

Place Making: Tube Factory Artspace and Big Car's Success Secret

by Phillip Barcio

One recent cold December morning, Jim Walker and Shauta Marsh received some warm news. Big Car Collaborative, the D.I.Y. arts organization they founded in 1999 in a rented closet, had just received a \$3 million grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc., a philanthropic foundation established by Josiah Lilly, son of Colonel Eli Lilly, founder of Eli Lilly and Company.

The press release quoted Colonel Lilly's grandson of the same name: "It takes an artist to make us see, not the bewildering details of the world around us, but the great universals that give significance to our human experiences."

The \$3 million windfall will help Big Car expand Tube Factory Artspace, the non-collecting museum/community gathering space it opened in 2016. Located on Indianapolis' southeast side, the Artspace formerly served as a dairy bottling plant and, unsurprisingly, as a metal tube factory.

When Big Car purchased the property, it also acquired a small commercial structure on nearby Shelby Street. Both buildings were vacant and boarded up, as were about a dozen surrounding homes. They transformed the smaller commercial space into Listen Hear, a gallery housing a community radio station; the station is streaming at <https://www.wqrt.org/>. Tube Factory, meanwhile, hosts two exhibition galleries, a woodshop, and a large open space functioning variously as a community meeting hall, pop-up market, lecture space and performance venue.

Big Car also partnered with Riley Area Development Corporation to acquire the neighboring abandoned houses, which they renovated into artist housing. Some are for artists to purchase with the caveat that they can only later be sold to artists, at a controlled inflation rate; others are used as artist rentals or for Tube Factory's residency program.

This latest grant will help Big Car purchase and renovate another adjacent industrial building. "It will have 25 studio spaces and a flex space that will be able to hold large-scale installations with multimedia capabilities," says Marsh.

Based on this description, it is tempting to see Big Car as a well-oiled, well-funded machine—nothing like most scrappy, D.I.Y., alternative arts organizations. But things were not always like this for the collective.

Flashback to 1998: Indianapolis's alternative art scene is centered at the Faris Building, a near-downtown industrial building housing 50 art studios and five artist-run galleries. For a decade, the Faris was legendary, spawning the underground performance venue Brand X and avant-garde exhibition spaces like Hot House. Then, Kite Realty bought the building, intent on renovating it as the new corporate headquarters of, who else, Eli Lilly and Company. The artists had four months to vacate.

One of those artists, Philip Campbell, Hot House founder, made a bold decision. Rather than simply moving to the next artist building that would eventually get shuttered, he approached Southeast Neighborhood

Exterior (top) and interior (bottom) views of the new building Big Car will purchase and renovate with \$3 million grant. Photos courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.



Development Inc. (SEND), a community development corporation operating in Fountain Square, a depressed nearby neighborhood. SEND owned a historic commercial building where a G.C. Murphy five and dime store once operated.

Campbell offered SEND an alternative to converting the Murphy Building into lofts and a parking garage as planned: “I wrote a seven-page proposal about how the arts have been the success of every great city in the world,” he says, “and they bought into it.”

SEND helped Campbell and his business partner Ed Funk purchase the Murphy Building from them. Studios and galleries soon filled the space into which many displaced Faris artists moved. “It was a labor of love,” says Campbell. “I didn’t want to become a landlord. It was like, ‘Oh my god, nobody gives a shit about this community of artists.’ It was just going to be dispersed. So that’s how the Murphy was born. I think we finally had heat in February of the next year.”

Walker and Marsh were two of the earliest tenants. Campbell rented them a 16’ x 16’ closet. Actually, he gave it to them for free.

“Shauta and I were paying for everything out of pocket,” says Walker when recalling the early days. “I was a journalist and a teacher. Shauta was a journalist. Whenever Phil Campbell had an empty retail space on the ground level, he allowed us to use it for a show, free of charge. A lot of our first community shows took place in those spaces. This was the beginning of us

learning it is best to work with either someone who’s really invested in the arts or to own your own space.”

Marsh concurs. “Phil operated the space in a way that supported the artists. When people were late with rent, he was kind about it. He knew what it was like to struggle. Most artists are broke or under a mountain of student loan debt. A lot quit making art after a while because they can’t afford a studio or supplies. Phil was an important influence on us as an organization.”

When a 1,200-square-foot studio became available, Walker and Marsh traded up, and Big Car was born. In the ensuing years, Big Car impacted the scene significantly. Walker, Marsh and several other artists and writers worked together to establish it as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit. They structured the gallery’s programming around the ideas of placemaking and community. They hosted artist talks, First Friday art shows and musical performances. They applied for 24-hour wine and beer permits to help raise funds. Sun King Brewery, which was also just starting out, donated beer.

Soon, Big Car’s projects extended beyond the gallery walls. They hosted community movie nights in the police station parking lot and assisted with a neighborhood mural project. One of their most influential projects is the annual Masterpiece in a Day event—founded by Campbell and later operated by Big Car—which invites everyone in the community to gather in the central business district to create a work of art that day, to be exhibited at a free event that evening.

