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12 Ways Collectors Can Help Galleries Survive and Thrive



Installation view of work by Angelo Plessas at Breeder Gallery's booth at Frieze New York, 2016. Photo by Adam Reich for Artsy.

With all the talk about the struggles of emerging and smaller galleries, much of the commentary has been focused on how fairs can better support galleries, or how galleries can experiment with new models to survive. But what about collectors? As the party that comes to the table with arguably the most resources, do they have any role or responsibility in ensuring gallerists can keep the lights on?

European dealer Thaddaeus Ropac isn't so sure. For him, the collector's primary duty is to the art and the artwork; galleries, he said, aren't a charity. But others believe collectors do have a role to play. [Sean Kelly](#) launched "Collect Wisely" in May, a multimedia campaign to encourage collectors to be more thoughtful and less financially driven in their practice.

"The art world is an ecosystem," said Alain Servais, a Belgian collector who often takes to Twitter to criticize art market goings-on. "Definitely collectors cannot complain about the current state of things if they don't do their own work."

Some (hopefully) obvious things collectors can do to make dealers' lives easier: Buy art. Pay for it on time. Be gracious. Don't flip the work.

But there's a lot more collectors can do if they want to see the galleries they care about survive and prosper. Artsy spoke to a dozen gallerists and art-world professionals during Art Basel week about how to build the perfect collector. What should collectors do more of? Less of? What's the best way they can support galleries, both materially and emotionally? Here's what they had to say.

Trust the gallery

Multiple respondents wished collectors took a broader view of their programs. Rather than buying just one or two artists, get curious about the other artists in the stable, and how they relate to one another. After all, said Dmitry Komis, director of New York's five-year-old David Lewis Gallery, "there's a reason why they're together in this program." Hannah Robinson, founder and director of Glasgow's Mary Mary, said

she'd like to see a more consistent engagement. "There's a trust in you when the name is doing something," she said. But she would like to see collectors "opening up their parameters a little bit," to look at other works that maybe "aren't selling like hotcakes like the other ones" at that particular moment.

Consider unorthodox financial arrangements

When Jaring Dürst Britt and Alexander Mayhew started their gallery Dürst Britt & Mayhew three-and-a-half years ago, they approached three collectors they knew for loans totalling €50,000 in exchange for deeper discounts on works by their artists, including Puck Verkade and Wieske Wester, both of whom were showing at Liste. Dürst Britt and Mayhew needed the money to build a track record at smaller fairs in order to pave the way to Liste, where they had set a goal to show by their fifth year in business. They pay back the loans each month, but can also pay off a chunk at a time if a collector-lender sees a work he likes. Dürst Britt also said the arrangement encourages collectors to buy more.

In another example, Servais said he worked with a gallery that wanted to try Zona Maco, the Mexico City art fair, but was hesitant to risk the €15,000 it would cost to participate in case nothing sold. The gallerist asked Servais to prepay for €15,000 worth of art, which he could choose within 12 months. This helped them cover their costs for the fair, and spread them out over the next year.

Ask questions

Many dealers came back to the idea of "engagement" as one of the most rewarding parts of their jobs, even if it doesn't lead to sales. Ask questions, spend time talking to the dealer, learn about the artist. Polina Stroganova of Mexico City's PROYECTOSMONCLOVA stressed that collectors should keep asking questions until they've gotten satisfactory answers, or feel they've genuinely understood the artist's practice. Sometimes dealers might answer in hard-to-understand art-babble. "If something doesn't make sense to you, ask again. Sometimes people are maybe afraid—you give them the blah, and maybe they are still lost. Maybe things are making sense to the gallerist, but not to the collector," she said. "Ask uncomfortable questions."

Bring your friends

The most important thing collectors could do is "get their wealthy friends more excited about art," said Marc Spiegler, the global director of Art Basel. He cited the evolution of Latin American collecting circles, which grew through informal social networks since the region lacks other channels into collecting, such as museum young patrons groups. Instead, a core group of collectors started inviting friends to Art Basel in Miami Beach, where they made a fun weekend of it—fun enough to invite more friends the following year. Plus, he added, if you're a heavy social media user, "post the hell out of what you're buying and what you're liking, so your friends who are not buying art will be inundated with it."

Pick up your work

One staffer at a German gallery, who did not want to be named, said he'd love to see more collectors simply pick up or arrange to ship the work they've bought. That's first and foremost because art is meant to be in circulation, and having it piled up in a storage is not only inconvenient for the gallery, but means the art is not doing its job. Secondly, it makes for awkwardness at fairs or other events. "You have this situation when you see them in person, and the first thing you talk about is... 'Hey, when are the works going to be picked up?'" he said. "It precedes other discussions about selling more works, and that's a bad thing."

