



Tenderloin Public Art Exchange

This document contains the summarized findings from the Fall 2017 Tenderloin Public Art Exchange, a survey and focus group conducted by CounterPulse with the aim of understanding the role art can and does play for residents, workers, and visitors of the Tenderloin. This document is designed to create transparency into the strategy of CounterPulse's Public Art initiatives. The data collected from the surveys is intended to be open source and we encourage other organizations and artists to use our findings to inform their own initiatives.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Who is CounterPulse?
- 1.2. Our Mission
- 1.3. The 80 Turk Project
- 1.4. History of our Public Art Initiatives
- 1.5. What is Public Art?
- 1.6. Tenderloin Public Art Survey

2. Focus Group Summary of Findings

- 2.1. Core Insights
- 2.2. Renewed Mission and Vision
- 2.3. Strategies
- 2.4. Methods
- 2.5. Current Projects
- 2.6. Outcomes
- 2.7. Our Audiences

3. Focus Group Method

- 3.1. Outreach
- 3.2. Survey
- 3.3. Focus Group
- 3.4. Synthesis

4. Survey and Focus Group Information

- 4.1. Part 1: Discussing Public Art in the Tenderloin
- 4.2. Part 2: Discussing Community Engagement
- 4.3. Part 3: Who We're Talking To
- 4.4. Anecdotal reasoning for our core insights

5. Conclusion

6. Citations

Introduction

Who is CounterPulse?

CounterPulse is a space for art and community, a forum for the open exchange of art and ideas that spark transformation in our communities and our society. CounterPulse's core performance programming includes three annual artist-in-residence tracks embedded in curated seasons of risk-taking performances that occur in our 100-seat black box theater. CounterPulse is growing a series of robust Public Art initiatives that create spaces for art making for all who work, live, and play in the Tenderloin. In 2015 the organization, in partnership with the Community Arts Stabilization Trust, acquired and renovated a historic theater facility in the heart of San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood at 80 Turk Street. We've been enlivening our new home with art and action since March 2016. CounterPulse grew out of 848 Community Space, founded in 1991.

Our Mission

CounterPulse is building a movement of risk-taking art that shatters assumptions and builds community. We provide space and resources for emerging artists and cultural innovators, serving as an incubator for the creation of socially relevant, community-based art and culture. CounterPulse acts as a catalyst for art and action; creating a forum for the open exchange of art and ideas, sparking transformation in our communities and our society. We work towards a world that celebrates diversity of race, class, cultural heritage, artistic expression, ability, gender identity & sexual orientation. We strive to create an environment that is physically and economically accessible to everyone.

The 80 Turk Project

In 2016 CounterPulse moved from our longtime rental home on Mission Street, to our new home, in San Francisco's Tenderloin District at 80 Turk Street. CounterPulse is currently purchasing the building from our partner, the Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST). The 80 Turk Project is CAST's pilot project for a new model of arts land development and stabilization through an innovative land trust model. CounterPulse partnered with Jensens Architects on the full renovation and transformation of the former porn movie theater to the state-of-the-art, community-focused performance space it is today.

History of our Public Art Initiatives

CounterPulse's commitment to access to the arts, and our deeply held value that risk-taking art can shatter assumptions and build community, means that we have always supported some type of public art programming in addition to our choreographer residencies and performance seasons. In terms of the current iterations of these initiatives, CounterPulse has been partnering to bring artist workshops into housing developments since 2009 and hosting Block Fest since the Fall of 2016, soon after we moved to our new Tenderloin facility.

What is Public Art?

CounterPulse employs the term "public art" to describe our programming that is intended to occur for the public in the context of public space. This is in contrast to our programming which is designed to be framed in the contained context of a theater or gallery. We found the American for the Arts definition of public art to be relevant:

"Public art is often site-specific, meaning it is created in response to the place and community in which it resides. It often interprets the history of the place, its people, and perhaps addresses a social or environmental issue. The work may be created in collaboration with the community, reflecting the ideas and values of those for whom it's created.

Being public, the art is free and accessible to everyone. Public art creates a heightened awareness in the viewer of the site of the people and the broader context of what's around them. Today, viewers may capture a photo of the public art on their smartphone and share the work and the experience with others, extending the reach of public art beyond the site.

Whatever the form, public art instills meaning—a greater sense of identity and understandings of where we live, work, and visit—creating memorable experiences for all."

We necessarily trouble the notion of public space by considering how accessible (physically and socially) a space is for varied communities. Hence some of our public programming occurs in residential buildings, in community rooms,

which are an accessible public space for those residents. Other programming occurs in more conventionally defined public space and we work to make the space as accessible as possible using a harm-reduction framework.¹

Tenderloin Public Art Exchange

In the Fall of 2017 CounterPulse conducted our inaugural Tenderloin Public Art Exchange, with the intention to repeat the surveying and focus group work annually. We visited Single Room Occupancy (SRO) community meetings, and then invited residents, as well as people that work or frequent the Tenderloin, to come to a series of three focus groups. We conducted a written survey and then conversed in small groups about life in the Tenderloin and what role art does or could play in the Tenderloin. A working group was convened following the focus groups to remain engaged in CounterPulse's Public Arts initiatives. CounterPulse synthesized the findings from the the Survey and Focus Group and developed six core insights to guide the theory of CounterPulse's Public Art initiatives.

