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As told to Mark Sussman, 2166 words.

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# On making a curatorial project sustainable

Curators Matt Harkins and Viviana Olen discuss how they turned their hallway into a museum, and what it takes to transform a fun personal project into an actual business.

**How did you guys meet and start collaborating?**

**Matt Harkins:** We met at the Upright Citizens Brigade, which is an improv theater. We had worked with other groups of people, and then those came to an end. She had a sketch show that ended its run, and I was cut from a team at the theater. We just got along really well. We started hanging out all the time, then we moved in together in 2015. Within two months of moving in, we began our first exhibit, which was just in the hallway of our apartment. We turned it into the Tonya Harding Nancy Kerrigan 1994 museum.

We started a Kickstarter for it, but our funding goal was \$75. We weren't really thinking it was going to do anything, it was just something that was fun for us to write. We did that and we made the hallway as nice as it could be for a hallway, and then we just started running tours on weekends. Initially it was way more structured, like, call this number or we'll meet you downstairs, we'll do groups. We kept doing it, we never charged, but we still had full-time jobs, so I think we just got a little tired. And then it was like, "Just text us and come on up."



**Obviously, the museum emerged out of your involvement in comedy. But if it was kind of a joke at first, it's taken on some other kind of quality.**

**Viviana Olen:** Oh, yeah. It's our life now, the museum.

**Matt:** I think they were very fun and the exhibits have a sense of humor, every one that we've done. But it's not like we think these are really stupid topics. We don't. We actually think they're pretty important to talk about. We're going to be talking about them no matter what, whether you think it's important or not.

**Viviana:** We saw a lot of art galleries that seemed very, very cool and seemed like a place that we would not be cool enough to get into. Every time somebody comes in, we try to greet them and have a conversation. And also, just create a space where you can talk about *[The Real] Housewives*, you can talk about something that you do care about. A lot of times girls come with their boyfriends, and their boyfriends are like, "This is stupid." And it's like, "Well, get out of here."

**Now you're in a permanent space in Crown Heights, right?**

**Matt:** We did the pop-up for the Olsen Twins Exhibit, and we'd love to keep doing them, but the thing was we had to use Kickstarter in a more legitimate way to bring the money to get the space. Then that model of Kickstarter, it just wasn't...

**Viviana:** Not sustainable.

**Matt:** Because you're not really offering something to people outside of New York. So we barely made it, but we made it. Then we were like, "Okay, how do we do more where it's feasible economically?" And then we just found this space that we're in right now in Crown Heights on Craigslist. It was advertised as live/work.



**Viviana:** He's upstairs, I'm downstairs. We kind of share a room. For the past year, when we've been open, we just kind of put our stuff in trash bags and hide it when people come.

**Matt:** Now we're switching back to pop-ups because we've learned it just works better.

**Viviana:** And we need a kitchen, so...

**Matt:** We're going to leave this space and get an actual, standard apartment that has a kitchen, and then all of our exhibits will be pop-ups, for a number of reasons: in terms of running the exhibits, how long they should be, how easy it is to get people to come out, our location. All those factors.

**How did you figure out what those factors are?**

**Viviana:** So, we were doing exhibits each season and they were kind of mixed weeks. It was really interesting because, like for the Kim Cattrall show we sold a lot of paintings, but I think the fewest people came out. That was kind of an older demographic and that was before we started charging people to come in, so it was still free. We'd just started our merch line so we were selling a little bit on the retail side of things, like our t-shirts.

And then our next exhibit was with Pop Culture Died in 2009, and that was about tabloid culture. The most people came out, because it was summer. We weren't charging still, but we sold very few paintings. We'd never had enough money in the bank to buy all the merch ahead of time. We're still a two-person team, essentially, so figuring out retail has been something that's like, "Oh, that's on the back burner, we'll figure it out eventually." Had we had more merch in that one I think it would have been a little more fiscally successful, but it was very successful otherwise. A lot of people came out.

And then I think the next shift was when we did our spring series, and we were just like, "Let's just do a bunch of shows real fast." They each ran for two weekends and we announced them all at once. Then we were also charging people \$10 to come in, so that was the first time that we were like, "We're breaking even, kind of." It was great, because if one didn't do well, then the next one could. People would just kind of pick out what they wanted. I think it's hard to say, "Here's a model to follow." I think we've just learned not to make it last too long because people will just say, "Oh, I've been meaning to come."

**Matt:** At the end of last year, for the holidays, we expanded our hours. Five days a week. It was winter and we're pretty far out, so there weren't that many people. When people came, they would say, "Oh, I've been meaning to come to this." It's almost like the knowledge that it's there and you can come whenever,

it doesn't get people here, and then they might just never come. If you keep it shorter and just maybe add more [dates], you're opening yourself up to more people and also making it clear that you've got to come now.



**You call it a museum and you had referenced galleries before. "Museum" is such a freighted term. Does that play into how you think about the art that you put up and the exhibits you put together?**

**Matt:** Yeah, we're a museum with a lowercase "m." For example, everything in the permanent collection, that's not for sale. That is going to travel, it's never going to change. We can keep adding stuff to it and it can kind of pop up anywhere, the permanent Tonya Harding Nancy Kerrigan memorabilia, artifacts, art stuff. Anything beyond that runs like a normal gallery show where we, as curators of the gallery, will split profits with the artist. That's pretty standard gallery stuff.

