



ART, ALCOHOL, AND FUNDRAISING: MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN OR A DOOMED RELATIONSHIP?

BY YOLI (YOANNA) TERZIYSKA

The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) have taken on a novel approach to programming in the last year with two common purposes: to increase institutional relevance and popularity, and as a fundraising strategy. Both institutions organize frequently scheduled parties; AGO has First Thursdays and ROM hosts Friday Night Live. They are certainly not the first museums to develop programming that entices patrons and a larger audience with attractive parties featuring drinks and live music (take for example MoMA PS1's events, the Brooklyn Museum's Target First Saturdays, and London's Tate Late and SLAM Fridays).

In the case of the AGO, the first Thursday of every month sees a transformation in one of Canada's largest art institutions: the space opens up for \$15 per person at the door, where one enters the gallery space and socializes with other members of the Toronto arts community. The event features performance work, live music, artist talks, and alcohol that one can purchase at one of the many cash bars. The AGO invites a wide audience that can mingle and enjoy the museum's collection and alternative programming. Little mind is paid to the artwork. Instead of absinthe and whiskey, Toronto's creative professionals sip on mixed cocktails, craft beer, and wine; tattooed DJs play music in the background, and needless to say, everyone's outfit is impeccable.

Members of the Toronto arts community feel pressured to attend the event, at least once. It may seem, otherwise—that they are not “in the know” and that their conception of institutional programming is traditional (and traditional is bad). So we stand with our colleagues, holding a Chardonnay while actively participating in the “contemporary art world.” It's reminiscent of an art opening, full of small talk and attendees with an acute interest in pursuing a career in the local art world. The museum that houses the event may gain from its ability to remain contemporary and relevant by offering its space for social networking. On the negative side of the ledger, it may weaken its reputation in an act “selling out” by undermining its historical and cultural significance.

The ROM's Friday Night Live event is somewhat different in terms of the participating audience and nature of the party. The formula is the same: a visitor (typically a young university student) lines up and pays a ticket at the entrance on a Friday evening, purchases a drink and casually sips it next to a dinosaur skeleton. The museum space transforms into a nightclub—you can even get your picture professionally taken against a

customized backdrop for event-advertising purposes. As the night goes on, people dance to live music in state of inebriation under the watchful eyes of museum guards. Spilling a vodka cranberry on a decaying Egyptian mummy is a faux pas.

The “cool factor” here pervades the exchange, and it is reciprocal for both the institution and the visitor. The museum outwardly shows its separation from tradition. It distinguishes itself from any negative connotations of spending dull afternoons with family surrounded by lifeless, dusty objects. It becomes sensitive to yuppie social needs and interests—networking, alcohol, partying. Its visitor chooses to pay cover to a museum rather than a nightclub because they gain cultural capital by displaying an interest in history and philanthropy (they all know their money goes back to the beloved museum). But was the museum so beloved before it became *hip*? Does the museum lose its reputation as a stable cultural institution in the name of being hip, and does the problem lie deeper, in the lack of public funding?

On that note, such programming is a shrewd fundraising strategy, one that intuitively taps into current social needs and trends, and a way to remain culturally relevant. So, buy yourself a drink, save the museum, and let the party begin.

—Yoanna Terziyska

(Image on top: Sourced from HUG: The Hip and Urban Girl's Guide)

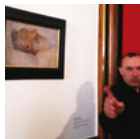
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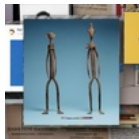
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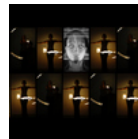
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Comment by: nikolet on Monday 12/22/14 at 11:41 AM

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