Twenty Years of apexart: A PROFILE OF FOUNDER STEVEN RAND

BY DARRAGH MCNICHOLAS

Two decades ago, the artist Steven Rand founded apexart as an experimental space for independent curators as an alternative to New York’s commercial galleries. Since then, the TriBeCa nonprofit has helped organize more than 170 exhibitions featuring the work of over 1,500 artists, published four books of essays, developed a truly idiosyncratic residency program, and—perhaps most importantly—refined a crowdsourcing process that yields a practically endless flow of strange and memorable exhibitions.

Rand is a self-described “young hippy”: in the generational pocket between the counter-culturalists and the enterprising bunch that followed. His shirt looks like dressed up plaid: crisp, white, and patterned with a burgundy grid. “I dress like I did in high school,” he says, “but with nicer shirts.” He runs apex’s programs with a staff of four and lives above the gallery space with his partner Nancy Wender, a psychotherapist, and Baci, his peppery black poodle. “I want them to have a real experience” (what Rand redefines as an estranged “cousin” of art).

Whatever the answer reached by the particular exhibitions, Rand is emphatic that the art gallery does not have a monopoly on art. So much so that his residents—a small number of individuals selected for apex’s “Fellowship Program”—are discouraged from venturing to galleries during their 30-day stay in New York. Instead, he sends them to incorporate lectures, court houses, box offices. “And it’s not like he’s discouraging from venturing to galleries during their 30-day stay in New York. Instead, he sends them to incorporate lectures, court houses, box offices” (2008), was a meticulously ordered collection of proposals, tools, and impediments that Bartram, an 18th-century naturalist, used whilst journeying up the American East Coast. Amidst the nets and old nature books were candy wrappers and other small reminders of the stubborn humanity and accidental artfulness of even the most disciplined scientific exploration.

Some of apex’s solicited exhibitions have posed similar questions. One show curated by Anthony Berlet, M.D., explored the ways in which plastic surgery could transcend its boundaries into art. For Rand, the reason to have a surgeon curate the show was obvious: “Why would you go to a curator to ask artists to do something about plastic surgery—Why not go to the people that are actually doing it?” Another show curated by Lynsey G, a pornography writer, presented porn as an estranged “cousin” of art.

Rand’s more recent work is similarly organic. A commission for a European Patent Office in Munich, Germany uses LEDs to imperceptibly alter the light on the building in a seemingly infinite rotation of 16.7 million colors. Most recently he designed a “Glasshouse Residence,” a house in Connecticut where he sometimes spends part of his week. Rand hopes to sell similar residences through his German art dealer. The residences feature large glass walls that make the ordered living space feel continuous with its more wild, sylvan surroundings. Though he trained as a sculptor at the University of Arizona, Rand says “the idea of designing discrete objects that wealthy people will buy to display was not interesting for me.” Architecture presents him with an opportunity to apply sculptural creativity to living space.

For Rand, the barriers between art, work, and experience are often indefinite. His more recent work seems almost to be a physical misrepresentation of the art world as an outward facing counterpoint to its surrounding intellectual and social environments. “apex doesn’t even seem like an art space any more,” said Kessler. “It’s starting to become a hybrid-cultural space.”

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Portrait of Steven Rand. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.