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Being an Artist Today*

*Edited by Marysol Nieves*

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October 2009



# TAKING AIM!

THE BUSINESS OF BEING AN ARTIST TODAY

*Edited by Marysol Nieves*

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# THE DEALER



## Gallerists and the Marketplace

CARLA STELLWEG

The Bronx Museum of the Arts' invitation to contribute to the anniversary publication of its Artist in the Marketplace program recalls my experiences of the 1980s when the program was initiated and I took part in it as a guest speaker. My gallery began in 1988 and was shaped by a vision to create a hybrid space that could provide the New York art world with exposure to the international Latin American and Latino artists and art market. Secondary market revenues enabled me to jumpstart the careers of those artists I had worked with previously, as an editor, writer, curator, and friend, in addition to a roster of a select group of then-unknown "emerging" artists. It took a lot of effort by the artists and me, as well as the interest of colleagues at alternative spaces, museums, independent curators, and a small group of collectors, to propel several into the curatorial and critical spotlight and, eventually, into the international marketplace.

Revisiting the 1980s gallery-artist relationships, I find it striking that most small outposts mimicked the relationships of a family, with its interdependencies and disagreements, often leading to separations and eventually ending in divorce. Today, by contrast, New York galleries are more professional and exhibit a business acumen that has in turn radically transformed the artists' role, to the degree that in seeking gallery representation, artists from around the world have appropriated the methods and strategies of "art as business."<sup>1</sup> These and other aspects of the complex gallery-artist-market relationships have over the past three decades resulted in an array of scholarly publications focusing on the "architecture of the art market and the change from disinterested promoters and patrons to merchants and marketeers."<sup>2</sup>

The foregoing is especially relevant in considering the unique role of the select group of gallery owners herein invited to partake in an electronic interview. Rather than follow the route of art as commodity only, their determination and resolve has been and is to work in tandem with

their participation in biennials, museum exhibitions, and public art commissions. We've always wanted to work with a diverse group both in terms of medium (sculpture, painting, video, installation, etc.) and origin. The artists are not connected thematically, but you could say they have a strong conceptual base. It's too varied a group for me to make generalizations.

Augusto Arbizu, referring to his gallery's history, said, "The gallery is a younger outpost of Greenberg Van Doren on 57th Street, focusing on emerging and international artists. I am very active in doing regular studio visits, and my primary interest is to be part of a dialogue with artists and to find, nurture, and sometimes rediscover talent." When asked how receptive his gallery is to identifying new talent and where and how he looks for new talent (artists, collectors, etc.), he replied:

I am always curious and definitely always listen to artists who already are part of the program, or artists whom I had an opportunity to work with before, and to curators who are active in seeing new work. It's like a network. I try to be open and objective and don't necessarily go on visits with the goal of finding artists for the gallery but want to find out what young artists are doing, what they are looking at and are responding to, what they like and don't like. On the flip side I am also very much there to help, whether it's to connect them with other arts professionals, or just give them very practical advice on their work, and help them to see and imagine it outside of their studio.

Brent Sikkema's gallery began in 1991 when, as he recounts,

[A]fter moving from Boston to New York, I opened Wooster Gardens in SoHo. In 2001 the gallery moved to Chelsea and the name changed to Brent Sikkema Gallery. Later, after Michael Jenkins joined the gallery as a business partner, the name changed again to Sikkema Jenkins & Co. The gallery does not focus on any particular type of contemporary art and represents artists of many different backgrounds who work in a variety of media: painting, sculpture, photography, video, works on paper, installation, etc.

In regard to taking on new talent, Sikkema clarifies: "We have been showing less-established artists that are not on our roster in smaller shows in the gallery's smaller rooms for a while now. We might consider an artist for a show after seeing [his or her] work in a group show or on the recommendation from a curator. Of course there is then a process of

visiting the studio and getting to know the artist." Similarly, Louky Keyzers Koning summarizes her approach to new artists as follows:

[W]hile the gallery expands and enriches its existing program, we [remain] involved in new talent by listening to suggestions from artists we know, to art professionals and collectors. We also do a lot of legwork visiting open studios, exhibits, and fairs. Reading catalogues, Internet articles, and art magazines also keeps us informed.

Carolyn Alexander adds:

[Ted and I] travel a great deal throughout Europe and South America and see many exhibitions in galleries and museums and at international exhibitions such as biennials. We pay attention to recommendations from our artists and curators who are familiar with the gallery. Since we work with more than twenty artists and want to be in close contact with each of them we decided in 1995 to have a small staff and stay focused on the artists for whom we are the primary representatives. We have not changed our way of working since.

