

HART INTERNATIONAL

NOT FOR TOURISTS (1): APEXART

Not For Tourists is an alternative guide to New York City's contemporary art scene. In each <H>ART-edition, NY-based curator Niels Van Tomme highlights a non-profit cultural organization. Ranging from the well established to the marginal, from the intellectual to the politically engaged, **Not For Tourists** leads through the artistic heart of the Big Apple. To start with: apexart.

"The opportunistic personality creates opportunity"

Apexart started 16 years ago and has since its inception hosted a wide-range of compelling exhibitions and innovative projects. What were the biggest advantages of starting the organization in New York? Apexart executive director Steven Rand: "I returned to New York City in 1985. As an artist, starting apexart was the farthest thing from my mind. As the 'art scene' became more and more commercial, at a certain point just complaining made me sound too much like an artist. I started apexart much like someone might start a bar that they wanted to go to. The biggest advantage of being in New York is the international nature of the city. It makes everyone feel 'at home' and comfortable quite quickly."

The city's art scene is notoriously competitive, a jungle-like battle zone between commercial art enterprises, established non-profits and independent underground endeavors. How does apexart function within this climate?

Steven Rand: "I understand the need for artists to eat and make money. I'm just not sure that professional artists who create gallery work make the most interesting work. I know it's a bit romantic, but the creative personality in fine arts isn't generally the personality that creates opportunity. The opportunistic personality creates opportunity and too often the number of people talking about you is more important than what they are saying. For almost 15 years we have presented opportunities for artists, curators and writers that have been transparent in process, creating a great deal of trust in our process."

Perhaps somewhat hidden to the general public, apexart hosts a highly unique international residency program where invited residents are given the opportunity "to experience a new culture rather than create new work". Why provide such a radical break from the participants' professional lives in one of the world's most action-packed and deal sealing cities?

Rand: "Too often residency programs consist of a studio and little else. Why bring someone to a different place to continue doing the same thing? If someone is involved in his or her work and they merely go somewhere else to do it, what is the point? When someone who is over 30 comes to New York City for the first time (our only requirements), we feel there are so many things for them to see and do, and so many interesting people for them to meet, that to isolate them in a studio, or even within the 'art world' would be a disservice. This would be true in most large cities and many smaller ones. We all know people who travel the art circuit, and never leave the proscribed path between galleries, art institutions and often the same restaurants each visit. Digital exploration is great, but so is actual adventure. We have been convinced that to lose control is to be at risk. We are paranoid and conservative. In our outgoing program, we send people away to locations such as the Australian outback or Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia where no contemporary art world, as we know it, exists."

More recently, apexart launched a franchise project, a stimulating commentary on the non-profit art world adopting tactics from the business world. That being said, did the franchise project also originate from the need to reach out to cities outside New York?

Rand: "We addressed a number of issues in this effort. No one really needs apexart to go to their city to help them put on a show. They can do that alone. What we bring is our brand and our process. And some financing too. But in going there, we also say to the people in the location that they are important - we are coming to them. We increase the perceived importance of locations like London, New York or Beijing if we live in one of these locations, but it is not as if one cannot make good work outside of these locations or that you are not important unless you are in one of these commercialized cities. Something too many people seem to think is the case. This year we limited the population of the location city to under 500,000 giving us locations such as Samut Sakhon, Thailand, Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana and Marica, Brazil. We're right in the middle of the selection process which you can follow on our website."

What can we expect from apexart in the near future?

Rand: "If parts of our program look schizophrenic it's because we're as confused about some of what's going on as you are. What are the essential differences between educational (and not just saying it) and promotional (and just not admitting it)? Why is the network so sophisticated while a lot of the artwork isn't? Why do I think that 'The Moment of Truth', a TV reality show, is the best art I've seen this year?"

Niels VAN TOMME

On view until Feb 20: 'The Incidental Person'
apexart, 291 Church Street, New York

www.apexart.org