¹ Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use. Harm Reduction is also a movement for social justice built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs. (Harm Reduction Coalition)



Block Fest with Tan Sirinumas

Focus Group Summary of Findings

CounterPulse framed our research around two major areas: daily life in the Tenderloin and art experiences. We traveled around the neighborhood, visiting community meetings to begin our information collection. We hosted focus groups and interviewed 60 Tenderloin residents, service providers, frequent visitors, and workers.

We developed insights using a structured design methodology to distill and synthesize the findings. Through this process we identified six core insights about life and art in the Tenderloin.

Core Insights

1. Relationships of proximity—particularly neighbors—but also friends, family, co-workers, and social service workers are core to thriving in the Tenderloin.
2. There are a lot of services in the neighborhood, but access and consistency are problematic.
3. There is a perceived “freedom to be” that is uniquely valued in Tenderloin.
4. There is a preference for art that is celebratory of the diversity of the Tenderloin, and is beautiful and uplifting.
5. Lack of environmental consistency encourages distrust and persistent vigilance.
6. There is a dire lack of public space in the Tenderloin. There are few benches, street trees, or parks.

Renewed Vision and Mission

These core insights led us to identify the gaps our programming could help bridge, and define the vision and mission of the CounterPulse Public Art initiatives.

Vision

A connected and resilient Tenderloin that is alive with art and accessible public space.

Mission

CounterPulse’s Public Art initiatives create spaces for residents, workers, and visitors of the Tenderloin to connect and build capacity for mutual support and co-organizing around the changes we’d like to see in our city, community, and buildings. We do this by leveraging public art to create public space, that is made open and accessible through a harm reduction framework. The public spaces we create are beautiful, information-rich, full of local stories, and celebrate the diversity and freedom to be that we value as a community.

Strategies

CounterPulse employs the following strategies in directing our Public Art Initiatives.

1. **Co-design:** all programs are created, curated, and revised in collaboration with intended audience, community leaders, and other stakeholders.
2. **Partnership building:** CounterPulse collaborates with a number of direct service providers, community organizers, and other arts initiatives to accomplish our mission.

3. **Storytelling:** CounterPulse creates space for residents to tell stories, specifically highlighting the diversity and “freedom to be” that is unique to the Tenderloin.
4. **Beautifying our Streets:** CounterPulse engages artists to make our streets more beautiful by creating murals, street sculptures, and green spaces.
5. **Creating Spaces to Connect:** CounterPulse leverages public art to create informative, engaging, and open-ended public space.
6. **Mentorship:** CounterPulse Public Art initiatives include elements to skillbuild and support emerging to mid-career social practice artists.

Methods

CounterPulse will employ several methods, each aligned to a specific strategy, in tactically administering our Public Art Initiatives.

1. **Co-design**
 - a. Regularly convene the Public Art Steering Committee of Tenderloin residents to participate in curation, support with outreach, and provide critical feedback.
 - b. Host quarterly community check-ins.
 - c. Employ prototyping and testing methods that rigorously collect feedback from Tenderloin residents, visitors, workers, and stakeholders during program initiation.
 - d. Host the annual Tenderloin Public Art Exchange and gather information using surveying and focus groups.
2. **Partnership building**
 - a. Build partnerships and collaborate with Tenderloin-based service-, arts- and justice- oriented organizations.
 - b. CounterPulse staff attends regular community meetings in the Tenderloin.
3. **Storytelling**
 - a. Creating spaces for telling stories of the Tenderloin that focus on diversity and the freedom to be that is uniquely valued in the neighborhood.
 - b. Design responsive marketing, wayfinding, and branding for CounterPulse Public Art Initiatives.
4. **Beautifying our Streets:**
 - a. Partnering with the community, artists, and funders to create murals and street sculptures
 - b. Partnering with existing initiatives to designate green space around the Tenderloin.

5. **Creating Public Space**

- a. Create arts events like Block Fest that generate safe and informative public space on Turk Street
- b. Work with partnered organizations to bring teaching artists into residential buildings to host movement workshops.
- c. Creating permanent or semi-permanent public art on Turk Street that provide respite.

6. **Mentorship**

- a. Supporting social practice artists through engaging in their process by providing feedback and teaching marketing and administration skills.

