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Centering artist voices: notes from a survey of artists and cultural workers in Philadelphia, PA, and Richmond, VA

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores our work collecting artist experiences and attending to the voices of artists themselves in two US cities. Prompted by an earlier phase of focus group research in Philadelphia with artists who voiced their needs as workers, we undertook a survey of working artists in Philadelphia and Richmond, Virginia. This survey research asks about the spatial patterns of artists living, working, and presentation locations and how that geography has changed over time, as well as how artists have weathered the pandemic in two cities. We believe this study makes innovative contributions from a methodological standpoint, given the questions we asked that supported a spatial analysis of where artists live, work, and present their work. It is also an engaged process where we centered long-neglected voices through focus groups and surveys. It is an exploration of how artists engage with space and time.

Arts and the city: context and goals of the project

Art and culture have long been considered a driver of urban quality of life, as well as community and economic development (Frenette, 2017; Markusen & Nicodemus, 2020). Yet the labor of artists often remains hidden. A recent report from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences emphatically declares that "Art is Work," and that art is valued as a positive public good. Yet that same report acknowledges that artists are fundamentally undervalued *as workers* in surveys of the American public (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2021). Why the disconnect between the value that Americans place on the arts and a lack of regard for artists as the workers who make arts and culture possible? The COVID-19 pandemic only underscored the precarity of artist livelihoods, which we explored in our research. Now is the time to reckon with the important contributions artists make to society and economy.

This essay explores our work collecting artist experiences and attending to the voices of artists themselves in two US cities. Prompted by an earlier phase of focus group research in Philadelphia with artists who voiced their needs as workers (Teresa & Zitcer, 2020), we undertook a survey of working artists in Philadelphia and Richmond, Virginia. In this previous research, we asked artists in focus groups to describe the

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conditions under which they live and make and show their work. Artists mapped where they have lived, worked, and exhibited their art, creating a spatial history of working artists in Philadelphia. We designed the survey to more broadly identify the spatial patterns of artists in Philadelphia and Richmond. This survey research asks about the spatial patterns of artists living, working, and presentation locations and how that geography has changed over time, as well as how artists have weathered the pandemic in two cities. The survey was conducted online from October 2021 through September 2022, with 88 artists from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and 59 in Richmond, Virginia participating.

We believe this study makes innovative contributions from a methodological standpoint, given the questions we asked that supported a spatial analysis of where artists live, work, and present their work. We asked for text comments on how survey respondents thought about the qualities of their spaces. It is also an engaged process where we centered long-neglected voices through focus groups and surveys. It is an exploration of how artists engage with space and time. Artists regularly negotiate the intersection of arts and place, with recent scholarship in the field documenting efforts in place imprinting, placemaking, and placekeeping (Courage et al., 2021; Redaelli, 2019). Artists are drawn to particular places, places in turn can structure artistic identities, and artists in turn impact the places where they work (Hollands & Vail, 2015).

At the same time, we consider this effort a work-in-process, with key methodological lessons to be learned about obtaining a representative sample of a diverse group of artists and engaging this population in research. Therefore, in the course of this essay, we reflect on and interrogate our methodological choices throughout this project, and issue calls for further arts-based and participatory research schemes.

Findings from the focus groups

This research contributes to an actor-centered approach to understanding artists' livelihoods in two US cities and their ideas for solutions to the challenges they face. Actor-centered approaches have been called for by Markusen (2014) in order to understand how choices are made in response to a complex, dynamic urban environment. This research agenda has so far entailed two distinct but connected studies, the first including focus groups of artists in Philadelphia, and the second, a survey distributed to artists in Philadelphia and Richmond. We conducted four focus groups in Philadelphia in 2017 and 2018, with 37 total participants.[1] We had an expansive definition of who we considered an artist. We embraced artists of all media and performance styles. We required that artists needed to have lived in Philadelphia for five years, that their art was performed or exhibited somewhere publicly in the last year, and that they made any amount of money from their art in the last year. Our goal was to avoid hobbyists. However, we did receive a little pushback from possible recruits, with a few challenging our demand that they had made money recently, as some artists had made money in the past but for health or disability reasons, they were not in a position to do so now. We compensated all participants in the focus groups, and received far more demand for participation than we had space to accommodate.

