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Helping Artists Become Artists

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One of the mysteries of the arts is how an artist becomes an artist. We know that very few trained and talented visual artists actually make careers in the arts. We know, heartbreakingly so, that even very dedicated and inspired artists fail to claim and hold attention for their work. The problem may be more acute for visual artists than for those in other fields perhaps because there are so many visual artists (compared to composers or choreographers, for example) and also because there is a commercial frame around the visual arts. The market sets a daunting standard for success. Many visual artists must believe, as one said to me recently, that "... there's no real field to break into... every single artist is a different story."

There are certainly initiatives that are meant to ease the emerging artist's way. There are competitions, open calls for exhibitions, artist residencies, fellowships and apprenticeships which are arrayed (almost overwhelmingly) on web sites like NYFA Source, but they are hard to sort through and sometimes costly. There are some artist-run galleries and non-profit spaces that are open to less known artists. But making a match is hard and, if it does happen, making it matter is harder. For unacknowledged or under-acknowledged artists, young and older, art can be a lonely and difficult business.

And it is a business. Conscientious curators and collectors visit studios, keep their eyes open, encourage talent when they can. It is hard for them, too.

Seeing all of this for so long -- for as long as I have been interested in art -- I am becoming a little bit encouraged by some positive trends. Three movements in particular may provide some relief to our sprawled and underserved population of artists: 1) The growth of local or hometown opportunities for artists; 2) The rise of unexpected exhibition places; and 3) Artist-to-artist initiatives.

Local or Hometown Opportunities for Artists. I like the basic philosophy of Artadia, a competition that picks some artists each year to fund and feature. What makes Artadia a different competition, as it says of itself, is that it "... leaps beyond clichés of second-city angst." It makes grants to artists within their home cities and ties them to the local major institutions, asserting in this way that to be an artist in Houston or Atlanta is as important as being an artist in New York or Los Angeles. Artadia's basic principle is important in that it serves many more artists than those that actually get its grants.

Cleveland provides another wonderful example. Cleveland's renowned and revered Museum of Art has joined with a donor/collector couple to refashion an old plant into a new museum "branch" in Ohio City, across the Cuyahoga River.

Artadia
The Fund for Art and Dialogue

This branch will address community needs and, importantly, encourage local artists. Working with local, living talent is a new mission for Cleveland's major museum – a truly "contemporary" mission. Another example: the Portland Museum of Art runs a biennial for Maine artists, only. Every two years, the state's lively art scene is recognized, professionalized, promoted by this major institution, lifting Maine art from a traditionally "amateur" category to a new place. At the Wassaic Project in upstate New York, the residency program has places reserved specifically for local artists who commute from their homes to the studios and join a cosmopolitan art community. The residents' work is showcased in Wassaic's summer festival, another unusual benefit.

In all these cases (and there are many others), artists are being claimed and acclaimed at home. It becomes a little less essential for artists to run away, to relocate, to become just one more artist on a crowded coast.

Unexpected Exhibition Places. Of course, museums and galleries and art spaces will continue to ground the art world. But certainly the public – as well as artists – also benefit when art is encountered in other everyday situations. *The New York Times* and *USA Today* have reported in recent articles that hotels across the country are mounting art as an amenity for their guests, providing a unique and stimulating environment. Individual hotels and hotel chains are commissioning art, running competitions, and collecting to get the work they want. Some hotels are defining themselves by finding local artists. At a historic hotel in rural Pennsylvania, for example, only local artists are on the walls and one of the major hotel chains has actually mandated that works by local artists are shown at each of its locations.

Hospitals and health institutions are increasingly buying art or encouraging donations of art to warm their corridors, giving both patients and visitors comfort. While major institutions lead the way, smaller, local hospitals and health centers are doing this as well. Restaurants and stores, recreation and health facilities, theater lobbies also do this, often looking widely and intelligently at the artists around them to find work they value either for purchase or for temporary exhibition.

Public art provides great opportunities for work to be seen and experienced. Sculpture in our parks and plazas is now a well entrenched public benefit in American places. According to Americans for the Arts, many of the 5,000 local arts agencies across the country help to encourage and organize art in public places. But new art forms are emerging that integrate the arts even more inescapably into the public consciousness and into public belief. For an Austin, Texas State Park, for instance, a local sculptor, Chris Levack, was commissioned to design ramps on which the skateboarders ride and do tricks and are watched by the public – Mr. Levack actually made skate-able sculpture. Suddenly, people in that park (skaters or not) know that art is around them and for them. In New York City, when the unused Governors Island (800-yards from Manhattan) became an historic redevelopment site, artists were given a major part in it. There are studio spaces for resident artists, art activities, exhibitions and celebrations, many opportunities for the city's less known artists.

In these ways, more and more, public art is rooted into everyday life. Artists are designing play equipment, routing water ways, using environmental features, reimagining history, challenging passers-by to pause and think about their whereabouts. In such ways, artists encompass us – the public – becoming less avoidable, more essential.

I wish that an interesting practice of the George Gund Foundation would be picked up and imitated by other institutions. Every year for its annual report, the Gund Foundation commissions a photographer "... to highlight a Foundation priority or area of interest." The artist produces true, enduring images of the Foundation's interests and concerns in Northeast Ohio. Readers know the work of the Foundation better

because of each artist's images. Many other institutions could capture realities through art as Gund does and foster artists in the process. When art inhabits unusual spaces like reports or programs or calendars or ads, audiences and artists grow.

Artist-to-Artist Initiatives. A third growing trend I sense is that established artists are more often shouldering less-established artists. At the Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City outside Manhattan, the sculptor Mark di Suvero has created a park in which other sculptors show their work; a place where park-goers, parents and children, community people, and the art establishment can get to know new artists. He also offers residencies, internships, and jobs for artists, giving them the tools they need to move ahead on their own.

Eric Fischl, another prominent artist, is mounting a national program that will put distinguished artists with emerging artists in typical American places outside the urban downtowns – places where people live and shop and play. These artists, distinguished and emerging, will get to know each other and cultivate new audiences at each site. Versions of this basic idea – banding big name artists and newcomers together to spread interest in the arts – are being developed in other cultural initiatives as well.

No one can say for sure that these initiatives will increase opportunities for striving art makers. But it is heartening to know that the art establishment is stretching, that a variety of institutional efforts are being made to put emerging artists into view. It is good to know that interest is increasing for artists in their home towns and communities. It is good to know that wise and rewarded artists are mounting innovative projects to find future talent. It is just possible that ideas like these will spread, offering fresh opportunity and hope and pathways to emerging artists.

A salute, then, to the institutions and the individuals, from hotels and museums to donors and artists, that are helping to put creative people in front of us, bringing their talent from wherever it is to wherever we are. We can hope that many many more such efforts take hold, expanding possibilities for artists and for the rest of us.