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Art Talk AM: Courtney Fink

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**COURTNEY
FINK**

COURTNEY FINK IS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
SOUTHERN EXPOSURE, A NON-PROFIT VISUAL ART
ORGANIZATION IN SEASIDE, CALIFORNIA. ESTABLISHED IN
1974, SOUTHERN EXPOSURE SUPPORTS ARTISTS
AND ARTISTS THROUGHOUT THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
REGION.

CYRUS W. SMITH OF ART TALK AM IN CONVERSATION WITH

COURTNEY FINK

NOVEMBER 10, 2008

CYRUS SMITH

Courtney Fink is the Executive Director of Southern Exposure, a non-profit visual arts organization in San Francisco. Founded in 1974, Southern Exposure supports emerging artists and youth through active exhibition and education programs. Prior to her work at Southern Exposure, Courtney worked at the California College for the Arts and at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco, and for Franklin Furnaces in New York. Fink also publishes books under a small press she founded by the name of Art Workers Press.



CYRUS SMITH I was hoping we could talk about the origins of Southern Exposure. The organization has been in the Mission District since the start in 1974, right?

COURTNEY FINK Yeah, we were founded in an old can factory. It's actually the oldest live/work space in San Francisco, and a group of artists took over one of the bigger spaces and starting showing their work in it, and that's how the gallery was first started.

CS But you've moved a few times, recently.

CF Yeah we did. We were there for 32 years, but in San Francisco every building needs to be earthquake-proof. Unfortunately the owners weren't able to realize that, and so we ended up having to leave. We took it as a really exciting opportunity though. A lot of the work we do is site specific, so with 32 years of one location to respond to, I think it shaped a lot of who we were as an arts organization. It was a great chance to kind of test ourselves. So we found a very

small storefront and decided to operate out of that storefront for a short period of time while realizing mostly public art projects. Southern Exposure has such a strong identity in San Francisco, and I think people really associated us with that space, but clearly after about a year and a half of really shifting what we were doing and how we were doing it, it was clear that we were still ourselves no matter where we were.

CS Good to find out.

CF It was more of an approach and how we did things. Like I said, it was founded by a group of artists. It was run mainly by the people living in this live/work building for at least the first twelve years. If you look into the archive, the early days, it's just this really free form. No money involved, no paid staff. It really has evolved a lot. But, it really was formed with a collective notion in mind, that a group of artists would run this space together, and a lot of how we operate still kind of takes that as a really important part of our model--that artists are a really vital part of the

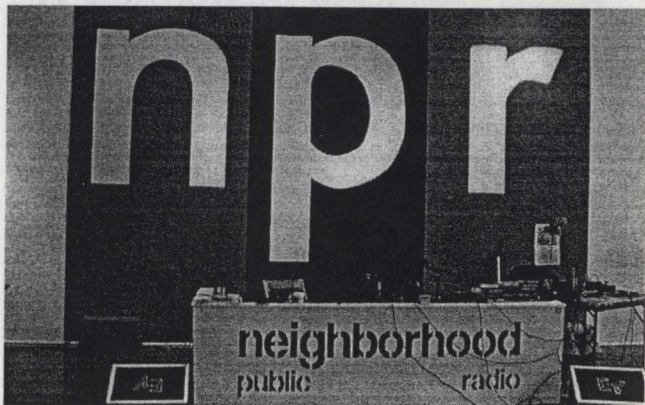
conversation. The way we curate shows is we have an artists' committee called the Curatorial Committee. People are constantly cycling through and it really infuses the organization with a sense of democracy.

CS And about that kind of democratic approach too, your submission process is still very open, especially for an organization that is as established as you are. How many submissions do you take in a year?

CF We take in a lot, but not as many as you might think. But our mission is really centered on being open and accessible, and involving artists. Also, I think the open submissions process opens our eyes to what we might not see. You know how things can get sometimes, where you only see what your friends might show you. We find the most surprising things sometimes, in ways that we wouldn't have expected...

CS Showing up at your doorstep ...

CF Yeah. It's hard enough for an artist to get an opportunity, and many of the alterna-



tive spaces at this point don't accept work. So how are artists supposed to get involved? We really are trying to stay open.

CS And it's interesting thinking of your role there, maybe not picking work to go on the wall like a curator might traditionally, but negotiating all these different relationships, negotiating with artists and allowing them to pull things off.

CF Definitely. Especially, with a committee, because we have to actually agree. Oftentimes we have heated debates for months. But, that's also the beauty of it—we don't always agree but we negotiate through it. Getting back to your question though, we like to commission new work. We give artists an honorarium and a materials budget and we kind of trust in them. And the result can happen either in the gallery or in public space, depending on how they work. We don't ask them to propose anything, we just choose them on the

IMAGES /// Neighborhood Public Radio, Radio Cartography. 2006. Produced for So-Ex Off-Site.

merit of their work. And then based on that we kind of let them do what they want to do. Many times it's their first big show, so there's a lot of learning involved. We're there to help, but for the most part it's a chance for someone to realize something, and to kind of reach the next step.

CS Let's get into some specifics. You were talking about being part of Southern Exposure at a kind of a rocky time. You're moving quite a bit, something that you've never done before as an institution, but that might have led to some opportunities. I'm thinking of Southern Exposure's Off-Site series. Could you talk about that, maybe as a specific example of helping artists develop projects?

CF Yeah, sure. I feel incredibly lucky to be a part of the organization right now, being able to lead it through this transformation, as someone who is also emerging, you know. When I first got the job I had a lot to learn, but the fact that there's still an organization that's willing to trust in the next generation of people doing things like

that is pretty unusual at this point in time, especially considering how difficult funding has become.

CS That's true.

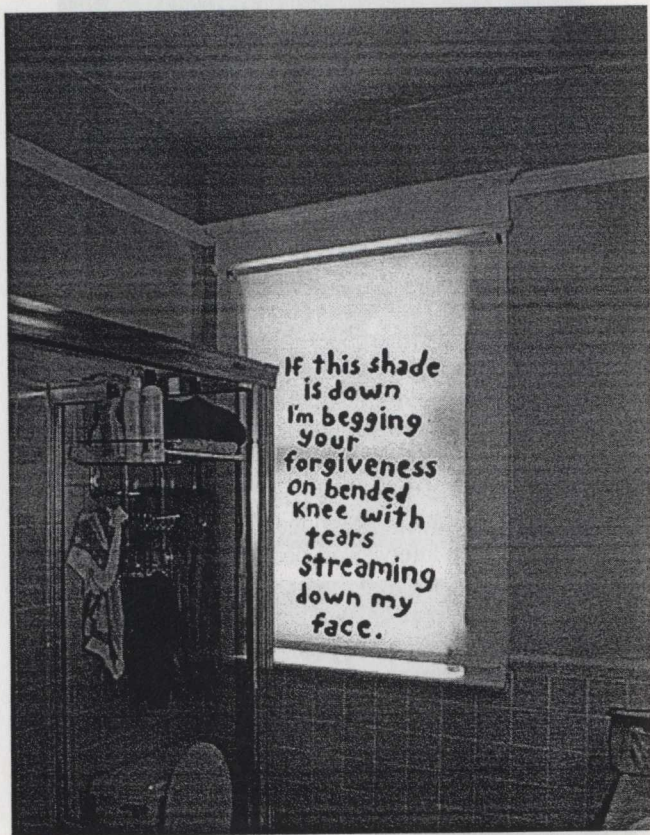
CF But I believe it's the best thing that's ever happened to us actually. Trying to reinvent ourselves and stay relevant, looking around you for inspiration and responding to what people need. And I feel like we're doing more, and have a bigger audience than we did two years ago when we left. But back to the So-Ex Off-Site, we really knew that we wanted to work beyond the space of the gallery, so we put out an open call for proposals based on a very specific premise, inspired by the notion of the situationist. We were calling it "The New Situationist" at first. How artists are looking back to that mode of production: situationist psycho-geographic practices, using the city streets, sort of roaming around. And we got about 300 proposals from around the world, which gave us a sense that there was something we had really tapped into—that there was a huge amount of this work



going on, but still not a lot of institutions willing to present it. It was all being done very independently.

CS Maybe outside the gallery, like you mentioned.

CF So, we commissioned eight projects. For example, establishing a radio station in our storefront with a group called Neighborhood Public Radio. We also worked with a local artist named Packard Jennings, who was really interested in creating his own series of lottery tickets that would be distributed at corner stores. And the way he did it was, he picked four neighborhoods in the Bay Area and he interviewed people in those neighborhoods and then printed four tickets, each with a series of eight different stories, so, 32 tickets in total. So, when you went to the corner store and you bought a regular lottery ticket you were given one of his, and you scratched it off, and it was this story from someone in the neighborhood. It



was a very successful project. I think we distributed more than 10,000 of them.

CS Oh, wow. That's a lot.

CF Just think about how many people you can reach working that way versus expecting people to come to you.

CS It's an interesting thing to think about. You were reduced down into this small storefront but then reaching so many people at the same time.

CF It's true. I mean, working that way requires collaboration. You can't realize a project without connecting with some other entity, people, or institution. So, you end up tapping into a lot of non-art audiences who have a referential interest in what you're doing as a result. We feel that we've done a lot of connecting with people who might not be connected to an arts organization, and who would experience the work and enjoy it.

CS So, I was hoping to switch gears here, just a little bit though. Along the lines of supporting artists, is the idea of finding an alternative economy for artists; something you've been looking at for a long time. I know a lot of your curatorial projects have had to do with work and the working artist. I'm thinking specifically of the free enterprise project, which happened just last summer, right?

CF Yeah, I can talk about that. You're right, I'm interested in the idea of artist labor, and what it takes to be a working artist, how to make a living. The whole thing was actually inspired by two artists, Will Rogan and John Herschend, who came to me just for friendly advice about a year before that. They were really interested in starting off a project they were calling "The Thing," which was a mail-order based subscription art project.

CS Just like you would subscribe to a magazine, right? But you get this art "thing" in the mail.

CF Right, you get a "thing." You don't know what it is, so it's sort of a surprise. They were basically coming to me just like, "We want to do this idea, but we don't know when we're going to do it." And I was like "You're doing it with us. No doubt about it." So basically, we founded Free Enterprise on the idea of investing in three artists' businesses by giving them seed funding to get started. We had a fantastic storefront on a really busy street corner with a huge amount of foot traffic, which was the perfect platform to realize these projects. So we invited three different projects. One of them was a pie delivery service by Nathan Lynch. The second one was Michael Swain who was making clothing, but using Braille lettering to design the clothing. And then the third one was The Thing.

CS It's amazing to set this up as an experiment, but then The Thing is one that's actually working, and that maybe could be a model for others to follow, hopefully, right?

CF Definitely. It's something we're definitely going to keep doing. And I think the idea of the experiment is really true. Having an open ended sort of situation for a while has been a chance to say, "Well, what else could we be doing? How else could we reinvent this?" I'm not saying that we're starting something that no one's ever done before, but it's a chance for us locally to sort of say, "What would be a good experiment?"

CS And you have become a funder in other ways too, right? With the alternative exposure grants...

CF Yeah.

CS ...another way that you're supporting artists, or at least arts organizations directly, right?

CF Yeah, yeah. That, I think that's one of, if not the most exciting things to come out of all this moving. With diminished base to support artists, we thought, "How could we have an impact on the arts commu-

nity without having to present the work ourselves?" So, if we're investing in dozens and dozens of artist-initiated projects, to build up the base of the arts community locally. And frankly, that's always where the most exciting work happens. It really starts from that beginning point.

CS So, you have all these tentacles now, and are maybe even reaching out to the future Southern Exposures of the world, right?

CF Yeah. That's the idea. I think it's important to support art making at that really core level.

ART TALK AM /// ON THE RADIO

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WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
KPSU RADIO 2008-2009

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This interview took place November 10th, 2008, live on KPSU, in conjunction with the PSU MFA Monday night Lecture Series.

All audio available for download at arttalkam.blogspot.com.

