

Art for Artists at ArtSect Gallery

Reviewed by Lucrezia Di Canio

“Please go down the dead-end alley and find the black metal stairs at the end on the right. The stairs have a huge number '22' on them. Once up the stairs, turn left and walk to your left. You will be greeted by tons of plants which are in front of the gallery.” These are the instructions all artists were given to reach ArtSect Gallery, which made me feel like I was trying to find a speakeasy during the American Prohibition of the 1920s. While attempting not to get lost, I bumped into Lia Blazer an old friend and fellow artist colleague of mine who I have not seen in at least two years. That is when the event *Art for Artists* began.

The twenty-seven artists, selected by the curator of this event, Lea Rose Kara, were following the previously mentioned directions to reach ArtSect Gallery on Saturday the 16th of October to take part in *Art for Artists*. Exclusively open to the participating artists, and a few selected guest curators, this exhibition was not meant to promote artworks to the public. It instead had the aim of bringing artists together to discuss each other's practice and, by the end of the night, take someone else's work home.

This event clearly responded to the isolation creatives have experienced in the past two years caused by the pandemic. Trying to stay in contact through video calls and social media definitely helped us keep in touch during lockdowns, however as Lea Rose Kara states “For me, Zoom calls can never come close to replacing the physical interactions we form with other humans in the flesh. If I was feeling isolated like this, as someone who was in an academic institution with only virtual access to other artists, I couldn't imagine how artists who didn't have either virtual or the face-to-face luxury, i.e a supportive creative network, felt during the Covid period.” Inspired and driven by this urgent issue, Rose Kara decided to organise this event as an opportunity for artists to not only put their work on show, but most importantly make them feel part of a community. The European Salon-Style hang allowed each artwork to have its importance and showed a successful strategy for the conversations and interactions to come to the forefront of the event. In fact, during the evening, I noticed that the artworks on show were serving more as an icebreaker for conversations amongst participants to start. Swapping artworks was the cherry on top of the cake.

Days before the *Art for Artists* event, Rose Kara launched a website designed to show all the artworks included in the exhibition. Access was granted only to the artists and curators that were involved in or specifically invited to see the show. This allowed us to get a preview on what we might like to swap our work for and who we might want to talk to at the event about our practice. “Swapping art with your contemporaries is a way of showing mutual respect, exchanging ideas, and building your own library of artistic inspiration.” Rose Kara's way of seeing this activity is very poetic and rightly charges the activity with particular importance. This was reflected in the cautious way most artists approached this part of the event. All artists were given a sticky name tag and could stick it near the artwork they were interested in swapping for their own work at the end of the night. Nobody placed their name tag near the artwork they wanted throughout the event. Evidently, the participants did not want to publicly express

preferences and face the possibility of being rejected by the artist they wanted to swap with publicly. However, the swapping did eventually happen through verbal arrangement between artists at the very last moment before the event closed. This part of *Art for Artists* acted as a very interesting social experiment, giving an insight on how artist's most feared critics might be in fact, other artists. The event involved very open and enthusiastic, emerging professionals who all showed a respectful approach to one another; however, I personally did feel pressure in wanting people to enjoy my work, and not in the same way I experienced in exhibitions or events that were open to the general public. In this situation you are forced to confront yourself with your colleagues and having another artist wanting your work in exchange for theirs is a huge compliment, arguably more flattering than a collector wanting to buy it.

Having said this, organizing an art swapping event during London Frieze week inevitably points to issues which cannot be ignored. The reference to the historical habit artists always had in swapping artworks can be seen as a comment towards the commercialization of art. Although Rose Kara's arrangement for *Art for Artists* to happen during one of the busiest art weeks in London with important fairs happening including *The Other Art Fair* was not purposeful, it raises questions around the artist as a collector and critiques art being presented with a price tag. This is emphasized by the choice of keeping the event's accessibility exclusive to the participating artists and some selected curators. The works were not put on show for them to be bought, valued, or solely observed, they were there to be discussed. Consequently, the artist is activated within the exhibition space, where normally they would make the work speak for itself. By doing so Rose Kara creates a space where the artist acquires different, refreshing roles which are usually bound to the studio rather than the exhibition setting. In fact, being an active participant at this event after navigating art fairs like a mouse in a maze, saturated with art objects, was refreshing, and reminded all participants that we can be a part of the upcoming London art scene, not merely numb spectators of it.

The timing of the event was not the only interesting contextual element of *Art for Artists*. Choosing ArtSect Gallery as the place to host it is another organisational decision which is worthwhile looking into. Head of Exhibitions and Culture at ArtSect, Nimco Kulmiye Hussein, explains the gallery's commitment to the decentralisation of art. "Educating and engaging more with digital works and virtual realities is something that is increasingly getting more attention. And then we have NFTs, which have been under discussion quite a lot during the last couple of years too. But that, I would say, is just the tip of the iceberg. Having a space that is dedicated to digital arts in real life is quite interesting, especially as it is indeed relatively new in the whole exhibition-making discourse". Hussein explains, ArtSect is an emerging space which focuses on questioning how digital art can be explored, curated, and promoted within a physical exhibition space. And yet, there were only three video pieces included in the *Art for Artists* event.

ArtSect Gallery dedicates some space within their program to host non-profit events that are either community driven or artist led. *Art for Artists* embodied both requirements and, therefore, fitted under the umbrella of exhibition proposals ArtSect intends to continue supporting in the future. Having said this, one still wonders: why

would a selection of predominantly traditional media artworks and a European Salon-Style hang be appropriate in a gallery like ArtSect? The purely logical answer is that it is not. However, the choice to build a website and make it the only platform through which the public can, to this day, access the documentation of the first *Art for Artists* event is quite fitting. Not only due to ArtSect's interest in promoting digital artworks and generally digital art curation, but also because it comments on the way we have all been forced to access art during the pandemic. The curatorial decision to embody two historically opposite presentation of art, brings up a vital dialogue between traditional media and the ever-emerging new media art. It shows how a physical space dedicated to digital art still holds onto some of the qualities of the classic "white cube" exhibition space. Does this mean that the game changing idea of digital art cannot escape the seemingly unavoidable fate of being viewed within four white walls? I believe ArtSect Gallery is the perfect emerging exhibition space in London to tackle this question and see how one might answer it.

Overall, *Art for Artists* is an unmissable opportunity to feel part of an active community of emerging artists. It opens essential questions regarding the circulation of artworks, their ownership, and the role of the artist as an art collector. *Art for Artists* will hopefully be proposed again in diverse venues and possibly different cities to give more creatives the opportunity to experience this needed event. Keep an eye out for possible future open calls as I found the exclusivity of making art for other artists an inspirational and eye-opening experience.

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Art for Artists: <https://www.artforartists.uk/home>

Curator: Lea Rose Kara, <https://www.learosekara.co.uk>, @learosekara

Gallery: ArtSect Gallery, <https://www.artsect.xyz>, @artsectgallery

Photographer credits to Christian John Dyson.



Curator Lea Rose Kara.



Pink Wall.



Artists and Curators networking in the space.



Video artworks in a darkened area of the gallery.



Small groups of artists gathering around each artwork to critique it.



Selected artists for *Art for Artists 2021*