

# The New York Times

## Art Dealers Move Out of the Gallery and Into a Taco Bell



From left, Emma Fernberger, associate director of the Bortolami Gallery; the dealer Stefania Bortolami; and the artist Tom Burr in the former Pirelli Tire Company building in New Haven, where Mr. Burr plans an installation as part of the gallery's "Artist/City" initiative. Credit Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

Stefania Bortolami still recalls, with cathartic exultation, the moment she decided to display her art in a slower, smaller way. It was May 2015, and Ms. Bortolami, the owner of the Bortolami Gallery in Manhattan, was at the art fair Frieze New York — her sixth such gathering of the year.

"By then, we were fair-exhausted, and the hanging and rehanging of our booths had drained our souls," she said. "The trigger thought was: 'I am craving meaning. This is all going too fast to make any sense.'"

When the fair was over, Ms. Bortolami began a series of internal conversations that resulted in a project called "Artist/City," a continuing effort to move the artists she represents out of her gallery and into the world at large. It was a decision meant to make their work feel less like a packaged product, she said, and "to bring the discourse back to art."

The received wisdom in the art world these days is that the markets through which artists interact with their audience are becoming more corporate and are increasingly ruled by cold, commercial forces that focus more on the bottom line and branding than on creative innovation.



A view inside the former Pirelli Tire Company building, a Brutalist-style space in New Haven, where the artist Tom Burr plans an installation.

For at least a decade, mega-galleries like Pace and Gagosian have dominated the fine-art landscape, showing work in Safeway-size spaces and at international branches, as well as at a string of art fairs across the globe. Last year, *The Art Newspaper* bemoaned this drift toward consolidation: After analyzing 600 art exhibitions in the United States, the publication issued a report that found that nearly a third of all solo museum shows in the country centered on artists represented by five of the world's biggest galleries.

But this monopolistic tendency has stirred a revolt among a circle of smaller galleries, which have started looking for inventive ways to compete against such large rivals. The rebellion, in its reliance on resourcefulness and imaginative grit, resembles the battles that the Slow Food movement has waged against big agriculture or that some tech start-ups have opened against legacy businesses (cab companies, hotels) in the transportation and housing spheres.

Because the art world tends to place itself in the world's most expensive urban areas, much of the fight boils down to grappling with — or skirting altogether — the issue of crippling real estate prices.

"We live in an era when much of what you read about are mega-monster galleries that are very rich and powerful, with tons of money and satellites," said Adam Sheffer, the president of the Art Dealers Association of America. "But that's really only 5 percent of the market. The vast majority of galleries are small single- or double-venue operations that are looking for creative ways to extend themselves into the community without feeling the need to engulf and devour the world."

Mr. Sheffer said that many small galleries had started breaking with convention by showing work in nontraditional spaces. "The gallery model is changing," he said. "It's advancing. And it shows a cooperative spirit among artists and galleries."



A detail of the former Pirelli Tire Company building.

The Artist/City initiative is part of that spirit and emerged from Ms. Bortolami's disillusionment with the industry. From 1999 to 2005, she worked at Gagosian, where her job at one point was to recruit new artists. Her tenure at the gallery corresponded with part of its precipitous expansion. (Today Gagosian's empire includes galleries in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Rome, Paris, Geneva and Hong Kong.)

"We thought it would be interesting to do something and just simply go the other way," she said. "Yearlong, not primarily commercial, experimental projects in cities that are museum- and culture-rich but are not considered art hubs."

So in December, Ms. Bortolami and Emma Fernberger, associate director of the gallery, undertook the first phase of the project, helping Daniel Buren install his paintings of vertical stripes on bedsheets in a private event space in Miami for a year. The aim, as Bortolami's website put it, was to create "a structure in which our artists can investigate their work without restriction."

A second yearlong exhibition followed in May, when Eric Wesley moved his "burrito paintings" into an abandoned Spanish Colonial-style Taco Bell in Cahokia, Ill.

"The whole thing came about as a reaction to how fast-paced and expensive the art world has gotten," Ms. Fernberger said. She said Bortolami "wanted to find a way to slow the process down and let people experience the long view."

This winter a third Bortolami artist, Tom Burr, plans to install his own work for a year in the vacant former office of the Pirelli Tire Company in New Haven, a forbidding Brutalist structure originally designed in 1968 by the architect Marcel Breuer. The building is owned by IKEA and sits in the middle of a parking lot of one of that furniture maker's sprawling stores.

The terms Ms. Fernberger struck with the company were exceedingly budget-friendly: IKEA agreed to let her use the space for an entire year for only \$1. And that was only one of the attractions of the site. The audience for Mr. Burr's coming show would probably include students and professors from Yale, and people passing by the site on Interstate 95, Ms. Bortolami said. "Some will come to see the show just because it's at an IKEA," she added. "And that's great."

Because of the exhibition's length and low budget, the Artist/City project has allowed Mr. Burr to approach his installation with increased freedom and flexibility. "I like showing in a place that doesn't have the extreme pressure cooker that rents in New York impose," he said, adding, "It can evolve over the course of a year, not only with the audience changing, but with the work itself reacting over time to the space."

The Bortolami Gallery is not alone in seeking alternatives to the expensive push-the-product ethos that bigness brings. The gallerist Gavin Brown, who is based on the Lower East Side and in Harlem, announced last year that he planned to open a space in a deconsecrated eighth-century church in Rome. And John Berggruen, a California gallery owner, is currently showing works of sculpture in a garden on his 11-acre personal estate in St. Helena.

Ms. Bortolami said she enjoyed escaping New York to show art in the real world.

"It's just so fun," she said while visiting New Haven last month. "Usually you know that beginning in September, you'll mount your first show. Then you'll do Frieze, then Miami, maybe with a couple of biennials mixed in. But this — —"

Ms. Fernberger interrupted: "It's an adventure. When you're studying art history, you don't think that one day you'll be on the phone, dealing with IKEA." The project, she added, has forced her to go beyond aesthetics into subjects like radiant heating. "I get to talk critical theory with Tom," she said, "then I get to go and research gas generators."



A view of a space in the former Pirelli Tire Company building.