Current Projects

Core Projects:

1. **Block Fest** - Block Fest animates and celebrates the unit block of Turk Street (between Mason Street and Taylor Street) with free arts activities, cultural offerings, community information, and discussion for the local residents, workers, and visitors. The program has been running monthly since November 2016 and we are working to expand the program to weekly in the Fall of 2018. Presented in partnership with Central City SRO Collaborative.
2. **Residential Arts Workshops** - CounterPulse partners with ABD Productions/Skywatchers to supporting bringing movement-based arts workshops to SRO residents in our two focus buildings. These movement workshops meet residents where they're at both literally and programmatically, as Skywatchers employs a harm-reduction philosophy to their program model. These workshops eventually become live art in the form of streetside performance and an annual staged work. Created with additional partnership of Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation (TNDC).
3. **Turk & Taylor Project** - a multiyear initiative supported by the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development and Group i. CounterPulse is partnering with artists, Twin Walls Mural Co., and Future Cities Lab to devise a blockwide art intervention that will mitigate some of the issues associated with the construction of the Group i 950-974 Market development. CounterPulse is working with Future Cities Lab to design an interactive streetside story gallery and street furniture. In June 2018, Twin Walls Mural Co. painted a 300-foot, blockwide mural along the unit block of Turk Street on the barricades of the Group i construction barricades. The mural was created during a residency at CounterPulse through the Spring of 2018 in collaboration with six Tenderloin organizations, who are also featured on the mural.

Additional Initiatives:

4. Participation in Sunday Streets and other off-site activities in partnership with CounterPulse artists.

5. Occasional free events at CounterPulse with some kind of offering. For example in the winter of 2017, we co-hosted the Women's Holiday Party, where we hosted a holiday party and gave away outfits and toiletry bags to attendees.
6. Free ticketing programs and space tours
7. Hosting Coffee Break, an occasional morning coffee hour in the alcove of CounterPulse.
8. Convening the Tenderloin Arts Working Group to guide the public art initiatives of CounterPulse as well hosting quarterly Community Check-Ins to share updates and get feedback from the community at large.

Outcomes

CounterPulse will analyze the success of our Public Art initiatives by tracking the following outcomes. These outcomes will be measured during our annual Tenderloin Public Art Exchange surveying and focus group, as well as with support from partnered service providers at our two focus residences:

- Residents perceive day-to-day life in the Tenderloin as more consistent and more in their control, leading to decreased sense of hopelessness and helplessness.
- Increased leadership from community members counted by increased number of resident artists, working group members, and volunteers.
- Residents are more effectively accessing services they need.
- Residents create tighter social bonds, more community groups are formed, and overall participation in community groups of all kinds increases.
- Residents are more aware of major changes happening in neighborhood (e.g. new developments, businesses opening or closing, changes to public bus routes).
- More residents feel like their voices are heard by decision-makers in their community.
- Increase in resident attendance of community events of all kinds in the Tenderloin

Our Audiences

Primary audience

CounterPulse target audiences for our Public Art Initiatives is anyone that lives, works, or plays in the Tenderloin.

Targets within primary audiences

Our target groups within the primary audience are:

- The 3200 SRO residents living one block or less from CounterPulse
- Tenderloin community leaders
- Tenderloin artists
- Residents experiencing social isolation
- Residents who are in recovery

Why SROs?

With a lack of public gathering space in San Francisco's Tenderloin District, SRO residents are often disconnected from each other, the neighborhood, and the city at large, which exacerbates many of the challenges of being a poor resident of San Francisco in 2017. There are over 30,000 SRO units in San Francisco—about 5% of the city's housing stock. A typical SRO unit is a single 8x10 foot room with shared bathrooms, existing inside former hotels and worker housing. In the wake of our city's current housing crisis SROs have become a vital last option for residents living below the poverty line. The Tenderloin alone houses 10,000 SRO units, the greatest density in the city.

By focusing our Public Art Program on serving the over 3200 SRO residents living one block or less from CounterPulse, the organization is uniquely positioned to provide transformative public gathering space for our city's poorest residents.

Geographic Focus

CounterPulse's Tenderloin Public Art Initiatives are specifically focused on the unit block of Turk Street, the span of Turk Street between Mason Street and Taylor.

Focus Group Method

Outreach

During the six weeks leading up to the focus group the engagement cohort visited 12 SRO community meetings and invited attendees to the focus group. We posted fliers around the neighborhood, and shared them with community organizers at Central City SRO. We also conducted in-person outreach at our Block Fest activities leading up to the focus group, and personally invited Artist Activators and other Tenderloin stakeholders. Participants were informed they would be compensated for their time.

Survey

The survey covered three general topics: 1) Public art in the Tenderloin, 2) How the community would like to engage with public art processes, and 3) Demographic information about the group. The survey was read aloud to small groups of participants by facilitators. The survey was comprised of primarily multiple choice, but some questions were write-in. The survey took about 20 minutes and occurred first in the meetings

Focus Group

The focus groups were comprised of facilitated 30 minute conversations in groups of 7 or less. The conversations covered discussion of the positive aspects of living in the Tenderloin, the challenges of living in the Tenderloin, and memorable public art experiences in the Tenderloin and elsewhere. We had an ASL interpreter during one of the sessions, but no other interpreters.

Synthesis

The conversations from the focus group and the results from the survey were distilled by the Engagement cohort using a facilitated process designed to uncover unexpected findings. The process included transcription, consolidation, sharing, grouping, and finally identifying core insights.

