

# THE ORGANIZATION

BY RON EHMKE

# ZATION

## BECOMES THE ART

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# CEPA, BIG ORBIT, AND JUST BUFFALO JOIN FORCES TO REWRITE THE RULES OF THE GAME.

The first sign that something's brewing on the second floor of the Market Arcade Building comes when you try calling. "CEPA Just Buffalo," the receptionist of the day answers. The phrase sounds like a cross between a law firm and a fragment of experimental poetry.

It's also incomplete: not only do the city's internationally acclaimed not-for-profit photo gallery and literary center now share space, they're also joined by the administrative headquarters of a third beacon of the local art scene: Big Orbit Gallery. Big Orbit's actual gallery is still on the West Side, and its performance space, Soundlab, is tucked further downtown, but Executive Director Sean Donaher maintains his home base in a corner of CEPA's office, where he also serves as artistic director. Confused? It's not as complicated as I'm making it sound; as you've no doubt heard by now, all three organizations are embarking on a three-year pilot project (funded in part by an implementation grant from the John R. Oishei Foundation and drawing on a team of advisors from Canisius College)

to forge a new sort of alliance, sharing ideas and resources to face the economic challenges of the day.

I asked the executive directors of all three organizations—Donaher, Lawrence Brose (CEPA), and Laurie Dean Torrell (Just Buffalo)—to discuss via e-mail the nature of their new joint venture and its implications for the community.

**RE:** "Collaboration" is the big buzzword of the last few years, and it's been bugging me that the local news often presents it as a brand-new concept in the art world, as if it took various government officials to encourage cultural organizations to

start teaming up. In reality, each of your organizations has a very long history of working with other groups, both locally and out of town, arts-related and otherwise. It's actually essential to what you do, and to the nature of art-making, period. Can you cite a few typical examples to provide a little context here?

**SD:** The practice of collaboration in many forms has been prevalent in the WNY cultural community since well before I joined it in 1993. This is what makes the relatively recent pressure from the funding community both ironic and puzzling.

Big Orbit has [collaborated on] large dual-site exhibitions and catalogs with the University at Buffalo and Hallwalls...

The National Association of Artists Organizations funded a Curatorial Exchange Project with a gallery in the Czech Republic which involved swapping director/curators for six weeks. Smaller collaborations are not only too frequent to count or list, but are also quite literally built into the functioning of the organization, both Big Orbit Gallery (through hosting/ sponsoring programs with various departments at UB, Squeaky Wheel, Hallwalls,

**SEAN DONAHER:**  
"When you think of Big Orbit, you think of the brick, the wood floor, the deteriorating porch, the high ceilings, whatever. The point being you can picture it; it is unique."

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Laurie Dean Torrell of Just Buffalo, Lawrence Brose of CEPA, and Sean Donaher of Big Orbit and CEPA.  
Photo by Jim Bush.

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Donaher: "Congregating cultural organizations in one geographical location is counter-productive to the health of the greater community. To strip neighborhoods of their cultural organizations is kind of sad. Many people would be upset if Big Orbit left the icehouse and the West Side."

CEPA, Buffalo Arts Studio, etc.) and Big Orbit Soundlab (most obviously hosting Hallwalls music programs and various Squeaky Wheel functions, a "Jazzopetry" series, etc.).

**LDT:** Just Buffalo regularly collaborates with more than fifty other organizations on programs and events; an example of this is the Harlem Book Fair/Buffalo [in early July], produced in collaboration with a business (Black Capital Network), a national organization (QBR/Black Book Review-Harlem Book Fair), local collaborators including the Buffalo & Erie County Public Libraries, the Convention and Visitors' Bureau, WNED, and Good Schools For All, among others.

**LB:** CEPA is a founding member of the New York Artist Workspace Consortium (consisting of ten [artist-run organizations]). We convene several times a year for peer support and to learn from each other. Our involvement with NYAWC helped to inform and influence our administrative collaboration. Also, last season when we had no money, Sean was able to curate a show from the collections of a number of those organizations (Women's Studio Workshop, Dieu Donné Papermill, Sculpture Space, Lower East Side Printshop, and Harvestworks) at no charge to us.

