

Steven Rand

Preface to

*Playing by the Rules:
Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces*

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Actually this is not a book about playing by the rules. It's a collection of essays intended to suggest that playing by the rules may not be the best way, the most interesting way, or your way.

The art world is surprisingly unchallenging and moribund. It is conservative, political, exclusive, and not very interesting or inspiring. While there's a lot of interesting creative work being done, we're looking in the wrong places, encouraging the wrong people and elevating questionable goals. The current structure of the gallery and collector actually discourages creativity by narrow definition and the pursuit of familiarity. Not everything can be art and just because it's in a gallery doesn't make it so. Who is in the art world and where did the artists go?

Art is small business but big money. Getting by, much less prospering, for an artist, writer, or curator is difficult; compromise may be necessary at times, and we all have to decide where that line is. An artist or curator having a "straight" job is not the sign of being unsuccessful, especially with success defined by income and name recognition. We have to work fast (production) and slow (concept) at the same time. It's not easy and slow often loses out. It's hard to be creative and follow through when we've learned that opportunity is more a result of personality than ability.

Consider the immortal words of Groucho Marx who cautioned, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member." Whether you're in the art club or applying for membership, consider your idea of what an artist is and what is important to you. The most valuable part of being an artist is freedom to do what you want. That freedom is the currency you have to spend. Joining the club can be expensive. And confusing.

Many creative disciplines feel particularly vital such as filmmaking, media, design, architecture, advertising, medicine, technology, science, and sociology, while the art world feels like a fashion show. Industrial fabrication creates magic that sculptors can't compete with. We will always have painters and sculptors, but a child growing up today will never look at a painting or sculpture the way someone did 100, 50, or even 20 years ago. We're in an increasingly non-contemplative time, flooded with exceedingly competent images. Fewer and fewer artists maintain a traditional "studio" and, increasingly, art making involves recognizing and capitalizing on that which is art as well as inventing it. It is referential and appropriated, not utopist, and often related to sociology. Many smart creative people who would have gone into art in the last ten years are now in technology or design related fields after assessing the inward directed collector/dealer structure and their future in it. We are reveling in digital ether while the art world is composing in analog.

New art, touted by curators, a hungry media, galleries and "market making collectors" moves quickly from the gallery, to the collector, and then to a museum, sometimes owned by the collector who employs the curator. We've become very sophisticated in promoting and marketing our work and there are artists working with these issues that are very interesting, but new art isn't known by roaming curators and hasn't landed in museums. Meanwhile, contemporary art museums are full of things that aren't really art. Museum and gallery attendance is up as a result of

programming aimed at doing just that with many merely trying to survive after mostly unnecessary capital drives for new buildings. The ubiquitous new museum building has left a great deal of lost romance, debt, and dubious design in its path. Creatively repurposed buildings around the world that were used to show art are being returned to the municipalities or demolished to allow for the capital campaigns so important to trustees and the museum. For most visitors, it is entertainment rather than a “driven interest” in the art.

Business is compelling and fun at first. There is immediacy and a quid pro quo that is easily understood—appointments, international travel, residencies, and promotion. Many artists and curators are playing business with a lot of interest and energy. Being wanted and involved feels good. Offering opportunity is a powerful opiate. Being creative and self-critical is hard. It can be very difficult doing work that doesn't get positive response.

Many artists have moved from the art world to the creative commercial world where the public is the audience and creativity and marketing combine with clear purpose. It is immediate and immediately gratifying, the way business can be, and often feels more creative than the art world. Reality shows and reality “game” shows (my favorite was “The Moment of Truth”) are sometimes incredibly sophisticated in their development and production, and can be compelling mirrors of societal values. Too often dismissed as not even close to art, this manipulation of contrived situations with the viewer as voyeur is like paint pushed around a canvas, sometimes done consummately and other times not worth the effort. Stephen Colbert, the Cartoon Network, and Comedy Central are social canvases that are often far more compelling and reflective than a gallery visit while reaching a far greater and more involved audience.

