,” says Rosichelli, “because we can then have food trucks and street venues, and we talked about video or time based artworks and projecting those outside, we’ve talked about public artworks, things visible from the freeway.”

Ideas for what is possible in this new space are freewheeling, and occasionally delicious. “Several of us mentioned pie in our visioning exercises, so I think we’ve got some pie stands in our future. I don’t know why that was a common thread, but let’s pull on the thread, let’s see what happens,” says Hutchison.

Plug could eventually expand their gallery space. “We also have the potential to grow,” says Rosichelli. “On the other side of this wall is a lot more room.” Only about one-fifth of the building has been developed—behind the gallery wall is a cavernous raw warehouse space (“You could play baseball in there!” says Watne).

The Agnes Arts owners will see where demand takes them. On the arts side of things, the building may eventually include rehearsal or recording space for musicians, a sculpture studio, photography dark room—whatever there is a call for, that is, whatever there are potential studio tenants/clients for. Plug is likely to have vibrant neighbors under their shared roof.

Agnes Arts also hopes to bring in some local businesses, to have a symbiotic relationship with the artists. “The businesses would subsidize the studios, and the studios would offer some kind of creative cache that would make that space a unique destination,” says Watne. “I think if we can balance that business ecosystem in the right



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“We had this space in mind [to use as a gallery],” says Watne, “so I was looking at approaching some small spaces like Plug. I always thought to myself quietly, ‘Something like Plug would be perfect here,’ so it just really worked out.”

Migliazzo & Co purchased the building in late 2019. Just a few months prior, Migliazzo and his brother had sold a building they owned in the Crossroads, Kunstrraum, that had housed artist studios for seven years, as the real estate became more valuable.

Watne wants to prevent that from happening again. After being displaced from his studio in the Kunstrraum building, he hopes that being a co-investor in this space will al-

lion, let’s do it. I don’t see that happening. I think it’s gonna stick around a lot longer.”

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Just inside the Agnes Arts building, a glass door opens to Plug’s new 14’ x 25’ white-walled gallery. It’s a downsize from their already-small space in the West Bottoms, but the building holds a lot of opportunity for creativity and collaboration.

“We have talked a little bit about partnering with the artists who are gonna occupy the studios to maybe curate some shows with people who are in the building,” says Hutchison. That could expand into the en-



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way—and still maintain affordability—then I think we’ll be doing fine.”

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Agnes Arts (1328 Agnes St.) is on the east side of Kansas City, off of Truman Road, a few blocks east of Prospect. The east side of Kansas City—that is, east of Troost, the racial dividing line designed intentionally by white city leaders in the early 20th century—remains predominantly Black, and predominantly low income. This segregation and poverty have been created historically by white supremacist practices like redlining, but continue into the present day with inequality in city services and funding.

While a dilapidated old building in a neglected corner of the city tucked alongside the freeway makes this an affordable option for artists to work in, there is also the question of how a development like Agnes Arts will impact the neighborhood around it. Will it be the next Crossroads—both for better and for worse?

Considerations about the neighborhood and community that they’ve moved into is at the fore for Plug.

“I have complicated feelings personally about moving into this neighborhood and onto Kansas City’s east side,” says Hutchison. “This is a really great opportunity to come to a neighborhood with eyes open and with intentionality and connect with the neighborhood and the community already in place, and do it a little bit differently, and constructively.”

They intend to reach out to collaborate with neighborhood associations and community leaders, which will hopefully pave the way to shape and be shaped by their surroundings in positive ways.

“We’ve been throwing things around, like community advisory groups, and whether there’s an advisory role on the board, we’re just workshopping ideas right now,” says Chaivaranon. “We want to hear

from folks. If they read this article and want to reach out to us, we would be so excited to hear their ideas.” (Reach them at info@plug.gallery.)

They are hoping to exhibit artists who engage with these issues directly. “One show that we do hope to have is one that really addresses the site and the community and the history of the building,” says Chaivaranon.

The building itself looms with the history of being a police facility. It was previously the traffic division and backup dispatch for the Kansas City Police Department. The folks at Plug want to acknowledge and reckon with the history of the space, as the police have been demonstrably harmful to the surrounding community.

Making those connections and having those community conversations is integral to what Plug does. Putting art on the walls is important, but their work doesn’t end there.

“The old space had a back room where we would have community events,” says Chaivaranon. “It felt really attractive that this space has artist studios right next door, that there is a public gathering space, because I think we really see a future of continuing Plug’s involvement with programming, community, and multigenerational audiences.”

At exhibitions and programs, “There’s always so many unexpected things that come from those conversations and those ideas and people meeting and sparks flying,” says Charbonneau.

Now that they’ve laid the groundwork, it’s time to get into those collaborative and curatorial visions. “We spent the last year problem solving and ensuring plug’s survival on a really basic level,” says Hutchison. “I’m excited to move beyond that process, and really sink our teeth into becoming what we have envisioned for Plug.”

“Initially we didn’t know if Plug would ever be a brick and mortar thing again,” says Johnson. “This was speculation for a really long time. It’s real now.”