A SCENE GROWS IN Brooklyn

Artists by the hundreds have been flocking to Bushwick, a working-class neighborhood just east of trendy Williamsburg. Curators, collectors, and dealers are following

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT on Wilson Avenue, a standard-issue urban thoroughfare located in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. A glittery Buick cruises between row houses and convenience stores, dispensing the dull thud of a bass-heavy beat. Clusters of neighborhood twentysomethings chat animatedly in English and Spanish. And, in the middle of a busy patch of sidewalk, artist René Stessl is frantically tending to a pair of women seated at a table draped in white. As curious pedestrians make their way around the diners, the affable Stessl dishes up a multicourse meal on real china. On the menu this evening: tomato soup followed by several different types of strudel, including ricotta-walnut and white cabbage with cheddar.

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COURTESY FACTORY FRESH, BROOKLYN

Bushwick Dice **by the Skewville collective (brothers Ad Deville and Droo) and a "toof mural" by the British graffiti artist Sweet Toof, installed as part of a pop-up "art park" at Factory Fresh for a one-day community event last summer.**

Diners enjoying René Stessl's "1hr Restaurant" on a Bushwick sidewalk.

Rooftop opening of "Fortress to Solitude" at NURTUREart Gallery.

Installation view of Ahram Jeong's *No More Picture with a Dead Body*, 2009, at Momenta Art.

This unusual dinner is part of an ongoing art project titled "1hr Restaurant," in which Stessl sets up his guerrilla eatery in locations around New York and invites members of the (often bewildered) public to sit down to a free home-cooked meal. An Austrian citizen (and former chef) who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Stessl has shown his paintings and installations all over Europe and is represented by the Teapot Gallery in Cologne, Germany. As part of his pop-up restaurant project, launched last September, he has served meals in Central Park and Times Square. Each event is photographed before he folds up his dining station and vanishes into the subway. This documentation serves as the final work.

Stessl heard about Bushwick while still in Europe. "I saw a documentary on Bushwick and artists and heard there was a guy doing shows in his apartment," he explains. "So, of course, I would want to be here."

NEW YORK CITY has long been home to concentrated colonies of artists. In the 1940s and '50s, there was the Greenwich Village of the Abstract Expressionists. In the '70s, SoHo was a magnetic pole for Conceptualists, including the building-slicer Gordon Matta-Clark and various members of Fluxus. And in the 1980s, artists and performers began pouring into Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In the new millennium, the peripatetic community of New York artists—a constituency perennially in search of that magical combination of cheap rent and big work spaces—has settled on Bushwick.

It's no mystery why the neighborhood is suddenly so popular: a working-class district that lies just east of now-trendy Williamsburg, Bushwick is dotted with industrial spaces that are ideal for cranking out installations and hosting underground events. It is also cheap. Retail space goes for about half of what it does in Williamsburg. And it's convenient—a 20-minute subway ride from Manhattan.

As a result, artists have moved into the area in droves. When the volunteer group Arts in Bushwick organized the first neighborhood open studios, in 2007, there were about 150 studios and alternative spaces listed. By last summer, that number had increased to almost 400. Now, on any given weekend, it's possible to see a techno-punk ensemble do lip-synch routines or go to an art opening in somebody's basement. There are indie-rock performances, pop-up sculpture parks, and an ever-evolving lineup of brightly saturated graffiti murals.

The confluence of happenings has drawn the attention of high-profile curators. Christian Rattemeyer, an associate curator of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, has been making forays into Bushwick for half a dozen years. Last fall, he helped lead a tour of the neighborhood's art spaces for the Friends of Contemporary Drawing, a MoMA affiliate group. "It's nice to be reminded that art is made in these vibrant environments," he says. "If you see it in a white cube, you see it disassociated from where it was made."

The neighborhood has also begun to attract a more permanent mainstream presence. In the past year, the nonprofit arts incubators NURTUREart and Momenta Art both decamped from Williamsburg to Bushwick (for the same arts-filled warehouse building at 56 Bogart Street). And,

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: CAROLINA A. MIRANDA; COURTESY NURTUREART, BROOKLYN; LILI CHIN; OPPOSITE: COURTESY VALENTINE, RIDGEWOOD, NEW YORK

Michael Ballou's *The Pile*, from his 2011 show, "What makes us different from the animals," at Valentine Gallery.

this month, Chelsea stalwart Luhring Augustine is scheduled to open a sprawling 12,500-square-foot space in the neighborhood that will serve as an art warehouse and exhibition hall. The building, once a supply center for 99-cent stores, will more than double the gallery's display area.

