

The Ten List: The Ins and Outs of Openings

by Beth Secor
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For those of you who are just starting out as artists, the opening night reception of your exhibition can be a bit daunting. What do you wear? How do you price your work? Who should you invite? These are just some of the questions you might have.

To help you succeed, I have consulted with a team of experienced artists from around the world on this very subject, and have come up with ten tips to ensure you will have an opening night to remember.

1. Finish Your Work On Time.

Nothing says "Closing" like a gallery full of blank walls, unless of course you are a conceptual artist. In that case you can say, "By using no materials, I'm doing my part to fight global warming." Or some such crap as that.

2. Learn to Say Variants of the Same Two-and-a-Half Sentences Over and Over Again.

If it's a successful opening, you'll find yourself changing conversational partners approximately every three seconds. Some of these people you have known a long time; others you have only just met and still others fall into a third category — people you have met probably hundreds of times but never remember — in other words, the people who hate you. Practice saying, "Oh, thank you so much. It's so nice to meet/see/not remember you. I started this series a week after I fell in the street and was 'hellip;." And then repeat ad infinitum throughout the evening.

If, for whatever reason, few people attend the opening, you can salvage the evening by saying things like, "Another glass of white wine please." "Are those new glasses? They suit your face. Ha, I said suit. Like you would wear a suit on your face. But not on your face, because you look great." "Yep.....What time is it?"

Whether your opening is successful or not, stay calm and keep your voice at an even pitch when you speak to someone, as it wouldn't be in your best interest to frighten away the few people who have bothered to wander into your show. Look the person you are speaking to in the eye, and speak very slowly, using simple words like "red" and "color."

Heed the words of this artist...

When your former professor shows up to your opening, the one you had a crush on (and kind of still do), don't talk to his eight-year-old boy really loudly like he's from another country, as apparently most American children speak English. Also, do not yell at the child, even if it's in a sing-song voice, about a sports team he might like, especially when said yelling adult is spilling her vodka/cran on his head, and one of said adult's boobs is threatening to fall out and give him a black eye.

3. Educate the Audience/Provide an Artist Statement.

I know, I know, I have already written about artist statements before, but I'm supposed to come up with a list of ten "do's and don'ts" for openings and right now I can only think of six, and four of those have to do with

either hallucinogens or alcohol. But I digress.

In order to properly educate your audience and enhance their viewing experience, it is helpful to have a good, solid artist statement available at your opening, especially if the work you are exhibiting is aesthetically weak. For example, if you were a visitor to a gallery and saw the painting on the right without having read the artist's statement, you might react to it in one of the following ways: a) vomiting b) taking a bath until you finally feel clean c) pulling out large hunks of your hair and then looking at them as though you weren't really sure whose they were d) looking for the nearest exit e) all of the above, but in this order: c, d, a, b.

Now read this artist statement and then look at the work:

Art practice in the postmodern era is questionable and undeniably dysfunctional due to the nature of equal sensibilities developed towards undefined or lost humanitarianism. Postmodern society is one of crisis; disdain affected by uncertainty and doubt. A postmodern society is one that is affected by everything that has come before. Human benevolence is clouded when it is deprived of accessibility to society's major defaults such as war, corporate globalization, [sic] and desensitized youth. Cynicism has replaced notions of the poetic; meanwhile art of the past has been reduced to economy. The artist performing the task of art making has a responsibility to humanity and does not mean that one has to practice highly politicized work filled with obvious clichés. The practice of making art is a sophisticated conceptual responsibility interacting with humanity. The artist sees the world differently; critically and profound.

Grammar, sense and repetition aside, don't you feel a little smarter and a little more appreciative of the artist and his work? What about dizzy? Do you feel dizzy? Words like "desensitized youth"; sometimes have that affect on people. I think you should lie down.

4. Consider Your Audience.

And by that, I don't mean craft your work to please a certain audience, I mean think about who you are going to invite to the opening, and who you are going to tell that you are going out of the country to have an illegal procedure.

Look at the following scenarios of people who have been invited to my openings and pick who should remain, and who, the next time one of my exhibitions rolls around, will have been "accidentally" deleted from my cell phone, computer, rolodex, address book and brain.

- a. An insecure, narcissistic friend who wears a fishnet top with no bra under her leather jacket and flashes people whenever she feels as if you — the artist — are getting more attention than she is.
- b. An older sister who within two minutes of meeting some people tells them that just that day she put makeup and an evening gown on a 17-year-old boy and then had sex with him. This same boy is one that she previously "adopted" in a ritualistic ceremony that she forced my entire family to hold for him on my birthday.
- c. My dear, departed grandmother. When she saw a six-foot painting that Jack Livingston made of a naked little boy standing in a garden, she said, "That is despicable," pulled a chair in front of the piece and sat with her back to it the entire evening so no one else would suffer the degradation of seeing a child's penis.