Offer some advice

Collectors, noted Spiegler, are often people who've had a lot of success in their own careers, and may have management wisdom to impart. "They could potentially offer advice to gallerists about running their own businesses," Spiegler said. Dürst Britt from Dürst Britt & Mayhew said one of the collectors who lent them money when they started out had run a successful car rental business in Holland. While he had initially seemed skeptical, he wound up giving them €20,000 because he felt a kinship with them as entrepreneurs.

Go to the gallery

Cherine Karam of Beirut's Marfa' Projects wished her collectors attended more of the events that the gallery puts on, which tend to draw more young people and academics. Servais, who makes an effort to visit galleries when he visits cities around the world for fairs and biennials, agreed. "The minimum we can do is to see the exhibition," he said. Plus, he added, it's a gift for the collector, since art looks far better in the gallery than at fairs.

Don't just buy, support

Whether that means funding the production of work in exchange for a discount or first right of refusal, or chipping in to support a museum show or biennial presentation of an up-and-coming artist, gallerists encouraged collectors to take that extra step beyond just collecting work. These types of steps often have mutual benefits. "Frankly, it's enlightened self-interest, because obviously, if you know an artist's work and they're going to be featured in a major biennial, it's to your advantage" to support that artist, Spiegler said—both materially, since those types of events boost an artist's market, but more importantly, on a reputational level.

Alex Freedman of Los Angeles and Paris's Freedman Fitzpatrick said collectors who "support certain types of museum shows, certain projects which you don't anticipate any kind of return on," can really help early-stage artists. Conversely, it can be tedious when collectors "buy works [and] then complain that the artist isn't able to develop," she said, noting that much like start-up companies, artists need continued investments, even small ones, to allow for transformation and growth. Guillaume Sultana of Paris's Galerie Sultana described two Marseille-based collectors in their forties—around the same age as the gallery's owners and many of its artists—who he said are incredibly supportive, always talking about the gallery to their friends and traveling to see shows, growing, in a way, with the gallery itself. "It's as if they are part of the team," he said. Additionally, Mayhew cited video work as something that's often costly to produce, and suggested that collectors help fund production in exchange for a first edition or other perk.

Be responsive

If a collector gets an offer for an art work, the least she or he could do is write back. "Respond to an email politely, even if you don't like the work," said Jasmin Tsou of New York's JTT Gallery, as this makes it more likely she'll reach out with other offers, perhaps of something the collector is interested in. "It's harder for me to want to reach out if I don't feel like they respond to emails." And the same goes for confirming sales, especially during fairs. Stroganova said she understands everyone is super busy during fairs and may not be at their computers, but responding to confirm a sale at a fair, especially, is "crucial." "If a gallery reaches out...it's great if the clients are responsive," she said. "It makes everybody's life very easy."

Do your own homework and research

Komis, who was showing at Liste, said he enjoys that fair in particular because he tends to see more ordinary collectors who are adventurous and do their own reading and research. That tends to be the case across Europe, he noted, where there are more middle-class people buying art for themselves as a part of their daily lives, rather than relying on art advisors to hunt down trophies or assemble collections on their behalf. “We like collectors that do research and read books, and don’t just listen to art advisors,” he said.

Collect in depth

If a collector does fall in love with a particular artist, it makes the artist and the dealer happy to see the collector buy pieces from each series. Aleya Hamza of Cairo’s Gypsum Gallery described one collector who first bought two pieces by one of her artists, [Taha Belal](#), when he saw the work two years ago in Dubai, and later bought two pieces from the series of intricate works-on-paper that were up at Liste. “That way, in the future when I’m showing the work, I know that, okay, I have this guy... it gives a sense of security,” she said. In addition, “artists like to know where the work is, and that it’s going to a good place, it has other pieces it’s in dialogue with.” Plus, she noted, it makes it easier to organize museum shows.

Don’t just buy over the phone

Rose Lejeune, a researcher and associate curator of the “Collecting as Practice” program at London’s Delfina Foundation, said most of the collectors she works with are aware that galleries are facing a challenging business environment. Part of collecting responsibly, she said, is not just to buy whatever a gallerist sends them. She has seen those easy sales translate into a gallerist second-guessing other parts of the program, or encouraging artists to do more in the vein of what sells easily. “The more you think you know what someone wants to buy, the more you pressure your artists to make that stuff,” she said. “Then you’re narrowing the spectrum of practices that can be visible.”