Creating opportunity shouldn't be more satisfying than fulfilling the obligation, even if we understand that putting it on our resume reaches more people than the exhibition or book will. You may even have the wrong job. Whether your interest is beauty, subversion, or somewhere in between, it's the depth of the response by the artist or writer to the problem (the work) that will transcend its physicality. Art is not confined to or confined by the art world.

Samuel Butler wrote, “The truest characters of ignorance are vanity, pride, and annoyance.” Angry artists act out, angry business people burn out. Doing good work that is unfamiliar may take longer to develop an audience but will have greater endurance and potential than derivative or copied work.

Self-actualization. Defined in Wikipedia as a term used in various psychology theories, often in slightly different ways (e.g., Goldstein, Maslow, Rogers). The term was originally introduced by the organismic theorist Kurt Goldstein for the motive to realize all of one's potentialities. In his view, it is the master motive—indeed, the only real motive a person has, all others being merely manifestations of it. However, the concept was brought to prominence in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as the final level of psychological development that can be achieved when all basic and mental needs are fulfilled and the “actualization” of the full personal potential takes place.

I started apaxart in 1994 much like someone would open a bar or pub with the idea that they were making the place they would like to go to. The idea was to put artists, writers, philosophers, and otherwise interesting folks in the role of curator and at that time there were not many independent curators. Curatorial studies programs began around that time, so there was clearly a larger desire to mediate between artists and the public. Most programs are well meaning, but as I've written in the past, many have helped nurture a corporate atmosphere of promotion and opportunism. Previously eschewed professional terms such as “networking” and “practice” heretofore used by doctors and lawyers have become accepted terms to describe one's art activities. These programs often have great faculty, however the offerings are rarely integrated or contextualized and the job market extremely limited. Many express criticism today that the art world is about business. Business is compelling in its immediacy, pace, and ego gratification, and it's reasonable that these concerns be reflected in the art world. We've learned what business always

knew—that smart promotion and networking are more remunerative than working outside of the public view. The art world is playing business even more than collectors and institutions are playing art.

We've done great shows at apexart and some "less great" shows but our greatest ability has been to create compelling juxtaposition. The more vexing the better. Some of our more confusing shows have made people ask questions about the structure, the essay, the installation, and the choice of artists. Getting people annoyed, offended, or generally pissed off creates a greater change in their tolerance and perspective than offering something easy and agreeable. A recent study of cognition noted that staying mentally agile was more the result of arguing with others than agreeing. Google and directed content sends you more of what they think you want, we send you what we hope is worth thinking about. We're agonists.

apexart does about six exhibitions a year in New York City and two "franchised exhibitions" elsewhere. We bring eight residents from around the world to NYC and send up to four folks, who have not traveled outside the art world, to distant locations where no significant contemporary art market exists. They are prohibited from "doing their work," encouraged to immerse themselves in a foreign culture as well as being open to new ideas and approaches.

apexart's residency program is not about trying to give people what they want. Or what they expect. It is not about creating career opportunity. We don't provide a studio or become their career advocate. NYC has so many interesting people and educational and cultural opportunities that putting people in a studio doing the same work they've been doing makes little sense. We create a schedule and make appointments with people that would be impossible for a "non-affiliated" visitor to arrange.

There are three "requirements" to be invited for a residency. You must be over 30 years old, this must be your first visit to NYC, and you have to be recommended by someone who knows you well. It is not unusual for the recommenders to be people we don't know as we may contact an institution and ask an assistant curator or professor to be a recommender. We try to avoid the "cultural" gatekeepers who tend to give the same people opportunities. Our challenge is to explain the ideas and reasons behind the program well enough so that they understand and select the right person. To avoid diluting the process we ask each recommender for only one recommendation. Residents may not have had such experiences previously because of schedule, economics, complete immersion with their work, or possibly because their personalities did not create such situations. This process has been in effect for eleven years with a remarkable roster of past residents, who have returned to their homes with new ideas, perspectives, and opportunities.

