

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Sampling BOS: Bushwick Open Studios 2015 Voices

Robin Grearson · Wednesday, June 17th, 2015

Brooklyn, 2015

Bushwick is a fast-gentrifying neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. For the last 9 years, volunteer organization Arts in Bushwick has worked with local residents and businesses to create an annual event for artists in the neighborhood to show their work and open their workspaces—Bushwick Open Studios. The neighborhood itself has become a brand and a tourist destination more recently, and rents there are among the highest in New York City; certainly unaffordable to many longtime residents and small businesses who are being pushed out as landlords seek to empty and sell their buildings or trade up to higher-paying renters.

For years, artists rented studios in nearby East Williamsburg's Industrial Business Zone, where many factories had been converted to inexpensive loft residences and workspaces. Now corporations are relocating from Manhattan and elsewhere into these sturdy, cheap buildings, because the steeply rising costs of industrial real estate in Brooklyn are still far cheaper than commercial locations in Manhattan. Bushwick's profile attracts brands and corporations who want to affiliate themselves with the arts community. Media companies who leverage their own reach create a symbiosis between themselves and the Bushwick brand. But their branding and their capital is itself reshaping the neighborhood, by occupying space and by creating pressures that price all types of spaces beyond the reach of more and more of the area's longtime residents and businesses, and the artists among them.

The recent Bushwick Open Studios 2015 event was fun, chaotic, free, and also heavily marketed—through Arts in Bushwick, its national brand partners and sponsors, and others who cocreate events during the same weekend. While the other events always seemed commercial, Arts in Bushwick in particular felt like it was making a sharp left turn this year, away from a longstanding focus on neighborhood sustainability.

A community can be formed or dispersed based on what occurs in the real estate market. The questions of who has space and who can acquire it today impact what a neighborhood will be tomorrow. To document Bushwick's growing pains, I thought about how to turn down the volume of branding and hype and listened mostly to what people had to say about space, resources, and focus.



Thursday, 3 PM

Nonprofit director: Capital is always going to flow to its highest-generating use.

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Thursday, 6 PM, BOS hub

Volunteers: A few of the sponsors were unhappy with the guide, so we printed a supplement and we're dropping them off at all the hubs.

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Friday, 1 PM

Restaurant owner: The people from _____ came and dropped off a stack of their new magazines. They didn't recommend my place, but they listed my competitor. I've had plenty of press, so I don't really care. But I took their magazines and threw them away.

I wish I owned this building. If I owned this building, I would tear it down and put up a big hotel.

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Friday, 2 PM

Construction worker, subway entrance: We're putting on a new roof, adding an automated ticket machine, Wifi.

*

Friday, 2 PM

Tour guide, walking tour: The city council has a 10-year fast-track plan to redevelop the neighborhood.

Tourist, walking tour: I've been traveling for a couple months from Germany, I've been staying in a room in that studio building, I found it on _____.

*

Friday, 3 PM

Artist: I am keeping my studio, but I am moving upstate.

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Friday, 4 PM

Artist: I just got fired.

*

Friday, 8 PM, outside BOS opening party

Collector: They're all trust-funders who don't know what they are doing. I'm a collector, there is so much good shit in there, it's worth waiting in that line, but there's no prices on anything. You can't buy anything.

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Friday, 9 PM, art opening

Building manager: We don't own, but we feel safe, we have long leases, 12 more years.

Artist: I don't paint live anymore, I feel like a circus animal.

*

Saturday, 1 PM

Live-painter: It's okay. They bought the paint.

*

Saturday, 2 PM, restaurant-bar

Manager: They told us for months they would renew our lease, and then right before we were going to sign, he just said no.

Bartender: Rich Hamptons types from Manhattan are renting studios here now, it's the new thing to do. They pick up girls and take them to their studios.



Saturday, 4 PM (quotes & exchanges here were part of *"Bushwick Open Studios: What Have We Done?," Conversation with organizers of Bushwick Open Studios from the first event in October 2006 through today*)

Artist: "My heart is racing right now, because I'm hoping this can be a safe place for me to say some things that I want..."

"A lot the conversation is structured around Arts in Bushwick and Bushwick Open Studios. It's almost as if arts didn't exist before that.

"Small things that may seem beautiful to other people to me are haunting, like _____ naming Bushwick 7th out of the 15 coolest places to go in the world...When you come here, are you gonna see my family? No. You're not gonna see much of the community that rebuilt what happened after the Italian fires.

"What I'm asking is, how can Bushwick Open Studios hold itself accountable in the future of the way that it restructures the actual Bushwick Open Studios event and how it thematically frames it?"

Panelist: “What would you change?”

Artist: “There are so many [longtime residents] that don’t even know what’s going on, it’s 2015 and this has been going on since 2006. It’s a matter of really making outreach work. Really making outreach happen.

