



VISUAL ARTISTS

Visiting Gallerists from New York and Boston

Panel Discussion at OBORO – 4001 Berri, local 301

February 25, 2015

ELAN received funding from the Canada Council for the Arts to provide resources to English-language artists in Quebec as part of the Council's Market Access initiative. ELAN assembled a group of gallerists from Boston and New York City to come to Montreal, visit artists' studios (as selected by a three-person jury) and galleries, meet artists themselves, and share observations on the art scenes in their respective cities. As part of their visit, ELAN organized a panel discussion for the visiting gallerists to talk about what they do, share some words of wisdom, and answer specific questions from the audience.

MEET THE GALLERISTS



Left to right: Scott Zieher, John Thomson, Camilo Alvarez. Photo: Guy Rodgers

Scott Zieher

Scott is the co-owner with his wife Andrea Smith-Zieher of ZieherSmith Art Gallery, established in 2003 in Chelsea, NY. The gallery is dedicated to the work of emerging contemporary artists in all forms of media. Born in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Scott received his MFA in Poetry from Columbia University School of The Arts in 1996. He is a published prize winning poet and collage artist. ZieherSmith continues to show emerging artists, but now includes more renowned and celebrated professionals. The gallery was among the earliest members of the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) in 2003.

Website: <http://www.zieher smith.com/>

John Thomson

John is the cofounder of Foxy Production, a contemporary art gallery in Chelsea, NY, also established in 2003. The gallery presents international artists across genres and disciplines. John was previously the director of the Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) in New York from 2000 to 2008, as well as the curator of media art at the Lux Centre in London, UK during the late 90's. He has taught at the London Institute and has presented lectures at the School of Visual Arts in New York and RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. He writes extensively on media art and the international art market.

Website: <http://www.foxyproduction.com/>

Camilo Alvarez

Camilo is owner, director, and preparator at Samsøn, founded in 2004 in Boston, MA. He was born in 1976 in New York City to Dominican parents, and lived in Santo Domingo for seven years. He received a BA from Skidmore College and is currently studying to receive a Masters of Liberal Arts in Museum Studies from Harvard University. He has worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Exit Art, Socrates Sculpture Park, MIT's List Visual Art Centre, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Samsøn's exhibitions have been reviewed by *Art Forum*, the *Boston Globe*, and *Flash Art*. In 2010, the gallery commenced a form of artist residency called subSamsøn.

Website: <http://www.samsonprojects.com/index.php>

INTRO REMARKS

(edited and condensed)

Scott Zieher (New York):

- ◆ **Artists are organizing their works online** to reach beyond the confines of their city or area. This way, curators and potential buyers can get a sense of the work of an artist based in Montreal without the need for travel. Furthermore, a gallery may only show a narrow selection of physical works, whereas space is not restricted online.
- ◆ Curators from big cities like New York are beginning to open **inexpensive galleries in places with much less competition**, such as Kansas City. That way, a big artist from a metropolitan city can get a solo show in a more rural area. Not many people will see it, but it will cost next to nothing and the artist will have a higher chance of getting into art fairs.
- ◆ Emerging artists who do not have the luxury of being recommended by bigger artists should **build buzz** around their work. **Document your shows with photos and videos** so that the gallerist can see that you have created a scene for yourself.
- ◆ **Master the art of self-promotion.** Revise your pitch, whether you deliver it by email or in person, so that the gallerist gets a clear and concise idea of who you are and what you do.
- ◆ **Asking the gallerist intelligent questions**, such as inquiring about a work of art displayed at their gallery that you really love, builds trust towards you and your marketability.
- ◆ Scott looks particularly for **focus and ambition** in an artist's portfolio. He wants to see that you have directed a deep attention to a particular subject matter.
- ◆ Although the business side matters, **curators choose art based on what they find appealing** whether or not it will make them a lot of money. However, if they believe in the work they will probably find a way to sell it.
- ◆ Part of why Scott agreed to participate in this visit is to promote a more open and less intimidating network between artists and gallerists. It is important to make the commercial art scene more user-friendly.