Caroline Burghardt, the gallery's director of publications and archives, says that the extra room will allow for the sort of long-term, large-scale pieces that would never work in Manhattan, where space is at a premium. The debut exhibition will feature work by video artist Charles Atlas. The plan is to do three or four long-term shows a year and possibly remain open on weekends, when the Bushwick scene generally comes roaring to life.

TWENTY YEARS AGO

Bushwick would have been an unlikely location for this kind of light-speed art-ification. A prosperous beer brewing center in the early 20th century, the area, which includes a warehouse district to the west and a hillside residential sector to the east, had gone into a steep decline by the 1960s, when much of the middle class left the city for the suburbs. Those who couldn't sell their buildings simply abandoned them or set them on fire to collect the insurance. By the early '70s, when the last of the breweries shut down, buildings burned almost nightly. Then came a vicious one-two punch: the 1977 New York City blackout that resulted in widespread looting and the crack epidemic of the '80s, which left Bushwick riddled with drug dens and plagued by one of the worst murder rates in the city.

Painter and collagist Fred Tomaselli lived in neighboring Williamsburg during the mid- to late '80s, when things were especially rough. "Bushwick had a huge aura of hellish dangerousness," he recalls. His neighbors warned him that it was "a no-go zone."

But as New York rebounded in the '90s, so did Bushwick. Violent crime plummeted. Immigrant families from Ecuador and Mexico moved in, as did clusters of artists who were getting priced out of other parts of the city. Fred Valentine lived in Williamsburg throughout the 1980s, where he cofounded Galapagos Art Space in 1995. As Williamsburg went condo in the late '90s, he found himself looking for an affordable spot where he could live and paint. He settled on an old knitting factory in Ridgewood, Queens, a largely residential community that sits on Bushwick's northern border. "The neighborhood was a little spooky," he recalls. "But the space was big and it was a good deal."

Valentine wasn't the only one to move east. Sculptor Wendy Klemperer ended up in Bushwick because she was looking for an industrial space that could accommodate the production of her oversize steel figures. Tomaselli landed in the area because he needed a separate "toxic room" for working with resin. Painter Amy Sillman and sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard both have studios in the neighborhood, as do legions of young artists who have poured into the empty warehouses to live and work.

"The majority of young people here come straight from grad school and they've heard about the neighborhood from other students," says Jason Andrew, who oversees the nonprofit community arts group Norte Maar out of a storefront gallery that does double duty as his apartment. "For a while, there was a whole RISD crowd," he says, referring to the Rhode Island School of Design. "Then there was a group from Ohio. Then we were getting people from New York. Then it was transplants from all over. Now, it's begun to slow down because many of the warehouses have filled up."

Where artists congregate, art spaces follow. In the fall of 2005, Ad Hoc Art—a print facility, art gallery, and film-screening space—set up shop in the neighborhood's industrial zone. Norte Maar appeared the following year. By

WENDY KLEMPERER

Wendy Klemperer's Bushwick space includes an area where she can work outdoors on her oversize steel figures without worrying about welding fumes or sparks.

2007, things had really accelerated: artist Austin Thomas opened Pocket Utopia, a storefront where she hosted exhibitions, salons, and a rotating array of resident artists. Chris Harding established English Kills, a warehouse gallery that has since displayed an aggressive mix of painting, collage, and performance. And, a year later, the urban-art space Factory Fresh opened up in a former grocery store on Flushing Avenue. Like the artist-run galleries that clustered in Greenwich Village during the Abstract Expressionist era, these gathering places have helped shape the loose agglomeration of neighborhood artists into a lively community.

Kevin Regan, who cofounded the basement gallery Famous Accountants on a residential side street in 2009, says that places like Pocket Utopia inspired his own venture. "People want to interact with each other," he says. "They want to have conversations about art." His space, which he manages in collaboration with artist Ellen Letcher, was opened with the idea that it would help foster discussion. "On Sundays, we'll have coffee and people will come over and we'll talk."

EVEN AS LUHRING Augustine puts the finishing touches on its sleek warehouse building, the local gallery scene, which has spilled beyond Bushwick's borders, remains gleefully homegrown. Events are regularly held on rooftops, in basements, and even in alleys. For two years running, Factory Fresh has helped organize a pop-up "art park"—featuring an array of muralists, sculptors, and graffitists—on a narrow side street alongside its space.

