

Alternative Spaces: What's best for me and my career?

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An alternative space can be an informal temporary space created by a group of artists, a café or coffee shop or the lobby of a bank or government building. It is understood by all that most people would like to be surrounded by artwork – to enhance their work environment, engage their employees and guests or to create a certain desirable image for their company. Given that your artwork is helpful in accomplishing all of these things, you as the artist, should consider what showing your work at these places does for you first and foremost.

First, consider the location. A trendy coffee shop or café in a fashionable neighborhood is likely to attract possible arts patrons who are interested in buying art. However, a government office building that gets very little traffic may not be the best use of your work. Before considering showing your work in any alternative space, you should visit the site to look at how the current work is displayed; its location relative to the foot traffic the space receives and evaluate who may be seeing the work. If you perceive that only employees will have access to view the work, chances are, this is not a good location for your work.

Free exposure? Experience, networking, and small sales, yes, but rarely does the promise of “free exposure” ring true in alternative spaces. If folks do not buy or at least inquire about your work when they see it displayed, they will most likely not seek you out at a later date after seeing your work at a restaurant. However, if you have small to medium size work in a lower price range that you are trying to sell, some alternative spaces can be very useful, but if your main goal is exposure, you are better off submitting to juried group shows and art fairs for your first experiences.

Who buys work at alternative spaces? Actually, there are many examples of artists selling work from unexpected places like café's and coffee shops. Typically, the work is small to medium in size and in a lower price range – say \$75 -\$250. Often these opportunities are best for emerging artists who may not have had their first show yet, but still need experience of framing, hanging, selecting works for a show, pricing their work, accepting feedback, signing a contract/agreement, installation, promotion, etc. More established artists that sell their work for \$1,000 plus, are less likely to be successful in an alternative space unless the space offers special incentives for patrons to view and purchase the work. For example, a fine dining restaurant may rotate shows of artwork in the \$2,000 - \$5,000 range, but will also offer each artist an opening reception and allow the artist to invite their collectors as well the restaurant's client list. This type of partnership works well because there is a give and take. The restaurant understands they are getting a great value in having the artwork in their space so they reciprocate by offering the artist a valuable promotional event.

What percentage of sales do alternative spaces take? Galleries take a percentage of sales because they are trained in such matters and are actively working to sell and promote your artwork to arts patrons. In the majority of alternative spaces, the work has to sell itself or it doesn't happen and therefore, the venue should not receive a percentage of the sale. If the venue offers special perks like adding your name and website to the menu that month or promoting the show via web and print outlets or hosting special openings

for you, the possibility of a small percentage would be more acceptable (10% - 15%).

Should I sign a contract or agreement? Anytime you sell or lend your work to anyone you should sign a contract or agreement. If the alternative space has a contract, look it over and make sure it sufficiently covers all aspects of your concerns before you sign. Feel free to ask them to make changes before you sign.

Insurance? Most alternative spaces will not carry insurance on your work so it is your responsibility to obtain insurance for your work. Remember, your work will be displayed in a public space so there is always the risk of theft or damage to consider.

Questions to ask:

- Is the staff encouraged to learn about the artist so they can answer basic questions for potential patrons?
- Does the venue take a percentage of sales, and if so how much?
- Will the venue help with promotion?
- Is there a possibility for a trade? Showing your work in their venue in exchange for their services or at least a discount for their services?

Declining gracefully. Once you have viewed the space and gotten a feel for the clientele and do not feel it is worth your time and effort to hang your work, explain to the representative why. Knowing what artists need might help them in their future efforts to buy or obtain artwork. Explain to them that although you appreciate their interest in your work, you must be selective in choosing locations to show your work as the process is costly in both time and money. Make clear that it takes money and time to transport, install, de-install, and create didactic labels and promotional materials, not to mention the potential risk of damage or theft in a public space. Therefore the potential gain must exceed the effort and risk.

Alternatives?

Of course those drab government buildings need art too, but because budgets are tight there may not be money for an art budget, what are some alternatives to offer these spaces?

Art Rental program?

Encourage the company to purchase one piece for their permanent collection and in turn you will offer to lend four more pieces for a few months.

Ask if the venue would be willing to provide a private or public opening reception for your work in which they would invite their client list.

In the end, there must be mutual gain for both parties involved when dealing with alternative spaces. As an artist you can and should be very selective about venues in which to show your work. Do your homework about the location and ask yourself, "What's in it for me?"