Camilo Alvarez (Boston):

- ◆ The **New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA)** is a non-profit organization that started off as an art fair in Miami, and now holds an art fair in New York City during May.
- ◆ Camilo's modus operandi is to get eyes on artists' works using a **triad of exhibitions, acquisitions, and press**. Exhibitions take place at institutions, other galleries, and non-profit spaces. Acquisitions are private individuals and institutions. And press is national and international, written or online. Once you learn the breakdown of the triad you can then decipher how those avenues work for you

creatively. Gallerists are responsible for hitting all those avenues, as well as art fairs, for the artists they represent and exhibit.

- ◆ **SubSamson** is a 6-month residency of mostly graduate students hosted by the Samsøn gallery. The residency started after Camilo noticed that many students in Boston had no clue about how to navigate the commercial art world. He also observed that people didn't get to meet the maker and see the making process as much as he would have liked.
- ◆ The co-ed residency hosts mainly multimedia artists who get access to a studio, his staff, his interns, his equipment, and other resources while being exposed to the professional art scene through exhibitions, acquisitions, and press.
- ◆ He helps the artists write grants, gets them studio visits, frequently gets them their first sale, and provides them with software to get an inventory going.
- ◆ **Art fairs** are part of his marketing plan. A booth at an art fair can cost around \$10-12, 000 US. Other expenses including air fare, hotel, and shipping can cost up to an additional \$8, 000.
- ◆ **The success of an art fair depends on where it is.** In Mexico City, you can get 5000 people looking at your work over the course of 4 days compared to six weeks in Boston, where the work could be seen by only 100 people.
- ◆ **For emerging artists, galleries should not be a priority.** Aim for residencies and non-profit spaces and build a network from there.
- ◆ Artists should **become familiar with the works and trends of the gallery** they want to contact, as well as the gallerist and the website. Minor mistakes like misspelling the gallerist's name in the email can ruin your chance of getting a response.
- ◆ Camilo looks for diversity across mediums in artist portfolios. He enjoys observing improvement over the years from their first works to their most recent.

John Thomson (New York):

- ◆ **There was a high market for media art up until the recession, after which unique works like paintings became valued over photographs or video** as people started to believe that investing in new media was too big a risk.
- ◆ Canice Prendergast, professor of economics at the University of Chicago, wrote an article on the art market from an economist's point of view where he explained how **the recession negatively affected contemporary art and emerging artists.** Since then there has been a boom in only one particular type of work, i.e. abstract painting.
- ◆ **Fewer and fewer people are attending galleries** because of events like art fairs.
- ◆ **People are streaming videos or sharing photos** of art shows on the Internet, thus decreasing the number of people who physically attend galleries and exhibitions. As a result, many people are buying pieces over the Internet that they have not actually seen.

- ◆ Although American galleries display international works, **having an American context is more attractive to American collectors.** Local residencies are a great way to integrate yourself into the art scene of a given city.
- ◆ **Some artists work better in an institutional rather than commercial model.** An artist who is well known institutionally may never have sold a work. Because there are many more artists than could ever be commercially represented, consider the institutional model as a viable option.
- ◆ **Galleries often evolve along with a group of artists,** some of whom have been associated with a gallery since they were only small project spaces. These artists make recommendations for other artists, thus extending the network.

QUESTION & ANSWER

(edited and condensed)

Audience: *Could you tell us a bit more about your bricks and mortar operation, the services you offer, and your approach to emerging artists?*

John: I think artists still want to show their work in a gallery space. A gallerist is sort of an agent for the artist who helps to boost their career and facilitate their exhibitions, so artists are still interested in galleries. However, economic pressures like paying rent and being located in an area where people will still come and see the work is becoming more and more difficult.

Moderator: *Just to add to that, what is the difference now between having a brick and mortar gallery and buying things electronically from presentation sites online?*

Scott: People who buy art digitally are still buying from galleries. Very few entities are strictly digital, and even web-driven platforms still have to contact galleries for their product. That's one brick and mortar thing that we do. Many artists appreciate that one-to-one relationship between the viewer and the work that you get with an exhibition, and want to preserve that integrity. They don't want their art on eBay or Artsy. They prefer to see it exhibited in galleries, museums, or non-profit spaces. However, other artists like the online approach, so there is a lot of debate there.

Audience: *Considering that you seek out artists you believe have the potential to be successful, how can the artist trust your success and that you know what you're doing in return?*

Camilo: Works of art are unique objects, so there is a unique relationship that everyone who encounters that unique object will have to enter. So based on that relationship, you have to trust that the gallerist knows what is best for that piece; they will know how to properly light it, talk about it, present it, price it, package it, ship it, etc. Yes, the artist sometimes gets involved, but we know the business and logistics side of things.