On the subject of whether artists should contact a gallery by e-mail, portfolio, or in person, and what advice would they give artists interested in working with a gallery in order to nurture relationships and develop strategies that will help them effectively and proactively manage their careers, Carolyn Alexander offered the following: "Young artists should contact young galleries. We don't accept portfolios and very rarely meet with artists. Artists should work from within their own communities. Art schools, nonprofit spaces, get to know young curators, keep up their contacts with their peers." Meanwhile Louky Keyzers Koning suggests that for artists to

become familiar with a gallery and its program they should regularly visit the exhibitions and attend events. Artists should avoid being like strangers walking in off the street. First find out if there is a natural "fit" for your work while offering the gallery an opportunity to notice your interest in [its] work. As to open submission policies, check gallery Web sites, and if no mention is made, call to ask if [open submission] is acceptable. If so, ask what is the best way and who is the contact person in charge. Artists should not contact a gallery if [it doesn't] accept submissions. A follow-up phone call is very important. Moreover, once the artist has gallery representation, they must become a team as it is paramount to gain each other's trust and share

information. Once that kind of gallery–artist relationship exists, he/she can develop a successful career.

Josée Bienvenu added:

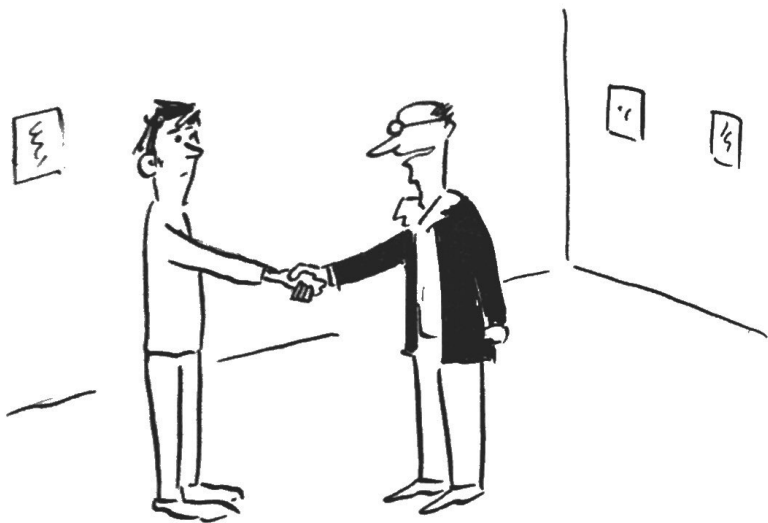
To show up out of the blue with a portfolio is never a good way to approach a gallery. I recall critic Jerry Saltz saying how he hates dealers' giving him a sales pitch about their show; well, for a dealer nothing is worse than [artists] at the front desk asking to show their work and wanting to leave their material right there and show you the paintings they are carrying under their arm. It is like a stranger coming up to you to ask you out for coffee. However, I think it is important for an artist to go in person to galleries on a regular basis, follow their shows to understand the programs, and then think about how to approach them and introduce their work if they feel that they are in tune. I also know many artists who established relationships by having day jobs at galleries, working as art handlers or registrars. It is a good way to develop ties in the art world. Collier Schor was an intern at 303, Cindy Sherman worked the front desk at Artist Space, and Jeff Koons used to sell memberships at MoMA. My advice is to try to understand the multilayered gallery map, to detect a few galleries they can work with and then find a way to contact them.

Augusto Arbizo of 11 Rivington noted:

An artist has to see shows all the time and have galleries see you visiting their spaces on a regular basis. The most organic way is to start a dialogue, not about work necessarily, but other things, to see if you have shared interests and ideas; this is one way to make a connection. But really, the primary advice I give artists is to really just focus on working, and to maintain a rigorous work practice; you can do a lot of strategizing and campaigning to get people for visits, but you have to have work, and a lot of work, in the studio for a gallerist to be able to visualize seeing *your* work in *their* space."

About this, Brent Sikkema says:

Because there would be just too much interest, we really don't have the ability to review submissions to the gallery. The gallery must therefore enforce a strict policy of not accepting unsolicited submissions. Developing relationships with other artists, curators, and galleries is important, but it's best if these relationships develop naturally and are not for the sole purpose of advancing [one's] career or getting into a show.



*"So it's a deal: You make the works; pay for production, installation, and promotion; we use your collectors and contacts; and in exchange we say you are cool."*



As to the question of what artists should know prior to agreeing to work with a gallery vis-à-vis contracts, commissions, discounts, and so on, the comments were equally illuminating and revealing. Brent Sikema said, "Galleries often work under casual agreements with artists. Artists must be proactive and protect themselves by being familiar with gallery policies—commission, splits on discounts, etc. They shouldn't be afraid to ask questions about these issues and, if they feel it is necessary, outline their concerns in a contract or written consignment to the gallery." Augusto Arbizo believes [that]

you have to find yourself in a nurturing environment, with you and the gallery having shared goals to grow together over time. All the basic terms are more or less standard (commission splits, archiving of artwork, insuring work, transport coverage), but it's also important to have trust and transparent communication. It's a collaboration in which both the artist and the gallery must fully support one another. It's not enough to just give the gallery artwork to sell and have shows every one or two years; you must also be supportive of your dealer and the gallery.

