

ART & DESIGN

It's an Art Gallery. No, a Living Room. O.K., Both.

By ROBIN POGREBIN JULY 3, 2016

There was wine in plastic cups and people milling around, but the similarity to any other art gallery opening ended there.

This was the painter Austin Eddy's one-bedroom walk-up apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, on a Sunday afternoon. The entry to the multiple occupancy townhouse was redolent with cat litter. The centerpiece of the show was in his bedroom closet.

The work was Ryan Johnson's "Life Study," a colorful sculpture made of aluminum, medical casting tape and other materials. It was not for sale. The opening was merely an opportunity to help Mr. Johnson, an artist between gallery shows, get his latest work in front of an audience, and for Mr. Eddy to do some networking.

Since the 2008 economic downturn, temporary do-it-yourself art galleries have proliferated in apartments, storefronts and other spaces all over the country. Call it a response to an art world in which dealer representation is increasingly hard to come by; exhibitions are costly; and formerly affordable areas like Bushwick have priced out artists, forcing them to seek out scrappier locations in which to show their work.

But these self-starting galleries also signify a growing effort by artists — both emerging and established — to find community in an increasingly stratified art world and to wrest control of their careers from the curators and dealers who determine which works are seen. They are taking matters into their own hands by promoting and connecting with one another.

“Artists are the tastemakers now,” said Emily Weiner, 34, who, with her fellow painter Sharona Eliassaf, 35, periodically mounts an exhibition series called the Willows in her Brooklyn Heights apartment (on Willow Street). “We don’t wait for galleries to pick us up.”

These home galleries are generally not moneymaking ventures. While a few might take a cut of the sales, most aim to just show the work and create ferment among artists and potential buyers. They bypass the commercial gallery system and its chic white-box formality.

“It’s tough to be an artist in New York City,” said Carole Server, a collector who attended Mr. Eddy’s show. “Studio space is incredibly expensive and difficult to find, and you face a lot of rejection. How many artists get some recognition?”

Given a high-powered, high-priced art market, in which it can be impossible to break in, “the opportunities come as much from your colleagues,” Ms. Weiner said. In 2013, she featured the artist Sam Adams in a Willows show. Mr. Adams suggested to the artist Jay Davis that he look at Ms. Weiner’s paintings. Then, last February, Mr. Davis included Ms. Weiner’s work in a group show that he curated in the space between the Ace Hotel’s lobby and the John Dory Oyster Bar in the Flatiron district.

“A decade ago, collectors would buy works straight out of your graduate school studio and there was a feeling of cutthroat competitiveness,” Ms. Weiner said. “It doesn’t help to be competitive right now.”

Most of these alternative galleries are open by appointment only and publicize their events through Instagram, Facebook and other social media. As a result, visiting these spaces can take effort. In an email to prospective attendees, Mr. Eddy explained that openings at his place, called Eddysroom, “are semi private events, so

please refrain from passing out the address and phone number, but feel free to bring a plus one” — and to “call or text if you are having trouble finding the spot.”

Indeed, those involved in this gallery scene say the trouble it takes to see shows at odd times in out-of-the-way spaces are a testament to the hunger for art experiences that feel human and intimate. “People travel to the neighborhood, find parking, come to my front gate, call the number because there’s no buzzer,” said Paul Soto, a writer who runs Park View gallery out of his home in the MacArthur Park section of Los Angeles. “For me to come down and have this interaction with them — it’s really personal.”

Several of the artists featured in these unorthodox shows are already established professionals, like Mr. Johnson, for example, who had a solo show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co in New York in 2010 and has been featured in group exhibitions at Marlborough Chelsea and the Sculpture Center.

“The big thing is just having a show, no matter where it is,” Mr. Johnson said. “There isn’t always an opportunity to show someplace, so you just make your own opportunity.”

Once a novelty, artist-run spaces now abound. The artist David Prince runs Adjunct Positions out of his garage in the Highland Park section of Los Angeles. Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam, married artists, operate the Suburban gallery in two outbuildings in the yard of their home in the Oak Park neighborhood in Chicago.

Many, not surprisingly, can be found in Brooklyn, including Mountain, which the artist Michael Fleming started this year in his Bushwick apartment, and Violet’s Cafe, which three artists started in 2013 in a former factory in Carroll Gardens.

Sarah Meyohas, an artist who recently received an M.F.A. from Yale, runs a gallery in the apartment she grew up in on the Upper East Side. “When we were in school, we had critiques,” she said. “I thought, ‘How can we have something that’s sort of like the next step?’ This is the way I could engage in a really direct way with other people’s work. It’s made me a better artist.”

Some of these galleries aim to redress what many perceive as a market that favors artists who are white and male.

“In some ways, I was interested in doing it because I was angry about what I was seeing around me,” said Violet Dennison, 27, one of the artists who started Violet’s Cafe, which is currently on hiatus. “All the artists that were showing were men. I felt like I had nowhere to be; there was nothing that represented me.”

To be sure, sometimes showing art in your home can be inconvenient.

“The downside of it was having a lot of people in my apartment,” said Katie Geha, 36, a writer and art historian, who until recently ran a gallery in her Austin, Tex., apartment. “But the upside was that I really did become part of an art community.”

Sometimes visitors showed up at odd hours.

“People would knock on my door,” Ms. Geha said. “And then I’d answer in my pajamas.”

Ms. Geha went so far as to accommodate an artist in residence: Jeff DeGolier, who constructed a large installation in her living room out of trash he found around Austin during his week sleeping on Ms. Geha’s lime green sofa.

“Living with that piece was extremely difficult,” she said.

Like Ms. Geha — now director of the Dodd Galleries at the University of Georgia in Athens — these entrepreneurial gallerists occasionally go on to bigger and better things. Alex Gartenfeld, who was an artist when he started the West Street gallery in his West Village apartment with Matt Moravec, is now the deputy director and chief curator of the Institute for Contemporary Art in Miami, and Mr. Moravec runs the Off Vendome gallery in Chelsea.

Some galleries that started below the radar have gradually earned greater attention from curators and critics, like Pierogi, Reena Spaulings and Regina Rex, all on the Lower East Side.

Still, artists say most galleries that operate on the margins these days are not meant to be steppingstones to the mainstream. They have become an important way for a greater number of artists to have influence and to make their own art world.

“We’re doing it because we want to hang out with other artists,” said Ms. Weiner of the Willows. “Artists are the ones who are creating the buzz.”

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