

On working with your neighborhood



Visual artist and curator Mark Cross discusses the evolution of his shape-shifting gallery space, the value of collaborating with your friends and neighbors, and why your phone can be a source of good instead of evil.

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As told to Daniel Sharp, 3005 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Curation](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#).

Muddguts started as a website in the early 2000s. Was it selling something? And what did the site originally sell? Was it artwork?

I was just posting photos. Most of it's still there. But Aaron, who was also perhaps better known as ORFN, was this sort of enigma. Really just this pillar of this underground, creative community that formed a lot of what came to be recognized as San Francisco art and culture. He would make these things—these handmade zines and small editions, or drawings on cardboard—that he would shrink wrap for whatever reason, 'cause that's how he framed his stuff. We put them on Muddguts and people would go crazy, like throwing a little piece of meat to a bowl of piranhas. They would eat it up. I was mostly just facilitating the sale of his work to get it out there.

We then made shirts and sold those, made some buttons and sold those, and it sort of just like... it didn't have any aim or direction, but it grew into something. When I had friends that were making things that I thought were cool or that could somehow be showcased on the platform, I would just upload it.

It then became a physical space, too.

Yeah, we did a couple art shows as Muddguts. One of them was in Rotterdam, Holland. We somehow convinced them that they needed to fly us out there to do this thing, and just kind of planted the seed that having a physical space was important.



Muddguts, 2018

I never had a credit card, I didn't have any credit, I didn't know anything about commercial leases. The building owners asked us for a business model, and I was like, "What are you talking about? I'm going to have a gallery." But the rent was only \$1,000 month, so I just offered to pay the whole year up front—that was all my money at the time—but we had the space

for a year. My friend Lele and I ran the space, and we eventually made a radio station that's now morphed into [8 Ball Radio](#), which I think just won a national independent radio award or something like that. When the year was up, the landlord was like, "Get the fuck out of here." I think they first thought that it was going to be a miserable failure and nobody would show up, but when we had our first show and 300 people showed up, they were like, "Oh, fuck."

And then you moved to the next space.

Well, when the first Muddguts closed in 2014, I opened up Rose Tattoo. That's been going for, what's that, four years now? It got to a point where it was running itself, and I was burnt out on tattooing, so I took a little step back. I ended up taking a year off. Sometime during that year, a space right down the street became available, and it occurred to me that I should take it. It was an old coffee shop that was a pillar of the old East Williamsburg neighborhood that I had gone to a lot, and I had a relationship with the landlords who used to run the coffee shop. I walked over to the space and asked the lady what was up with it, and she asked me if I wanted it, and I said yes. We shook hands, and she gave me the keys.

That was in January 2018. We had our first show in March. But it's different this time. The first space was strictly art on the wall, white walls, shows, people come, buy it, don't buy it. This new space I'm running myself, separate from Lele, who helped me with the first space. He kind of utilized the old Muddguts space to foster what is now 8 Ball. We still are close friends, just working on our own independent projects.



Monica Canilao and Xara Thustra

But the vast majority of our demographic who are paying attention to what we're doing couldn't even start to begin to think about buying art. Not everybody has a couple grand laying around to hang a picture on their wall. In this new spot, we're making smaller take-away items and working with artists and people from the neighborhood. T-shirts and books and fun stuff like that, to make stuff more available to people.

Now that is feeding into records, which is something that I'm really excited about. It's about broadening the spectrum of people who are giving a shit about what Muddguts is doing, using music, art, and literature to reinforce the sense of community that I feel is absent. Everybody's been disenfranchised. Painters paint, musicians make music, they're working with labels, artists are working with galleries, it's all so compartmentalized. Bringing everything back together like it was when I was a kid is something I want to see happen, and so do a lot of people in my community. It can't fail, because it's just all friends that are doing cool shit with each other and it's all positive and it's all pure. There's no ulterior motive, and no hidden agendas. It's just making stuff, looking out for each other, and trying to promote a sense of positivity.

It almost sounds like, even if Muddguts has to move again, or if it shifts again, it doesn't matter because the community will keep iterating.