Our [July/August] exhibition and catalog (*Artist Run: CEPA Gallery at 30*) was conceived by Jeff Hoone for Light Work in Syracuse. He raised the funds for the catalog and exhibition. CEPA got a nice grant from M&T Bank for extra catalogs for CEPA's use, and the Warhol Foundation supported expanding the exhibition for

Buffalo. Light Work and CEPA staff worked together on the catalog. This is a significant artistic (and funding) collaboration project that CEPA could not have pulled off on its own.

**LDT:** But I'd like to make a distinction between this type of collaboration, which as you say is an essential component of how we all operate, and administrative collaboration of the type we are undertaking. [The examples just cited] might be thought of as "horizontal" collaboration whereas [the new joint venture] we are looking to pilot and explore is "vertical" collaboration. It becomes a whole different thing when what's proposed is opening your books to each other, sharing a grant writer, getting onto common software and development platforms, collaborating on staff and board training, membership, and, in our case, deciding to share a physical space and offices—in other words, going where no one wants to go! Trust, and having the right partners, is essential.

**RE:** *My sense of Buffalo is that such joint ventures are particularly plentiful here and have been for many years, particularly across disciplines. The phenomenon seems to have been less prevalent in other cities, where there's often less interaction between, say, the literary crowd, media artists, and visual artists (and audiences). Have you noticed this yourselves?*

**SD:** I would completely agree, going by discussions I have had with peers in all parts of the country. I believe it is based in the history of development of the segments of the cultural community. Much of the history of the visual, media,

literary arts, and music in WNY is tied to the universities, especially UB. In the late sixties and early seventies there was so much vital creativity, much of it experimental, in the media, music, English/poetry, and visual arts programs at UB. The artists/faculty involved in these programs did not work in departmental vacuums. They were not only aware of each other and their work but freely collaborated with and supported one another. The natural community that the university system provided, I believe, carries on today infused in the many organizations which sprang up to support the artistic endeavors of these artists.

**LDT:** I don't yet have enough national arts experience to know [how Buffalo's scene differs from that in other places]. My impression is that locally Just Buffalo has always collaborated across disciplines, but nationally, the links have been primarily with other literary centers. It was three years ago at Grantmakers and ECCRAB [Erie County Cultural Resources Advisory Board] meetings that we all heard the "collaborate or die" message and we understood that we were being challenged to collaborate in a new and different way; but when we looked around the country for models, there were none. CEPA and Big Orbit had already initiated a collaboration which involved sharing an artistic director and equipment; ... so we had this idea that a new model of administrative collaboration was needed—by us, and by other organizations trying to survive and thrive in this very challenging environment.

**RE:** *In my own experience as a former*



arts administrator and an observer of others in that line of work, I've noticed that organizations that work together or share space sometimes run into problems maintaining their own distinct identities. Let's say Gallery X and Theater Y cosponsor an event; the press, public, and funding agencies may only perceive it as the sole venture of one or the other. Have you faced situations like that in the past? Are you concerned about it happening in this new situation? How exactly do you intend to maintain your own institutional identities?

**LB:** That used to be a big problem for CEPA when we shared space with Hallwalls [in the 1980s and early 1990s]. The nature of Hallwalls' events (especially media, music, and performance) overshadowed our exhibitions, making it difficult to get local foundation support and press recognition.

Now that we have established a strong identity (as have Just Buffalo and Big Orbit), we are less concerned and feel that there are more opportunities to cross-pollinate our programs to each other's audiences. Also, a big part of this collaboration will be invisible, as it is mostly "back office" collaboration and deep collaborating between the three Executive Directors.

**LDT:** We have been very clear that our first priority is not only to maintain, but to strengthen, our individual organizational identities. In this regard, I don't think it's too different from a great relationship, where each is enhanced through involvement with the other—whole new worlds open up to you!—but you can't lose your soul in the process. And the benefits don't come without some difficult conversations and negotiations. I envision it as three overlapping circles: the overlap part is the administrative collaboration, but we are each distinct and autonomous.

