

CULTURED

ART

RECESS FOUNDER ALLISON FREEDMAN
WEISBERG IS TRANSFORMING THE DISCOURSE
AROUND PUBLIC ART

SARA ROFFINO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIFFANY SMITH



DIRECTORS, LEADERS, EDUCATORS AND
ARTISTS AT ASSEMBLY AND RECESS
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: GEE WESLEY,
MANUEL MOLINA MARTAGON, SHAUN
LEONARDO, ALLISON FREEDMAN
WEISBERG, XAVIERA SIMMONS AND
KERRY CARRIER.

Last year, art-world matriarch Agnes Gund made waves when she donated \$100 million from the sale of a Roy Lichtenstein painting as seed money for the Art for Justice Fund—the sole mission of which is to end mass incarceration. She explained at the time that a realization about inequality in the United States prompted her decision, and at her encouragement more than a dozen other collectors also offered resources to the initiative.

Meanwhile, in Soho, a young non-profit founder was also thinking about mass incarceration, the public and how such issues were related to her storefront artist residency. Allison Freedman Weisberg established Recess in 2009, with the goal of creating a “flexible framework that was built to fit each artist’s individual goals” as opposed to a museum which requires artists to shape their ideas to an institutional structure. “I wanted to create a space where anyone could walk in and understand it as theirs. The mission has always been to create points of access and to build a more inclusive creative community,” says Weisberg, who—as the granddaughter of the late Public Art Fund founder Doris Freedman—knows a thing or two about public art. “We’ve been able to offer access to different groups through facilitating organic moments of connectivity between artists who are working and visitors who are coming into the space from very varied backgrounds.”

The organization’s multilayered platform is centered around a program called Session, where artists are invited to spend roughly two months making new work within Recess’s space (which remains open to the public through the process). Alumni include Sondra Perry, Sara Magenheimer, Abigail Deville, Liz Magic Laser and Jacolby Satterwhite, among many others. Earlier this year, Recess moved from a modest SoHo storefront to a relatively expansive building in Brooklyn.

“Almost every new initiative at Recess grows out of something that our artists are already thinking and talking about,” Weisberg explains of Recess’s Assembly branch, which launched in early 2017 with artist and educator Shaun Leonardo as the program’s lead educator. A partnership between Recess and Brooklyn Justice Initiatives, Assembly offers young adults who are involved with the justice system an alternative to punitive measures. After participants finish what Weisberg describes as a “visual storytelling and performance workshop,” prosecutors may close and seal their cases. “The justice system is one of the great failures of our time, and at a certain point it felt like if we weren’t fighting against the grain, then what’s the point?” says Weisberg.

Leonardo’s work as an artist deals with issues of gender and racial identity. For Assembly, he has developed a curriculum that offers both creative development as well as a path to paid employment for participants. “To transition from an obligation to free-form creative work is very difficult in the mind of a young person who has never been validated for their creative work,” he says, noting that

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about installation and art handling. “We want them to embrace their creative capabilities and to let them know that creative work is worthy of payment,” he says.

Fundamental to all of Recess’s programming is Weisberg’s insistence on challenging the art-world binary that separates socially-engaged practice from museum art. “There is absolutely no reason why the audience that participates in community-engaged art isn’t considered as meaningful a public as that which visits museums and institutions, and likewise that the museum public doesn’t have a place in a more community-based context,” she says. “I’m interested in reshaping the way we think about what the public does to inform creative practice.”

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