The focus groups were based around participatory mapping exercises, in which artists indicated the places they lived, worked (including rehearsal spaces and studios), and performed or exhibited, using different colored push pins. We put up maps of all the

Philadelphia neighborhoods on the walls and invited them to pin up their locations (Image 1) and then discuss the patterns they noticed. We also asked participants to place pins on places they formerly lived, worked or performed, and we talked about the way the city's arts landscape changed over time. Finally, we asked focus group participants for policy prescriptions, wondering what they could envision as a political economy more supportive of artists (Figure 1).

Here, we will summarize the findings of the focus groups in brief (for more information on the results of the focus groups, see Teresa & Zitcer, 2020). First, artists saw themselves as workers and not as solitary geniuses who did not need to earn a living from their work. They felt that dedicated space to develop their work (like a studio or rehearsal space) was important to a feeling of legitimacy, as well as increased artistic output. Many artists supplement their income from art with other jobs, or benefit from spousal support or family money. Though Philadelphia artists largely felt good about their living situations, they were concerned about rising housing costs, rising real estate taxes, and the spread of gentrification. Artists also fretted over the number of opportunities being given to artists from outside the city, when they could benefit from more performance and exhibition opportunities themselves. These concerns, while multifaceted and complex, speak to the scarcity of opportunity felt by many artists, and to the desire of arts funders to generate a national or international reputation, perhaps at the expense of the local arts ecology.

Upon the successful completion of the focus group research, we decided to pursue funding for an online survey that would further engage Philadelphia artists, as well as add artists from Baltimore and Richmond, VA. More specifically, the in-depth reflections of artists from the focus groups on their living and working conditions signaled their shared identification with other workers, while the mapping exercises created an emergent historical geography to arts in the city. Both of these findings raised the question about how widely artists identify with the needs of a broad working class, as well as could we collect additional spatial data for a more detailed analysis of the spatial patterns
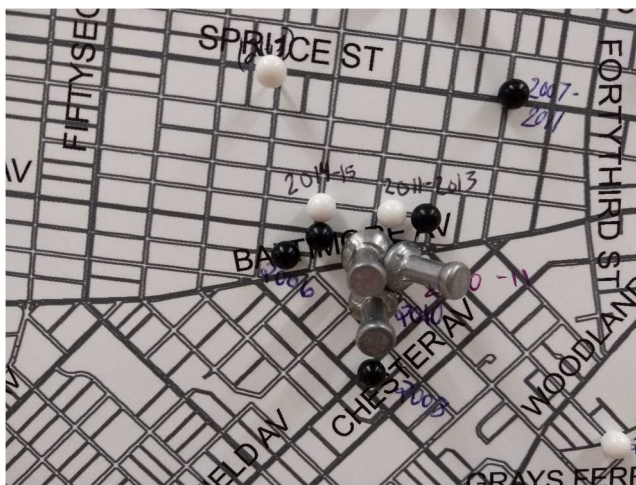

Figure 1. Closeup of Philadelphia map with participants' locations pinned.

of the arts. We received a small but competitive grant from Drexel University, which made it possible to administer the survey phase of the research.

Findings from the surveys

The survey was conducted online from October 2021 through September 2022.[2] Prior to fielding the survey, we collected a list of contact information for arts organizations based in Richmond, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, which served as our primary way to recruit survey participants. We developed this list from our own research networks, as well as other key arts organizations. We also advertised the survey through social media. We did not actively recruit survey participants from the group of artists who participated in the earlier focus groups, but we also did not track if any survey responses came from those artists.