**Viviana:** And we try to make it a little educational. Like, *Housewives* are the best performance artists. They deserve veneration and they should get that due. Tiffany Pollard did invent the internet, let's discuss.

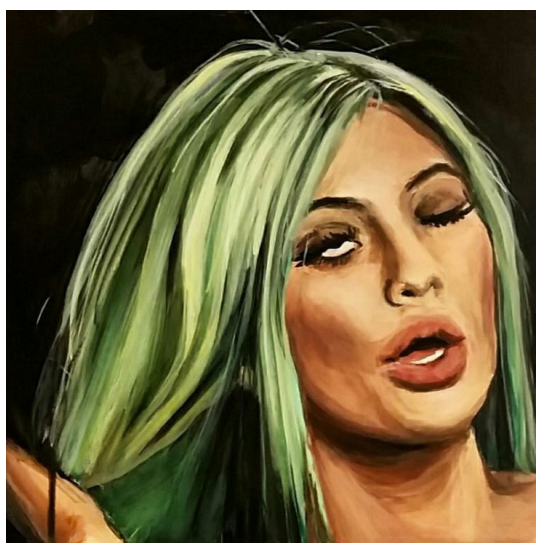


**Matt:** There was that David Bowie exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum right when we did the Tiffany Pollard one. There's no reason that somebody like Tiffany Pollard shouldn't get the same amount of credit and praise as David Bowie. They're working in different mediums, they're both really, really good and have made huge impacts. You know, if you go on the internet or look online and you'd never heard of either person, you'd walk away going, "David Bowie must have been much better." The summer exhibit we did, which was about the mid-2000s, that was a reaction to seeing all these kind of Manhattan galleries that would show photos somebody took of Patti Smith and Aerosmith hanging out backstage. And for some reason people are like, "That's cool, that's so cool." But then if you look at photos from the mid-2000s it's sort of like, "Oh, that's stupid, and trashy, and how dare they." That doesn't add up.

You guys are playing a bunch of different roles. You're artists in your own right, you're curators, you're business owners. And you were saying that balancing the flow of people with the amount of art that you sell in order to sustain yourselves is super important to keeping you alive. So how do you balance those three roles without getting too mercenary and also without doing things that you want to do but may not be sustainable as business ideas.

**Viviana:** I think it's something that we're still figuring out every day. We're lucky to have a really good working relationship. We're best friends. I don't think we have super great business minds, but we google a lot and look at *Housewives'* businesses. We actually started our business in November 2016 because we saw on *Housewives* that [Ramona Singer] said you need to get an LLC and a checkbook, and we were like "Let's get that!"

We do a lot of googling, a lot of asking, a lot of trial and error, and what we've learned is the more we wanted to do, the more it attracted people who were ready to help. Around the time we set up our gift shop we met this girl, Lindsay Li, and she has been behind the scenes since then. She helped do our website and she's the kind of person who's had businesses since she was 16. She's our third person who helps us with things that we didn't know about. You can't be afraid to ask people. If we had to buy all of the art before we did a show and then try to re-sell it, it wouldn't work. We try to create a place where artists feel like, even if their piece doesn't sell, they're getting a really valuable experience.



**Matt:** They're getting something out of it, which will be something that they can use for themselves.

**Viviana:** Whether it's press, or just the fact that they're in a show, or just something they're excited to do and that kind of creative freedom. We try hard not to tap anybody out and make sure that they're always feeling fulfilled. That's another huge part of it, artist management, making sure there's good vibes and everyone's respected. The more you do that, the more people want to jump on and make things happen. It's been super collaborative. The main goal is just to make it sustainable. I think we're hopefully getting there. It has been three years now of putting our stuff in trash bags.

**Viviana:** Oh, wait, one last piece of advice: start mailing lists right away. I didn't do that, and that's one thing I kick myself about.

**Matt:** Like we said, we don't have very good business minds. For over a year we didn't charge anyone to come up into our house and show them around. And we were giving them a lot of time. Some people just would not leave. Then we didn't charge for the pop-up, we didn't charge for the first exhibit we did in this space, and it was really getting to the point where it's like, we don't really have a choice. You realize, "Hey, it's not that weird to charge for the time and the work that you're doing."

**Viviana:** We're getting enjoyment out of this because we get to work together, and we get to do this really, really fun thing. It took each of us awhile to [give] ourselves permission to charge for it. But I also think on the flip side, when we got the first initial press bump, if we had immediately tried to capitalize on it, people would have just been like, "Well, fuck you." And we would have been like, "Okay, this is done."

**Matt:** And we didn't even know if it was good or if it was going to get anybody excited, so it felt like there was no way. It's hard for us to be like, "Pay this much." I mean, it was in our apartment.

Matt and Viviana of THNK 1994 recommend:

Cher doing Abba covers

*Speed 2: Cruise Control* Soundtrack

Melanie Griffith (in general)

Staying inside

QuickChek Summer Sub Days

Name

Matt Harkins and Viviana Olen

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