

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

On the Necessity of Thinking Big: A Talk with Jason Andrew

by [Thomas Micchelli](#) on February 25, 2012



"Camp Pocket Utopia with site specific art work by Lars Kremer titled 'Echo.'" L to R (top row): Adam Simon, Ellen Letcher, Mary Jane Ward, Claire McKeveny, Norman Jabaut, Andrew Hurst, Jennifer Dalton, Wellington Fan, William Powhida, Kristen Jensen, Brece Honeycutt, Keven Regan. L to R (bottom row): Jason Andrew, Fern Dog, Austin Thomas, Matthew Miller, Julia K. Gleich, Lars Kremer, Chloe Bass, Paul D'Agostino. (all images via Norte Maar) (click to enlarge)

A week ago, on the night of Friday, February 17th, two incongruently mirrored exhibitions opened on either side of the East River: Charles Atlas' [The Illusion of Democracy](#) at Luring Augustine's new Bushwick outpost; and [What I Know](#), a large group show of Bushwick artists, curated by Jason Andrew, at the New York Center for Art & Media Studies (NYCAMS) in Chelsea.



A view from the NYCAM installation of "What I Know." (click to enlarge)

The exchange between these two events, which witnessed scores of Bushwick denizens heading to Manhattan for *What I Know* and then back again to attend the red carpet Lühring Augustine affair (joining such bold-face names as Marina Abramović, Klaus Biesenbach, Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith), demonstrated the complexity of the Bushwick community's ambitions, its heady possibilities and inevitable perils.

It used to be simple: an alternative art scene would spring up in a scruffy neighborhood, and — in a scenario replicating the domination of the Neanderthals by the Cro-Magnons — the laidback outsiders either interbred with or were vanquished by the more aggressive high-end gallery elite. In the case of Bushwick, the levers are in place, but the outcome is not so certain.

Jason Andrew has been a longtime activist in the Bushwick artists' community, which burst into unanticipated coherence and visibility last April at the Center for Performance Research, Brooklyn, with the three-evening run of [In The Use of Others for the Change](#), produced by Andrew's nonprofit organization, [Norte Maar](#). A ballet in three movements, *In the Use of Others* wedded the choreography of Julia K. Gleich and her troupe of dancers with the talents of artists Audra Wolowiec, Austin Thomas, Kevin Regan, Andrew Hurst, Shona Masarin and Amery Kessler.

Writing in [The New Criterion](#), James Panero had this to say about the production:

One thought was that I was seeing the reincarnation of [Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes](#). Maybe that idea won't excite everyone as much as it excited me. For a while I have harbored a belief that the groves of Bushwick grow the same special fruit and enjoy the same artistic climate that gave rise to [Montparnasse](#) a century ago. The reappearance of the ballet troupe of the Parisian avant-garde would seem to support my theory.

The special nature of the Bushwick scene, which has been fostered in no small part by social spaces such as the now-closed [Pocket Utopia](#) of Austin Thomas, Andrew's Norte Maar and Paul D'Agostino's [Centotto](#), is a rich subject for speculation, as Panero suggests, especially now that this particular juncture in its development has arrived.

Lühring Augustine's star-studded opening signified a recognition of the neighborhood's vitality by the art world's oligarchy (or, in the minds of many, its targeting by the Death Star), and Andrew's *What I Know* has countered that move by presenting the handmade and often improvisational Bushwick aesthetic at the threshold of the moneyed vaults of Manhattan. An uneasy dance, to say the least.

I thought it would be productive to discuss these events with Andrew, and perhaps to pinpoint the origin of the Montparnasse moment that the audiences of *In the Use of Others* experienced last April.



A view of "What I Know" at NYCAM.

Thomas Micchelli: Did you plan to open *What I Know* on the same date as Luhring Augustine's Charles Atlas exhibition?

