

How to approach a gallery?

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project space

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Dedicated to all the working artists, curators, art professionals, and galleries.

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Introduction:

The art world is often described as a lonely place. It can be lonely, but it does not have to be. Only after moving to London, I realised how naive and privileged I was in my experience of the art scene while living in Glasgow. Glasgow offered an international, metropolitan, academic, and more importantly, a friendly art community. Even if you were the most asocial person in the world, as long as you kept going to art openings and talks, you would end up seeing the same faces over and over again; eventually, a familiarity would develop that would then sometimes grow into a friendship. I am not talking about gaining some 'insider access' or 'useful contact', no, just becoming part of a group of people trying to figure out their careers in the arts. That peer group offered an incredible amount of support and a safe space where I could talk about art and try to figure out the wild world that is the art world. In Glasgow, I never felt lonely in the arts.

By the time I moved to London, private views and gallery events were part of my lifestyle. A Thursday at a private view became a habit like a Sunday roast or a pint after work. When I moved to London, my basic instinct was to go to a gallery event, so I hit the internet, trying to find a resource that would tell me what was happening in which gallery. That is how Art Map London came to be.

A friend of mine, who studied art history in London, said that Art Map would never work, because no gallery would send in information about their private view - I thought that if something worked in Glasgow, it would work in London. Hence, I spent a week sitting alone in my room creating what would become the heart and soul of Art Map - the gallery database. That week was one of the loneliest times in my life - I was out of university, I had no job, my support network was gone, I had no knowledge of London galleries, and I had no one to talk with about what I was going through.

Fast forward a few years, and from a scared and clueless graduate, I became a specialist in the London primary market. From an Excel spreadsheet, Art Map grew into a listing website and a foster community for artists and art professionals who are trying to figure it all out. This book is a detailed summary of everything I learnt in the past two years about the primary art market. My experiences were gained in London; however, these lessons can be applied in other art market centres as Berlin, New York, Miami and Paris. This is a book I wish I was given after I moved to London; it would have made my time here a lot easier.

No matter how you choose to read this book, I want you to remember its main message - you are not alone. The art world is a big place, and no matter what type of weird you are - somewhere out there will be a weirdo, who is into the same art stuff as you.

Part I:

What is the art market?

Art Community vs Art Market

Before we dive into a conversation about art galleries, we should first talk about the art market and art community and the place that a gallery and the artist have in both.

First of all, the art market should not be mistaken for an art community. For example, Glasgow has an amazing art community, but it does not have an art market. London, on the other hand, has an art market, but does not have a developed art community. London has hundreds of micro communities that developed out of artist groups, collectives, and mutual interests; however, these are few and far between and are often closed to outsiders. In other words, London has a handful of small communities scattered all over the city and a lot of individuals who wander from one opening to another.

As my personal experience has proven, and it is something that has been confirmed in many interviews and conversations, for artists at the start of their career, the art market is not important. The most important thing is their community. In London, the majority of communities and networks are not open to outsiders. You have to stumble across them by going to art events and reaching out to fellow artists and joining the artistic conversation both online and offline. There are, however, a handful of groups that provide foster communities as you try to figure out your direction and find your people. Art Map London is a great example of such a support network for artists.

An art community is a network of individuals, who support each other and exchange opportunities, an art market is a market like any other market, only instead of meat and vegetables, art and artists are the goods being sold and traded.

Primary and secondary markets

The art market is divided into the primary and the secondary market.

The primary market is defined by works being sold for the first time. Thus, all living artists (known or unknown), as well as the majority of independent curators and emerging galleries, operate within the primary market.

The secondary market is where the resale of the work takes place. Usually the artist does not participate in this transaction, as it's the work's current owner (a collector) who resells the work. The resale happens through an agent, such as a gallery, a dealer, or an auction house.

The secondary market is diverse and filled with works ranging from thousands of years old to those produced 2-3 years ago. There is an unspoken rule that auctions will not resell anything that is less than two years old out of courtesy to commercial galleries and, possibly, not to encourage the speculative buying and selling of art known as 'flipping'. This said this 'unspoken rule' is often ignored.

The secondary market provides an artist with a 'market value'. On the primary market the prices are largely 'made up' by the artist or their gallery. Thus, you have everything from artists giving away artworks for free to unknown artists pricing their works at tens of thousands of pounds.

The secondary market is more stable than the primary market, as the stock (art works) that you buy has a more or less fixed resale value. Artists whose work is only on the primary market do not have a resale value - you could have bought a work for 10,000£, but unless you can resell it - it's worthless. Hence, galleries that work only on the primary market will argue that you should buy art 'because you love it' and are prepared to live with it for a very long time, because if you try to resell it - you can't. On the other hand, those who operate on the secondary market will often use the 'investment' argument to reassure their collectors. The truth is that the majority of people who buy art (be it on primary or secondary market) usually do it for a mixture of those two reasons, because they love the work or the artist and because there is a chance that it will go up in value. As an old saying goes 'No collector buys art for investment but everyone keeps track of how much their collection is worth.'

Living artists operate within the primary market, and it is usually out of their control if their work enters the secondary market. The transition from the primary to the secondary market is a massive milestone; it can break or solidify the artist's career.

If the work sells well, this makes your art a 'good investment'; it gives reassurance to collectors that if they fall out of love with your work they can get rid of it. On the other hand, if an artist who came up on auction for the first time fails to gain at least the same amount that the primary dealer sold it for, then that can destroy the artist's career. The one thing that is never forgiven in the 'art world' is work losing its price. To protect their artists from being resold, many galleries make their collectors sign an agreement that the gallery will be given a chance to buy the work back if the collector ever decides to sell it.

I think the conclusion to make out of all this is that the secondary market requires a lot of education and awareness. It also has more internal politics, involved parties, and money. On the secondary market, it is no longer about the 'love for art' it is also about investment. Thus, many artists do not even want to get involved with that side of the art world and rarely attend art fairs and auctions.

The primary market, on the other hand, is more purist, naive, and idealistic. It's for the love of art. Less money is involved in the primary market, and because less money is involved, you either get serious collectors who want to stay ahead of the curve, or the general public that wants 'something pretty to hang on the wall'.

Personally, I am more interested in the primary market both as a writer, educator, and speaker. The primary art market is a place I feel at home and the area that I have researched in depth; therefore, this book will concentrate on the primary market.