Louky Keyzers Koning further noted:

When artists start working with a gallery, they don't know how the relationship will unfold, therefore I suggest [they] begin with a consignment agreement instead of a contract. In general, gallery commissions are 50 percent. Artists should find out what the gallery's policy is regarding discounts. At the outset, make the consignment agreement for a fixed period of around six months to continue moving the work after the show. Avoid misunderstandings and address issues such as commissions, retail prices, and possible discounts and find out if the works are insured. Even though we all wish for sold-out shows prior to the opening, reality is different—especially in the current market. In general I think consignments are sufficient if the relationship between artist and gallery is built upon trust. Still, artists should create an inventory with notes and the works' location and condition in order to build the relationship and let the gallery know what is available, with details of price, location, etc.

Josée Bienvenu elaborates on this topic, saying:

The art world is very unregulated, which is both a blessing and a curse and allows a lot of freedom; at the same time, there is no standard protocol for galleries and artists. Customary protocol is to split sale

proceeds 50/50 and agree to share or not share discounts. My advice is to enter the field from the perspective [that] a gallery is a "partner-in-crime," instead of a client/purveyor or mother/child relationship (in France the "primary" gallery is still called the "mother gallery"). The most important factors are teamwork and trust. Perhaps some key elements in writing (not necessarily a contract but at least by e-mail) before the first solo show to avoid future misunderstandings. In a gallery-artist relationship artists should know [that] the gallery isn't going to take care of their entire career while they hide and work in their studios. Artists need to be engaged with their community of fellow artists, curators, art critics, and collectors to develop and nurture relationships that will benefit his/her career.

Carolyn Alexander adds:

Artists should feel confident that the gallerist is convinced [of] and enthusiastic about their work. They need to have a clear understanding of what the gallery commitment involves in terms of exhibitions, promotion, and finances. The commission the gallery takes, their policy in terms of discounts, what the gallery is paying for. [Artists need] to recognize that they are also making a commitment.

Finally, when asked how they operate under today's difficult economic circumstances and whether this has affected their ability or willingness to work with new talent, Josée Bienvenu offered some sobering but encouraging words:

[The year] 2009 was a difficult [one], for about nine months when no one was buying much and people stopped going to visit shows at the gallery. Surviving this crisis taught me to be more careful about the way I run my business, and its small infrastructure makes it easier to expand when the market is booming and compress when expenses surpass income. I don't think crisis affects the ability to work with new talent. To the contrary, it is an opportunity for artists and a gallery to reevaluate what really matters since new talent is the heart of a dynamic program. Also, when sales are slow you have to invent new ways to communicate and reach out. For instance, during the crisis the art world started to become friends on Facebook and, since not much was going on, [updated] their pages with stimulating information, which resulted in dealers' looking at each others' galleries more.

Louky Keyzers Koning concurred:

As the market changed, we noticed collectors really want to be informed about the artist developments (e.g., shows, articles, etc.). Artists need to provide clear and easy-to-read information; quality instead of quantity matters more. Use Internet tools; [the Web] is a great platform with which to launch a user-friendly, interactive Web site (e.g., video interviews, blogs), keep it updated to promote return viewers. It is a great time for full-time committed artists. Don't wait: a downturn market offers great new chances for upstart projects.

Carolyn Alexander added:

Today's market has not affected my disposition to work with new talent—it's more about how much time and energy I have. I won't commit to an artist unless I feel I can do something for [his or her] work. In general, as a result of the state of the art market, we have reduced the number of exhibitions we have and are more conservative in terms of production support.

Brent Sikkema observes: "Today's economy does pose many challenges, but we find that great art still attracts the attention of collectors and institutions. We are willing to show new art that we think has this quality." Augusto Arbizo stated: "In terms of operating a gallery, one must operate responsibly and on low overhead, no matter what the economic circumstances. This is the way to run a business. At the end of the day it is very much a retail operation, so it has to run efficiently and effectively and when it becomes difficult, one has to be even more creative and enterprising." And Louky Keyzers Koning concluded:

[W]e used the time for self-reflection and efficiency, creating a consistent and enduring dialogue between our artists and their audience. A well-organized gallery can focus on promotion. We also enforced stricter "rules" with regard to the issue of artist-gallery teamwork and discontinued our relationship with those artists where this was not the case. It didn't affect our interest in new talent, as it is always fascinating and inspiring to discover new talent and to develop that artist's career.

### Notes

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### Gallerists and the Marketplace

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