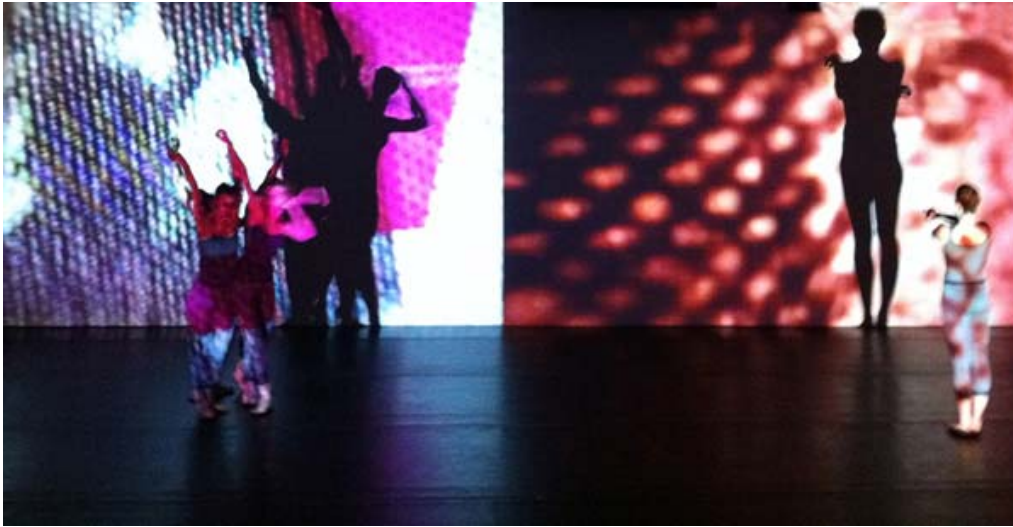
Jason Andrew: I'll leave that up to you. But I can add that staking out independence for me and my artists is kinda my thing. That both openings could coincide and open with equal fanfare is only a credit to how diverse the New York art world is today. Living autonomously from the machines that drive the mainstream certainly offers an experience of the intimate kind.

I disagree with your statement that LA's opening signified a recognition of the neighborhood's vitality. Their presence doesn't legitimize what Paul D'Agostino has been doing for years out of his apartment or what [Small Black Door](#) or [Airplane](#) are doing in their basement. The only thing it signified is there are cheaper warehouses in East Williamsburg than there are in Long Island City. Hell, we all came here for the same reason. Cheap space. To think that their presence somehow legitimates the neighborhood is kinda silly. I am happy they have joined the conversation, but personally, their decisions have no influence over my programming just as my programming will not have any influence on theirs. There is certainly enough love to go around. I think we saw the workings of the fully operational "Death Star" and our world still seems quite intact.

At NYCAMS, *What I Know* is a curatorial tour de force and represents the work of 49 artists. I've juxtaposed historic figures like Jack Tworikov and Robert Moskowitz with that of young artists. It's important to see the exhibition not as a collective, but as a collection of individuals. I see it as a bellwether reminiscent of the many independent and alternative salon exhibitions that history has witnessed. The exhibit is free from institutional constraints and societal influences.

These are all artists I have come to know and love. It's a show with its guts in beauty not satire. It's a straight-up painting and sculpture show. It's not mired in conceptual pits. I take curatorial cues from the likes of Henry Geldzahler, Richard Armstrong and Rob Storr. The show is simply what I know. Thinking big is what I do best.

But because the show is my personal reflections (it includes many works from my own collection) that doesn't mean that the show should be immune to criticism. In fact I'm bracing for the onslaught. It's one of the main ambitions in *What I Know*, to offer up the work of 49 artists for review. And to flex my curatorial muscle!



"In the Use of Others for the Change," a new ballet in three movements directed and choreographed by Julia K. Gleich, and featuring collaborations with artists: Audra Wolowiec (sound), Austin Thomas (set), Kevin Regan (text), Shona Masarin (film), Amery Kessler (sound), Andrew Hurst (video/projections/sound). Premiere: April 14, 2011 at Center for Performance Research.

TM: I'm interested in what you said about *What I Know* not being a collective, but a collection of individuals. I can see the importance of making that distinction clear in this case, but you have certainly been involved in collective efforts, notably the ballet, *In the Use of Others for the Change*. You have also collaborated with Austin Thomas and others on [Camp Pocket Utopia](#), a summer residency in Rouses Point, New York, near the Canadian border, which offered classes for children as well as salon-style discussions among the artists during the off hours.

The published materials about Camp Pocket Utopia made an explicit connection to the ideals of [Black Mountain College](#). Would you like to explain a little about what Black Mountain was, and what you see as its relevance today?



A view of "What I Know" at NYCAM. (click to enlarge)

JA: When I first arrived in Rouses Point in early 2004 with my partner at the time Norman Jabaut, I was struck by the potential. Together with the choreographer Julia K. Gleich, I started Norte Maar for Collaborative Projects in the Arts. By the summer, we had converted the local ice rink into a stage and the entire village into ballet lovers. We organized a summer conservatory of dance and mounted a full summer of art exhibitions out of my house on Pratt Street. We brought in artists from all over the region. I spent what little savings I had. Parties were held under a tent which I pitched in front of the house. Discussions about art and life took place on the porch.

Black Mountain College was an experiment in education that lasted from 1933 until 1957. It operated as a communal experience in living and learning, and it fostered freely interdisciplinary thinking among its faculty and students, who included John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg and many, many others.

My enthusiasm to create a Black Mountain-inspired summer school came when I met the artist Austin Thomas. Together and with the help of a few supporters, we made an away camp for our Bushwick friends. And then I had to rent the Elementary School to accommodate us all!

TM: Do you see the informal discussions that take place in Bushwick today — at openings, salons, studios, bars and cafes — as the equivalent of the type of unconventional mentoring and peer interaction that took place at Black Mountain? In other words, should we continue to idealize Black Mountain's memory, or do we have our own version of it right here, right now?

JA: Oh artists constantly create new versions. Look at William Powhida and Jennifer Dalton's [#class](#). Look at [Bruce High Quality](#). It's the historians, kind of like me, that link it back to "the good old days." The place I think we all should source is the place where conversations are spun. Dialogues are insightful. I can't help but see a parallel between the artist community in Bushwick and that of [Eighth Street](#). It began a few years ago. Perhaps due to the economy. Suddenly everyone stopped being interested in Chelsea and became interested in one another. Just like the artists of Eighth Street. They began talking to one another, and not about Picasso or Braque. Does that make sense? I trace it back to Austin Thomas and her little Pocket Utopia gallery on Flushing where we all used to gather for an afternoon beer. In most cases there wasn't anything that drew us all there except each other. We were seeking out our own kind of audience, mostly among ourselves.



A view of "What I Know" at NYCAM (click to enlarge)

TM: Do you see your activities, from the salon to the ballet to art classes, as part of an overall program, or as ad hoc gatherings for a particular purpose?

JA: My projects never serve a particular purpose beyond the making and the showing of art. Whether it be an exhibition or a performance. I may father the idea, but my artists, they are the geniuses. They take it to the next place. It is a challenge to keep one's ego away from manipulating the process. I just want to offer the creative platform. Then find the money to produce the final result. That's the essence of Norte Maar.

TM: What has surprised you about the artists' involvement? Did you expect they would willingly leave the secure confines of their studios to risk the possible conflicts and frustrations of collaboration?

JA: Not every artist can be a collaborator.

TM: Perfectly understandable, but even if some, or most, artists prefer to be left to their solitary endeavors, the neighborhood's collaborative spirit is the first among its distinguishing characteristics.

I wouldn't call this a lack of competitiveness, exactly, because I can't see how an artist can get around the impulse to excel. But there is a genuine appreciation of one another's work, which is motivational in different way.

Do you see this as philosophical or generational? Are the artists in Bushwick more community-oriented because they've seen how "the machine," as you've called the mainstream system, can brand artists and trivialize the conversation?

JA: It's got to be philosophical. Again, I am constantly drawing parallels to the position of the artists of the New York School to that of the artists I surround myself with today. With only a handful of galleries in the early 1950s, artists back then weren't thinking about their next show or jockeying to get a curator into their studio. They were making work and

discussing it amongst themselves. It was an amazing time, a real and complete struggle. But it produced some of our great American classic figures. Gorky was the first painter's painter. Meaning, he was a hero among the artists, but experienced little commercial success during his lifetime.

I imagine Bushwick has the air and the pace of the early 1950s. Out here we've been able to make work, exhibit it, discuss it, dish on it, without any pretense. Out here we're all individuals. To quote the sculptor David Hare, "The artist is a man who functions beyond or ahead of his society. In any case, seldom within it." It's the collective individuality that makes up Bushwick's community. And the diversity among us is our strength. There is a trust and an honesty that God I wish I could preserve. There is a fluidity of discourse. Out here we all want to be the painter's painter. Then we all hit the bar.

TM: "Collective individuality" sounds like the perfectly paradoxical term to describe the community.



A view of "What I Know" at NYCAM (click to enlarge)

JA: Totally. But many people have asked me if there is a defining characteristic among the artists in Bushwick. My answer is the one Hans Hofmann offered when asked what exactly constitutes the basis of the artist community at a round table discussion among artists at [Studio 35](#): "Everyone should be as different as possible. There is nothing that is common to all of us except our creative urge. It just means one thing to me; to discover myself as well as I can. But every one of us has the urge to be creative in relation to our time — the time to which we belong may work out to be our thing in common."

The blessing, as Richard Pousette-Dart once said, is that the establishment can, at any moment, bless any one of us. "The disaster is that they can cause disparity among us, too."

TM: The ideal, then, would be to retain the messiness of the dialogue and avoid codification at all costs.

JA: Exactly. And as long as Ben Godward is making sculpture, they'll be enough messiness to go around.

TM: Does the neighborhood act as its own critic? Do conversations tend toward analysis or encouragement?

JA: Many may disagree, but the neighborhood does act as its own critic. Take a look at the NYCAMS show. Every work in that show is exquisite all unto itself. That kind of quality cannot exist without pressure, without awareness. I know for a fact that there are conversations that tend toward both criticism and encouragement. It's almost like the artists dare each other to think big or beyond. I visit studios as often as I'm invited. What I think the neighborhood is missing is a forum where artists can gather and talk about the last museum show they saw or the next painting they are making.

Public discussions of late have been centered around issues of gentrification. Which I think we are all bored with. Fuck, be a good neighbor, pick up some trash on the way to the subway, volunteer. Now let's just make some serious fucking art while we can. There is no stopping progress. Let's think big. Make some crazy ass art while we have the opportunity. Nothing is certain. This is the reason I push myself: to take advantage of the moment. It's why for two years, not only was I mounting exhibitions at [Storefront](#) but continued the exhibition program at Norte Maar. Somebody's got to give these artists a platform to spring from.

TM: *The Village Voice* took note of that when it voted you "[Best Exhibitionist](#)" of 2011.

JA: I'm thinking as big as I can while I can.

TM: Thinking big has its dangers. The ballet, for one, took big risks. Fundraising was involved, the rental of rehearsal and performance space, insurance, transportation, publicity, media — an enormous undertaking that, if successful, would be — and was — a galvanizing event. If not, it could have left a bitter taste in everyone's mouth.

JA: There is a level of risk in all that we do. One thing I don't do well is think about the risk! Yes, there is a lot that goes into a ballet. But there is so much that comes out of one too. I'm manic when it comes to mounting projects. But somehow, somehow, the artists bring out their best and the quality is superb.

TM: Do you agree with Panero that this was a "reincarnation" of Diaghilev, that "the groves of Bushwick grow the same special fruit and enjoy the same artistic climate that gave rise to Montparnasse a century ago"?

JA: For those who know me, thinking big is just what I do. These ideas come with great sacrifice. And come too often! It's extremely challenging for someone with my economic position. Often, these projects are self-produced. I function in such a spontaneous way that there is little time to think about having a fundraiser. I seize the opportunity to produce, whether it be a ballet, an exhibition, or poetry reading. I'm manic about it even if the funds aren't there. Perhaps this is what I have in common with Diaghilev! I'll be bankrupt silly. But this is what defines me. I believe that my big ideas have cost me my relationships. I rarely have time for anything, or anyone else. I'm now in the middle of organizing the next ballet which will open in April. I am constantly aware that you are only as good as your last project.

I'd like to blame the artists. They keep me thinking big. I'll stop by a studio and see a huge new painting like I did this past summer with the painter Brooke Moyse. Then I'll stay awake at night thinking about how I can get that painting seen. I'll watch a section of choreography and can't help but think how amazing it would be if it were set to the new score of the composer I met last week. I see painting as costume and sets as sculpture and my world just gets bigger and bigger.

It just so happens that I landed in Bushwick in 2006 and so did a ton of amazing artists. Slowly I came to know them one by one and they got to know me.

TM: And so the groves of Bushwick arose from an accident of timing?

JA: I'll have to quote Jackson Pollock on this one: "I don't use the accident. I deny the accident."

* * *

[What I Know](#), curated by Jason Andrew, continues at the New York Center for Art & Media Studies (NYCAMS, 44 West 28th Street, 7th Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 16.

The current show at Norte Maar (83 Wyckoff Avenue, #1B, Bushwick, Brooklyn), [Paul D'Agostino: Appearance Adrift in the Garden](#), is on view until March 4.

A new ballet produced by Jason Andrew and Norte Maar will feature new choreography by Julia K. Gleich with several new artistic collaborators, and will premiere April 12 at [Center for Performance Research](#).

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