Scott: We take it very seriously that what you make is important to you. And it's important to us as well. It's our livelihood, we take 50% of the profit. Your exhibition is there for six weeks and then it goes away. Until you do another show 18-24 months later, we are responsible for your pieces, so that's where the trust matters the most. Are we taking you to art fairs, are they the right art fairs? Are we putting them in the right context? It's about how we manage that. Payments, presentation, lighting, promotion, how we deal with collectors, how they deal with a sale, our navigation of these things is how we gain your trust. You may also meet art collectors who have reputable comments about the gallerist and their past successes.

Audience: *What factors do you look for when considering an artist?*

John: The most basic quality I look for in artists is being very committed to their ideas and practice; it has to be their life's work. Gallerists love genuine artists who are passionate about what they do, as opposed to artists who just follow trends or the styles of other artists. Also, gallerists want a balanced program; therefore they would not put the works of two similar artists together at the same time. So it's not just a value judgement on potential artists, but I have to consider if they fit into our collection.

Scott: If you know that a gallery of interest is exhibiting an artist whose show is similar to yours, do not expect to be accepted until later down the line. We couldn't show you even if we wanted to for the sake of maintaining a good, diversified program.

Camilo: Also, thinking about it politically, all the artists in a collection are speaking to different people in the audience, so to maintain a larger audience and gain more people you have to have fertile subgroups that combine to make the general audience. So the gallerist must also consider these audiences when putting an artist in a show.

Audience: How do you come across the artists?

Scott: It's never the same. We come across artists through art fairs, group shows, and recommendations from other artists, but not so often from other galleries or curators. We also receive many emails from artists with samples of their work. Artist recommendations are particularly big.

Moderator: How would someone from outside that network who would not be recommended by an artist you know establish a presence?

Scott: Use the DIY approach. Mount a show, photograph it well, and create your own scene online. This will make the dealer confident in you by the mere fact that you were able to create a buzz around your work.

Camilo: You can email the gallerists or contact them through the website, providing a link to your online portfolio. If you come up to me tomorrow on the street and say that you saw one of my shows and you read a review, I'll see that you've done your research. So just let that show in your contact message.

Scott: I'd get the pitch down too. You should be able to clearly say who you are and what you do. You need to master self-promotion. It doesn't hurt to ask questions like, "Do you accept submissions?" "Are you interested in new work?" "Do you show photography?" Asking intelligent questions is a good way to win our trust in you.

Audience: I saw in a magazine a list of the top 100 commercial artists and only 5% of them were women. How would you respond to that as businessmen?

John: There is a new emerging collective base of women who are investing in women artists. Although there are only a couple women in the Top 100, that's only one part of the art market. It doesn't fully represent what is happening overall.

Camilo: There is a primary and a secondary art market. Gallerists take part in the primary market, where works are sold for the first time, while auctions take part in the secondary market, where works are resold. The secondary market is very unregulated, so the number of female artists involved may be higher than it appears to be. Plus, there are a few not-for-profit organizations and collectors who cater solely to female artists.

Scott: As important as it is to promote equality among all artists, gallerists must prioritize the product over demographics. It feels like there is change happening in terms of widening the range of artists beyond the stereotypical white male painter to artists of varying genders, ethnicities, ages, etc. It's ludicrous that those numbers are the way they are. If you look at some great female artists next to their male counterparts, prices are 50% less.

John: It does relate directly to who is buying art, and what their perception of good art is, and the stereotype of the genius male painter is still strong in some people's minds but I do think it's dissolving.

Audience: *How much do ongoing trends influence your selection of artists and planning of exhibitions?*

John: I look for artists who really believe in what they are doing, so if they were following a trend, I would rather find the artist who set the trend. Maybe an artist just feels like switching things up, but maybe their choice to change their style is not an ethical one. It could send the wrong signal to curators and collectors.

Scott: Also by the time we act on picking up an artist who is following a trend, the trend is over. Abstract painting has gone on a bit long, but most trends are seasonal. It's very popular for newer galleries to show art from a few decades ago or rediscover someone from the 80's, so I would look at the incentive in setting that particular trend and pay attention to the trend setters rather than the followers.