

ORGANIZATION PROFILE

PROTEUS GOWANUS

A few feet away from the Gowanus Canal, down a little alley at the corner of Union and Nevins Streets, underneath a raised golden arm, is a small place called Proteus Gowanus. As you walk in, you don't really know if you're in a store, a reading room, a gallery, or just a comfortable gathering place that has a huge black antique safe off to the side. And then you realize it is all of those things.

Started a couple of years ago by Sasha Chavchavadze, Proteus Gowanus is an interdisciplinary gallery and reading room that strives to connect the arts, non-art disciplines such as math or history, and the community. "Unique," "anomaly" and "inspired" are words that have been used to describe Proteus Gowanus' approach. The organization, itself incorporated as a small business, has allied with seven small non-profits for mutual benefit. Kentler Drawing Center, for instance, contributes work to the installations and maintains a flat-file of prints at the exhibition space that holds works of 90 artists. Commissions help the gallery cover costs. They also throw events to raise money for their non-profit partners.

There ends up being a kind of symbiotic relationship between Proteus Gowanus and the constituent organizations, where each is helping the other. Books and other items are for sale from collaborators, such as *Cabinet Magazine* or The Institute for Figuring. The linking and networking serve the dual purpose of creating an interdisciplinary environment, and bringing all the various audiences of these groups in contact with each other.

Proteus Gowanus' year-long rotating exhibitions and events are informed by a singular theme, which the partner organizations and various artists in the area take on. This year the theme is "library," which is especially relevant in a year when libraries are everywhere endangered. Kentler sees this as a "non-packaged" way for its members to reach new audiences.

Proteus Gowanus is named after the sea god who could change form. Sasha sees this as connected to the way the Gowanus Canal and the area are transforming and also to the changing model of approaching visual art, often collaborative and mutually supportive, instead of isolated. A couple of years ago Sasha couldn't imagine doing this, but with the evolution of her own work, and with the change in ownership of the building that now houses the gallery, she ended up working with a number of other people on the idea, such as Leslie Kerby and Maddy Rosenberg (who is now instrumental in curating at Proteus). They approached some non-profits to become partners in the venture. Sasha created a gallery that is both intellectual and accessible.

There is a loose screening process for artists who want to become involved in Proteus Gowanus. The gallery is very welcoming of artists sharing ideas and proposing pieces for the exhibition space. They are also on the look-out for interesting workshops and presentations. Their audience is constantly growing, and the gallery is becoming a destination for many who savor projects that deal with visual arts' interaction with other disciplines.

Sasha tries to inculcate a "concrete sense of being in the place you are in, exactly where you are." An example of this is connecting art and history in her collaborations with the Brooklyn Historical Society, and in the library exhibit, tying together the concrete (say, parts of a card catalogue) with the esoteric (abstractions indicating the Dewey Decimal System). There is a shelf devoted to historical libraries in Brooklyn. There is a desk from the Brooklyn Museum Library that concentrates on 19th century collectors whose books have become a part of the Museum's present-day collection. And an event that came out of this exhibition was a stunning presentation by two writers about "Libraries in Danger," surveying libraries that have been burned and bombed from ancient Alexandria to today's Baghdad.

The Gowanus area is a collection of historical artifact, new ideas, old manufacturing and innovative artistic endeavors. The canal is coming back to life. The Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club, another Proteus partner, recently gave rides to people hopping from Proteus to Kentler to other studios and places of interest on the canal. In the words of Florence Neal, director of the Kentler International Drawing Space, this kind of project allows people "to really see where they are." It allows them to connect things in ways they'd never have thought of. It allows them to maybe find an old plaster arm in a warehouse, paint it gold, and raise it above the doorway as a calling card of a new gallery.

PROTEUS GOWANUS

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GALLERY HOURS:

Thursday & Friday
3-6 pm
Saturday & Sunday
12-6 pm and by appointment

PETER WALLACE is the founder of Brooklyn Artists Gym, a studio and gallery facility for artists. He is also a sculptor and theater director.