

FRONT LINES

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POETRY IN MOTION

From fledgling sidewalk poets to literary dynamo, oh the places Chase Public will go.

→ALYSSA KONERMANN

IT STARTED WITH A FEW GUYS AT THE CORNER OF CHASE AND HAMILTON Avenues in Northside. On a Friday night in 2010, they staked out the sidewalk, armed with a table, handmade sign, and typewriter, shouting at passersby to ask if they would like a poem. When that happens—even in Northside—“you have to say something back. You can’t just keep walking,” says Mike Fleisch, one of the then-poets and current board chair of Chase Public. “Almost everybody said yes. At least after more questions of, *What?*”

The *what* was Short Order Poetry: the poet interviews the receiver, who then picks up a personalized poem about 15 minutes later. Back then, Chase Public was merely an intermittent gathering, rounding up people interested in art and open dialogue, but the group’s capacity was limited by other jobs and busy lives. Now, in a second floor space on that same corner, the nonprofit is gaining momentum through regular events that include poetry readings, film screenings, writing classes, experimental music and theater, and what they call the Response Project, in which six to eight people respond in their chosen medium to the same piece of art, such as Sappho’s poetry or “Chelsea Hotel #2” by Leonard Cohen.

The pace picked up in 2013 when Fleisch and friends held Short Order Poetry at Collective Espresso in OTR, where Scott Holzman—now the executive director of Chase Public—was working at the time. Holzman, who had done some writing and readings of his own, liked what he saw, and the next time Fleisch stopped by, suggested they apply to do a box-truck installation at MidPoint Music Festival. In keeping with Chase’s *why not?* style, Fleisch said, “Yeah, you → [CONTINUED ON P. 20](#)

→ want to help?" After submitting their application—the total amateurishness of which still amuses them—they got the gig. "Not *really* knowing what Mike did for a living, I did this absolutely hilarious, MS Paint stick-figure [mockup] of what the truck layout would look like," says Holzman. Fleisch, whose day job involves visual modeling and collaborative design, adds: "But your impulse was solid and pure!" The result was a shipping container furnished like a mid-century living room, out of which they distributed roughly 350 poems—a huge scale-up from the group's previous events.

After that, Holzman hit the gas, putting any spare energy and time—outside of his two paying jobs—toward Chase Public, pushing it beyond the sporadic, casual stage it had been stuck in. He also connected a whole new community of artists and like-minded souls to the organization, people who have become a source of ideas for programming. "That was always our hope," says Fleisch, "that if you make a space available and give people the right structure and invite them in, that they will be creative together." Chase has since been commissioned for Short Order Poetry by big dogs of the local arts scene (the May Festival, Cincinnati Art Museum), collaborated with the



Artist's Exemption
"The main litmus test to what makes a good Chase Public program is [that it] appears to have creative value and does not make sense to do at a bar or traditional venue," says Holzman. "[It's] an opportunity for an artist to do something outside of that."

he took part in the group's September Response Project, giving the backstory of a photo in the museum's *Unknown Elements* exhibition that participants then responded to.

But as a small arts organization committed to a literary mission—what Holzman → **CONTINUED ON P. 22**



SPEAK EASY

BETWEEN THE MOON AND DELHI

▶ There's a lot of Cincinnati in EL VY's *Return to the Moon* (Oct. 30), the debut collaboration from The National's **Matt Berninger** and fellow indie rocker Brent Knopf. We chatted with Berninger about his new sound and growing up on the west side.

You have a very distinct singing voice, but the tempo of this record is punchier, more upbeat than The National. Was that a direction you wanted to go in?

I didn't want to make a record that sounded like The National, but I also didn't want to avoid that, either. I was just excited by what would happen if I did my thing and Brent did his. I can't play the guitar or piano; Brent even tried to get me to play tambourine. I was like, *No, no, that's not for me.* I'm happy being the borderline alcoholic, self-obsessive narcissist singer. I love that role. (Laughs).

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ART

IN PLAIN HINDSIGHT

Revisiting our most notorious artistic moment. —CEDRIC ROSE

It's been 25 years since the Contemporary Arts Center ignited a national debate over artistic freedom and censorship with Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment*. The artist's works and influence, however, remain vital, as evidenced by a new anniversary exhibit, *After the Moment: Reflections on Robert Mapplethorpe*, which presents works by 35 contemporary artists, including some who witnessed the protests and obscenity charges brought against then-CAC director Dennis Barrie.

"We were interested in how that exhibit lives inside people's heads and hearts and starts to affect how

they're making art today," says co-curator Steven Matijcio. While *After the Moment* considers Mapplethorpe's larger body of work, it highlights the Midwestern reactions to the show that got Barrie indicted, along with ramifications for what artists can show today. It's a debate that's far from over, Matijcio points out; Andres Serano, who has drawn the ire of religious conservatives for decades, still invokes their wrath when his controversial photos are exhibited.

"We need to fight these good fights," he says. "There are certain works that capture the zeitgeist and continue to resonate and arouse intensity on both sides. And that's what good art should do."



→ **AFTER THE MOMENT: REFLECTIONS ON ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE**, OPENS NOV 6 AT THE CAC, CONTEMPORARYARTSCENTER.ORG

MARK HARRIS. UNTITLED, 2015. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

BAR TALK

WHAT (WE ASSUME) PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT LEGALIZATION ON ELECTION DAY.

—JASON COHEN

NOBODY

"I HEAR BUTLER COUNTY'S GOT THE BEST TERROIR."

(EXHALES FRAGRANT PLUME OF SMOKE) "OF COURSE I VOTED FOR ISSUE 2."

"ARE WE GROWING POT, OR GROWING THE SIZE OF GOVERNMENT?"

"ELECTION DAY?"

AN APRIL 20 PHISH CONCERT

→ calls “thinking of things in terms of empathy rather than dollars earned or hands shaken or asses in seats”—Chase Public may have reached a crossroads. It’s one that Sholis has seen before. “The challenge is how you get from barely keeping up, [with people] volunteering their time, to the point that one or two people can make it their full-time focus,” he says. “There’s a liftoff that’s very difficult to achieve, because it relies on a lot of sweat equity to make that transition. And it sounds like they’re [approaching] that point.”

This summer, Chase Public started the process to become an official 501(c)(3): filing the paperwork, engaging a fundraiser, creating a board, and hiring Holzman full-time. But where do they go from there? “It’s a hard question. And I am happy to not know exactly what the answer is,” says Holzman. “It’s just taking the next step forward, which as far as I’m concerned is continuing what we’ve been doing but doing it to a more full capacity. Finding ways to interact with more communities and become a consistent organization. It’s up in the air, but not in a negative way.”

CORNERSHOT

POSSESSIVE TENDENCIES

→ **IN A TOWN REPUTED FOR ITS STANDOFF-**ishness, it’s funny how Cincinnatians really like to *own* local businesses. Just ask Zack Snyder, who bought Luckman Coffee on Beechmont Avenue in Mt. Washington in 2014. “Cincinnatians love to make things possessive—Kroger’s, Busken’s, Meijer’s,” he says. To combat this tendency, Snyder recently posted a message on the billboard in front of his coffee shop poking fun at this longstanding custom. His message: *It’s Luckman Coffee. Not Luckman’s. Luckman.* “I grew up going to Servatti’s with my grandfather and always assumed that was the name. I never bothered to read the sign. I have customers who still don’t realize it’s Servatti,” he says. That’s right, people: Singular, no apostrophe-s. Quite a shock to your gigantic-pretzel-loving mind, no doubt. Originally from El Paso, Texas, Snyder has lived in Cincinnati for 20 years—which means he’s still enough of an outsider to notice this kind of thing.

—ALYSSA BRANDT



You’ve said this is the most autobiographical you’ve ever been on a record. I have a 6-year-old daughter, and I can see her personality forming. I’m fascinated by that. I think that’s why I wanted to dig into my Cincinnati roots and how I fell in love with music. There are a lot of specific Cincinnati references, including the Jockey Club. I actually never set foot in there, but my older cousin Peter would tell me about seeing the Ramones and Black Flag there. I really romanticized it. The place I went was Cooters on Short Vine—that’s how my identity formed. But Cooters didn’t sound as good to put into a song.

Do you think of yourself as a nostalgic songwriter? Yeah, totally. Most of the stuff I’m writing about is not specific memories, but emotional nostalgia for things. “Return to the Moon,” the song, is sort of a naïve nostalgia. Cincinnati felt like the moon—it didn’t feel like I was connected to the rest of the world until I found music. I was nostalgic for how that happened, how a person becomes who they are.

You’re from Delhi. How often do you get back to the west side? Several times a year. My parents are still there. They live down off of Wesselman Road. I wrote some of this record there.

Does it feel like it’s changed? It doesn’t feel that different. It feels kind of like it did, and that’s a nice thing, a comforting thing.

—JUSTIN WILLIAMS

Visit the Arts & Minds blog at cincinnatiimagazine.com to read more.

THE RUNDOWN

OUT OF SIGHT

Mr. Dynamite, a new mural depicting James Brown at 1437 Main St. in Over-the-Rhine, was dedicated earlier this fall. We spoke to lead artist Jenny Ustick on how she got it on the good foot. —RJ SMITH



THE LOCATION

“It was a music street, and ArtWorks wanted something different than what had been done with the other murals—something more modern, more energetic.”



THE CANVAS

“It had been a while since I painted on a wall from the late 1800s. [It] had seen some better days. You’ve got all these bumps and lumps and gaps and holes.”



THE PROCESS

“It’s a bit like a glorified paint by number. Me and the 12 apprentices had it all mapped out—this area is in this color, fill it in and move on.”



THE MAN

“I looked at a few images of James Brown, particularly from the time he was recording for King Records in Cincinnati, and found one that showed him on fire.”



THE INSPIRATION

“There’s something difficult and a little funky about the colors, and I thought that’s absolutely perfect. He had amazing clarity of voice, but boy he could make it gritty.”



THE DETAILS

“Oh my goodness, those teeth were probably the biggest topic of discussion in the final weeks, to get them just right. The hair came together pretty easily.”