

Anita Durst and Chashama - bring a positive energy to artists and communities alike

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Sid Chidiac displays his art at a Chashama event

Credits:

Photo courtesy of Sid Chidiac

Anita Durst started Chashama in 1995, and has been helping artists find spaces to create and showcase their art ever since. Her organization uses vacant buildings and storefronts, sometimes in communities in need of revitalization. This in turn keeps those neighborhoods active and vibrant, and also benefits building owners and artists. Chashama works with landlords and developers to identify underutilized real estate, which the owner is then willing to donate on a short-term basis. This benefits both parties as the spaces are put to good use, looked after and maintained while they are awaiting commercial tenants, and the artists themselves are better able to live and create in these free or highly subsidized spaces.

Their numbers so far are pretty impressive. According to their website they have converted more than 40 locations, giving 7,500 artists access to subsidized space, which has supported 10,000 public presentations for over 500,000 viewers.

Their vision of recycling and repurposing buildings in transition, means they invest in neighborhoods, foster local artists and help to sustain a vast range of creativity and culture. Anita realized from her own personal experience that the lack of affordable space was the greatest threat to sustaining a diverse, dynamic and provocative cultural environment in NYC. Her mission has resulted in relationships with some of New York's largest developers and property owners, including the Durst Organization, Newmark and Company, Forest City Ratner, George

Comfort and Sons, Brause Realty and HEC Real Estate.

Chashama offers several programs including those for visual arts, performances, and window displays for exhibits or studios. Spaces are converted into temporary theatres, galleries, artist studios and rehearsal spaces. Information on how to apply for these programs can be found through their website at chashama.org. One of their programs at Chashama North even includes having shared meals, such as supper on Wednesday and Sunday and lunch every day. The meals are primarily vegetarian and focus on wholesome, organic, sustainable local foods. They believe cooking and eating together will foster a sense of community and encourage a dialogue about contemporary art and life.

We spoke to Anita about where the inspiration for Chashama came about, the services her organization provides and how these programs are helping artists give back to communities.

How did Chashama first come about?

My inspiration was my mentor, Reza Abdoh, an avant-garde director I worked with. I was an actress and in many of his productions. He taught me about creativity and how it brings you out of the box. Then when he passed away in 1995 I started the organization to continue his energy and vision. Reza loved the theatre and I wanted to make theatre like him, but found I just couldn't replicate it. We would be rehearsing and people would ask to rehearse in our space when we weren't using it. I saw a need there and it has grown from that.

My family is in real estate so I was getting rehearsal spaces for myself, and again people would ask to use my spaces when I wasn't there. I have a great love of art so I then moved towards getting spaces for artists.

I believe society needs art, as it is very controlled by advertising and the government. I believe art is a way to find a different plain, and to communicate in different ways that we aren't right now. Art gives a solace and protects us from ourselves, and our own destructive behavior.

How do you feel artists can enhance a community or bring life back into it?

If you have an empty space and there are no people in it, and the building is falling apart, this causes a bad energy in the whole neighborhood. It sends the message that nobody cares and no one wants it. So if you put a youth program in there, which is what we have done, and then say to the young people in the community, "come to them and be a part of it". They will then come and make art and be a part of it, and that in turn changes the energy in the community. You are changing the look of the neighborhood and also the feeling in the neighborhood. You are sending

a positive message to the neighborhood, and saying it has a value and is worth improving.

How long are spaces normally available to artists, and do you help them with relocation afterwards?

It depends on the program as to how long it can be occupied for, but usually for as long as the space is available. Our contracts are on a month to month basis, but studio spaces are usually available the longest period of time. We don't usually help someone relocate, but they can always reapply for the program, or we can relocate the artist to another one of our available spaces. Gallery spaces are available for the shortest period of time and there is usually a new performance or exhibit in them every 3 weeks.

Artists speak very highly of you. How do you find artists or how would they find out about your organization?

In the beginning we had to go out and search for the artists, but now that we have been around 15 years we have a huge waiting list of artists that want to work with us. We sometimes put out advertising with the New York Foundation of the Arts, but mostly it is through word of mouth.

Do you assist with putting the artist's shows or galleries together?

We have 3-5 shows opening every month, and we provide the space. We will also give the artist a little help, such as with publicity, but mostly it's up to the artist. We do try to help as much as we can, but we only have a staff of five and we have over twenty spaces, so it's hard sometimes. We can direct the artist towards someone that can help them more if needed.

To find out more about Anita Durst and her organization Chashama, and to see a list of upcoming exhibits, visit their website at chashama.org