



Hello!

I don't know if you've noticed, but modern art has a public relations problem. Admittedly, some of this is fair. A whole wing of the art world is primarily functioning as a tax evasion scheme. The world's most famous contemporary artist<sup>1</sup> is boring and lame. And I am largely taking it for granted that someone in your position knows about the art world's history of empire/class/racism/misogyny/homophobia/elitism that isn't just history and certainly isn't over.

But a lot of this isn't your fault.

There are millions of people who hate modern art while knowing very little about it; people who could not tell the difference between a Rothko and a Ruscha, yet *take pride* in thinking that modern art is dumb. And a lot of these people have not made it past the 1950's. They think that Jackson Pollock is a con-man. They wonder how you know that a Mondrian is hung right side up. They heard about a painting somewhere that was just a white canvas and they are still mad about it. Fundamentally, their issues are not about the current state of the art world. It is a response to bad publicity.

I blame Hollywood. If you look at television and movies, the only people with a worse reputation than artists are critics (and those dudes HATE critics). So often on the screen, the "hot take" about the art world is that it is some emperor-has-no-clothes scheme. While that is a take, it certainly isn't a hot one. To call it bland and reheated would be to do a disservice to microwaved mozzarella sticks. So often in these wannabe savage takedowns, the general moral thrust is that people in the art world are pretentious rich dicks who think they are better than everyone else. Now, if you have a Damien Hirst piece in the foyer of your second home, you might be an asshole. But I think that a lot of the art-haters out there would be genuinely comforted to know just how little money most artists are making. For every fucko with a Picasso sketch in a safe, there are hundreds of people with very traditional finances who have found that occasional museum visits and a collection of small prints, art made by friends, and a few rare splurges on something special have brought incalculable joy into their life.

Now, I can hear what you are probably thinking: *"I know all of this already! This is my life! But what do you want me to do about it? We don't have the advertising dollars movie studios do. As much as I would love to burn the studio lots to the ground, it would never work. Our museum staff is too full of indoorsy nerds and pacifists."*

That is why I am here! Because I have a solution.

You should start a club. The club will be for artists. The club will be free. Artists in your community will submit a portfolio of work and you will select an appropriate number of cool and interesting artists to join. You will offer them some perks like semi-regular meetings, free membership, and free food. Free is essential. You will develop some programming and events. You will follow the ideas that speak to you and discover what works. And ideally, you will start to grow a community.

A shocking amount of art programming falls into two categories: programs for the already wealthy and programs for absolutely everyone. The first leaves some artists working two jobs trying to pay off M.F.A. debt while their more moneyed contemporaries retain the time and connections necessary to actually make the most of that education. The second is generally focussed on introductory skills and tends to best benefit those most inclined to take up the most space in the room, creating an artificial scarcity in overfilled and underfunded programs. The gap between these paths is huge, leaving space for quite a lot of opportunity.

I recognize that this club would put your institution in the unenviable position of "gatekeeping," but I would encourage you to sit with that discomfort for a minute before throwing it away. Again and again, institutional gatekeepers are replaced not by utopia, but by big money wearing their favorite big tech quarter-zip. People say that the internet has allowed artists to circumnavigate traditional institutions, but right now the two biggest gatekeepers in the art world are the Instagram and TikTok algorithms. It will not be perfect, but there is a value in institutions seeking to become better and more equitable curators and advocates rather than throwing their hands up at the admittedly difficult task and looking the other way as Mark Zuckerberg steps in to tend the empty gate.

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<sup>1</sup> Banksy

*“But wait, mysterious stranger! Where would the money for this program come from? It’s one thing to get big donors to drop some cash on a piece of architecture they can understand and put their name on. But a vague program/club? Never! Despite what the shine of our hardwood floors might tell you, we are really pinching pennies over here.”*

Well, if you are looking for a group of people who know how to make the most out of a little bit of money, who better to look to than artists? And I am not speaking metaphorically. I am not saying that an artist can take pencil and paper and turn it into something priceless. I am saying that many of the artists in your community do not have a lot of money. They have learned how to screenprint in their living rooms. They have found discounted plywood and thrifted mirrors to paint on when they couldn’t afford canvas. They have signed up for catalogs selling things they cannot afford to use the glossy photos for collages. Even something as simple as a solid wooden table could make a big difference for an artist living in a cramped apartment. You do not need to put a lot of money into this program to have a big impact.

*“But what about burning down movie studios? We’ve gotten away from the vengeance that first drew me to this letter.”*

This community could be the greatest publicity and advertising your institution will ever have. You would be bringing talented and excited people through your doors. You would be inviting them to meet and engage with other artists. And all of these people *have phones*. In fact, you are not just bringing excited people with phones into your museum, you are bringing the most interesting and dynamic and artistic people you can find. More to the point, it will be reaching people in a completely different way than buying an instagram ad or courting an artsy micro influencer to talk about your current exhibition. It is the difference between creating a set for a play and building a home. Fundamentally, people want to have a good time with other people that they think are cool. It is why people rush sororities. It is why people take improv classes and start bands. And it is the reason that people pay money to see those bands. There is no reason you can’t have a piece of that.

*“This has been fun and all, but this isn’t really what we do. We aren’t a school. We aren’t a studio. We are a museum. It’s a different part of the art world entirely!”*

Well maybe that is something you have an interest in changing. When people talk about the “art world,” their associations are continuing to move farther and farther away from a person creating art. Instead, they understand it as a world of interlocking institutions; fancy schools, wealthy donors, and massive museums with most of their collections in storage.

Even when artists are in museum spaces, their opportunities for self-expression are incredibly institutionalized. They produce artist’s statements that suppose the academic dialogue through which they anticipate their work being framed. They lead procedural tutorials aligned with their discipline, but rarely related to what makes their work exceptional or interesting. And the self-affirming nature of institutions means that those who act the way we want an artist to act in a museum get more opportunities to repeat their performance. At its best, this shrinks the museum into a resource for graduate students. At its worst, it turns the work of a museum into puffery; an institution focused on reassuring its wealthy members of their sophistication through artists educated and practiced on the ways they must flatten themselves for their consumption.

What we far more rarely see is how an artist chooses to express themselves in the context of the art museum. Surrounded by space and history and attention, how would they respond? How would that change as more of the people around them are fellow artists doing the same? And how would that change the work of the institutional artists visiting the museum? I do not know the answers to these questions. No one does. But I do know that the more the art world is associated with cool people making cool work, the more attractive it will be to people who currently understand it as intellectual broccoli.

I appreciate that there are a lot of blanks to be filled in and a lot of dots to be connected. But if you connect those dots correctly, you could end up with something beautiful. And hopefully, you are the best person to fill in those gaps in a way that works for your community and institution. I also appreciate that there is a fundamental disconnect between artists and museums and between art and most people. So, even if you do not adopt this plan, I hope you will try something. Things will change--the always untenable present is particularly untenable these days--so I hope they will change for the better. And I hope you will be a part of that change.

Sincerely,  
The East Nebraska Secret Commune Social Quarterly