5. Convince People to Buy Your Work.

Everybody knows the real reason artists make art is to make money. Anyone who tells you "I paint to breathe" or "I live to create digital images" or "Without art I am just a tricked out cell phone without a soul" is delusional and should be institutionalized.

Here are a few ideas that will help put the "bling" in your opening:

- a. Don't round off dollar amounts. For example, a person will think \$1,999.98 is a lot less to spend on a photograph than \$2,000 is.
- b. Don't point out what is wrong with the work if someone seems interested in purchasing it. Do not say, "This piece did not really turn out as well as I had hoped it would. See this area here? No, not there, that is a scratch on the glass. Oh god, that looks horrible! I can't believe I didn't see that before! Oh well, I tried to do the best I could."
- c. Price according to the amount of time you spent on the work. In other words, the less time you spent on the piece, the more you should charge.
- d. Don't appear desperate and clingy. Selling artwork is like getting a date. The more aloof you appear, the more sales you will make. If someone seems really interested, turn your back and shut him or her out of your conversation.
- e. Cash or check? If they hand you a check, demand cash, and when they give you that, hold the cash up to the light to determine whether or not it is counterfeit. Behavior such as this will guarantee repeat customers.

6. Location, Location, Location.

Think twice about the gallery you have chosen. Is it really the best place to showcase your work. Is it off the beaten path, perhaps in a sewage pipe or demolished building? Is it easily accessible? (For example, does it have a door, or do you have to crawl through a window?) Is it surrounded by barbed wire? Once a patron enters, is he ever heard from again? Is the gallery owner reputable or does he have a name like Louie the Lip?

For example, a friend of mine often exhibits his work in Russia, but I question the wisdom of this, as the people who attend his openings often end up beaten or dead. He writes:

A mayoral candidate and his rival both showed up at my opening in a Russian provincial capital. Both were looking for a little free press by appearing at the opening of the visiting American artist, and jockeyed to have their photographs taken with me, each competing to show who loved America the most, vying to show who could hug me with the most ardor and warmth. These photographs ran in the local press, and I guess in one photo it appeared as though I loved one of the guys more than the other, causing he who was less loved to beat the hell out of his rival, which did not result in a prison sentence, but instead helped to him win the election.

In Yekaterinburg, a man named Roman, who was the sponsor of my exhibit at the Museum, gave me a ride to the American consulate's residence for a dinner in my honor. Two bodyguards rode with us to the dinner. Two weeks later someone tossed two hand grenades into Roman's office at the museum, killing one of those bodyguards, and wounding Roman in the leg. Roman subsequently left town and was never heard from again.

Scratch Russia off your list.

7. What Should I Serve?

It's really important to serve some sort of refreshment at your opening, as it creates ambience and draws people to the show in ways that your art never will. Seriously. Typically, galleries and museums serve wine and beer, and on occasion hard liquor and finger foods. Here are some other actual, for-real opening night refreshment options that you might also want to consider:

- a. Cheetos and Pop Rocks², although the Cheetos got all over the price sheets and walls, and people were more interested in looking at the Pop Rock "explosions" than the actual work itself.
- b. In the late 1980s, at a DiverseWorks exhibition of acid blotter sheet art by Mark McCloud, guests were served LSD. Everyone agreed the show was a resounding success.
- c. In 2000, an employee at the American Visionary Art Museum was sent to purchase food for an art opening and was told to, "buy on the cheap." She returned with the following items: A slab of butter, hamburger buns and Craisins. Guests mistook the Craisins for salsa gone bad, and kept going outside thinking they might find hamburgers cooking on a grill, but to no avail.

8. What Should I Wear?

Various websites I consulted suggested to "dress comfortably and wear something clean." I invariably wear something that is at least three or four years out of style, because I found it on sale and didn't realize it was dated. But what I have to say to you, the novice, is to wear what you feel best in. For example, you could wear a little red dress, black underwear on your head, a Cossack uniform or a Cat in the Hat hat. Or all four. But make sure the articles of clothing you chose are clean, especially if you have chosen to wear black underwear on your head, in which case the panties should be really, really clean, unless you prefer otherwise.