The survey asked participants principally four categories of questions, including artist demographic information, details of the type of artistic practice, the spatiality of that practice, and the challenges and what policy and wider changes would help artists overcome those challenges. The survey included some questions specifically about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected artists. The survey responses included 88 artists from Philadelphia, 59 in Richmond, and 9 from Baltimore. Due to the low number of responses, we did not analyze the Baltimore data. We attribute the low response rate in Baltimore to our relatively under-developed research networks compared to Philadelphia and Richmond. Survey respondents from Richmond are overall whiter and have a higher income than the region as a whole. For our Philadelphia respondents, our survey sample is less white than the region, but still lacks the same racial and ethnic diversity as the Philadelphia region. The Philadelphia respondents also have significantly higher incomes than the regional median.

In terms of artistic practice, about two-thirds of all survey participants are engaged in non-performing arts, and a wide range of artistic practices are represented, including visual arts, dance, theater, music, and folk arts. While less than half of artists responding to the survey reported making art as their full-time job, a significant number, 65%, indicated their desire to do so. The most frequently cited sources of support for art-making were grants and non-arts related day jobs. Over 80% of surveyed artists from both cities report being satisfied with their quality of life; however, nearly half were dissatisfied with the state of their mental health, and in Richmond 63% indicated they were dissatisfied with the amount of time they were able to devote to art, compared to 43% in Philadelphia (Table 1).

Given that the survey was fielded during the COVID-19 pandemic and many artists were likely to have experienced COVID-related job loss or temporary closure of artistic venues, we included specific questions about what impact COVID-19 has had on artists' lives. In open-ended questions about the impact from the COVID-19 pandemic, most respondents indicated that COVID had negatively impacted artists' ability to show their work. Others noted that the pandemic also negatively impacted their mental health, which helps contextualize responses about the dissatisfaction with the state of mental health.

Finally, when asked in an open-ended format about what would help artists make and show their art, the survey participants offered many suggestions. By far the most frequent responses the participants gave were focused on expanding public support for the arts

Table 1. Artist survey responses on quality of life, mental health, and housing.

	Very satisfied		Somewhat satisfied		Somewhat dissatisfied		Very dissatisfied	
	Philadelphia	Richmond	Philadelphia	Richmond	Philadelphia	Richmond	Philadelphia	Richmond
Quality of Life	34%	39%	43%	51%	18%	5%	4%	5%
Mental Health	24%	22%	30%	29%	34%	24%	12%	24%
Housing	36%	44%	43%	41%	19%	15%	1%	0%

and artists themselves. These answers included both targeted public spending and support for artists and artistic spaces as well as more general public investment in things that would benefit a wider group beyond the arts community, such as affordable housing and universal basic income. Finally, the survey results also contribute to understanding the methodological challenges of executing such an actor-centered approach in a way that captures the variety and diversity of the artistic community across multiple dimensions of artistic practice, gender, race and ethnicity, and class.

Methodological innovations

We review the results of our methodological choices and propose alternative approaches (participatory, creative) for future research with this population. We first included spatial questions in our focus group study; specifically, we asked participants to locate on a map places where they have lived, made their art, and exhibited their art. The mapping exercises produced spatial data about the location of artistic spaces in Philadelphia over time. From the couple dozen artists in the focus groups, we could discern emergent spatial patterns, which we triangulated through focus group discussion. Based on this earlier focus group research, we were eager to gather more spatial data to see if those patterns held, developed further, and/or if they existed in other cities, like Richmond.

We designed our survey to include this spatial component of artistic practice and life in the city. Participants were asked to write the location and/or address of places they lived, worked, and showed art, and the year(s) those spaces were important to them. Our goal was to collect a large-N set of spatial data of artists working and living. The data collected in this part of the survey, however, was often incomplete or the way participants completed the questions varied, complicating the analysis. For example, the survey was designed to allow participants to engage with the spatial questions in a semi-open format to maximize flexibility and the data that we could collect. However, allowing this kind of flexibility in how participants could respond – for example, by naming a specific building or venue, by nearest intersection, and by street address – added to the complexity of the data and the time required to analyze them. When artists would indicate an important location from years or even decades ago, it became difficult to verify the venue or exact location without first-hand knowledge of the spatial history of the city.

