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Artists Take Stand on Student Loans in 'Debtfair' Art Fair

By Meredith Hoffman (/www.dnainfo.com/new-york/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/meredith-hoffman) | July 30, 2013 6:50am | *Updated on July 31, 2013 2:18pm*

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Noah Fischer has pieces displayed on the Debtfair website.

Noah Fischer

BUSHWICK — Artists have a new way to trade paintings for debt relief in "Debtfair," (<http://www.debtfair.org/text/118>)the latest twist on the typical art fair.

The fair — in which buyers write checks directly to banks and lending companies to pay off artists' debt in exchange for their work — is a way to highlight the mounting burden of student loans and to symbolize how "creativity can liberate us from debt," co-



"We're holding it in venues public and private throughout the city," said Beery of the fall fair, for which exact dates and locations have not yet been solidified. "The commitment the artists are making is also to speak with people interested in their art about their economic realities."

Participating artists also post on Debtfair's website (<http://www.debtfair.org/artists>) images of their works and answers to questions like: "How does debt affect your art practice?"

And in Bushwick, just one mention of the fair draws artists eager to combat the prominent economic struggle.

"Whenever I mention it to an artist they're like, 'Oh my God, yes! I feel frustrated!'" said co-organizer Kristian Nammack, who was approached one recent afternoon by an artist who overheard him talking about the fair outside Bushwick's Wyckoff Starr (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/places/wyckoff-starr>) cafe. "[The artist] walked up to me and just said, 'That's really interesting.'"

Any New York City artist with debt can submit work to the fair, along with an account of his or her financial situation and background.

"In Bushwick we're talking about young artists...and so many of them are fighting just for the scraps that small independent galleries can give them," said Beery of the appeal to local residents. "We want to inspire a critical context for art that's based not on aspirational fantasy but on economic reality."

Beery said the fair was more a "symbolic action" than a practical reality, but noted its power came in placing "debt directly in the center of the art conversation."

Debtfair's website — pioneered by Occupy Museums, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street — also includes a tally of debt owed by the participating artists.

So far, the total is at \$1,111,168.44.

William Powhida — a Debtfair participant, Bushwick artist and eminent voice in the arts community — wrote on the website that he owes \$26,000 to lending company Sallie Mae (<https://www.salliemae.com/>) after receiving his BFA and MFA in fine arts.

"I believe that Debtfair provides a necessary context for raising awareness about the economic reality facing not only artists, but anyone who is taking on large amounts of debt for higher education in an economy with stagnant wages and increasing income inequality," wrote Powhida, who teaches high school to supplement his income.

Debtfair co-organizer and professor Jim Costanco said the amount of debt on student



loans has increased dramatically since he was in college.

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"I teach at Pratt [Institute] (<http://www.pratt.edu/>) and we're sending kids off with \$150,000 in debt," said Costanco, 50, noting that the U.S. Congress had recently threatened to permanently double interest rates on student loans. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/18/us/politics/senate-reaches-deal-to-end-fight-over-student-loan-interest-rates.html>)

Meanwhile, fair co-founder Noah Fischer linked the fair to Occupy Wall Street's message of collective action combating inequality.





"The capitalist debt system profits even more when people ignore their loans and pay them late, or slowly," said Fischer, noting that paying someone else's debt in exchange for a painting was "a form of mutual aid."

"It's about understanding that all economic behavior, like culture, is ultimately collective and needs to go horizontal," he said.

More details about Debtfair and how to get involved can be found on the website for the group, (<http://www.debtfair.org/index>) which holds weekly meetings for interested artists at a different location each Monday evening.



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