It takes so little to connect so many people, but you have to—unfortunately, in this city especially—have the finances to start it, and I had that. I found myself in a position where I had some extra money. So what the fuck do I do with this extra money that I've worked so hard for? I use it to foster and nurture and embrace and promote this amazing stuff that my friends are doing who haven't quite found this reward for the risk that they've taken. I see people who are doing great stuff who are also struggling, and we can make some shit happen, get some money in their pocket. People who have money to put in their pocket will come through and give it to them. We try to make stuff fun. The agenda is not to get rich, and that just makes success really easy. All it is is getting people together.

You also had a show with an artist who lives above Muddguts. How did you come across his work, and how did the neighborhood respond to his show?

The same month we moved into the space, I started seeing this older guy, whom I came to know as Sal, wandering around the neighborhood. He had this incredible style. His clothes are all 60 years old, but he's kept such good care of them. He's just the chilliest dude on the planet. I was like, "What the fuck is this guy's deal?" One day I saw him using the keys to get into the apartment next door, so I introduced myself, and he started hanging out front, smoking cigs with me, and we grew to be really close friends.

He was walking home one day and had a painting in his hand and I asked him about it, and he said that he had made it. It was this incredible painting of this cat that just was so genuine and so pure and so ... just awesome. He gave it to me, and I still have it. I told him, just kind of in passing, that I wanted to see more of his work. We were installing for this show with Barry McGee, Todd James, Alicia McCarthy, and Steve Powers, and Sal walks in, hours before opening, with 10 paintings and is just like, "Where should I hang them?" I was like, "Sal, I think this show's installed, but why don't we set up a table for you out front?"

He was super into it. He set up a table out front and brought down a bunch more paintings, they're all fucking phenomenal. He was selling them for \$50 to \$100, and people were just buying them up like crazy, so he did it again at the next show that we had. I was just blown away. I said, "Sal, how many paintings do you have?" He's like, "I think maybe 100?" I'm

just like, "What the fuck? Show me. We gotta have a show, Sal. We can't just keep peddling these on the sidewalk. We're going to have a fucking show for you and it's going to be sick."

A month later, we had a little window of time available, and Sal brought down 65 paintings, and wanted to hang them all. Sal is 85, totally self-taught, and had never had an art show before in his entire life.



Salvatore Olentino at Muddguts, 2018

We hung all 65 paintings in the gallery. We opened the show and every single one of them sold in, I think, 45 minutes. It was crazy. I felt like a Wall Street broker running around, taking people's orders. The demand didn't stop there. People are still hitting me up trying to get commissions and stuff like that. On the surface he seems very unaffected by it. He's like, "Oh, yeah, of course. They're great paintings, why wouldn't you buy all of them?" But his wife was just talking to me the other day, and she was in tears almost. He hadn't been painting so much, he wasn't going outside so much anymore, and she said now he's painting every day. He's going out to the supermarket. He's got a little more pep in his step, and is pretty excited to have another show. I told him if he makes 10 paintings, we'll do another show, and he's already done eight, so he's on it.

It's also so genuine, and so organic, how you met. Sometimes I see galleries only finding work on Instagram or having to travel to different cities and spaces to see "good" work.

And it's kind of like the same 10 or 20 artists that are just getting shown all over the place, 'cause it is such a commodity, or it has become one. Maybe it should be, I don't know. Who am I to judge? Respect the hustle of whoever is getting theirs, but there's something so genuine about your next-door neighbor just making paintings 'cause he wants to make paintings, and people buying them because they want to put them in their house.

Money is a funny thing, but I feel like at its root, money is sort of a token of trust, and I want to give my money to people I trust and who are doing good things. Sal is somebody who I trust, and who is doing good things. It was refreshing to see the community, the neighborhood, give their money and their trust to Sal, and the same is happening with the other shows and records and books that we are making.



Muddguts website, 2018.

How do you get to know your neighbors?

Just by talking to people, and by having a great appreciation for the concept of a community. I live on Graham Avenue, in this neighborhood that revolves around the commerce that happens on Graham Avenue. I sit on my bench all day long and I talk to people. I feel like there isn't enough of that. I felt so repressed, or just so awkward in my life for so long, and traveled around so much, and fancied myself this lone-wolf vagabond traveler guy. But finally I just realized that I'm not that at all. I am a homebody and I like where I've planted my roots, and I just have a lot of care and concern for my community and I want to know the people who've been there before me. I'm thirsty for their approval and recognition, and to foster a sense of community and camaraderie, which is so rare and fleeting.

