

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Gus Gscheidle

lfiftyone gallery + art space, in Kensington

by Zornitsa Stoyanova

About a year ago I interviewed Gus Gscheidle about his [lfiftyone gallery + art space](#) in Old City. A promising new spot for experimental performance of any kind, the space was abruptly and permanently closed a month after our interview. It was a blow to Gus and the community.

First of all, I took a little while to try to fight it. I was going to try to stay. The problem was zoning. In fact, it wasn't zoned for anything. I was told it was zoned commercially. ... I had two separate [commercial] leases. ... It was a ... lesson.

During the years Gus was at the Old City location he produced many shows but also had many complaints from neighbors. In one instance, police were called at 8 p.m. on a First Friday during a sound check for a band performing that night. When the policeman arrived to check on the noise complaint, he noted the gallery's location on one of the most commercial streets in Old City and laughed at the early and almost absurd timing. He was even apologetic about showing up.

It just became increasingly clear that ... that's not the space I should be in.

Early in March 2016, right after [Sam Tower](#) finished a show, city officials immediately and permanently closed the space. It was in the middle of Sam's weeklong run, and Gus was not even allowed to sleep in his own bed that night. Friends and artists from the community quickly offered their resources to find another space. The show finished its run at the Iron Factory, but it took four months for Gus to find a new location. Eventually, Jamie Moffett (founder of Kensington Renewal) called him.

We've been friends for a long time so he heard about ... the situation. ... He knew of the space that [had] opened up, and he suggested it.

The two-story house that Jamie recommended, at 3312 Kensington Ave., used to be a restaurant or coffee shop; there is still an “employees must wash hands” sign in the first-floor bathroom. It had enough space for him to live, revive *1fiftyone gallery + art space*, and create a basement art studio for himself. The house was being renovated when Gus first saw it.

I said to [the workers] ... “I'm pretty sure I'm going to take this. Can you hold off [on the drywall]? ... I really love the way these exposed walls look.”

It has a completely different feel than the last space ... but there is something ... kind of odd about this new space. These bold vertical stripes and arrows and circles on the wall—as if this was some sort of a seven-year-old's idea of how you draw a circus tent. ... There was something so peculiar about it. And I have to say a tiny bit of weird alternative kind of punk in the space.

After many conversations and visits to the house with friends from the performance community, Gus moved in, in June 2016.

Since opening its doors for the Fringe Festival in September, the new *1fiftyone gallery + art space* has had an average of two shows per month. The welcoming neighborhood and the versatility of the place no doubt played a role in the increased number of productions.

The new neighborhood is just amazing and filled with a lot of wonderful people I've met so far. Tito, the one neighbor who had a store next to me, [is] a really nice guy. ... When the store was open ... there was a speaker outside ... playing all of his great different kinds of music. But then he said to me, “So if you ever have a show, you just tell me and I can lower this for you. Or you know, you want to borrow the sound system?”

Yeah. This is the complete opposite of where I came from.

This neighborly environment has also enabled Gus to envision and plan for the future.

I'm reaching out to some community groups [Kensington Renewal] in that neighborhood area, and trying to see what we can do. I'm hoping to get the yard [an empty lot next to the house]. It might happen, it might not. ... But you never know. There'll be able to be some outdoor seating for the space. ... I might be able to build a small stage out there, so we can have outdoor performances and maybe put [in] a little tiny garden. ... And one of the plans is also opening up to visual artists.

He is also dreaming of offering the space to local organizations for art classes for children or differently-abled people, something that was impossible in the fourth-floor Old City location. He might one day build a wood shop in the basement that would be accessible to artists as well. When I asked him if he has any kind of curatorial vision about who presents work in his space, he answered,

I'm trying not necessarily to say no, but I do have an idea, that I really want to ... be political. ... I remember reading not too long ago ... that ... any act of making art these days is a political statement in and of itself. So, I think I'm trying to give independent artists the space ... ones that rarely get a voice someplace else. ...

I'm not saying that I wouldn't deal with more established performers, but I think giving a platform or a space to somebody who is less established, is what ... I'd like to be known for. I want people to feel like they can take risks there. I want to see risky performances. I want to see people ... feel like they're stretching themselves.

During the latest [Four Weeks in January](#) organized by Kevin Meehan, Gus performed his first-ever solo piece. An improvisational mono/dialogue with his future self over Skype, he describes it as petrifying and pushing his own comfort levels. He is also no longer shying away from bringing artists to perform together, starting his own curatorial practice.

I really want ... [to mix] genres and have people ... [be] confronted with something that they might not otherwise choose to go to. I just really want to see a lot of diversity and hopefully

cross-pollination with things as [the space] grows. ... So, I think it's good and helps bring different communities together that may not normally go to the same thing. It's an idea. It's a great idea.

Ultimately, Gus wants to serve the performance and local communities. Although he funds everything out of his own pocket, he always credits the community and artists for the existence of his space.

Nobody does anything by themselves. I'm not doing this all myself; that's simply untrue ... because for four months people let me live with them. People helped me vet the space and ... organize and get the word out. I don't think anybody does anything by themselves. There's such a support system there in the arts. Because there has to be.

And I think that's great, and that's one of the reasons why I love it so much. It's because you're just part of something bigger and that's important.

fiftyone gallery + art space, 3312 Kensington Ave. in Philadelphia, is open for rehearsals, performances, and other risky ventures.

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