Survey and Focus Group Information

Below we have published information from the survey portion of the Public Art Exchange, along with the reasoning behind our core insights. This information is made freely available to the public, in hopes it will be useful for other public art practitioners in the Tenderloin. For the survey portion we have selected highlights from the fill-in questions for concision. [Please contact us](#) if you're interested in reading the full list of responses. Please note that we are not able to share the raw files from the focus group section of the Exchange to protect participant's privacy. The findings from the focus group are available synthesized with the survey findings in the report above, and elaborated on in the next section, "Anecdotal reasoning for our core insights."

Part 1: Discussing Public Art in the Tenderloin

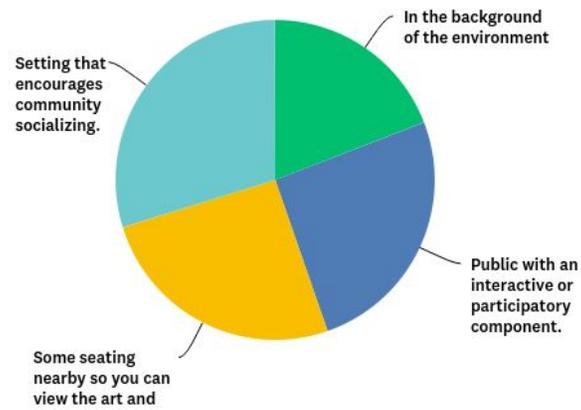
Describe a time when you enjoyed a public art work:

“At the Tenderloin National Forest Skywatchers event where there was drumming, singing, dancing, and food!”

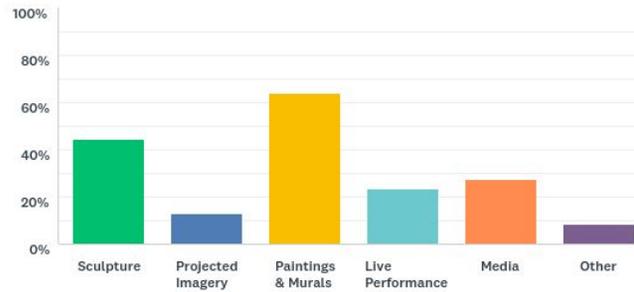
“I was deeply moved by the Quilt when it was here.”

“I was at a lion tamer show it was amazing grant cats and sparkly costumes.”

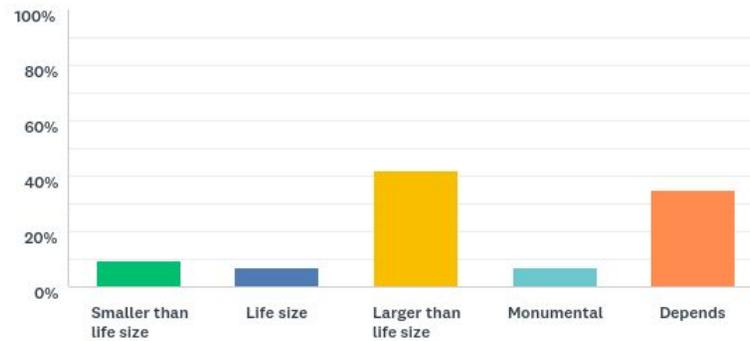
Q2 How would you like to interact with a public arts activity?



Q3 What kinds of public art would you most like to see in the Tenderloin Neighborhood?



Q4 What scale of public art fits best in the Tenderloin?



Q5 What do you love about living in the Tenderloin?

"I love the Tenderloin because I had a roof over my head when I was homeless."

"That the neighborhood supports one another."

"A place to stay not homeless."

"Not much!"

"I love the roughness and toughness of the Tenderloin and its a community like no other."

"The moment and how music and dance seem to be everywhere and the city lights the city that's beautifully alive."

"The diversity of the neighborhood, the cultures and backgrounds that people have."

"Interacting with diverse people as you go about your daily activities."

Q6 What are the challenges you face living in the Tenderloin?

"The cleanliness and the struggles of my neighbors with drugs homelessness and violence."

"Lack of greenery."

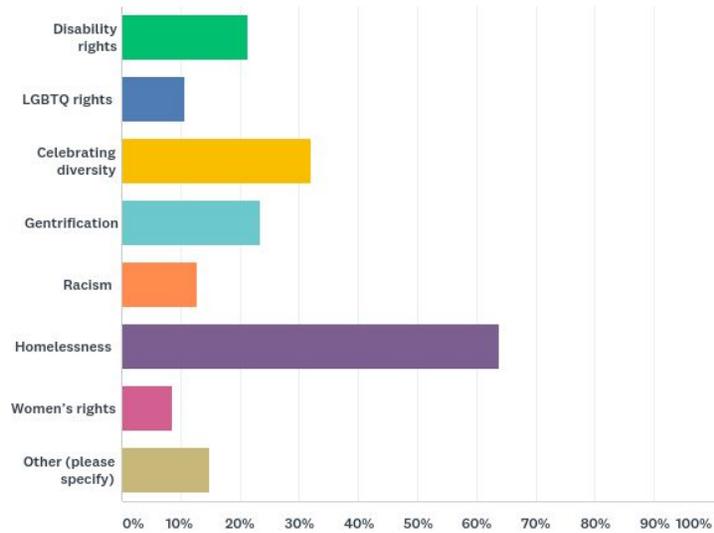
"Gentrification and filth."