The people at Wikipedia, who obviously have never attended an opening, have this to say to gallery owners and curators on this particular subject:

If you want a theme, ask your artists to dress according to the theme. If the event is classy, dress classy. If the theme is Victorian, dress in elegant Victorian clothes. You must, too — the hosts really must participate.

By Victorian, they mean something like a bifurcated ensemble, which is sensible and hygienic, and by classy they mean trashy. And by "You must, too" they mean somebody is being a little too controlling, so get off my fucking back.

9. Should I Include a Performance Piece for Good Measure?

Sometimes people think they should include a performance piece as part of their opening night festivities. These are the same people who have fallen off the mailing list of informative brochures that alert the general public of common mistakes made by people who have just come of age.

If you want anyone to take you seriously, please do not ever include the word performance or performance art in your vocabulary, unless you happen to be someone like Laurie Anderson, which you are not.

Here are two examples of why performance is confusing and dangerous. The first is mine:

In 2005, I had a solo show at the Museo De Ciudad de Queretaro in Queretaro, Mexico. A group of young women devised a performance for the opening that I was told was based on my family portrait paintings. This was a three-part piece set to music, which included a girl in a pink wig who vogued to "Vogue" by Madonna, a girl in a skin-tight leotard who twirled a globe around to lilting tunes of a Mayan ocarina and a girl in a pink pinafore, who skipped around to Manuel Zumaya's "Lamentations of Jeremiah," while crying over the loss of a toy monkey, which she later found.

At last I understand the true meaning of my work.

The second is from an anonymous graduate of an important school of art who reports this opening night performance disaster:

My former roommate hired an amateur boxer to stage a fake fight with him outside of the museum as part of a performance piece during his graduate school opening. None of us liked my roommate for various reasons, but the first and foremost is he was territorial and had taped off his studio to mark his space, and got pissed if anyone walked over the line. After a few beers we chatted up the boxer before the match and told him to knock my roommate's lights out. The boxer punched him really hard in the second round, causing the guy to have a brain hemorrhage, which then led to a coma. He has since recovered, but is disabled. He sued the school and won.

I really don't know what to say here.

10. Drinking: Is it an Option?

If you are human, you are going to be a little nervous on opening night, so my advice to you is, even if you are in a support group like Alcoholics Anonymous, you should at least have one or two drinks that evening to take the edge off. But don't have more than two. Ok, maybe three or four. Or five tops. And maybe just a line of cocaine. But no more, or otherwise you'll find yourself in scenarios like the ones confessed below:

I was having a show at a very prestigious private Episcopal high school, one replete with its own art gallery and gallery director. The headmaster of the school, who lived on campus and who was a bit of a drinker, hosted a party for the adults afterwards and served as refreshments liquor of all sorts. At the time I was fond of Scotch, as was the headmaster, and we managed to get more drinky than anyone should, especially since we were just within yards of a campus filled with innocent teens.

At the end of the party, the headmaster was fortunate enough to remain harmlessly at home. I, on the other hand, left the party and began zig-zag weaving my way across campus toward the gallery to get my things and subsequently head out for a fun evening of drunk driving. I had enough of my wits about me to realize maybe I ought to sit down on the lovely campus lawn, right in front of the entrance to the school and literally unwind, as walking straight was not really working for me. Many hours later I awoke. The sun was out, the bell had rung, and I'm not sure how many parents and students passed me by on their way into the school. I woke to this realization, stood up, made two full 360-degree rotations, lunged into the gallery, got my stuff and drove home, endangering the lives of I don't know how many motorists on the way home.

No one ever said anything. I was lucky; they were Episcopal, and even their priests drink.

Yet another cautionary tale:

It was my second opening ever, a group show, which featured up and coming young women artists. For the exhibition, I created a series of hand-made paper pieces about my newborn child, which were placed in crappy little frames that my dad had made me out of baseboard. At one point in the evening, a drunk smashed into one of my pieces, breaking the glass. I was indignant and kept insisting that someone should make him pay for the piece. I was also pretty drunk, and about 15 minutes later I passed out in my end of the gallery, nestling my head on top of the shards of broken glass.

What a terrible mother! Ok, I admit it, that was me.

So there you go! Follow these ten simple tips and you'll soon find yourself on the path to a flourishing art career!

And by the way, please invite me to your first opening. I'd love to see that train wreck. And by train wreck, I mean success story!

My special appreciation goes to the many artists who helped me write this piece.

1 Ok, I don't have a cell phone and I still feel good about myself.

2Cheetos Pop Rock Combo © Beth Secor and Matthew Sontheimer 2009

Beth Secor is an artist and a writer who hopes she is a lot nicer to people than her evil typing fingers are.

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