

OPEN STUDIOS AND THE
HOMESPUN GALLERY MOVEMENT:

FINDING COMMUNITY

BY AIMEE LE DUC

Chris McCaw is a photographer who grew up in the Bay Area and has been living and working in San Francisco for more than a decade. He followed the expected route of many young artists: he went to art school; he learned his craft and then graduated and meandered through multiple jobs, internships and volunteer positions at the various non-profit organizations throughout San Francisco.

Recently, he hosted a party in his SOMA railroad apartment where he lined the walls of his hallway with a collection of black velvet paintings he had collected over the years and raffled them off to his party guests. The party was a huge success for many reasons. He finally rid himself of scores of bad velvet art and made a little money, but more importantly, a friend of his asked if, after the party, he could hang his own work in Chris' hallway. Chris agreed with the same nonchalance that inspired the velvet-painting extravaganza and from that moment on, his apartment walls have never been the same.

That friend, another photographer, Chris Koperski hung his work on Chris' walls, made a few postcards and opened McCaw's doors for a reception. The exhibit was a triumph. Koperski was able to display his work for his friends and the community was given a new space to not only consider new work but to also consider how and why we see work in the first place.

Homespun galleries have always been threaded among the rich texture of the San Francisco art scene. Part of what makes the Bay Area unique is its cross section of towering institutions, museums and blue chip galleries positioned against house galleries, alternative spaces and core non-profit organizations that all work together somehow to provide multiple access for artists to show their own work and see the work of their peers. Chris McCaw's hallway gallery is only one example against many art spaces built inside kitchens, back rooms and apartment lobbies.

The phenomenon of SF Open Studios, now in its 31st year is a shining example of how a neophyte art enthusiast can access this Bay Area cross section of hidden art venues. Supported by the non-profit organization, ArtSpan, SF Open Studios is an annual gathering of people who transform their living spaces as well as their studios into sites of exhibition and spontaneous community. It is an amorphous and organic event, allowing participants to define its drive and passion by their very presence.

I can remember, after only living in San Francisco for a little more than a year, seeing the foyer of my small apartment building turn into a gallery every Saturday and Sunday for a month during SF Open Studios. Neighbors I hardly knew hung their photography and work on paper all along our drab manila walls and invited people from all over the world to come in for a look.

These sites revolve around loosely constructed themes that act to bring groups of people together that might have never met otherwise. After all, these are hallways, garages, roommates' doors and stark front rooms flanked by chips and salsa, cheap beer and the potential for something new rising to the surface.

Other people have taken advantage of this self-determination and created their own spaces for exhibitions. 667 Shotwell happens to be the home address of San Francisco artist, Chris Sollars as well as the address of the 667 Shotwell project space. Sollars hosts artist projects and community events in his space in the Mission and documents them all on his website, 667shotwell.com.

Chris shows projects and work created by his friends, past classmates and other artists that interest him. Since the space's beginnings in 2001, a thematic voice has been created that travels along the lines of Sollars' own practice. He has literally created a locus of dialog for his own work and the work of the space's participants.

In 2004, a group of artists and students transformed the garage of a Pacific Heights mansion into an experimental performance and gallery space. In addition to bi-monthly shows, the Garage Gallery now hosts a biennale in its space with the next event to be held later this year. The organizers of this space hope to change the context of art by changing the context of a familiar place, particularly one that was never intended to house art - a garage in an upscale neighborhood.

The first Garage Biennale in 2004 showed work by a local collective, Mind Strata. This group used the makeshift gallery to show their own work in a way that would not have been possible in a traditional gallery setting and it worked. The members of the collective now create socially challenging, site-specific installations all over California.

SF Open Studios is about creating a space for those who are compelled to create even if the work happens outside of a traditional gallery or museum model, even if it is created outside of a purely commercial model, even if it is created for no other reason than it could be.

In fact, SF Open Studios is really a lesson in spontaneous exploration. It is a discovery of new kinds of spaces even if they are already marked on a map. It is

the discovery of sites transformed into locations of what visual art can be - the exchange of passion and ideas by experiencing a physical object or conceptual presentation. By considering SF Open Studios in the context of these home-made, alternative spaces, the event becomes a moment to re-examine art practice through the transformation of various spaces into sites of creative exchange.

While the public is attracted by ads and TV spots as well as the full color Guide, the artists in these spaces as well as the experience of SF Open Studios are sustained by word of mouth, by spontaneous relationships and by a collective desire to create and share ideas. None of the individual space facilitators deny the inherent value of established galleries or the exhibition institutions in the city; on the contrary, they are interested in using an alternative process to access them.

SF Open Studios nestles perfectly within the framework of these spaces. Working within the structure of a long standing organization, SF Open Studios publishes SF Open Studios: the guide allowing viewers, shoppers, tourists and other artists to find those hidden places that allow a fixed group of work to contextualize an entire city in a unique way for a short time.

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Spaces Referenced:

*Chris McCaw
31 Rausch Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
www.chrismccaw.com*

*Chris Sollars
667 Shotwell
San Francisco, CA
www.667shotwell.com*

*Garage Gallery/Garage Biennale
2830 Pacific Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94115
www.garagebiennale.com*