"If you are a recovering addict there are a lot of triggers here."

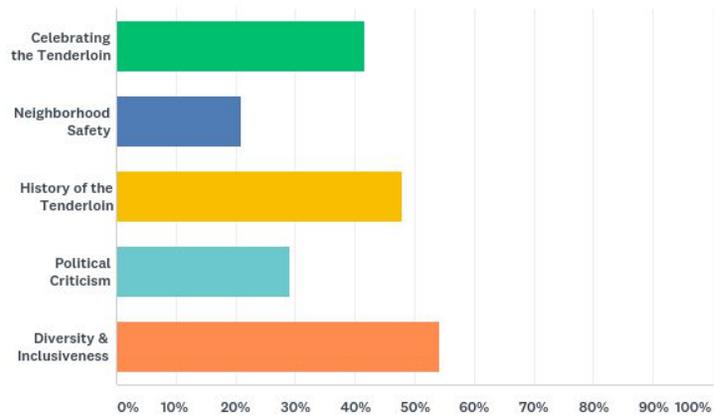
"Too wild sometimes."

"I face the challenges of being old."

Q7 What sort of cultural or social issues in the Tenderloin that you would like to see public art address:

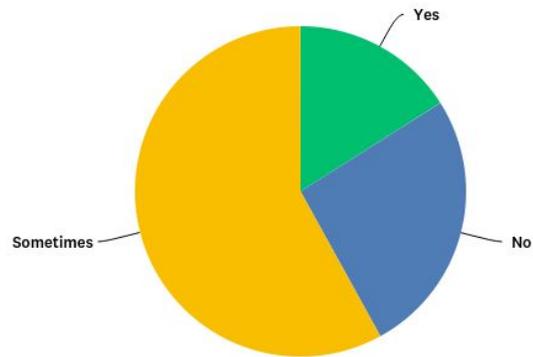


Q8 What sort of theme or message would you like for public art in the Tenderloin to convey?

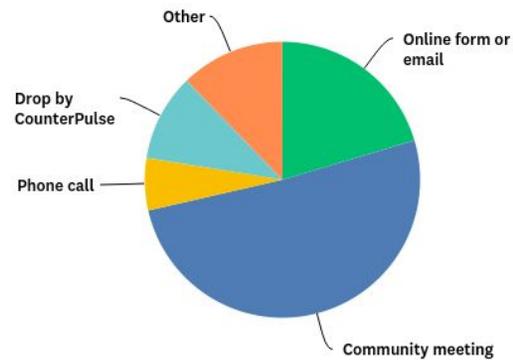


Part 2: Discussing Community Engagement

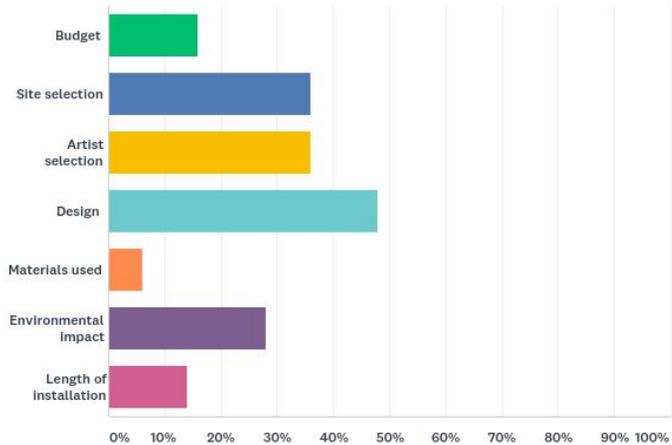
Q1 Do you feel your voice is heard by your fellow citizens, community organizers, policy makers and people in leadership positions?



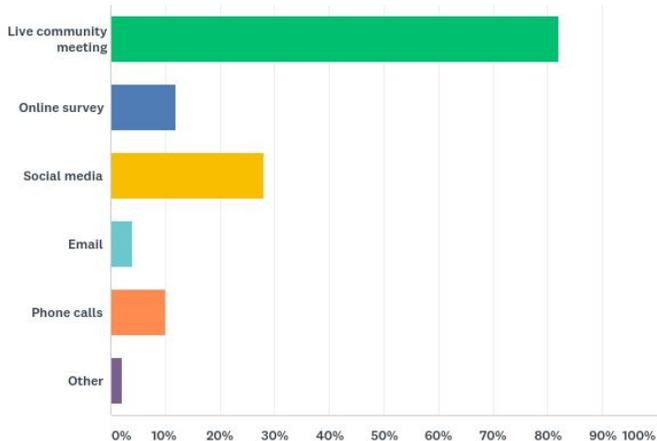
Q2 What is the best way for you to provide comments, suggestions or feedback regarding planning public art in the neighborhood?