The resident is provided with a studio apartment at 14th Street and Union Square, the hyperactive middle of NYC. They are then given a rigorous schedule of up to four appointments and activities each day, which include auditing classes and lectures outside of their discipline, touristic activities that explain the city, and visiting some of the smaller idiosyncratic museums from the more than 200 that exist in New York. The resident attends large and small performances of music, theater, and readings, all the while meeting with people from different disciplines who have been invited to be part of our "friends of apexart" list. They go to Washington, D.C., for two days to meet with folks, to go to museums and performances, and to get a sense of the image the U.S. has of itself in a place they often hear about and sometimes have to respond to. It is generally one of the compelling adventures of their residency.

The main intention is to fill their mind with as many ideas and experiences as we can and then let them sort it out on their own when they return home. We have no agenda other than making a creative place not confined to the self-referential, often hermetic art world that discourages "outsider" activity. They have the chance to spend time in a way that can only be done somewhere else, displaced, with no sense of obligation, and alone. Mates or visitors are not allowed and many really do return home with a new sense of independence and energy. Our

residents have come from every continent and from every socioeconomic level. The residency is only one month long and time passes quickly. We emphasize making friends rather than social networking, and we think one's opportunities will increase if one's work is more interesting. Do people rebel at the schedule? On occasion, but it makes for another good discussion opportunity. Most residents are too busy.

In addition to bringing residents to NYC, we have a mirror program that reverses the process with the same philosophy and sends local artists, writers, and curators who have become too entrenched in the hermetic and incestuous art world, to remote locations around the world. Past residents, familiar with the program, have assisted us in places outside of the art circuit that offer new experiences and personal reassessment. Residents have gone to locations such as Kellerberrin in the Australian outback and Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. A vacation for a businessperson can be research for an artist or writer that should be fun, exciting, new, and without guilt. Success for an artist is staying challenged by your work, and figuring out a way to do it for life. If the reality of artist as romantic bohemian has given way to artist as entrepreneur, provocateur, and entertainer, then let's encourage thought, art, reaction, and commentary about it. Values change, let's let the art change.

For everyone involved we want apexart to be an educational organization rather than a promotional one. We don't do one person shows and consider ourselves in service to our audience first, and then the artists and curators who work with us. The white box of the gallery space continues to confound and perplex. We are idea centric, and place a great deal of emphasis on the essay that accompanies each exhibition. Our documentation for each exhibition takes the form of a color brochure with an essay by the organizer. Each season there are two open calls for exhibitions: Unsolicited Proposals and The Franchise. Both programs are set up to allow anyone to compete on a level playing field with well-known curators, writers, and artists, by first anonymizing the proposal. No resumes, catalogues, or recommendations are accepted. Ideas for exhibitions are entered online and limited to 600 words for the UP and 400 for the Franchise (up from 250). In each of these evaluation procedures, a large number of jurors are invited to weigh in. We wrote a PHP script that allows people to submit online and then substitutes a number for their name. On the jury side, the script constantly randomizes the order of the submissions so no one proposal is always first or second. It is not unusual for us to invite more than 200 jurors and to have each proposal receive more than 25 votes. Relying on the idea of "crowd sourcing," the jurors are given unique usernames and passwords and asked to read at least a certain number of proposals, sometimes only 25 and other times up to 100, with the idea that fresh eyes and the overlap of readers will produce a more objective result. Additionally it means that we involve twice the number of people who would otherwise have been involved and eliminates the influence exerted by the most vociferous and powerful jury member on the others when done in a small group in person. This often amounts to undue influence rather than discussion, whereas our process gives each juror equal input. An art historian who prevailed in last year's Unsolicited Proposal process had submitted a proposal three times before his was selected; he continued to do so because he was comfortable that the process was a fair one. This process is very effective and we have offered the script to others. It makes the process fair, easy, and very efficient to conduct. At the conclusion of the process we provide a ranking by title of all proposals received to help the author get a better sense of how his or her proposal fared.

