

Artists Trade Their Work for Plane Rides and Gallons of Paint



Sarah Rose Sharp August 28, 2015



Dianna Frid, "Notations #1," on Art for Miles (image courtesy the artist)

DETROIT — There is a great tension between the investments an artist makes to produce work and the living she extracts from selling art. It is a classic conundrum that many artists have to fund their own efforts for some length of time by an alternative means of support, and one major expense, especially for beginning or mid-career artists, is swinging travel expenses for residencies, art fairs, and international shows.

Enter Julia Friedman, who founded the Los Angeles-based [ExchangeWorks](#) in late 2013, with a mission to create a worldwide trading economy between artists and the public. This enables the free exchange of art and resources — such as materials, professional services, and, most recently, frequent flyer miles (though international trading is possible, currently most of its services and exchanges are within the US). Says Friedman, who studied fine arts in college but quickly moved into the business side: "Throughout my career as a gallery owner and before that, when I ran an arts management service, I saw a wide gap between artists and the public, as well as the continuous need for artists to find resources that enable them to work." Friedman was director of her own gallery, with locations in Chicago and New York, and produced and managed projects at international venues, such as the Yokohama Triennale, the Berkeley Art Museum, and Exit Art in New York. These experiences inspired her to found [ExchangeWorks](#), with the support of "instrumental" advisors Eric Garduño, Bonn Macy, Rocio Villalobos, and Rob Ray.

[ExchangeWorks](#) looks for artists who regularly perform or exhibit, and sell work, and therefore helps artists who are already on their path. Artists select the work they want to offer and set the terms of the exchange, and [ExchangeWorks](#) then confirms that value by evaluating the artist's established record with institutions and galleries, and facilitates the process. Though the site charges no fee to post art or resources, or to contact participants, some artists on [EW Art + Public](#) do request to charge a fee. In the case of fee-based events, [ExchangeWorks](#) collects a 13% commission from those artists.

When artist [Pedro Véléz](#) needed a place to stay near the High Line in New York, to facilitate his preparations for the Whitney Biennial last year, he found an apartment through [ExchangeWorks](#) in Chelsea owned by law professor and arts supporter Tony Sebok. Says Véléz:

Not having to worry about lodging expenses in a city as expensive and prohibitive as New York really gave me the stress-free environment I needed at that particular moment of my career. I believe [ExchangeWorks](#) is a progressive and groundbreaking new tool that will provide the art class with a new set of opportunities that will enhance its capability to produce art and maneuver social interactions, more in tune with today's economy.

In exchange for the temporary accommodations, Sebok received a series of photographs that were created during Véléz's stay. Another artist, [Olga Koumoundourous](#) needed 100 gallons of paint to complete a public project in a Los Angeles park. The site-specific structure, "[Roundhouse Shines](#)," reclaimed the abandoned site of a railroad track. Through [ExchangeWorks](#), Koumoundourous accessed local stores that provided the paint from their excess inventory and returns, and, in exchange, the stores received mentions in the media around the project.

Now in its second year, [ExchangeWorks](#) has begun partnering with museums, galleries, and art organizations to find resources for artists whose work they exhibit, and has also launched a new program, [Art for Miles](#), currently in a two-week trial run. "While speaking with artists and arts organizations, I repeatedly heard them talk about their urgent need for travel support," says Friedman. "International flights are among the most in-demand resources for artists. This really helps to minimize the cost of traveling while researching or preparing for exhibitions around the world."

This kind of free transaction between artists and art collectors has previously existed informally, but was lacking an official channel, particularly online. In a sense, [ExchangeWorks](#) has found a way to convert travel equity into art value: people with a surplus of travel miles can use them to buy tickets for artists in exchange for artwork. Visitors to the site can browse for artists that interest them and choose their method of support — which holds appeal for a set of buyers interested not just in art objects, but in supporting a specific artist, or the arts in general. "People checking out [Art for Miles](#) have ranged from art collectors to people who travel a lot and are curious about art," says Friedman. [Art for Miles](#) partners, who are helping to pair artists with resources providers, include [Kandori3](#), NYC; [Center for Contemporary Art](#), Plovdiv, Bulgaria; and [Benaki Museum of Islamic Art](#) in Athens, Greece. That program ends on August 31, and may run again in the future.

The dynamics of a business plan based on a trading economy seem unsustainable, and [ExchangeWorks](#) has yet to prove itself by the numbers. In the future, Friedman speculates that [ExchangeWorks](#) may offer premium services or sponsorship opportunities in order to generate revenue. For now, it seems Friedman's greatest metric for success lies in enabling artists to build their careers and create more work.

[Art for Miles](#) via [ExchangeWorks](#) continues through August 31.