Q3 Which aspects of the public art planning process should include community participation?

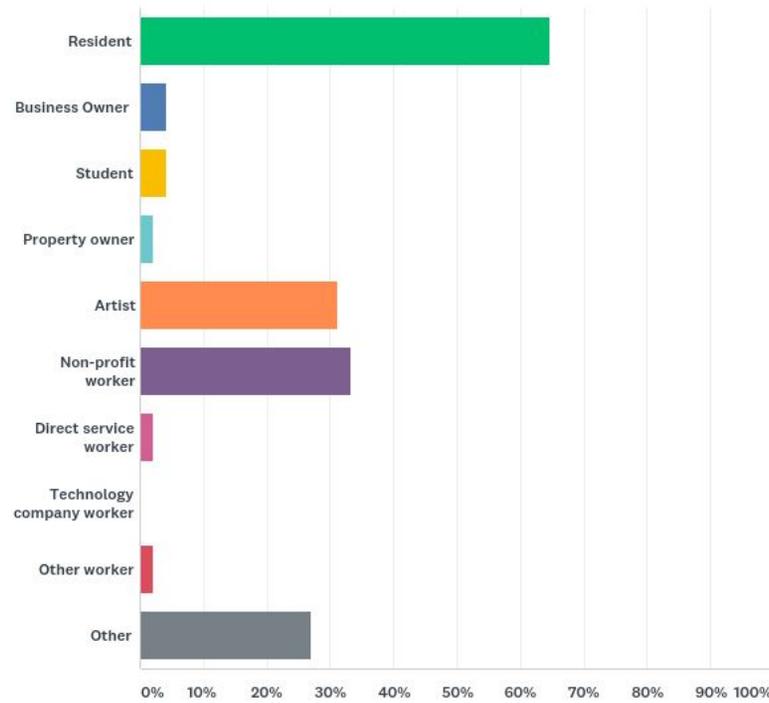


Q4 What is the best review process for the community to evaluate and provide comment on the project during the exhibition phase?



Part 3: Who We're Talking To

Q1 What is your relationship to the Tenderloin?

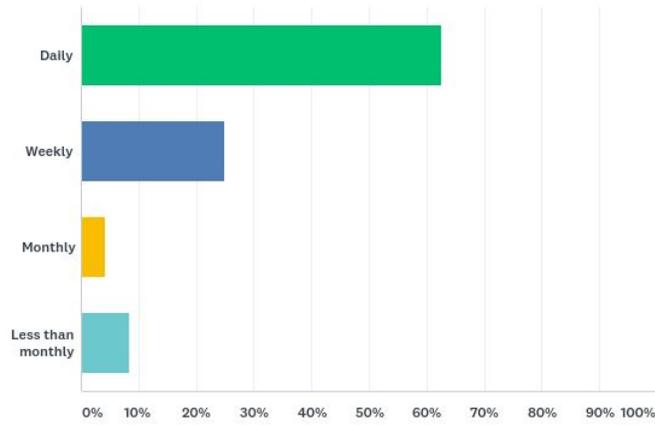


Other

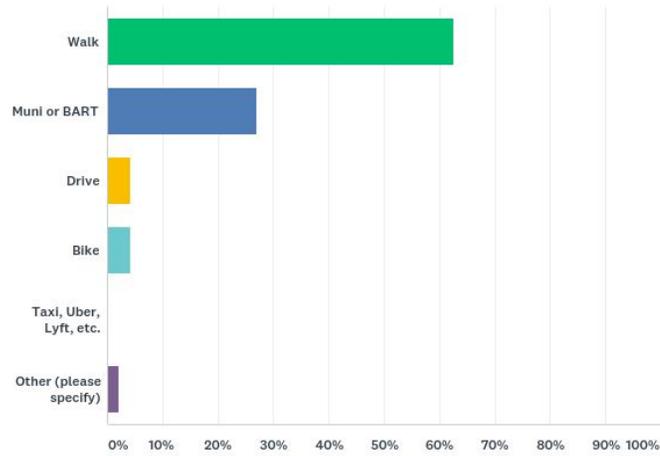
community organizer
Drive for Lyft
Former resident for 11 years

homeless, staying in TL temporarily
I'm homeless and have been for 16.5 months
it's complicated
just moved from TL but my bro lives here
Keeping my life together
Native who helps out!
Outreach
Participant in Skywatchers
Volunteer in the Tenderloin

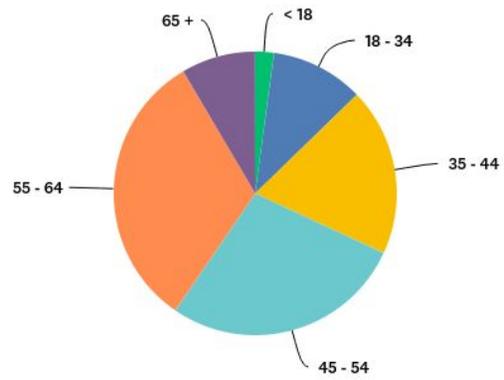
Q2 How often do you travel on Turk Street?



