

Open Houses - What to do when people get difficult

by Bill Black



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This week, I promised you the nitty-gritty of what you do with your home, your furniture and your children for those four weekends in May and how to deal with difficult artists.

We'll start with the last point - yes, some artists can be difficult.

Now, I should point out that the vast majority are not. In my house we exhibited a mix of professional and non-professionals over the five years we were open and I had very few problems with the 100+ artists who exhibited there. However, when I did have problems they inevitably revolved around the fact that some artists seemed to forget that they had been invited into a home. My home. They treated my house as if it were a public space, rather than a private space that the public were invited into. With three small children in the house, this lack of consideration sometimes grated and was inevitably a point of friction. You want an example?

An artist's friend came into the house to see her. He used our toilet, in an area of the house clearly marked Private, without asking us, going upstairs onto the floor where our children were tucked safely out of the way. We have no objection to people using our toilet but I don't like going upstairs in my own home to find a stranger wandering about in an area clearly designated as Private.

It has to be said that a tiny minority of exhibitors don't exactly forget your home is a private place during those four weekends in May, they actively never engage that idea of it in the first place. In their mind it's their exhibition space and as it's open to the public, they treat it like a public place.

So, if you find yourself sharing your home with an artist like that, what do you do? A softly-softly approach would be my recommendation. Often, the stress of exhibiting, the confines of space and the high expectations lots of artists have of the Open Houses means that they are not deliberately abusing your hospitality – it's just that it comes somewhere far down

the list of priorities for their exhibition. A gentle reminder will suffice 99% of the time and given that you're going to be spending most of your time in close proximity with said artists is better than confrontation.

However, if even your most clearly expressed wishes are ignored by the remaining 1% then a bit of firm laying down of rules must be done. Never forget it is your home and that the artists are there at your invitation. If they don't like the way you do things then they should not have accepted your invitation to exhibit with you in the first place. While it is their individual exhibition, it is your overall exhibition and your home.

The flipside of that, of course, is that you can't go shifting the goalposts on an exhibiting artist. You have an obligation to make it clear to exhibitors in your home what you will and won't accept, what they do/don't have access to and how you expect them to react when visitors come in. It is a mutual agreement. After all, even if as home owner you have the right to determine all the rules in the first place, you should stick to them yourself.

So what can you do if you're an artist exhibiting in someone's home and they are being difficult with you? Well, you have to have a little more sympathy with them than with yourself. Being an Open House owner is to find oneself thrust into a very peculiar set of circumstances, very quickly, that has a steepening learning curve even after the front door has been opened. For over a month, their house will look more like a gallery than their home and even though that is their choice, I think that many house owners don't quite anticipate the strain and upheaval that staging an open house will have upon them and their family. So put yourself in their place before you have a go at them and think 'what if that were me – is what I'm asking reasonable to expect of someone else?'

Your next actions will very much depend on the answer to that question. If you're asking for something that is reasonable but can wait, then do the noble thing and count to ten – or ten thousand – before asking your stressed home owner to stop insisting on whatever it is that's driving you nuts.

If, on reflection, you can see that it might cause the owner a lot of problems to grant your wish then console yourself with the knowledge that when you open your own home, you can do it your way.

If, however, you have asked for something reasonable and you've suddenly realised that the charming home owner who graciously gave you space to show your work has transformed into some kind of power-hungry demonic being, possessed of little reason or sense, then do what you think is best for you. Grin and bear it, grab your artworks and run

screaming from the building - you have to use your best judgement in the circumstances involved.

There are plenty of homes to show in and plenty of artists to show in them. Just remember that whether you are a home owner or an exhibiting artist, the whole event will run more smoothly, be more fun and attract more people to your home and work if we're all nice to each other.

And as I bask in the radiance of goodwill to all I realised I've run out of time and space to talk about the practicalities of Open Housing. Looks like I'll be back for another article next week then.