In 2010 we invited 371 jurors and 110 juried for the Franchise. In 2009 we received 455 proposals and invited 296 jurors with more than 150 actively involved. Each juror was asked to read at least 25 proposals with the idea that a larger percentage of people will gravitate to the best idea and that the relative jury process (crowd sourcing) is more effective than the traditional process of having five people sit around a table during a grueling multi-day process where keeping track of so many submissions is all but impossible. It is not unusual for us to receive submissions from more than 60 countries for each program with the jurors coming from as many countries. We consider the

submissions process a creative writing exercise and submitters are advised: "We never know how our jurors will evaluate different aspects. Be creative and make it interesting." If you would like to be a juror, send us a note and tell us why.

So while the UP is an opportunity for people to do a project in NYC, the Franchise emphasizes that the center of the world is wherever you are. Also based on a creative writing exercise, this process is about branding and finance, as each year apexart leaves NYC for two exhibitions. It is about branding, in that no one needs us to be there to organize an exhibition, and about financing, in that we bring, well, financing. The first year we went to Los Angeles and the last to Thailand. Learning as we go, we impose arbitrary limitations to serve underserved places. Last year submissions were limited to cities and towns with 500,000 people or less and resulted in the involvement of people from the community, which would not have happened in a mega city center.

For each exhibition we print an edition of 10,000 100-pound cover stock, color brochures that are sent free of charge to individuals, institutions, and galleries in more than 105 countries. They contain an essay of about 1,300 words written by the curator/organizer and reproductions of the works in the exhibition in a way that clearly addresses the idea of the show and acts as much like a surrogate of the show as possible. They are short, interesting, and easy to carry, and easily recycled with no guilt if you choose not to keep them. Over the years more than 1,200,000 of these mini catalogs have been sent. Being in service to our audience, we try to produce materials that they will read. Too many catalogs are produced each year for shows that don't warrant them and no one reads.

We have restructured the jury procedure so as to be more fair and objective than it often is, and have changed the form and concept of the residency program to promote new ideas and experiences rather than career opportunities. Our exhibitions are about asking questions and exploring ideas rather than validating the participating artists, curators, and writers. Everyone involved is encouraged to innovate his or her approach, enlarge his or her horizon and help us assess if we are doing what we say we are trying to do. We pursue creativity rather than art. For the fortunate folks who know what art is and where to find it, there is a massive structure in place. Stop reading this and go network or something. For the rest of you, maybe the "art world" isn't a club you want to be part of.

Change is good, regardless of the outcome. It makes you reconsider and helps suggest new directions. Too often art school becomes a place to refine your ability rather than experiment and grow. Art schools, universities, and curatorial programs really need to reassess how they are preparing their students while leaving them deeply in debt. This book is not about good and bad or right and wrong. It is about encouraging you to consider and reconsider situations and ideas as unencumbered as possible in an effort to understand better what you are doing and why you are doing it. Unfortunately we rarely grow up and only get older.

It is very important to try new things, go new places, spend time alone, and even cause a little trouble doing the unexpected. Acting out is important. Learn new skills that are interesting, can show up in your work and can help make you money. Poverty is not good for creativity and you never know where inspiration and new ideas will come from.

Steven Rand (stevenrand@apexart.org) is an artist with a requisite level of anxiety, hypersensitivity, paranoia, and an M.F.A. He started apexart instead of complaining about the commercialization of the art world, but hasn't stopped complaining. He doesn't get along well with others and is not a curator, a writer, or an architect, but is designing a house, and tries to write. He has had one-person exhibitions in New York, California, Germany, Poland, and China, been in quite a few group shows internationally and has traveled extensively. He lectures and gives talks around the world, and considers apexart an act of creativity and sincerely appreciates all the folks who have been part of the process, especially NLW.