



Identifying in the Art World

June 20, 2014

Text Written By Maria Napolitano

I am a writer for Boston Art Underground—as you know, an art blog. This relies upon, or implies, two things about me. The first is simple: I write, and so, I am a writer. To me, this is straightforward. But, I also make art. Is my work exceptional? No. Am I talented? A second no. But do I always return to it, as I do to my writing? Yes. So, if the same idea holds true for both my writing and my art, then the fact I create makes me an artist. But this is a concept I struggle with: I'm no professional, no star of the community. My work sits in a pile in the corner of my bedroom instead of hanging on museum walls, and even my college degrees are in language arts, not art itself. Do I need to be an artist to participate in the community, to write for this blog? Can or should I claim this title of artist? If I do, what does that make those who are more involved and prolific? Is there more to being an artist or a writer than participation?

I've lost track of the number of times that I've been asked, "So, you're an artist?" simply because I show an interest in art. I visit museums, installations, galleries—often to write for this very blog—and in making conversation, gallerists often conclude that I'm an artist too. I usually stammer some short, lighthearted response that amounts to, "No, but I pretend to be," but this explanation ages quickly and feels like an excuse for my presence, as if I need permission to enter the art world. But it raises the question: what is being an artist? Is it an internal desire to create, or is it a label bestowed by an impressed audience?

<http://bostonartunderground.com/identifying-in-the-art-world/> Go MAY JUN JUL
When I was in particular language arts classes, we constantly drew on culture and art in that pursuit. The Spanish language arts classes were a whole. However, as I tried to expand my involvement in my own work, enrolling in art classes was nearly impossible. The art school was a very closed community, one that actively excluded outside students from classes despite ample enrollment and studio space; I was very lucky to succeed in gaining permission to participate. However, the people, both undergraduates and faculty, that I studied with were welcoming and inspiring, and stood in complete contrast with how practically difficult it was to dabble in their world. Once I was able to work around and with them, there was no resistance to my presence. No one questioned my qualifications or dedication, and I found more admiration that I was willing to confront my talentless hands than judgment of my young work. But without the label of art student—that is, artist-in-training—I still had to battle bureaucracy to enroll in these classes.

I did not graduate from artist-in-training to artist; I graduated from my majors to the "real world," where I had to create a new title for myself, as my courses of study no longer defined me. When making small talk, I am now identified by my career: when asked, "What do you do?" my response begins with "I'm a..." before my current title, reducing my identity to my job. But, like anyone else, I am more than that. How do I choose the adjectives to describe my life, my identity? Some are simple: heritage, hometown, height, age, and profession. But the more difficult ones come from within, without an external representation. It is difficult to describe myself to someone and ask them to take me at my word: having proof of my statements gives me credibility. I write, so I am a writer, and here, you see some of the results of that pursuit. My career is similarly straightforward. But we run into problems when we reach further. Am I an artist without art to show for it? Or is there something else, some way of thinking or participating in the community that fills that space?

Writing for Boston Art Underground has provided me with the consistent motivation to cross in the art world, and while my status as artist is constantly questioned it has not been as a discourteous query or an assessment of my presence. I would instead characterize it as a cousin of the "What do you do?" we all encounter so often in day-to-day life: as a form of small talk, an easy way to open a dialogue, and a way to allow someone to define themselves. Instead of assuming my position in a community, I'm being asked how I self-identify. If I choose to call myself an artist, so be it. It ultimately depends upon my perspective.

But springing from this train of thought is a more important one: I haven't parsed exactly how I identify, but I still participate in the community. A completely determined identity is not integral to being a part of the Boston, or any, art scene. There is no need for this world to be closed off; any community worth its while, especially a growing one, is composed of diverse participants, even those who are unsure of exactly what they bring to the table. A person's exact niche may not be clear until they explore internally and externally. The status of being an Artist, or any other descriptor, is an issue everyone must approach individually, but the construction of a shared community does not have to wait for that question to be answered. The art world draws on the production of Artists who are sure of their craft, but still this community is part of and depends on the participation of a wider population. Labels matter less than collaboration, and titles matter less than community. From spontaneous conversation to widespread events like Open Studios and First Fridays and Thursdays, I have found the Boston art scene to be welcoming to dilettantes and devotees, and growing with inspiring speed through the involvement of self-proclaimed artists and unlabelled participants, together.

Like 4 people like this. Sign Up to see what your friends like.



RIDE THE SUBWAY, SEE SOME ART.

Boston Art Underground makes find art in Boston easier. No matter where you are in the city, world-class exhibitions and galleries are never more than a short subway ride away. Using the MBTA subway map as a guide, Boston Art Underground's one-click stop familiarizes its users with the art spaces in Boston and showcases local artists and organizations.

[Sims Co. Art](#)
[Advertise With Us](#)
[Corporate Art Placement](#)

STAY CONNECTED

[Facebook](#)
[Blog](#)

FRIENDS AND LOCAL RESOURCES

[Eye Design](#)
[Boston Hassle](#)
[Massachusetts Cultural Council](#)

[Arts Boston](#)
[Massachusetts College of Art](#)
[Big Red And Shiny.](#)
[ArtSake Blog](#)