**SD:** Much discussion has taken place around this fundamental question at all levels of the three organizations (staff, board, and committees). And it will always be on the table for the



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next three years. ... In the infant stage of planning for the collaboration, Lawrence and I concluded that we needed to expand the project to include a third organization. ... The idea was that three organizations would provide for a more balanced partnership, thus helping to insure strong individual identities.

A partnership of this nature has many built-in organizational safeguards, not the least of which is the individual organizations' boards of directors. Each board is committed to the collaboration on the organizational level, meaning if any one ED leaves their organization the new ED must maintain the collaboration. Therefore the boards are very involved in the planning and oversight of the collaboration and are, as they should be, the strongest guardians of individual missions and community presence.

**LDT:** I absolutely agree with Sean. In considering funding our project, Oishei was very clear that it had to extend beyond the personalities of the three directors and include buy-in and active involvement at the board level (and among the staff, too). This is no small matter, and we are extremely lucky to have visionary board leaders.

**RE:** *But why not merge into a single umbrella organization with a shared name? Wouldn't that be an easier concept for outsiders to grasp? I know you're clear you don't want to do that, but did you ever contemplate it?*

**LDT:** What you describe is a typical merger, and we never wanted to do this. The reason people so quickly default to this option is that there are not other models to refer to. Our model will not be for everyone, but we hope to at least open people up to the idea that you can [take a] risk and try new things—and that the greatest risk is in not doing this. We hope to be part of inventing something new (the organization becomes the art!) that will be more useful and robust in carrying our missions forward. The reality is that our missions are at risk unless we can find very efficient and smart ways to operate in these lean, lean years.

**SD:** We never contemplated a true merger. We feel that we ultimately will achieve all the benefits of merger through the administrative collaboration, while still keeping our individual organizational identities

intact.

We certainly contemplated and haven't yet dismissed moving the three organizations into a stand-alone building. It is on the table as a future possibility. Discussions have been along the lines of moving into a dedicated building that could be built out to maximize the collaborative potential. The building could be marketed as a destination and could have a separate and unique name. Anyway, there is an established committee that will be researching this and other shared space options.

**LB:** We are considering the idea of a shared space, but that will have to evolve out of what we are doing as a natural next step. Right now, with Just Buffalo moving into CEPA, we see this as a wonderful incubation process: to be able to see how it works without much risk.

**RE:** *Sean, Big Orbit's office is in one space, its gallery is in another, and its performance space is yet another—and its equipment is shared and borrowed across all three. None of these are within easy walking distance of each other. How is that working out?*

**SD:** So far it works great. The benefits by far outweigh the negatives, as the negatives are really more time-based annoyances than anything else.

I have always considered my office at CEPA as my [only] office. In that regard it is a huge bonus. It is where I am. It is where everyone knows they can reach me. In this age of mobility it is very convenient. Same goes for Craig [Reynolds, Soundlab director]: his Soundlab office is his office at *Artvoice* during the day. By not having offices at Big Orbit Gallery or at Soundlab, we each become our own office. Craig and I both have full-time jobs outside of Big Orbit. If Big Orbit communication had to be tied to an office at Essex Street or Soundlab, nothing would get done.

Big Orbit Gallery and Big Orbit Soundlab are ultimately in two separate spaces because they couldn't, for obvious reasons, coexist at 30 Essex Street. Our two options were to move Soundlab off-site or to move both programs into a new location. The nature of real estate in Buffalo determined the eventual solution. Big Orbit's rent is \$220/month; Soundlab's is \$750/month. Only in Buffalo can you have two beautifully functional,

dedicated 2,500-square foot spaces for less than \$1,000 a month. Because of this, there is no reason to do it any other way at this time.

