

## Recession Adds New Meaning to 'Struggling Artist'

by Nicole G. Anderson

Monday, July 06, 2009 12:00 AM

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Photo (c) [Rachel Rampleman](#) Trinie Dalton reading at FEAST, an community-supported artist fundraising event.

New York's artists have always lived in a state of flux. Up-and-coming artists from around the world have seen New York as the ultimate destination spot. Once here, they often have been urban pioneers -- establishing creative enclaves in what had been derelict and industrial neighborhoods. Then the artists often lost their homes and studios as those areas became playgrounds for hungry developers.

The current economic climate has only exacerbated the artists' struggle, forcing them to reevaluate their options. As galleries close and art nonprofits suffer from cutbacks in funding and the loss of support from private institutions, artists must look for new outlets and resources in order to sustain themselves. Many have discovered alternative channels for showcasing their work and staying afloat financially.

### **Cutback, Cutback, Everywhere a Cutback**

The art community has been hit particularly hard by the economic downturn. Although some artists support themselves solely on the sale of their work, the vast majority supplements their incomes with temp work, doing graphic design or teaching. But much of this employment has disappeared as a result of the recession. The [New York Foundation of the Arts](#) recently conducted a statewide survey on how the recession is affecting artists and found that many have lost their jobs and are struggling to afford studio space and materials on top of covering their daily living expenses.

Jackie Battenfield, a visual artist and professor of professional development classes at Columbia University and the [Creative Capital Foundation](#) , has first-hand experience with the challenges artists face during these tough economic times and just wrote a book entitled, [The Artist's Guide: How To Make A Living Doing What You Love](#)

"First of all, many artists subsist at the margin. Most artists will only earn enough at an outside job to pay the bills -- they don't earn extra because to do that would mean giving up time from their art," she explained in a phone interview. "They also have more expenses than the average

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person since they have to make whatever they earn cover their art practice, so they are under-employed to begin with."

Battenfield and others predict that the high cost of living in New York and waning job opportunities will result in a decrease in the number of young art school graduates moving to the city, although no one knows for sure. The executive director of New York Foundation for the Arts, Michael Royce, explained, "We found that people are not moving out of their homes to reside in another state more friendly to their needs but rather are moving out of their homes because they can't afford the rent or mortgage payments and into the homes of family members or friends."

To make matters worse, many artists have lost representation, as more galleries have tightened their belts or shut down. Over the past year, several galleries have had to close including Bellwether Gallery, Cohan and Leslie, Rivington Arms and 31 Grand, while the Zach Feuer Gallery dropped half of its artists. With less opportunity to show their work, many established artists are applying to teach, boosting job applications at art schools but not the number of positions available.

### The Trickle Down Effect

New York City's cultural organizations also are feeling the heat from the recession. With the cutbacks in funding from the mayor's office and foundations and private corporations scaling back on their support, these organizations are hurting at a time when artists most need their help. The New York Foundation for the Arts directly experienced this rise in demand with a 10 percent increase in applications this year for the unrestricted cash awards of \$7,000 the organization provides to artists in different disciplines.

Artists not only turn to the non-profits for support, but many work for these organizations. Due to cutbacks, many nonprofits have let staff go or decreased salaries.

"Funding has definitely been more difficult from private corporations, and there was a slight reduction from the grant from the city," said John Strohbeen, president of the [Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition](#)

. "But Mayor Bloomberg had to reduce his budget for the current year, and he did cut back on our funding as he did to all of the organizations."

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In terms of city funds, things could have been far worse. The [Department of Cultural Affairs](#) expected a 16 percent cut, but in the end, saw only a 2 percent reduction in money available for the Cultural Development fund and the [Cultural Institutions Group](#) for fiscal 2010.

"The city's fiscal realities mean that funding for agency budgets will be lower for the foreseeable future," explained Commissioner Kate Levin of the Department of Cultural Affairs. "In the meantime, we are doing everything we can to support the 1,400-some cultural organizations that sustain the city's quality of life — especially important during these tough economic times."

### Exploring New Avenues

In spite of the economy, there has been growth in some areas of the art market. Both the [Affordable Art Fair](#)

and

[The Armory Show](#)

reported record-breaking attendance although sales

[dropped sharply](#)

at auctions held in conjunction with the Armory Show. With more than 60 galleries from around the world, the Affordable Art Fair attracted over 10,000 visitors and made over \$2 million in sales "I think that it would be fair to say, like anything else in this economy, that there was a volume in sales in lower price work but still all the pieces were selling," said Paul Morris, vice president of

[MMPI Art Shows & Events](#)

### Making the Best of the Worst

While it is easy to focus on the negative, many artists are transforming their struggle into opportunity, proving tough times can also be a period of remarkable ingenuity.

"I think innovation and creativity is rewarded in this type of situation more than any other. I think when everything is really roaring along, your time is spent capturing the market," said Morris. "It is an opportunity to invent a new paradigm for the art world. If you look at the history of how down markets affect artists, artists are making work for themselves and not for a market."

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In Greenpoint, the aptly named [FEAST](#) (for Funding Emerging Art with Sustainable Tactics), a recurring communal dinner in a church basement, began in February as a means of democratically supporting emerging, local artists. Open to the public, diners pay for their meal on a sliding scale and vote for one of the proposed artist projects, which is then funded by the proceeds from the dinner and presented at the next FEAST.

"The positive of this economic downturn is that artists are creative -- they're using their resources to band together to do more events on their own. I believe that there will be a lot more alternative and tiny spaces cropping up in low rent neighborhoods around the city just like it did before," Battenfield said.

At a time when most galleries are playing it safe and sticking with their roster of well-known artists, the owner of [Envoy Enterprises](#), Jimi Dams, recognized the need to lend a helping hand and offer exposure to emerging artists. In February, he launched the series, "One Day at a Time," a 24-hour art show exhibiting the work of a different artist each day beginning at 6 p.m.

Open studio tours have become ubiquitous in neighborhoods throughout New York. The budding artist community in Bushwick just put on the third annual Bushwick Open Studios and Arts Festival. This resident-run organization, [Arts in Bushwick](#), not only gives artists the chance to exhibit work, but also aims to promote discussions about preserving the artistic identity and character of the neighborhood and preventing the displacement of local artists and residents.

Cultural non-profits are also providing resources and programs designed to help artists continue their work. The non-profit, The [Lower East Printshop](#) has several different residency programs including the "keyholder residency" which offers free 24-hour access to printmaking facilities and materials for one year, in addition to showcasing work in various open studios.

The Department of Cultural Affairs is devising various programs as well. "Given the fiscal realities, we're rolling out a number of initiatives that provide new resources to the field at little cost to the taxpayer," Levin said. "Our goal is to help organizations save money when resources are scarce, provide access to credit and bridge loans, and maintain and grow the communities of volunteers and stakeholders who sustain and nurture organizations, helping them to manage through the downturn and poise them for the future."

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The mayor has expanded the [Materials for the Arts](#) program with 10,000 square feet of new warehouse space to meet the growing demand for art supplies and to continue to help serve art organizations and public schools. Recognizing the rising unemployment rates among artists, the [Department of Small Businesses Services](#) and the Department of Cultural Affairs will allocate \$75,000 for a program to train and place art handlers.

The economic downturn might not make living in New York any easier on artists, but they continue to look ahead. A Brooklyn-based visual artist, [Baptiste Ibar](#), said in a phone interview, "I think it is positive, but we're trying to stay afloat. We're building giant rafts in case it is a real flood. Art really has to become this necessary, vibrant part of the community, not just purely a marketing thing."

Nicole Gates Anderson is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn.