Terri C. Smith of Franklin Street Works in Conversation for 10xCommunity

We sat down to learn more about her time specifically at Franklin Street Works, and how the organization is dedicating its next chapter to archiving its powerful body of programs, events and exhibitions, contextualizing them for a new audience.


Lead image, Roots & Roads, curated by Anita N. Bateman, installation view. Foreground: commissioned site-specific installation by Nontsikelelo Mutiti. Background (L-R): works by Jay Simple and Bryan Keith Thomas. Photo by Object Studies.)
ANTE. Thanks, Terri, for sitting down with us! So Franklin Street Works was known as a contemporary art space but during your time working there, it achieved recognition for engaging with social justice as well. Can you elaborate on the founding of the space, its evolution and how social justice aligned with FWS’ mission?

Terri C. Smith. Being the founding creative director of an arts organization is a unique perspective because you are steeped in its institutional history and have a deep on-the-ground understanding of its growth and impact. When I was invited to co-founded Franklin Street Works by Stamford lawyer and philanthropist Kathryn Emmett she had the idea of an art space with a cafe. It was up to me to craft the specifics in terms of mission, vision, and programming. I had been in Connecticut working in the arts for a few years and had a sense of that scene. When I began conceptualizing what FSW might look like, I was thinking a lot about NYC alternative art spaces from the 60s and 70s like Artists Space (https://artistsspace.org/), The Kitchen, (https://thekitchen.org/) and Food (https://somethingscurated.com/2018/08/16/remembering-new-yorks-seminal-artist-run-restaurant-food/) and their commitment to emerging artists and grassroots principles. I also had 15 years of experience working in two accredited museums and valued good scholarship and museum best practices. So my thinking was to create a program that included rigorous exhibitions and also integrated values of community inclusion – a discursive, social, and activist community hub with contemporary art at its center.

When we first opened in Stamford, Connecticut, showing conceptual art necessitated a lot of interpretation and direct conversations with visitors. In the beginning, merely showing conceptual art felt like a form of activism! All of our exhibitions were original, thematic group shows curated in house by guest curators or myself. This thematic approach aimed to build an audience beyond art-interested individuals by drawing connections between contemporary art practices and events in our day-to-day lives. In other words, if an exhibition included work about the environment, the idea is that it would attract folks who might not be familiar with contemporary art, but, because of their interest in nature, science or conservation they would have a point of entry. It was an individualized approach that aimed at connecting, often challenging, contemporary art to a broader public.

As far as how the social justice trajectory connected to our mission, these key factors spring to mind: our coincidental opening of the space when Occupy Wall Street was encamped in Zuccotti Park; an archive of artist activist collectives we developed for a 2013 exhibition; our exploration of Franklin Street Works’ values with a 2014 strategic plan; and a show on immigration Yaelle Amir curated for us in 2015 (see above, “Acting on Dreams.”) I’ve only recently realized it, but Occupy Wall Street was a profound influence on the formation and direction of FSW. I knew some artists who were involved in the Park – many of them affiliated with Bard MFA. It was intriguing to me how artists brought an unmonumental sculpture/MFA materiality to activism and how an alternative, pop-up social system that shared qualities with social practice projects was being constructed from scratch there. I now understand FSW was influenced by OWS’s materiality and its creation of an inclusive, activist space that interrogated the status quo and posited corrective, world-building scenarios.

Social justice as an exhibition theme was directly addressed for the first time with our 2013 exhibition Working Alternatives: Breaking Bread, Art Broadcasting and Collective Action, co-curated by Mackenzie Schneider, Jess Wilcox and myself. We were thinking about how artists used food, broadcasting, and collective action during the early history of alternative spaces in NYC, and how artists were still using these tactics. Jess explored artists who use food, Mackenzie looked at artists using media like television and newspapers, and our gallery manager, Sandrine Milet, and I explored collective action, sending out an open call for materials from self-described artist/activist collectives. The starting date for our artist/activist collectives was the end date of an existing archive organized by NYC artist/activist collective Political Art Documentation & Distribution (PAD/D), which included socially conscious arts organizations working from 1979–1990. We put a call out to more than 90 collectives and received materials from approximately 30. While the show was on view, Brooke Singer, a Professor of New Media at SUNY Purchase (who was in one of the collectives we exhibited) invited us to take the archive out of its boxes and present it as an exhibition at the College’s Passage gallery later that year. Sandrine and I curated Collective Action Archive with Purchase students Stephen Barakat and Gina Mischianti, writing additional interpretive texts about the collectives and exhibition essays from various points of view. Eventually the materials were accessioned into the SUNY Purchase Library zine archive, making them available to students and scholars.

This year-long immersion into collective action art practices was followed by Franklin Street Works’ 2014 strategic plan, which re-emphasized our commitment to socially conscious art and community engagement. In the strategic plan, we described our core values, “Art is part of a larger social enterprise and thereby serves as a catalyst for social action. Both the individual artist and our communities are vital partners with us. The artist creates new models and impacts our communities. Our communities generate creative conversations within our space and elsewhere about our production.”

The next year, when Yaelle Amir curated *Acting on Dreams: The State of Immigrant Rights, Conditions, and Advocacy in the United States*, FSW’s work in social justice really began to crystallize. I personally had an “ah ha” moment about how actionable elements could become part of an art exhibition when Yaelle asked us to create a resource list of regional immigrant organizations for the catalog. I was energized by how *Acting On Dreams* was firing on all cylinders. The artworks and commissioned installations were well executed and materially interesting, but it
was also exhibition as logistical support, community gathering place, investigative journalism platform, educational venue, and more. From then on, we were off to the races in actively planning exhibitions that addressed social justice issues head on.

ANTE. The pandemic has affected everyone in the arts, and has required flexibility and resourcefulness. Your team has recognized that the time has come to put future exhibitions in the physical space on hold. What are your goals moving forward in building an archive? In addition, how do you hope this archival project will evolve? What resources in particular are you seeking to help achieve this goal?

TCS. It is important to me that the legacy of Franklin Street Works lives on through a digital archive that is organized and accessible to anyone interested in contemporary art history or any of our 415 past exhibiting artists and collectives. I’m working with a handful of past board members to map a path forward in creating that. Right now we are exploring the best approaches in applying for archiving grants. I’ve also been talking to other small art spaces that no longer have physical spaces but still have an online presence, and chatting with archivist friends about the best order of operations in getting started. Since the entirety of FSW’s institutional memory is in my brain and my computer (and back up disk, of course!) it is my responsibility to organize the materials in preparation for a professional archivist. In a perfect world, I’d like to have the spirit of FSW live on in a less localized way. It would be exciting to see the archive combine with a national program of grants for emerging artists and to create and/or support commissioned projects.

Love Action Art Lounge curated by Terri C Smith, installation view of Carmelle Safdie’s commissioned, site-specific installation. Photo by Object Studies.
ANTE. What particular aspect of your tenure do you reflect on with satisfaction?

TCS. There are so many, but two aspects that come to mind immediately.

First, the transformative nature of Franklin Street Works’ educational programming. The physical space of FSW is an intimate repurposed Victorian row house. So when we had tours, talks, and performances, there wasn’t much physical distance between the community and the presenters. I also intentionally set a very welcoming tone that signified there wasn’t much, if any, hierarchical distance between artist and audience either. I think this intimacy and casual, social vibe created a comfortable space for learning, questioning, and authentic connection that was memorable and resonant. There were dozens of times when a past event attendant would volunteer specifics about how it changed their perspective or affected the course of their work or life.

The second aspect is a personal one. I developed so many wonderful relationships with FSW’s artists, curators, staff/board, interns, and contract workers these last nine years. So many of the people we partnered with on projects were collaborative, talented, and conscientious. My life is vastly enriched for having known them. I was 43 when I co-founded FSW. Frequently in middle age we can become set in our ways, but my life was infused with an endless stream of compassionate critique, encouragement, and aspirational thinking. Many of the folks I worked with became my teachers, modeling generosity and inquisitiveness, pointing out when I was being old fashioned or on auto pilot, and perennially challenging me to work toward optimal equity and inclusiveness. As stressful as the labor of running an art space can be, the love, laughs, and learning outshone the fatigue that sometimes accompanies this type of work.

(https://antecedentprojects.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/9e0ca90c-88c7-45f8-807d-0747fd1a6cde.jpeg)

Sherry Millner artist talk on the occasion of In this place where the guest rests, curated by Jacqueline Mabey. Photo by Michael Mandiberg.
ANTE. How have you focused your energy on moving forward during the pandemic as a cultural producer?

TCS. With the COVID-19 pandemic, this is such a universal question right now in the arts and beyond. Right now my energy is focused on staying connected with close friends, taking care of my body with exercise, and connecting to nature (and my dog) with walks and gardening. I’m also doing some freelance grant and copywriting for an Alzheimer’s organization which has me thinking about how the labor of families, especially women’s labor, is literally keeping eldercare afloat in the U.S. I am thinking there is a feminist exhibition on labor, healthcare, and ageism in there somewhere. Things are still fresh with FSW closing, and I lost my mother recently too so there are a lot of new normals to digest, consequently, I am doing a lot of reflection right now, in a good way, I think, I hope..! Haha.

As we touched on earlier, I am starting to organize materials for an FSW archive. I am also awkwardly working to shift the Feminisms and the Arts class I teach at UConn-Stamford to distance learning and continuing ask colleagues and friends – especially those whose practices are about creating more equity and inclusiveness in the art world – how I can support them and their work during these difficult times.

In contemplating the last nine years, I’ve realize that curating for me is most rewarding when it’s in collaboration with a community where I feel a significant connection. Ideally, if I were to commit to another full-time position in the visual arts, the community I choose to work with would be as important as the organization. The places that feel like home to me are Bridgeport (where I live) and New Haven (where I have friends and there is a vibrant art scene) as well as my hometown of Nashville, TN. So I hope to stay put in Connecticut or move back to Tennessee. That said, we never know what the future brings, so I’m keeping an open mind at the same time.

Tags: art and activism art nonprofit art space community-based art conceptual art Curating curator Franklin Street Works Jess Wilcox MacKenzie Schneider Sandrine Milet social practice socially engaged art SUNY Purchase Terri C Smith