Neighborhood movie night at Tube Factory Artspace. Photo courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.



Not only did Big Car create a successful alternative art space, it has also fostered renewal in the Fountain Square neighborhood, which had struggled for generations since the interstate came through, destroying hundreds of houses. With an artist-friendly landlord and increasing interest from philanthropic organizations, it appeared Big Car had nowhere to go but up.

Then 2008—the Great Recession—struck. Campbell describes the devastating impact: “Fifth Third Bank had our mortgage on the Murphy Building. Back in 2000, they just handed us money. It appraised for more than a million dollars. The next year, they gave us another \$150,000 for renovations. Then in 2008, I get called by this person I had never spoken to before. The bankers we had been talking to for eight years had been fired.”

Campbell was told they could no longer afford their mortgage. An independent appraiser valued the building for \$800,000. The bank called in the loan. Campbell hired an attorney who told them nothing illegal was going on. “There was nothing we could do,” says Campbell. “We somehow managed to work a deal that, if we put the building up for sale, they wouldn’t foreclose on it. Eighteen months later, we closed the sale and basically walked away with nothing. We didn’t owe anything, but we didn’t have anything.”

Two local property developers, Larry Jones and Craig Von Deylen, bought the Murphy Building. Their loan was financed by Fifth Third Bank. Once again, the Indianapolis artist community was scattered. Campbell moved on to help establish Indy Indie Artist Colony, a six-story building with artist live-work spaces, practice rooms for musicians and a gallery. Now he’s a full-time artist with representation in New York, Louisville and Indianapolis.

Walker and Marsh meanwhile faced an existential question: what would become of Big Car when it lost its lease? Rather than succumbing to the woes of this all-too-common narrative—an alternative art space being displaced by economic forces beyond its control—they mobilized.

They realized the most successful Big Car projects connected artists with neighbors at events like Masterpiece in a Day. Aesthetic phenomena that engage people in social discourse are part of a larger movement called social practice art. “At that time we had no idea what social practice art was,” says Walker. “But that’s exactly what we were doing.”

They applied for grants to instigate more social practice interventions. They widened their programming



(Top) Tube Factory Art Space exterior after renovation.

(Bottom) Tube Factory Art Space interior after renovation. Photos courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.

all around the city. They managed a space in an abandoned mall and in an old auto shop. They also organized pop-up exhibitions in underserved neighborhoods. The projects were geared towards the needs of each community and designed to engage neighbors in ways that transcend typical artist-viewer relationships.

Says Marsh, “We made sure at least one of our artists lived in the neighborhood where we were working. We wanted someone going to the neighborhood associations, meeting the neighbors and making sure things were done in a way that’s respectful, not just imprinting what we want in the neighborhood.”

They instituted a significant change from their earlier model: nothing was for sale. “We weren’t anti-commodity,” Marsh says, “but it was not the focus. We wanted people to understand how important art is. We believe fundamentally that art has the power to transform people. I always say people are more open to art than to each other. We learned there are all these different entry points to art. There’s hobby and craft, which is very important. There’s the high-art world and the part that’s about commodity. There’s making art just for pleasure. A lot of people stop making art because they can’t sell it. If you feel good about making something, we think you should make it. We want the



(Top) Jim Walker and Shauta Marsh.

(Bottom) Juan William Chávez's bee sanctuary.

Photos courtesy of Big Car Collaborative.

public to see all these different ways people can learn about art and art appreciation.”

Certain struggles kept recurring, however. Every rented space was temporary, and every landlord had censorship power. Ultimately, they realized the only way Big Car could be sustainable was if it could buy a permanent space outright.

Walker and Marsh realized that dream in 2015, using grant money to acquire their current properties. One of the first things they did was acquire a permanent wine and beer license, which they say is key to fundraising. It helps that Sun King still generously donates beer to Big Car's events. They also established a fee-for-service practice, offering design and placemaking consultation to architecture firms and other businesses.

The biggest lesson Walker and Marsh learned, however, has nothing to do with fundraising, or even with owning their space. The real secret of their success is that they fulfill a social need. Tube Factory Artspace is a vital, participatory member of its community.

Marsh recalls going through a difficult period during which she reflected on how she felt about working in the arts. She saw a woman at a bus stop crying in 10 degree below zero weather. “She’s standing in this spaghetti strap top and sweat pants, and there’s snow on the ground. These are people lacking basic needs. They don’t have food, they don’t have clothing, so I

asked, why am I doing this? Shouldn’t I be addressing these needs? Is art a band-aid for this?” Marsh realized she couldn’t fix those things. As a child, coming from an abusive home life, the arts had been an escape for her.

“You can give people food, clothing and shelter,” Marsh realized, “but if they can’t see an alternative future where they have power and agency, they get stuck. So, I went back to that. I thought about how we can provide a space and a platform for people to understand each other through an artist, or through themselves—maybe they make art that shares their perspective. As humans, we have to be reminded of what other people are experiencing all the time. Also, the arts do reach the wealthier one percent, so if an artist has access to people who can make change, they can get across the idea that this is important and should be given attention.”

