

ENTERTAINMENT

Could this tiny art gallery become Cleveland's last pay phone standing? (photos)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio - In late September, Cleveland City Council [approved spending up to \\$200,000 to remove non-functioning pay phones](#) from around the city. The next morning, Allison Lukacsy-Love was flooded with messages.

Since 2013, she's been operating [Phone Gallery](#), a tiny pay phone box outside of Russ' Auto Care in Collinwood, 15302 Waterloo Rd., that she transformed into a place for local artists to show their work. It's been so well-received that she's planning to add a second gallery inside a pay phone in South Euclid's City Hall.

"I was nervous when I saw the legislation," Lukacsy-Love says. "I received text messages, emails and messages to the gallery's Facebook page. There was definitely anxiety. But on the flip side, it was really great to have all these people ask if they can help."

Her councilman put her in touch with Dedrick Stephens, the commissioner of assessments and licenses for the city. Lukacsy-Love says she was told the pay phone box would be placed on their inventory list in order to account for it, but it wouldn't be added to the removal list at this time.

"He could see even though it didn't fit the criteria of having an active payphone in it, it wasn't a nuisance," Lukacsy-Love says.

The Phone Gallery originated when another local artist, Ivana Medukic, had a grant for the project. Lukacsy-Love, an architect currently working as the Community Projects Manager at the City of Euclid, added her expertise and eventually took it over when Medukic moved.

For the first year, the gallery showcased works from artists in the neighborhood and Lukacsy-Love's own network. When she discovered Cuyahoga Partnership for Arts and Culture's Creative Compass, she put out a call and artists from across Northeast Ohio responded.

The gallery rotates its exhibit every one to two months to coincide with Walk All Over Waterloo art walks. Artists have shown acrylic paintings, photography, ceramics, charcoal drawings, upcycled work and fiber art, among other mediums. Given the size of the phone booth, each piece can be about six inches in depth. The current show features acrylic work by Charley Frances. Interested artists can apply [here](#).



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Cleveland's tiny Phone Gallery

Allison Lukacsy-Love's Phone Gallery, located inside an old pay phone in front of Russ' Auto Care in Collinwood, is Cleveland's tiniest art gallery. Pictured here is work by artist Charley Frances. (Photo courtesy Allison Lukacsy-Love)



"Phone Gallery is a whimsical, unique and unusual place to display art, so people tend to install really colorful, vibrant, fun pieces," Lukacsy-Love says.

The gallery's auto shop home base pre-dates the Beachland Ballroom, which kickstarted Collinwood's arts scene. Lukacsy-Love says the placement is intentional - she wants it to be art that's accessible, free and part of the community.

"This hasn't always been an arts district," she says. "There are still people in the neighborhood who don't quite feel like they fit into that. Maybe there's a bit of intimidation in walking into a white box gallery. This is something that's constantly rotating, it captures people in different ways."

One of the mechanics, Lukacsy-Love recalls, once joked around about it being a silly little installation outside the shop. Then he noticed two photographs of East Cleveland by Marine veteran and Collinwood resident [Stephen Bivens](#) that were on display.

"The mechanic saw his childhood home in that photograph," Lukacsy-Love says. "This lightbulb went off. Last time I saw him he was like, 'What's going into this next?' He's waiting for something else to speak to him the way that did. It really exposes the artists to a community and exposes the community to art."

The Phone Gallery is all about those little unexpected surprises in your neighborhood. That comes natural to Lukacsy-Love, who designs streetscapes in her day job.

"We want people to be able to walk through our neighborhoods, we want there to be interesting things along the way," Lukacsy-Love says. "Just recently, a guy rode by on his bicycle while a new artist was installing her work and said, 'I love this one, but the art before this was really moody and it spoke to me.' Another person stopped by, startled by the unusual place for art display, and asked about how often it changes. The gallery really gets people to pay attention to their surroundings."

The city estimates there are around 1,700 pay phones that could be removed. Lukacsy-Love has been toying with the idea of one last hurrah.

As a 2016 Creative Workforce Fellow, she was working on developing new locations for other pay phone galleries. The legislation means a change in direction - but there's still time to create artwork at any of the other pay phones, even if it lasts less than two years.

"I'd love to get a bunch of artists together and tell them to go out and do an awesome mural on the box or build an installation inside," Lukacsy-Love says. "It's going to get taken down, but for the temporary nature of what it is, it could be this really cool guerilla public art."

"If they're coming down, that's fine, but maybe we can pay some respects to what used to be an important, useful part of our community before they go away for good. Before this legislation came up, you couldn't ask people to name five pay phones because they just don't fit into our daily lives anymore. But if all the sudden, 200 were painted fuchsia, you couldn't miss them."



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