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RETHINKING THE RESIDENCY

Community-focused Actualize provides space and support to artists

BY RACHEL GALLAHER

ONE NIGHT IN DECEMBER 2023, industrial designer Kate Bailey sat down to dinner with philanthropists and art supporters Shari D. Behnke and Edie Adams. It was a routine get-together at Adams' house — the three women, each deeply involved in Seattle's creative community, had grown close, bonding over their love of art. Adams and Bailey had met through their jobs at Microsoft, where they worked on the team that designed the Surface Pro tablet. Behnke and Adams overlapped in their support of regional arts organizations such as the Tacoma Art Museum, Artist Trust, and the Henry Art Gallery. All three are driven, savvy, and dedicated to promoting local creators.

"There is no art community without individual artists," Adams says. "When I started collecting, I looked at the work as the mark of the artist, not just something to hang on the wall. Supporting and promoting artists has always been important to me." Behnke and Bailey — a visual artist outside of her design career — felt the same.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN
Shari D. Behnke, Kate Bailey,
and Edie Adams (from left)
have created a space for
artistic expression free from the
pressure to produce.



STEFANO ALTAMURA, ETHAN CHIEM

As the night progressed, the conversation turned to 500 Pike St. Bailey shared how Nii Modo, a downtown gallery she was heavily involved with, had lost its space. “I was searching for a new location since much of the artists’ tools and supplies had to be moved to storage,” Bailey says. “Shari suggested I look into the Coliseum space as a potential solution.”

At the storied address sits a landmarked building that had cycled through a series of businesses — the state-of-the-art Coliseum Theater, an outpost of the clothing retailer Banana Republic — before briefly playing host to roving arts incubator XO Seattle in June 2023. Within weeks of opening, the pop-up shut down amid sexual assault allegations against one of its founders. Suddenly, dozens of artists found themselves in the lurch as the show they had prepared for was gone. Six months later, the building was still vacant, and Adams, Behnke, and Bailey couldn’t stop talking about it.

“We were discussing how it looked so good as an art space,” Adams recalls. “And we let that sit for a bit, but then someone said, ‘I wonder what it would actually take to make it successful.’ And little by little, we started seriously developing this idea.”

Working at breakneck speed, the trio planned to open a centralized hub for artists that would provide no-cost, long-term studio

space, and hopefully, help to reinvigorate Seattle’s stagnant downtown core. Named Actualize AiR (the second word stands for Artist in Residency), the women-run, women-funded project, underwritten primarily by Behnke and Adams, is rooted in community — and access. To that end, the team brought on Julia Anderson last October to develop programming and work closely with resident artists.

“Having a studio space is not just about a place to make art,” Bailey says. “You can make art in your living room, but there’s something about being in proximity to other artists and in a space where collectors and curators come through on tours — that’s often a limiting step between someone who gets a solo show and someone who doesn’t.”

Bailey is no stranger to the residency model, which she loosely compares to the structure of an MFA program, without the hefty tuition cost. She helped Nii Modo launch a mini artist-in-residency platform for 10 local creatives. “It was a great opportunity to test out this business model of providing free long-term studio space in a central



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— MARY ANNE CARTER

location,” she says. “When I started that program, I noticed that while I was doing it for the artists, when I would bring curators, collectors, and art lovers through, the enthusiasm those people left with was infectious. That is the energy that downtown needs right now.”

After months of planning and recruiting dozens of volunteers to help build studio partitions throughout the 13,000-square-foot building, Bailey, Behnke, and Adams opened Actualize AiR in July 2023, timed with the annual Seattle Art Fair. The main floor is divided into studio spaces current-

STEFANO ALTAMURA



ly housing 30 artists ranging from photographers and painters to quilters, graphic artists, fashion designers, and sculptors. Around each corner is a new project, a work in progress, or a budding collaboration. Several artists have already sold pieces through an open house or visiting collector.

In addition to the past residents from Nii

Modo AiR, the first round of artist residents for the pilot project were invited to apply by staff and stakeholders. There’s an open waitlist available to the public for future openings. Artists are chosen through an equity lens, including space needs, diversity of artistic practices, and interest in community building. During their residencies, which last for a year, artists have 24-hour access to their studios.

“Traditional art residencies often conjure an image of a short-term, long-distance opportunity that culminates in a predetermined volume of work and output by the artist,” says Mary Anne Carter, a part of the first residency cohort. “Actualize defies this by providing artists longer-term access to local space without firm expectations of what artists must create in this time. This self-guided opportunity frees artists of the constant pressure to produce, allowing for more experimentation, larger scale projects, and greater connection to the local community.”

Getting the public into galleries to see — and ideally buy — art has long been a challenge in Seattle. Actualize’s founders hope its central location and the coinciding foot traffic will encourage interest in the space from serious collectors and the art-curious alike. The sidewalk-spanning windows, which once

IN RESIDENCE
Artists Mary Anne Carter (left) and Drea Harper can experiment in Actualize’s space.

held mannequins in conservative office wear, are now packed with eye-catching, colorful installations and video work. During the Seattle Art Fair, the space had two open houses, inviting the community to see what the buzz was all about, but currently, it is not regularly open to the public.

“We’re trying to get to a point where we can welcome everyone in all the time,” Behnke says, “but without full-time staff, it’s difficult. We want to be able to host workshops, guest lectures, and hands-on demonstrations, but we also don’t want to get ahead of ourselves. We’re being methodical about each step of the process.”

“The idea with Actualize is that we’re rethinking how to best support the working artist today,” Bailey says. The trio secured a one-year lease on the building to start, and has the right to renew the lease each year as long as the property doesn’t receive interest from a market-rate tenant. In a neighborhood that was hit hard during the Covid-19 pandemic and continues to suffer business and restaurant closures due to high rents, shifting demographics, and a complete overhaul of the way we work, a building full of lively creatives shaping the city’s cultural landscape certainly beats empty storefronts and blacked-out windows.

“Artists nurture spaces and communities,” Carter says. “We’re problem-solvers and community-builders. Historically, we’ve cultivated beauty, dialogue, and

progress within spaces overlooked and abandoned by other entities. Actualize provides a template for allowing artists to inhabit spaces still seen as ‘valuable.’ We don’t have to work in marginal spaces. We just have been because we’ve been priced out of anything else.”

Behnke agrees. “Seattle needs a revitalization of the downtown core,” she says, “and I don’t know if the city is approaching it the right way. I don’t want downtown to be revitalized on the backs of artists, only to have them be pushed out once things get going again. Retail is great, restaurants are great, but let’s make artists a permanent part of the landscape.” ■