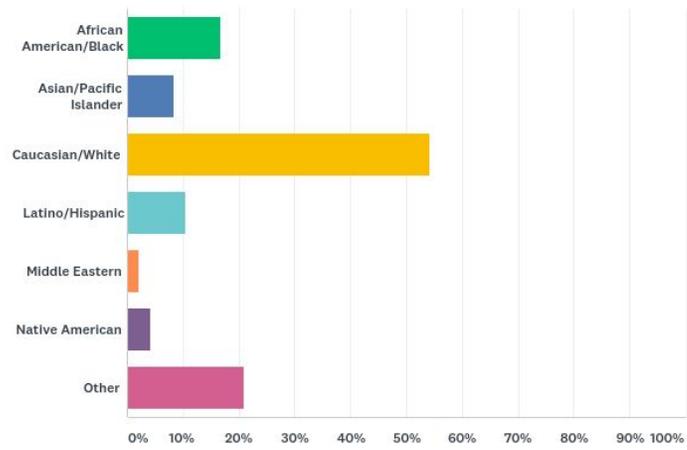
Q3 What is your main mode of transportation?



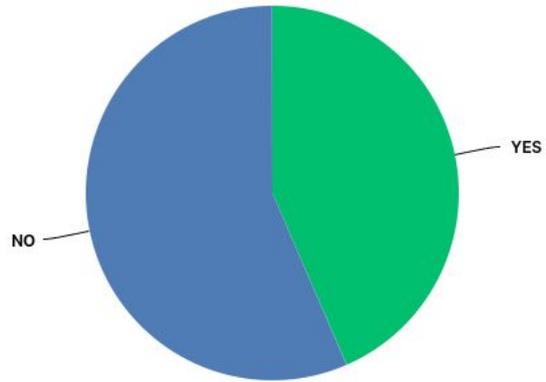
Q4 What is your age?



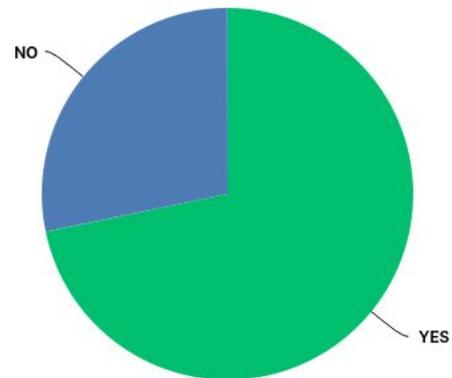
Q5 How do you describe your race or ethnicity?



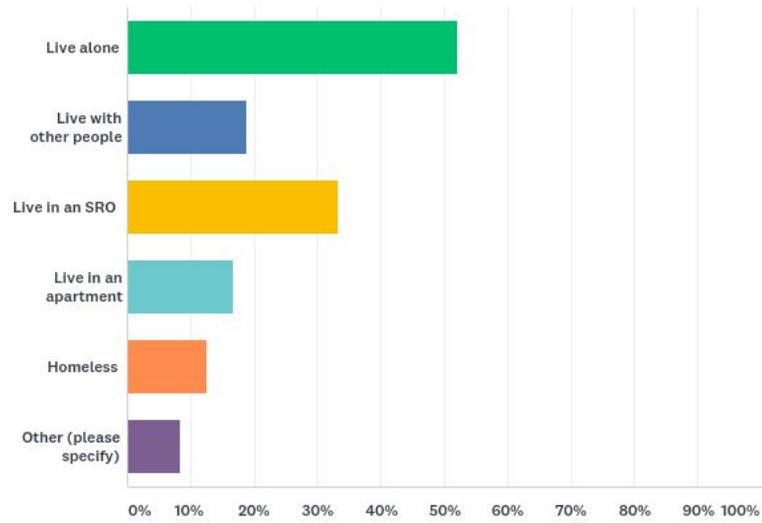
Q7 Do you identify as LGBTQ?



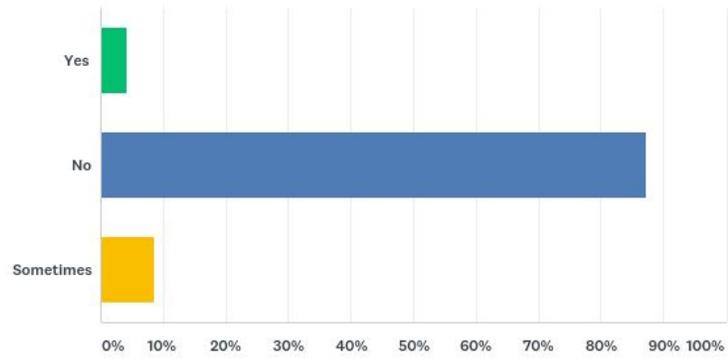
Q8 Do you identify as Disabled?



Q9 About your household:



Q10 Are there children in your household?



Anecdotal reasoning for our core insights

To help provide context for our findings we turn to anecdotal evidence to elaborate on our core insights.

Relationships of proximity—particularly neighbors—but also friends, family, co-workers, and social service workers are core to thriving in the Tenderloin.

Our focus group discussions highlighted the importance of relationships of proximity for Tenderloin residents. Participants expressed enjoying the ability to interact with diverse people and gain access to social programs. Some participants, who have been living in the TL for years, conveyed they got involved in their communities at a very young age, signifying the importance of positive youth programs. Many participants connect with their communities through volunteering at events and community groups, leading to positive connotations with the Tenderloin at large. As one participant expressed, “I’ve never known or seen so many different races, religions, and mix of people that all get along and live without wars.”

Because of this insight, CounterPulse is structuring our public art programs to make space for people to join together, converse, and just hang out, thereby building on these relationships of proximity. We also focus on engaging artists, volunteers, and service workers from the Tenderloin to lead these activities.

There are a lot of services in the neighborhood but access and consistency are problematic.

Participants regularly referred to a rich amalgam of social service and arts organizations a positive attribute of living in the Tenderloin. Our conversations circled back to all the support available for the homeless, people with mental or physical disabilities, people living with drug addiction, or simply for folks who want to get involved in their communities. However, access to these services is limited for a variety of reasons. Participants mentioned that some social service organizations are beyond capacity with their support, while other organizations have closed down. Further, a couple participants noted that access to mental health is particularly limited in the Tenderloin.

This insight was the core inspiration to make Block Fest weekly, and to invest resources into designing the wayfinding and identity for the program.

There is a “freedom to be” that is unique to TL.

Focus group participants regularly conveyed a social freedom within the Tenderloin that allows individuals and communities to express themselves. This “freedom to be” is enjoyed by artists and creative thinkers, LGBTQ individuals,

and cultural groups. Throughout our conversations we heard how “music and dance seem to be everywhere” and participants enjoy the sight of San Francisco’s cityscape from their perspective in the Tenderloin. Another facet of living in the TL that was identified was the “roughness and toughness” and resilience of the community. Most participants agreed the Tenderloin is rich with artistic, creative, and unique individuals that by in large live in harmony with one another.

The qualities of open free expression are not hard to see in the Tenderloin, we hope our programs can support and celebrate these qualities rather than try and supplant it.

Art should be celebratory of the diversity of the TL—it should be nice, pleasant, not too in your face.

One of the most prominent themes in our discussions was the importance of celebratory and pleasant art in the Tenderloin. After describing the many hardships of living in the Tenderloin, many speakers expressed they don’t want to view art that does not perpetuate negative stereotypes; but rather, uplifts residents and visitors of the Tenderloin.

We are using this insight to curate artistic activations that are pleasant and enjoyable, and less focused on challenging people. As an experimental performing arts theater, we recognize that there is room for both kinds of art in the world (and everything in between), but our public art programs will be more focused on joy, healing, and celebration.

Lack of consistency and control over the environment encourages distrust and persistent vigilance.

Participants remarked that one of the challenges of being a Tenderloin resident is that so many things feel out of your control. In addition to generally unsafe conditions that encourage distrust, environmental changes happen without sufficient communication to residents. For example, most residents did not know that the buildings across the street were going to be demolished in a month from our conversation. Confusion over bus lines being rerouted was another common complaint, as was, changing public services and the processes with which to access these services.

This insight inspired CounterPulse to look at our public art initiatives and consider how we could make them more frequent, predictable, and consistent, for example expanding Block Fest to weekly.

There is a dire lack of public space in the Tenderloin. There are few benches, street trees, or parks.

A major challenge that we identified was the dearth of locations Tenderloin residents can use to sit or rest. With a lack of public restrooms, benches, and even trash cans to dispose waste, Tenderloin residents feel relegated to sit and sleep in business alcoves and sidewalks, using creative materials for seating such as milk crates.

This insight led us to focus our public art activities on creating respite: spaces where people can just sit, rest, and engage in an activity if they would like.

Conclusion

The 2017 Tenderloin Public Art Exchange has structured some of the fundamental direction and benchmarks for CounterPulse's Public Art initiatives. It is a process we will repeat annually each annually, using this initial groundwork against which to test, measure, and refine our programs. This year's Public Art Exchange was made possible through funding from the San Francisco Office of Economic & Workforce Development. If you would like to get involved in this work, provide comment, or have questions please contact us.

Credits:

This report was written and compiled by the CounterPulse Engagement Cohort: Erica Dixon, Rick Darnell, and Justin Ebrahemi, and was made possible through funding by the San Francisco Office of Economic & Workforce Development. Thank you to the focus group participants for your thoughtful engagement with our work.

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Citations

"Public Art." Americans for the Arts, 20 Dec. 2017, www.americansforthearts.org/by-topic/public-art.

"Principles of Harm Reduction." Harm Reduction Coalition, harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/.