Tube Factory welcomes neighbors during all business hours to socialize, read, work and look at art. It’s public space. They publish a newsletter to let residents know about everything that’s going on. There’s even a neighbor on their panel to judge which artists receive residency opportunities.

“We also have a chicken area out back,” says Walker. “Shauta is working on a project called the Chicken Chapel of Love, where people can get married and have chickens as witnesses. We also have a bee sanctuary that the artist Juan William Chávez from St. Louis built.”

Walker also recently partnered with Kevin McKelvey at the University of Indianapolis to create one of only a handful of social practice art master’s degree programs in the United States. “We’ve always thought about how much we have to learn from the people we’re working with,” Walker says. “It’s not just about you and your vision. You have to be interested in other people and their stories.”

Such a vision is what makes Big Car work. It’s about more than just about having an alternative art space, a D.I.Y performance venue, or an artist-run gallery. It’s about creating a paradigm in which art, placemaking, and social engagement assist in the practical evolution of a more connected culture. ■

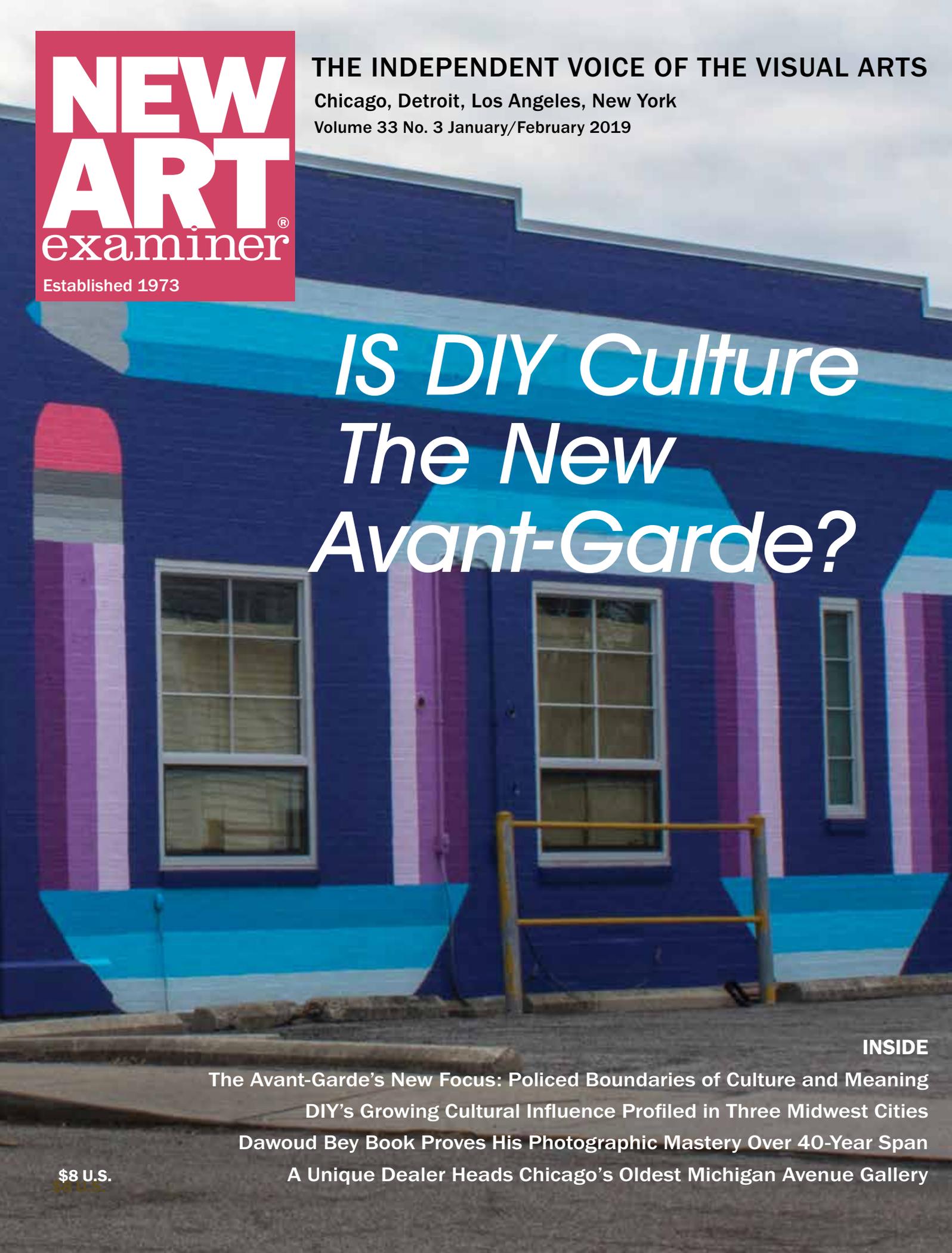
Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.

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