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How Galleries Support Their Artists

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A regular reader of the news has likely seen headlines about a Damien Hirst show, a record price fetched for a Jeff Koons sculpture, or a new work of street art by Banksy. And there's some visibility to the touchstones of an artist's trajectory: group and solo shows at galleries, price appreciation and a good showing at auctions, and ultimately an appearance in a museum show or collection.

What's less immediately visible to the wider world is the role that galleries play, and how a gallery itself becomes established. There are a handful of so-called "mega-dealers" whose names may be familiar even to those on the fringes of the art world, Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth, Pace, and David Zwirner among them. But galleries are still the beating heart of the art world, the mechanism through which many artists find their way to institutions, the world's great collections, or just the homes of people who love their work.

Galleries have multiple roles, both visible and invisible: to incubate and support their artists, often by going above and beyond the normal work of putting on shows, promoting their artists, and selling the works; and to providing services such as financial management or book publishing, in order to help their artists focus more fully on their work.

"There's the things that you see in our gallery that are in front of the scenes, which are obviously the exhibitions, the publications that we make, then there are things that are behind the scenes, which could be everything from working with an artist on their archives or working on research for an exhibition for years or maybe researching artworks that passed through the gallery in terms of secondary market," says Julia Joern, a partner at David Zwirner.

Galleries come in all ages, shapes, and sizes too. Art Basel and UBS's Art Market 2017 report estimated there were roughly 296,000 dealers and gallery businesses in 2016. Just under 40% of them had annual sales of less than \$500,000, while a similar share had sales totaling between \$1 million and \$10 million. Nearly two thirds of all galleries employed five or fewer people, and only 4% had 20 or more employees.

Regardless of size, at the core of a gallery's identity is its "program." The term generally refers to the roster of artists a gallery represents, but can also describe a conceptual framework or area of focus that guides that roster, as well as other activities such as collaborations with other galleries, performances and lectures, or fair appearances. Most will stress that their primary role is to facilitate their artists' production of great work, in any way they can.



We spoke to representatives from three galleries of different sizes and ages, recognized for their strong programs, to learn more about how galleries serve their artists, evolve as institutions in their own right, and what it means for them to succeed.

Night Gallery

Night Gallery started in 2010 in a strip mall in Los Angeles's Lincoln Heights neighborhood, and has since moved to roughly 5,800 square feet, spread across two spaces in the city's gallery-heavy downtown. Founder and artist Davida Nemeroff initially opened the gallery with a roster of her peers, fellow Columbia University MFA students whose common thread, she says, is a visual language that references or critiques the popular vernacular. While it's not necessarily obvious in each work, she sees it in the work of Rose Marcus, which often includes photographs of New York City landmarks or icons, or the signage that sometimes works its way into Mira Dancy's figurative paintings.

In the early days, Nemeroff and her former partner Mieke Marple had a modest goal: Be able to hire a gallery assistant. Although Marple is no longer with the gallery, Nemeroff now has a staff of four full-time employees (not including herself), which allows her to spend more time outside of the gallery, including about 20 hours a week on studio visits with her artists as well as others she doesn't represent. She also sees her role as helping ensure her artists are consistently engaged in work they're excited about, and ideally achieving "breakthroughs."

She also devotes a good deal of time to traveling and supporting artists in person, going to openings and shows in other cities, such as Winnipeg, Canada, and Durham, North Carolina. Especially for a younger gallery, collaborating with other galleries is "huge," she says, helping create a "multicity support network" for her artists. It's also part of her role to serve as an intermediary between her artists and the wider critical conversation.

"One of the strengths of any great gallerist is really knowing what's going on in the scene and in the conversation," Nemeroff says. "Knowing that will also help your artists be part of that conversation and leading the conversation."

She's also seeing more evidence that she and her team are doing something right: more sold-out shows, more placements of her artists into public collections and prestigious private collections, and acceptance into higher-profile art fairs. These are all assurances Night Gallery has come to be "regarded as a serious gallery, and not just a cool party gallery," she says. But even as she savors what she and her team have accomplished, she knows there's much more to do.

"It's a battle," she says. "I'm of the mindset that it could always be better and we could always do more and we could always sell more."

—Anna Louie Sussman