**RE:** *There seems to be a trend lately toward arts organizations heading back downtown again; in addition to Just Buffalo and Big Orbit, I'm thinking of Hallwalls (set to open their new exhibition and screening space in the former Asbury Delaware Methodist Church on November 4) and at least one more rumored relocation.*

*It's been interesting over the last couple of decades to watch culturals continually rethink their relationship to that part of town in light of ever-changing realities. Do you have any reflections on the health of downtown right now and/or in the near future? Why do you think arts organizations are giving it a shot again?*

**LDT:** There's an urban energy that's undeniable. We joke about the "chi" of certain places, and of course we want to be where the "chi" is strong! I think there is an incredible cultural corridor taking shape, extending from Trinity Church on Delaware, which is now renting space to organizations, to the church Hallwalls and Righteous Babe will share, to the Theater District, right down to Market Arcade.

**SD:** I am somewhat torn on this one. I believe the health of downtown can only be strengthened by the presence of culturals, but at what cost to the neighborhoods which lose them?

Soundlab is downtown because the nature of the programming is a good fit for an urban setting. In the way Soundlab references club culture in its presentation format, it would be weird if it wasn't.

Big Orbit Gallery is tied to its space [on Essex Street on the West Side] for many reasons: cheap rent, the unique physical nature of the space, and the connection to history that the Essex Art Center has provided Buffalo as the original location of Hallwalls, an early location of CEPA, the Artist Gallery, etc. The space Big Orbit is in has been a gallery for well over thirty years.

I believe that congregating cultural organizations in one geographical location is counter-productive to the health of the greater community. To strip neighborhoods of their cultural organizations is kind of sad. Many people would be upset if Big Orbit left the icehouse and the West Side.

Now, having said that, Hallwalls and Just Buffalo moving downtown is fantastic. Hallwalls should have never left downtown. I believe the Tri-Main endeavor was a failure from the start in terms of creating a conglomerate of culturals, in that it probably alienated as many patrons as it attracted, as well as stripped a lot of personality from each organization by enveloping them in a cavernous setting. As for the proposed collaborative aspects of the plan, they never materialized. This is not surprising, as it is completely unrealistic to expect that throwing a bunch of culturals in one building will lead to meaningful collaborations.

**LB:** I also don't believe in creating an "Arts Ghetto." I think having a diversity of locations and areas is healthy for the community at large and is better for the various organizations.

**RE:** *Each of your organizations is noteworthy for some very interesting satellite programming (CEPA's bus shows, Just Buffalo's floating Open Readings, and Big Orbit launching Soundlab all come to*

*mind for starters). In another article in this issue, Bruce Adams asks whether Hallwalls is a space or an idea. Allow me to pose the same question to each of you about your own organization.*

**LB:** Interestingly enough, I would have to say CEPA is both. We are strongly identified with our location in the Market Arcade and people see us as a destination. But now we do so many satellite

exhibitions that CEPA has become an idea. I do, however, see all of our satellite projects as a way to bring art to a broader spectrum of people, but it is also a great marketing tool helping to brand CEPA in a larger arena.

**LDT:** Sometimes I envision Just Buffalo as a wheel with spokes, each spoke representing a "point of entry" into the literary arts. Other times, I imagine us as "Intel inside," a core identity that can be placed in a variety of platforms and provide unique energy. Our "brand" (Just Buffalo) can be delivered to the community from any number of places.

**SD:** In that you can't completely separate one from the other, every organization is both. However, the idea of an organization (its mission, history, politics, membership, etc.) is ultimately more important. It is what makes it possible for Hallwalls to change locations and yet continue and hopefully thrive.

[On the other hand,] when you think of Big Orbit, you think of the brick, the wood floor, the deteriorating porch, the high ceilings, whatever. The point being you can picture it; it is unique. Same for CEPA and the Market Arcade Building, and I suspect in a very strong way in the future, Hallwalls and the church. Can all these organizations get up and move to another location/building and continue their programming? Sure, but it would inevitably be different, in that the new space would infuse itself into the idea of the organization just like the old spaces did.

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The Market Arcade was built in 1892 by E. B. Green and W. S. Wicks as a covered shopping mall. It contains many neoclassic architectural elements.

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är'ti•san, n. one who practices an art; a craftsman



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