



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

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-schnauzer that switches on-demand between states of excitement and calm so dependably that Rand can sneak him into restaurants in a furtive dog carrier.

Rand's face is tanned from New York sun and recent trips to Ramallah (for an exhibition) and Barcelona (for family time). He stands in a kind of productive tension with the corporatized art world: savvy enough to successfully negotiate it, but idealistic enough to found an institution devoted to contradicting its logic.

Rand's countercultural streak is filtered through a shrewd, enterprising worldliness. He argues that market pressures limit the pool of talent available to the art world and pigeonhole the type of work that gets produced. “Networking in business is important, but networking in a creative field doesn't get you the most creative person, it gets you the best networker,” says Rand in his calm, measured voice. He doesn't begrudge professional artists who, by definition, require a certain amount of financial success to feed themselves. Instead, he tailors apex's programs differently, to focus on ideas rather than marketable personalities.

apex receives its submissions “open-call,” using an online script to anonymize proposals before sending them to more than a hundred jurors, including many art experts, who then read a selection and rank their favorites. To better

navigate apex's hundreds of submissions and to encourage curators to refine their ideas, proposals are limited to 500 words. “By the end the winners basically pop-out,” says Rand. A “Franchise Program” mirrors the process to produce shows outside of New York, this year in Detroit, Beirut, and Dar es Salaam. In both cases, the result is a wildly varied set of curatorial projects that occasionally position surgeons, musicians, writers, and trained curators at the helm.

The most recent show at apex, *Hidden Passengers*, asked a question that aptly embodies their ethos: Where, if anywhere, is the line that separates art from science? The show packed a surprising amount into the small gallery space—a literalization of their 500 word limit. Sketches, films, sculptures, and installations were supplemented by a panel discussion, presentation, and lecture on scientific research about creativity.

One installation on display, Mark Dion's “The Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered (equipment)” (2008), was a meticulously ordered collection of provisions, tools, and impedimenta 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.

Whatever the answer reached by the particular exhibits, 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 economics lectures, court houses, boxing classes, psychotherapy, and improv classes, packing in around four events per day. And the outgoing residency program sends New York artists to places like Phnom Penh and Seoul instead of art meccas like Paris and Berlin. “And it's not like he's setting them up with the art world of Cambodia,” says Jon Kessler, apex board member, artist, and associate professor at Columbia University. “He wants them to have a real experience” (what Rand describes as “cultural immersion”).

Though Rand is not the sole critic of the art world's insularity and excessive comfort, his place within the artistic community lends a particular sensitivity to his critique. His dissatisfaction with the contemporary art market is balanced by a desire to cultivate more creative energy, better ideas, and a wider perspective. This attitude is backed by a democratic conviction that good artistic work is produced by many people in many different disciplines. “The art world changed as the economy changed,” says Rand. “A lot of creative people were able to get creative opportunities outside of the art world in a more remunerative way, with greater feedback from the public.”

The ability to incorporate “feedback” is an essential property of apex's model, and features

in much of the art that Rand praises. He offers the show *Tosh.O*—a program where comedian Daniel Tosh playfully comments on popular Internet videos—as an example of societal responsiveness. While Rand appreciates the thousands of quirky cultural products on TV, he asserts that true art requires an extra ingredient: a kind of higher order manipulation. A recent franchise exhibition by apexart, *Video Slink Uganda*, illustrates his point.

The exhibition made use of a Ugandan cultural phenomenon (similar to *Tosh.O*) where VJs or “performer/pirates” lend a rich mix of popular references and humor while commentating over blockbuster films. The VJs perform in video halls or *bibandas*: often small huts packed with upwards of 60 people. “They're seriously hot,” says Rand who visited the Ugandan *bibandas* with his staff. The VJs man cameras that alternate between the screen, the commentary, and the audience—forming a prosocial and participatory copy of a Hollywood film. They then sell and distribute the pirated DVDs across Uganda. In what Rand might have pinpointed as the quintessentially artistic act, the organizers of *Video Slink Uganda* contacted African-American and African artists to make short art-videos to be appended to, “performed” over, and sold as appendages to the pirated DVDs. The artists' integrated videos replicated like a virus as they spread across Uganda.

Much of Rand's own artistic work solicits similar forms of feedback. In the late '90s and early 2000s, Rand used formica samples to form large, abstract mosaics. The reviewer Gregory Williams pointed out that the pieces worked in two directions at once: they evoked the personal memories (rooted in the ubiquity of the sterile material) and worked as a timeline of middle-class décor. Around the same time, Rand began working with thermographic tiles, combining them to form large panels and sculptures. These tiles provided instant responses to their environments. Like living photographic negatives, color rippled across them as they reacted to gallery lights, drafts, or the breath of too-close gallery goers. Like apex, these large, formal structures incorporated social and environmental inputs to create unique and transient results.

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, world, and experience are often indefinite. His more recent work seems almost to be a physical interpretation of apex's place in the art world as an outward facing counterpoint to its surroundings. “apex doesn't even seem like an art space any more,” said Kessler. “It's starting to become a hybrid-cultural space.”