SLUICE

ARTIST-RUN PROJECTS

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apexart NYC

Charlie Levine & Karl England meet Steven Rand

CHARLIE LEVINE They say never meet your idols. But what if you don't idolise a person, but an idea, a concept, a space? Whilst in New York for the Exchange Rates expo Karl England and I went to meet Steven Rand, Director of apexart in Lower Manhattan. apexart is a gallery that inspired me through my MA back in 2005/6, and in 2007 a friend returned from a trip to New York with a book, *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* edited by the gallery, and I have never looked back.

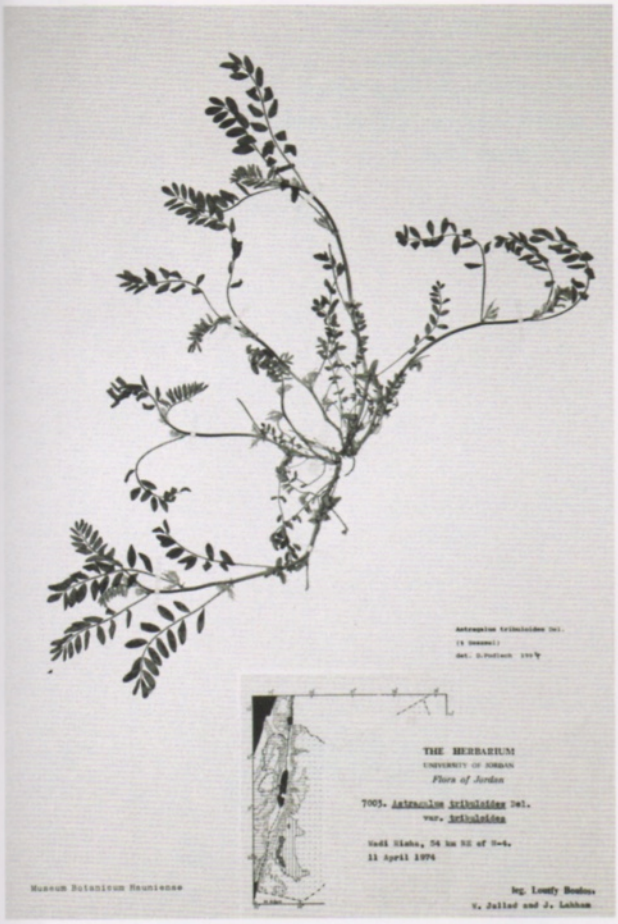
apexart, in downtown Manhattan, has been innovating the art scene since 1994 through fellowships, publications, exhibitions, unsolicited proposals and one off franchises. Steven Rand says he started the gallery "much like someone would open a bar or pub with the idea they were making the place they would like to go to." And this is something I have always done in curating, and Sluice have certainly used this as an ethos since its inception. Steven said that apexart wasn't about challenging the art world and the way it works (a significant portion of the art world is happy with it as it is), but that rather it offers an alternative for those that want it. This is a distinction of priorities and focus; apexart contributes through legacy and example, it doesn't want to please everybody, it doesn't necessarily want to please you or me, and that's its strength.

"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...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."

Steven was an unusual person to meet, generous and warm. Our chat over a cup of tea on the sidewalk outside his gallery began with us finding out about him but slowly morphed into a critique of Sluice. What is our output, why, for whom? Rand is direct, these are not rhetorical questions to mull over. Rand wants answers.

I idolised apexart from afar and had the fortune last year to hear about it direct from the source. It did not disappoint, neither did it shock and awe. It was, as it should be, accessible, interesting, 'normal'. An art world we inhabit in the form of Sluice, but also one that inspires us to go further. For Sluice this means to challenge partners, participants, audiences and ourselves more. Steven lives by his philosophy and inspires others "It is very important to try new things, go to new places, spend time alone, and even cause a little trouble doing the unexpected. Acting out is important. Learn new skills that are interesting... Poverty is not good for creativity and you never know where inspiration and new ideas will come from."

Alberto Baraya,
Herbario de plantas artificales Expedición Nueva Zelandia, Plate 03,
Objecto encontrado y dibujo sobre cartón,
64 x 48 x 10cms
2009



Pia Rönicke
The Pages of Day and Night (detail)
2015

Photogravure
10 x 16 inches

Courtesy of the artist and gb agency Paris

KARL ENGLAND In *Playing by the Rules* (published by apexart) there is an essay titled 'Tributary or Source?' It argues that in the 1970's alternative spaces served a crucial role in providing a platform for non-traditional art forms (performance, video etc) that the commercial and institutional platforms were not yet catering to. But that today art once considered too conceptual or unwieldy has a place in the market so the raison d'etre of the alternative scene has thereby been removed.

The narrative runs like this: the anti-establishment avant garde becomes commodified, and as the artists enter the market, many of the artist-run spaces morph into commercial spaces themselves, thus rendering the anti-establishment tamed. This is undoubtedly true of many DIY initiatives. However, this strikes me as a partial reading of why alternative spaces exist in the first place. Although it's true (to an extent) that medium is no longer a barrier to the market, validity must still be acquired somewhere, and if no one will validate your ticket, or if you reject the primacy of the designated validator – you assume the role yourself and you look to your peers for affirmation.

So is apexart (and the like) a tributary to the mainstream? If you believe the market is a reliable arbiter of value then the 'alternative' must be a tributary to be cleared as soon as possible. But for spaces like apexart the alternative represents something more fundamental, not necessarily an opposition, but rather a viable 'other'. This is what gives the alternative art scene agency today. Art is instrumentalist by the market, and value is prescribed by the market, but only if we acquiesce.

Every artist and arts organisor must navigate their own response to the museum-curator-collector-complex, as each of us hold different stances in regards to institutionalism, state and corporate funding, instrumentilisation etc but on the overriding driver of the contemporary art-world there are plenty of artists, projects, galleries and other platforms that do not acquiesce to the market-driven, and to many of these – apexart is a lodestar.

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Install photo
courtesy of apexart