

March 05, 2010

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Recommended Citation

Fodrowski, Samantha, "2010-03-05: Art appreciation, or becoming a "guerrilla curator"" (2010). *News@Northeastern*. Paper 528.
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20001771>

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Art appreciation, or becoming a "guerrilla curator"



Matthew Rich offers advice on how the novice art patron can get the most out of a visit to a museum or gallery. Photo by Lauren McFalls

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Matthew Rich, a lecturer in the [Department of Art + Design](#), is a finalist for the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston's 2010 James and Audrey Foster Prize, and his exhibit, "Matthew Rich: IRE & ICE," at the samsøn gallery in Boston, was selected as one of the top 10 exhibitions of 2009 by the Boston Globe. Here Rich, whose own work with latex paint on cut paper straddles the boundary between two and three dimensions, discusses the art world and offers advice on how the novice art patron can get the most out of a visit to a museum or gallery.

Many people are intimidated by the world of art. How might an art novice prepare for visiting a museum or gallery?

A good place to start is to find a review of a particular show that is written by someone independent of the institution where the show is being featured. You can find reviews in newspapers, in magazines or online. A review will give you an idea of what the show is about but also give you a specific opinion about the show. This will provide you with a singular perspective that you can carry with you into the museum or gallery and compare against your own as you orient yourself amongst the work. Ask yourself, "Do I agree with what the reviewer said about a particular work or the show as a whole?"

There is no universally perfect way to prepare to see art. Experiencing art is a process. Just like forging any other kind of loving relationship, imperfection and revision is a part of it, and no two people go about it the same way. Give yourself some leeway.

When visiting a museum on a whim, what is the best way to decide what works to see?

Spend time looking at what you want to look at. This, unfortunately, is easier said than done. There are a lot of things in museums that announce a sense of importance and demand attention. In fact, everything in the museum is presented as significant and valuable. In many respects this is true and we should be grateful to museums for protecting, preserving and presenting art and objects from a broad range of time and place.

That said, it can be intimidating to have a personal experience within the scope and seriousness of the mission of the museum. My advice is to not attempt to compete with the museum or gallery for a sense of command of the material. You are the guerrilla curator of your own revolutionary collection. Your mission will be clarified and focused as you look more and more. Your collection will be as big and diverse as you wish and will reflect your identity and be all the more precious for this.

Art galleries can be found in most metropolitan cities. What's the best way to pick and choose among them?

Practically speaking, in most cities, there are clusters of galleries in particular districts. Unless there is a specific gallery that you know about and that you want to visit, I would start by exploring these districts as a whole. Galleries are free and small. If you go into a gallery and are not interested in what you see, you can be in and out in a minute and on to the next.

Galleries change shows usually every four to six weeks. If you return to the gallery district again, repeat this process. If you begin to notice some galleries that put up reliably interesting shows, plan to spend more time at those. Don't be afraid to make decisions based on your interests. Art is not universal, in the same way that ideas are not universal. There is some art that many people celebrate, but this does not take away from the

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value of a painting that only two people really like.

The author of a recent piece in The New York Times observed that during her visit to the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, almost no one stopped to view an object for a full minute. What should people look for in a work?

Spend time with things that make you look more, think more, want more and let it be that simple. Shoot for a sense of forward progress, whatever that means to you.

Be as light as a feather in the beginning and be easily swayed. Trust your eyes. If you stop to look at something, assume it has a quality that appeals to you. Your eyes are smarter than you because they start looking at good things even before you know why. Listen hard to your eyes and follow their lead. Trust your body. If you feel a bit heavier in front of a particular piece, then stick there for a moment. Conversely, if you find yourself passing through whole rooms without stopping to look, assume that the work isn't for you right then, on that particular day, in that particular mood, at that particular time.

It is a difficult skill to figure out what you like. Be radically intuitive, impulsive and hypersensitive until you develop confidence and start to recognize personal patterns to your interests and start to answer these questions: Why do you like to look at something or this set of things? What do they share with each other or with you, your history, or your other tastes?

It is in this way that what you look at will become part of your landscape of looking and thinking and ultimately part of your vocabulary of experience.

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