"Sometimes you get tired of being overwhelmed with all the showiness elsewhere," says Eugenie Tsai, curator of contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum, who makes "semi-regular" jaunts through the neighborhood. "This feels more intimate and sincere." Tsai is in the midst of presenting a series of exhibitions at the museum titled "Raw/Cooked," featuring the work of emerging artists from Brooklyn. The first

Opening of a group show, "View of Outer Space from an Aquarium," at Famous Accountants last year.

two artists in the series, Kristof Wickman and Lan Tuazon, both live in Bushwick.

As is generally the case with emerging art scenes, galleries come and go. Ad Hoc and Pocket Utopia have closed their spaces. But others continue to thrive. Both English Kills and Factory Fresh are in the black, selling original works that generally range in price from $3,000 to $6,000, with small works and prints starting as low as $100. The much smaller Famous Accountants, which sells works from $500 to $2,500, was expecting to turn a profit by the end of 2011. And new galleries seem to pop up every month. Last fall, Valentine opened a namesake gallery in the front of his studio. "I want to create opportunity," he says. "It's such a boost for anyone to have a show." Until February 5, Valentine is showing Adam Simon's intimate graphite drawings derived from stock photographs and Rick Briggs's large, colorful paintings.

There are others, too, like Microscope Gallery and Tompkins Projects on the south side. Regina Rex, located in a warehouse building to the north, participated in the NADA Art Fair during Art Basel Miami Beach in December.

The neighborhood's happenings have also rippled through the greater art world. Last year, a posthumous exhibition of Alvin Baltrop's photography at Famous Accountants helped resuscitate his documentary work in art circles. One of the gallery's exhibitions—of paintings by Matthew Miller—was also reviewed in the *New York Times*. And countless other spaces have served as launching pads for a variety of artists. English Kills has long shown the mosaiclike seascapes of Andrew Piedilato, who, last fall, had a one-man show at Patrick Painter Gallery in Los Angeles.

While there isn't a unifying esthetic, the unifying ethos is of the relaxed, do-it-yourself variety. Harding, who works a day job as an art handler, found the space for English Kills, on Forrest Street, by standing outside a warehouse that intrigued him. There was no buzzer, he recalls. "So I waited in front of the building until someone came out and I asked for the landlord's phone number." Within weeks, he had a gallery. Now he has a roster of more than a dozen artists. Though his reputation has grown, Harding keeps the operation simple. He runs it on his own, with the help of occasional volunteers and the regular presence of his friendly little dog. His guiding principle: "I show what I like."

HOW MUCH LONGER Bushwick will be able to hold on to this informality remains to be seen. The neighborhood sits at a crossroads of cultural production, home to dancers, singers, and aspiring novelists. Indie rockers have flocked to the area, establishing homespun recording studios and an Internet music station dubbed Newtown Radio. On the food end, things are even buzzier. Roberta's, a local pizzeria, has become a culinary destination after two positive reviews in the *New York Times*. Pricey bars and industrial-chic eateries are materializing on side streets and in warehouses.

All of this has generated talk of the "G" word: gentrification. The real-estate website Curbed.com regularly runs stories under the header: "Bushwick Gentrification Watch." Some locals have taken to calling the area "Bouge-wick," as in bourgeois Bushwick. There is even a YouTube series devoted to exploring the issue: *East WillyB*, about the misadventures of a young Puerto Rican man named Willy who is trying to keep his neighborhood bar alive as the area shifts from working-class quarter to artsy enclave.

Naturally, these changes have led to some concern among artists (and long-time locals) who would like the neighborhood to remain affordable. Chloë Bass, a performance artist and one of the organizers behind Bushwick Open Studios, suggests that the neighborhood's new commercial entities support subsidized studio programs and community spaces. "This would at least keep art-making in the neighborhood," she says.

For the time being, however, the artists of Bushwick revel in their moment. Any given weekend offers an onslaught of performances, salons, and impromptu exhibitions, not to mention guerrilla restaurateurs from Vienna. "This is where the artists are," says Eric Heist, an installation artist who is also a cofounder of the two-decade-old Momenta, an arts nonprofit that got its start in much the same way that many of the spaces in Bushwick did: a group of friends came together to help each other display their work.

"That's why we're here," Heist says. "We follow the artists wherever they go." ■

CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

Untitled **(above) and** ***Self-Portrait*****, both 2010, by Bushwick artist Kristof Wickman, featured in the Brooklyn Museum's first "Raw/Cooked" show last year.**

TOP: COLLECTION JOHN FREIDMAN; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST