

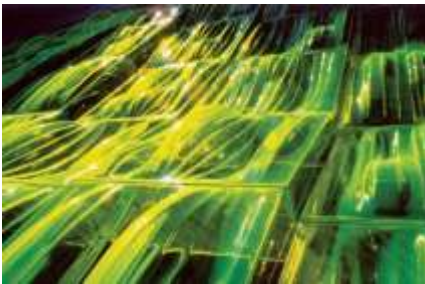


## Artadia: 5 Cities 41 Artists leaps beyond clichés of second-city angst

By Alana Wolf

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Just what is it that makes Atlanta’s art so different, so appealing? Or, for that matter, what about Houston’s or Boston’s? Various incarnations of this question are posed in the essays that introduce each chapter of *5 Cities 41 Artists: Artadia 08/09*. The book is the first in what will be a biannual publication produced by **Artadia**: The Fund for Art and Dialogue showcasing artist-awardees selected by a jury of internationally-recognized panelists. While current and former cultural producers of Atlanta passionately debate the benefits and drawbacks of place, this book offers a glimpse into the commonalities, as well as the regional specifics, of current artistic practice in Boston, Chicago, Houston, and the San Francisco Bay Area, in addition our own Southeastern urb.



ATLANTA: Tristan Al-Haddad,  
PATTERNS + PROFILES, 2005, PETG,  
steel, 92 x 8 x 10 feet. Image courtesy  
Artadia.

Since 1999, **Artadia** has successfully invigorated specific communities in the United States by granting visual artists unrestricted awards and providing them with a national network of support. **Artadia** aims to foster artistic innovation and expand the creative dialogue between artists across the country. You may notice that the Artadia lineup includes neither New York nor Los Angeles. This is by design.

The cultural inferiority complex that plagues nearly every American metropolis when it discovers, much to its horror, that it is neither New York nor Los Angeles deserves a long-overdue challenge. It’s a specialized sort of neurosis that may sound familiar to anyone living on the periphery. Even so, artists who perceive themselves as second- and third-city residents, fretting over their relegation to the shadows, succumb to a recognizably American anxiety: Exhibition organizers in the 19th-century U.S. were constantly looking over their shoulders – to Europe. Artists working stateside were pegged below their European counterparts much like the way landscapes were placed beneath history paintings in the salons of the 18th century.



5 Cities 41 Artists: Artadia  
08/09, book cover image  
courtesy Artadia.

New York has so thoroughly established itself as the *ne plus ultra* of the art world that it can seem as though it has always been that way, yet not so long ago icons like the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art were struggling to shake off their American inferiority complexes. We are still a comparatively young nation, but that's easy to forget when viewing the landscape through the microscope of contemporary art. Temporally zooming out, however, can deliver a perspective-shifting poultice to counter excessive hand-wringing. The reports from **Artadia**'s five cities enact a similar feat by enlarging the art world's geographic viewfinder.

The book contains introductory essays by curators working in each urban center that brim with civic enthusiasm for *not* being New York. Despite some Chamber of Commerce-style boosterism, the authors exercise an important act of cultural critique by focusing not only on what is wrong, but also identifying hopeful movements and moments when things go right. While no author was keen to trumpet the state of the economy as purely beneficial (some featured artists were chosen at the nadir of the nation's subprime crisis), there are a few hints suggesting that fiscal instability has permitted freedom for artists who have little stake in the share of an ever-shrinking pie. Practices such as collaboration, cross-pollination, institutional hierarchy-hopping, and trans-disciplinary alternatives are all emergent phenomena profiled in *5 Cities*.

The first chapter begins in our own backyard, where Atlanta's arts community is lauded as "vibrant" by Andrea Barnwell Brownlee of the Spelman College Museum of Art. However, she admits that national perception of the city's art scene remains nebulous, if it is considered at all. In her essay, she sees the Atlanta BeltLine "uniquely poised to contribute significantly to advancing contemporary art in the city and altering the above perceptions." (20)

Moving northward, Jen Mergel of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, reports that her city's old-guard institutions are looking beyond the usual hierarchies to the activities of their less-established neighbors. Mergel defines the city's historically pragmatic bent as key to those who occupy it, reaffirming artist and critic Dushko Petrovich's call for a "practical avant-garde" in 2007.

Stephanie Smith of the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art muses thoughtfully on factors that provide fertile ground for flourishing arts practice in peripheral cities. Smith embraces the term "provincial," encouraging artists to recognize places that offer regionally unique support that is sometimes difficult to find in more established art capitals.

Meanwhile, Michelle White of the Menil Collection describes Houston as marked by internationally renowned institutions, enormous cockroaches that fly about, "...and a strange, dark iridescent bird called the Grackle." White's descriptions present a Houston that is defiantly determined to avoid suffering from an uncertain identity. Rather, it is a visceral city whose sense of place is bound to rodeos and the Old West of Texas lore, one defined by a duality of "Picasso paintings and Brahman bulls." (86)

Reading these essays creates the impression that, while some cities have turned their backs on "(badly) imitating New York," the movement towards a viable alternative still has its challenges. As Chicago's Smith dryly quips, "it's not all roses and collaboration." (62) Her statement is echoed in a confession by René de Guzman of the Oakland Museum of California that "the local art market is just not big enough to support the creative activity in the region, and the money available to buy and support contemporary art is spent elsewhere or concentrated within a limited number of the biggest museums." Adding that the issue is hardly confined to the Bay Area, Guzman champions artists who adapt by repositioning themselves as entrepreneurs, but he also dismisses fledgling arts nonprofits as impractical ventures in light of the current economy.

More problematically, Guzman suggests an analogy that San Francisco is to Manhattan as Oakland is to Brooklyn, going on to posit that Oakland can be thought of “... as a Williamsburg (New York) West or Chinatown (Los Angeles) North in the making.” (112) Scruffy Oakland may be the haven for artists outside San Francisco’s polished downtown — but do we really need another Williamsburg or Chinatown? The majority of *5 Cities* presents overwhelming evidence that this sort of thinking is precisely the least productive. Artadia’s financial support and networking opportunities give artists a concrete defense for drowning out the tired ballad of such second-city angst.

While it’s undeniable that New York and Los Angeles continue to draw artists who equate ties to these cities as a measure of accomplishment, there are myriad alternatives for defining success. Buying into the Gotham ideal of either coast is a limited point of view. White notes in her essay, “Houston artists, of course, know what is going on outside of their peripheral post, but they don’t have to necessarily be there to matter.” Current technology lessens the importance of place and its associated psychological freight, allowing artists to connect with global audiences. This increasing virtual “placelessness” stands to escalate the value of regional quirks.

Outside Atlanta, the metropolises depicted in *5 Cities* bear distinct identities that inform regional artistic practice. But Atlanta’s lack of distinction may be less a drawback than one might guess. Rather than mourning over what we haven’t achieved, we might instead imagine our city, as Barnwell Brownlee does, in terms of what it is becoming — not quite Tara, but hopefully not a “Williamsburg South” in the making, either.

After all, Atlanta does not need to adopt someone else’s history; it has a problematic plenitude all its own. Atlanta is Waffle House and So So Def and John Portman and fractious traffic jams. It is the Tibetan monk’s chant flowing across Emory’s green-mown quad and the rumble-crush of NASCAR. It is marble-crumbling cemeteries where time and air hang perfectly still until it reaches cicada hour. It is MLK and CNN and fried-this and nouveau-that, always propelling itself ever toward what is new, newer, newest. What stage could be riper for the act of creation than a place that is constantly becoming?

And if we should, understandably, find ourselves coveting our neighbor’s city, we may do well to know that we are hardly alone in our shortcomings. At one point in her essay on Chicago, Smith lays out a hauntingly familiar litany: “There’s no shortage of laziness or cliquey-ness or blind spots, and nowhere near enough cross-pollination across diverse communities — of taste, of race, of class. The second-city mentality may never be entirely eradicated. The city still loses talent to the old coastal centers. People go. But they also come. And more and more often, it seems, they stay.” (62)

*Click here for more information on 5 Artists 41 Cities: Artadia 08/09 (USD \$40.00). Copies are currently available at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, who will present its second exhibition of Artadia artists from the San Francisco Bay Area in Material Deposits, on view from July 15 through September 18, 2011.*