Limitations

We contrast our own work on this project with a more recent project undertaken by Zitcer called the PA Humanities Discovery Project. This project sought to create the

first ever statewide picture of humanities practitioners in Pennsylvania. It was similar to the Locating Artists project in that it consisted of an electronic survey and a series of focus groups. However, it generated 550 survey responses that were broadly representative of the PA population. And it was able to sustain eight focus groups, generating a larger volume of useful data.

There were three key differences that made the project successful on a different level than our Locating Artists project. The first was that the budget was over $100,000 (supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021). Second, there was a National Advisory Board as well as a Pennsylvania Working Group (both compensated for their time) that met with the research team and guided the development, deployment and interpretation of the data. Finally, there was consistent, dedicated staff support from PA Humanities, who knew the practitioners well, and could conduct outreach for the survey and focus groups to make sure the right people participated. The PA Humanities Discovery Project points to some of the ways the Locating Artists project could be enhanced for a future iteration.

Throughout the Locating Artists survey phase, we faced demographic representativeness and response rate challenges. It is notoriously getting harder to get responses to electronic surveys, even when offering financial incentives, as we did (Daikeler et al., 2020). Unlike focus groups, which can offer pre-screening to curate a diverse sample, survey responses are harder to curate. Absent the large and well-connected outreach team that Zitcer had with the PA Humanities Discovery Project, it was difficult to root out and encourage participation from a sufficiently diverse and large sample. In the future, it may be useful to have an artist advisory board that represents the diversity and scope we seek, and have that group actively work as recruiters, as well as help interpret and frame the findings for public consumption.

Implications and reflections

This project on centering artist voices has implications for artists and those who value the arts; implications for theory; and implications for research practice. From an arts and culture perspective, this research centers artist voices and policy perspectives, as well as delving into the particular dynamics of Philadelphia and Richmond. One could imagine similar participatory cultural mapping projects taking place in other communities, perhaps driven by major funders or policymakers who may be able to implement the recommendations generated by the artists, thereby shaping a future full of possibility.

Our work starts from the theoretical position that artists are workers, and important contributors to society, rather than a fringe or an ornamental presence. Artists are also precursors to the modern gig economy, and their ability to navigate precarious labor conditions should be held up both as an inspiration to all workers, and a cautionary tale about lack of protections for vulnerable classes of workers who deserve more support, whether it be tax relief, guaranteed income, or universal healthcare. In addition, many artists are plagued by perceptions of scarcity of opportunity driven by funding conditions that may prioritize artists from other places. These are serious concerns for our respondents, and these deserve collective public deliberation.

From a methodological perspective, we find there is much to recommend to the field when it comes to participatory asset mapping exercises like those we undertook during

both the focus group and survey phases of the project. For example, we contrast the artists' participation in the analysis of the spatial data they produced in the focus group mapping exercises with our own much more limited analysis of the survey's spatial data. We also need to be honest with ourselves and with our artist co-conspirators that this work takes real financial, time and labor resources. The time and attention to recruitment paid during the PA Humanities Discovery Project by an expanded staff and not just two faculty researchers (as well as the larger budget) ensured a higher level of survey and focus group participation in that project. We can imagine a future scenario where we employ artists as co-creators of the research design, implementation and interpretation of this project. We are inspired by the continuing evolution of Participatory Action Research (Cahill, 2007), arts based participatory research (Nunn, 2022) and critical cartography (Kim, 2015) to achieve aims of belonging and inclusion. The sense of place (Cheshmehzangi, 2015) and placemaking literature (Keidar et al., 2023) offer avenues for further exploration of the connection between artists and place, including the challenges expressed by some artists concerning their mental and overall health. By including artists in every phase of the project, we further increase their sense of agency and the validity of the responses we generate, inviting them to become authors of their own narratives (Lake & Zitcer, 2012).

Notes

1. Human subjects research for focus groups was approved by the Drexel University Institutional Review Board, Protocol #1702005186. Research participants gave informed consent by being read a consent document and offering verbal assent.
2. Human subjects research for the survey was approved by the Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board, Protocol #HM20021755. Research participants gave informed consent through a survey participant information sheet that preceded the survey. Participants indicated their willingness to participate as a condition of being able to access the survey.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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