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EQUALITY

# Here Comes Debtfair, a Market for Art Inequality Across the City

by SYDNEY BROWNSTONE

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“Starving artists” may be an affectionate term for the city’s legions of struggling creatives, but it belies a more disturbing trend. Art market prices have shot up faster than the GDP, and the globalization of the marketplace prompted NPR’s Adam Davidson to conclude last year that the “art market, in other words, is a proxy for the fate of the superrich themselves.”

Meanwhile, MFAs have become both increasingly expensive and necessary for any career in the arts, says Tal Beery, one of the organizers behind Debtfair, a radical remodeling of the art market taking over the city this summer. Nationally, student debt has topped \$1 trillion, and defaults have increased 36 percent in 2012 alone. “The debt that artists have to accrue in order to start playing the game, the barrier for entry, is much greater,” Beery said.

Enter Debtfair, a “series of experimental market-actions” meant to turn art fairs and auctions like Frieze New York and Sotheby’s on their heads. “What we’re trying to do is get together a number of venues, artists studios, bodegas, streetside areas where artists can display work related to debt,” Beery said. For example, there’s going to be a kit from which artists can craft their own mobile art booths—temporary exhibitions that can be set up in front of banks, or “more arrestible actions” inside banks, explained fellow organizer Noah Fischer. Patrons will then be able to write out checks to the lending institutions on behalf of the artists themselves.

Debtfair stems from the Occupy movement, specifically Occupy Museums, a working group that helped organize the rally at the last performance of Philip Glass’s “Satyagraha” in 2011 and dropped a giant banner inside MOMA. Once the museum confiscated the banner, Occupy Museums labeled the action a “unilateral acquisition.”





right now,” Fischer said.

Debtfair will hold together through mapping, similar to Bushwick Open Studios or Go Brooklyn. But instead of having folks wander into studios with artist statements glued to the wall, Debtfair will also serve as a forum for artist interviews—about their debt, of course.

“It’s not for Occupy people, it’s for everybody,” Fischer explained. “Debt pulls everyone together.”

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