

Sales & Exhibition Options

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" . . .the burden of responsibility has been shifting slowly to the artist . . ."

If you understand geology, you know that the earthquakes serve an important function. Beneath the earth's surface, a constant buildup of pressure occurs, and as it continues to build, some adjustments must be made, both below and on the surface of the earth. The earth consists of plates and these plates must constantly adjust to change. When an earthquake occurs, we on the surface are adjusting to this buildup of pressure, and as we endure one aftershock after another, we gradually settle into change.

During the past two years, the art world has gone through similar readjustments. With the spiraling prices and the abundance of the eighties, pressure in the art world was building up. Consequently, this pressure had to be relieved by some type of violent change—a crack or a split and a violent upheaval to reverse its direction. The art quake appeared in the form of the recession. Now, as survivors, we must reevaluate and readjust the infrastructure in order to fit together these broken pieces.

Los Angeles has been particularly hard hit. Aside from the recession, the social and natural disasters of drought, riot, fire, flood and earthquakes have plagued the city. When we examine the effects of these disasters strictly in terms of commerce, we see how each natural disaster interrupts traffic patterns, work schedules and generally contributes to a loss in leisure time, not to mention its effects on the psyche. If we assume that galleries and art-related businesses lose two to four weeks for each crisis, a time when consumers are concentrating on the essentials of survival, and if we calculate this figure in terms of potential earning time lost, Los Angeles galleries have lost an average of three months out a ten-month season. It's easy to see what a devastating impact this kind of lost time can have, even under the most desirable economic circumstances, not only for galleries and art services, but for the artists who rely upon the gallery structure to market their work.

Therefore, it becomes increasingly important that artist look to other sources during this time of transition. Typically, four options have been available to artist in terms of showing and selling their work:

- 1) Private commercial galleries are in the business of selling artwork. They can offer artists a one-person exhibition, the possibility of review, public exposure, an announcement, an opening reception, etc. They generally take 50 percent of sales for the privilege of representing you on an exclusive basis, an exclusivity that usually needs to be defined two ways: by the geographical area to be covered as well as the length of time it will remain in effect.
- 2) Private art consultants specialize in selling artwork to corporate collectors—banks, law offices, hotels. They can't offer exclusive or an exhibition, but they can sell work in large quantities. They usually work out of their home or a small office, so there is no public exposure, but at the same time, they usually take a smaller percentage because they do not have the operating expenses of a regular gallery. I like to think of commissions to galleries and private consultants as "fee for services rendered." Since the private art consultant cannot offer you the range of services a gallery can, their commissions generally are lower; you can expect the range to be anywhere from 10 to 60 percent. In this recession, however, we are finding more and more consultants demanding 50 percent.
- 3) Non-commercial galleries are in the business of educating the public. In most cases, they couldn't care less about selling the work, but they usually offer good exposure for an artist if the space is reputable; examples are museums, college and university galleries, or alternative artists' spaces. The best way to approach these galleries is to submit proposals. If you know of three or four other artists whose work seems compatible with your own, gather all the slides and bios to propose an exhibit, say, of "Left-Handed Bay Area Artists," or whatever. Use your imagination to come up with a concept or curatorial theme.
- 4) Juried shows and competitions are a good way for an emerging artists to build up a resume. My advice is to enter them discriminately; the primary value of a juried show is the opportunity to familiarize a good juror (gallery, museum director or critic) with your work. It is also a good way to build a resume and get the experience of seeing your work in public context. But be careful. Remember, the juried show is essentially a fundraising event for a particular institution. Artwork is usually not insured and the artist almost always has to assume round-trip packing and shipping costs.

Now, however, the time has come for artists to use some of their creative energy to invent new ways of promoting and selling their work.

During the last several years, the burden of responsibility has been shifting slowly to the artist. Galleries have become less and less willing to accept responsibility for career development, and the artist must assume more. Artists can no longer harbor the fantasy that their job is over even when and if they are lucky enough to acquire a gallery. It can no longer be assumed that a gallery will do anything more than just sell the work.

Effectively managed cooperative galleries can begin to fill the gap if the artists can agree on specific career goals and hire a gallery manager whose job would be the accomplishment of these goals. Just opening a gallery and hiring a gallery sitter is not sufficient; this may massage the egos of the artists who have exhibitions but will do little to expand their audience or promote their work.

Artists have also started to turn increasingly to alternative spaces for opportunities to display their work. Although I never encourage artists to expend a great deal of energy organizing shows for restaurants or office buildings, there have been many successful cooperative exhibitions organized in conjunction with corporate sponsors. The goal is not just to get the work seen, but to get it seen in the right context, by the right audience. Most artists make the mistake of thinking that they have met their goal once the show is hung, but nothing could be further from the truth. To effectively "work a show" means:

- calling and writing everyone who has ever expressed an interest in your work, inviting them to see your show;
- making sure you have a good mailing list and sending press releases to all appropriate art critics and writers;
- targeting gallery directors and curators whom you feel would be responsive to the work;
- making certain you have documented the exhibition properly before it comes down; and
- using the guest book to follow-up with any interested contacts and adding them to your mailing list.

Artists must embrace the challenge of these changing times to educate themselves about the business aspects of their careers and embark upon the path of self-management.