

Art World

How Does an Artist Get a Gallery, Anyway? Here Are 11 Practical Steps That Could Lead to Bona Fide Representation

Artists, dealers, and other experts talk about what it takes to win the eye of a gallery.

Brian Boucher, August 12, 2019



4. Be a Presence

Nothing can substitute for being a regular presence at the place you want to be, say the experts. Artist **Rebecca Morgan** hosts “ask me anything” sessions for artists via her Instagram, dealing with this very subject. “You should make the effort to attend all the programming that you can at galleries you like,” says the artist, who is currently preparing a solo show at New York’s Asya Geisberg Gallery. “By being present and showing up, you will become a familiar face. I think it’s helpful to post pictures from the opening or exhibition; galleries are also always looking at who is present and attending. In my experience, they almost always check out who is posting or signing the book, or who is a regular attendee.”

Rivera is even more blunt: “You’ve got to go to openings! You’ve got to suffer! Either you can waste time going to the movies or you can go to an opening and then go to the after party.”



5. Pick a Specific Target

A light touch and a measure of sincerity are important, according to **Morgan**. “You should introduce yourself to the gallery owner or manager, or other artists in the stable, with nothing more than ‘I have been coming to this gallery for a while and I really love the exhibitions and wanted to say hello,’” she says. “Actual, real relationships happen from saying ‘Hello, I really admire you’ or ‘I like your program.’”

Nota bene: That part about “liking the program” is key. A very common mistake is for artists to look at the problem of getting a gallery indiscriminately, as if all galleries are the same. Knowing what, specifically, a certain space specializes in, and why your art, in particular, would work for it, is very important if you want to be taken seriously.

“If you tell the person at the front desk that you admire the gallery, you really should be able to discuss some artists in the gallery’s program to show that you mean what you say, that you’re really interested in what they do and you’re not just looking for any gallery to work with you,” Wittels councils.

6. Yes, Do Instagram. But Do It Right.

Instagram and other social media are fine tools for artists. They have offered ways to network and gain exposure that previous generations just didn’t have, opening new entryways into the profession.

But keep in mind, not all exposure is created equal.

“I was just talking to an artist who was getting ready to reach out to a gallery and I looked at their Instagram,” Morgan says. “I had to tell them, ‘Look, I don’t see any of your work. I see selfies.’ Be

mindful of what it's going to look like when people are trying to find your work. Get your house in order.”

7. Learn the Delicate Art of the Studio Visit

A studio visit is almost always the first step toward a gallery relationship, Wittels points out, so it's important to know some basic protocol. “There has got to be a respectful dialogue,” she says. “It can't be a monologue on either side. If you're going to lecture me, you could just send a press release.”

On the flip side, it's important actually to listen to what your visitor wants to say, Wittels advises. “Let them tell you their ideas about your work, or what other artists your work reminds them of. You want them to see things you've never thought of before.”

Also worth keeping in mind: You'll need to have a healthy amount of work to show your visitor. “I've been to studio visits where there was one painting there,” Wittels says. Referring to Jay DeFeo's ten-foot-tall masterpiece, she adds, “unless it's The Rose, there better be more than one!”

8. Don't Get Ground Down

There is a lot of rejection baked into art, an inherently demoralizing condition. It's worth remembering that this is totally normal. Don't let it rattle your self-confidence too much.

“I've been giving people the same advice about putting yourself out there,” says Morgan, “and sometimes they have trepidation to do it. I completely understand how intense it is. Yes, it's uncomfortable. Yes, there's a hierarchy. People say, 'I'm so shy or anxious, I can't.' But at the end of the day, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

10. Make Your Own Opportunity

The bottom line is that there is always a risk for dealers in starting to show a new, unknown artist. The task is to get on the radar. Paradoxically, this means that the best way to get someone else to show your work is sometimes to start by showing yourself.

In an interview for the catalogue of the 2015 New Museum Triennial, the artist Josh Kline credited the huge role that the circle of peers around the former artist-run space 179 Canal had played in his career, and argued for the importance of artists creating their own spaces:

I think it's essential for American artists to be curating—organizing exhibitions and starting project spaces—and finding ways to create platforms for themselves and their communities. In these spaces artists can present their peers and their ideas on their own terms, while providing the kind of nurturing exhibition environment that many artists need at the beginning of their careers but that is largely absent in the market and institutions. Since the financial crisis, conditions have genuinely opened up, creating other routes into the system for artists beyond expensive financially crippling graduate programs. A whole new wave of short-lived artist-run spaces (some more rigorous than others) has emerged after the crisis. The space that gave my community its start, 179 Canal, was one of the earliest out of the gate. The magic trick is finding a way to get the grown-ups to pay attention.

Morgan puts this even more bluntly. “Remove all the furniture from your apartment and start your own gallery!”, she says. “What are you going to do for yourself? How bad do you want this?”