The bench, too, sounds like the place to be.

The bench is the place!

It also forces you to keep your ear to the ground, and your eyes open.

I took a walk one day 'cause I'm like, maybe I should take a walk and see the world. I got about three blocks in, and I'm like, "Where the fuck am I going? I just need to go back to the bench." Within 10 minutes of sitting on the bench, five different friends started to congregate, some of whom didn't know each other, and we all were just talking. That's how I've gotten everything done in my professional and private life. I meet so-and-so who lives two blocks away, and they do this thing. This guy's a plumber, this guy's a printer. This very organic network of people who I can come to know on a personal level from just having interacted and engaged with them in the community and given them my money, my trust. I'm here to reinforce, or enable and empower the people who I want to be enabled and empowered, and there's no way to do that if you're not engaged with your community. We're animals. We're a species that thrives through connection and community, and I just stopped rejecting that a while ago. I have learned to really embrace it and not be so afraid of it.

I can affect change in my neighborhood. I can create a neighborhood that I want to live in. There are some storefronts vacant on Graham Avenue right now, and I'm vetting friends who maybe want to start a business or move a business to come to the neighborhood so we can create this utopian metropolis.

How do you define community?

For me it's just what we're talking about: sitting on my bench and talking to our neighbors and being a part of something instead of being apart from everything. Staying in this spacetime that I occupy. Being aware of my surroundings, and conscious of how what I'm doing impacts my neighbors. And not being a fucking asshole.



Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe wearing a Muddguts coach jacket in front of a Matt Lines work, 2018

I'm also curious to hear about tactics for listening to your neighborhood instead of, say, staring at your phone.

I don't know if I'm the person to ask, 'cause if you ask anybody in my neighborhood, I'm sitting on the bench, staring at my phone all day long. Somebody actually just asked me the other day, they're like, "Can I ask you a personal question?" It's somebody I see five times a day. They're like, "I walk past you five times a day, every day, and every single time, you're staring at your phone. What the hell are you doing on your phone?"

But I'm literally doing Muddguts, you know? I'm calling people and emailing people and liking my friends' photos on Instagram. I'm listening to the song that my friend just sent me. I'm running this business from this thing that fits in my pocket, that I sometimes use to open a bottle cap that isn't a twist-off.

It's such a valuable asset or resource, but also has the potential to be a force of negativity. We can get sort of lost in these rabbit holes of looking at so-and-so's Instagram, and starting to be like, "Why don't I have a fucking vacation in Paris right now?" Or, "How come that person is posting selfies with that person and not with me?" It's all just how you utilize that resource, like with anything.

I used to drink alcohol, like a lot of people drink alcohol. I drank way too much fucking alcohol, to the extent that it was harmful to me and my wellbeing and my ability to function at the level that I would like to. I had to stop drinking all alcohol, 'cause I don't want to drink all the alcohol. I don't see my phone, for me right now in my life, as being a force of negativity, but for some people, maybe it is, and maybe they have to separate themselves from that. I say, "Look at your fucking phone all day long if you want to, but maybe go take a walk every now and again, or find a cool bench to sit on while you look at your phone so that people can come by and steal you away from it every few minutes."

It's refreshing to hear ways to use your phone that actually nurture relationships.

It's fucking amazing. Do you know that an iPhone comes with GarageBand on it? I was sitting on the couch and found GarageBand. I think we were talking about this the other day. I made an album's worth of "music" over the course of three hours that I otherwise would have just spent watching Forensic Files on repeat. I mean, I also was watching *Forensic Files*, and I sampled *Forensic Files* for my "vocals," but you could fucking do anything with a phone. It's crazy. This fucking thing is like, two inches tall. You're probably reading this interview on your phone, you know what I mean?

Yes, literally. Oh my god.

Keep reading. Keep looking at your phone.

Mark Cross recommends:

Things to do after visiting Muddguts:

[Go to Punk Alley](#)

[Take the Staten Island Ferry](#)

Sit on a bench all day long and be open to meeting new people. Listen to them.

Name

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Vocation

Visual artist, Curator, Owner of Muddguts