“Access. Making sure there is a voice of native Bushwick artists within that scene. It is imperative within your mission statement that native Bushwick’s residents and artists have to be a part of this process. Because it’s no lie that my family is being displaced, consistently, you know what I mean?... Shine more light on the community things that you do, make those the highlights. Because at the moment, Bushwick Open Studios being a highlight is a catalyst to further gentrification of this place....

“Making sure there are panels and workshops and discussions that happen that can target a place of bridging.

“Come together for marches and rallies against buyouts and tax breaks.”

Panelist: “I could not agree with any of your points more.”

BOS organizer: “...Basically there are 10 of us, and we all have day jobs. And we don’t have the time or the energy. [community organizing]...takes a huge amount of money. Do you know what generates the money that Arts in Bushwick operates on annually?”

Artist: “Let’s make sure to move forward with love, because I feel so much shade from you right now.”

BOS organizer: “We have an inherent internal conflict...It’s important for you to realize how limited our capacities are right now. “

Artist: “It’s important for you to realize how you’re talking to me right now...I heard everything you’re saying, but I am begging for you to speak to me with love...This is what I was scared of, that something like this would happen.”

Panelist: “We’ve created this beast that generates all this publicity...”

BOS organizer: “It obviously isn’t working. I’m not gonna argue with you about that on any level.”

Panelist: “What is the purpose of this festival for this neighborhood right now?”

Panelist: “Everyone who’s been involved in the leadership of the festival agrees with everything you’re saying.”

Artist: “This whole process that’s been beautifully done by you all has an effect.”

Panelist: “Of course.”

Panelist: “Everything you’ve said has been tried and hasn’t gotten traction...Help us think through new solutions instead of thinking that you thought of a solution that we just haven’t tried yet.”

Panelist: “Stop focusing on the dissimilarities, ‘I’m white, you’re black. You’ve only been in the neighborhood two years, I’ve been here my whole life.’ We’re all being exploited, we’re all being priced out of the city, and this cannot stand. We all have a right to housing, a foundation of safety.”

Artist: “I was vacated out of my building...To come home and be told you basically have two hours to move...”

“I’m a Latino artist, I know what it feels like to be displaced...to feel like I’m no longer a New Yorker because everyone else that comes in and takes over these neighborhoods are now the ones that have that control, because they can pay that rent, and we can’t pay that rent.

“So much art and life and history was left in that building when they padlocked it. “We have two months to move. I don’t even know if I can stay in Brooklyn anymore. And I love Brooklyn. I want to be able to say that I can stay in New York because it’s my home. It’s all I know.”

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Saturday, 5 PM

Artist: I really wish this event would die.

Artist: One of the organizers built another website last week and sent everyone who registered an email telling them to go to this other site, and when the artists got the email they started freaking out because they didn’t understand what was happening.



Saturday, 7 PM, Book-launch party

Speaker/Bushwick native: I didn’t know if I wanted to talk to this white teacher, but then I saw her work, and she wasn’t taking pictures of crack vials in the streets. She was taking pictures of families, she took a picture of me when I was 7 years old.

Speaker: The johns—we called them johns—worked at the banks across the street.

Guest, age 93: Remember, people do count. Just remember to share with one another. It doesn’t have to cost a lot.

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Saturday, 8 PM

Artist: I came to Bushwick just to see you. Now I have to go have sex. I love you.

Artist: It’s hard to get opportunities when one group has all the walls.

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Saturday, 9 PM

Artist: They just left, but do you want a beer?

Artist: I signed a four-year lease three years ago, but the owner hasn't said he wants to sell the building or anything.

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Saturday, 10 PM

Artist: There were two points I really felt the neighborhood change. First, when _____ became _____, that's when people with deeper pockets started coming. And second, two weeks ago, when the billboard company bought the space across the street.

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Sunday.

Artist: All the people in my building who registered for BOS got postcards from this realtor.

Artist: If you want to work together on _____, let me know.

Artist: This is the work I was telling you about.

Artist: We just moved in, in January. We're lucky, we've been working with a lot of brands. The rent is high, we're not sure how long we can stay.

Artist: We're interested in learning how people want to interact with the creek.

Activist: You should talk to the guy wearing the egret hat.

Artist: Yeah, I'm losing my space so I'm moving to LA. May as well check it out, right?

Artist: Someone stole my painting and I was freaking out, but someone else found it and contacted me.

Artist: I'm over it this year. None of these people understand what I do.

Artist: Do you know _____? I think you two should talk.

Artist: I've already moved to a new studio. I just hung a few pieces for BOS.

Artist: I sold a lot of work last year, when my studio was at _____, but the rent is too high there now, it's not worth it.

Artist: BOS is a hydra, like my girlfriend's painting here.

Artist: I'm moving out of my studio, I'm starting grad school.

Artist: Thanks for coming by.

Artist: The BOS map doesn't have street names? That's not good.

Artist: The building here is relatively well-maintained, and rent here is...reasonable.

Artist: _____ just bought _____.

Restaurant owner: We opened on Monday.

Artist: I'm hungry.

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