

Open Houses - 10 Golden Rules

by Bill Black



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This week it's all practical nuts and bolts stuff I'll be dealing with. How do you set up your home, how do you take money, how do you pay your artists? All the fun, stress-free bit. So, with up to 23 artists having exhibited in my home in a single year and having opened my home for five years in a row, how did I do it without going nuts? By being organised. It's a huge undertaking, whether you plan to exhibit 1, 5 or 25 artists in your home. Lots of open house owners do it in lots of different ways and I always tried to be clear about as much of it in advance as possible.

So, first things first and golden rule number one: **Decide what's open and what's private.**

In other words, determine the amount of space you want to turn over to your entire exhibition first of all. Then decide how much space you, as an individual, want. Then decide whether or not you are going to have other artists exhibiting with you. The majority of open houses feature more than one artist and it's a sensible choice for purely practical reasons, if nothing else. House sitting, answering questions from rooms full of visitors, taking payments, etc are all handled better with several hands on board. You'll be surprised how busy it can get, especially if you are part of a popular trail.

Next, the biggest source of friction between owner and artist can be over space, so here's golden rule number two: **Block out everyone's space in advance.**

Have your artists round for a cup of coffee one morning – individually or en masse – and clarify what space they'll want/need. If you're in the lounge and it has three 'hangable' walls and you've decided to take one for yourself then there are two more to fill. Now, this is your choice as home owner; do you want one artist with work on both walls or do you want two artists taking a wall each? It's your house, you decide. Then, over that cup of coffee tell the artists what you had in mind. If they sound at all hesitant about being able to fill the space you've offered them, be wary, because that means they probably can't.

Usually, though, you'll find the problem is the other way round – an artist will want more space that you're willing to give them. Find out why is my advice here. If it's to put up a

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large back catalogue, ask yourself how happy you'll be with that. If it's the back catalogue of an artist who sells well, then why not? If it's the back catalogue of an artist who is still trying to sell work that they've been exhibiting for years, then say no. If it hasn't sold before, it's not likely to do so now. Always remember; it's your house, your exhibition. The same blocking out applies to 3-D artists as well. Take special note of table and display case sizes (especially height), making sure there's clearance for people to walk around a 3D display. With all that sorted out in advance, come installation day, all will run much more smoothly.

Golden rule number three: **Make it as simple as possible.**

That's an 'apply to everything' rule. Keep your artist layouts simple, your paperwork clear, your signs and labels big and easy to read. You want to make the experience, for artist and visitor alike, easy and enjoyable - simplicity and clarity make for good bedfellows in this respect.

Golden rule number four: **Agree a commission.**

Or not as the case may be. Some houses don't take any money from their artists at all. However, you will have had to pay out at least a couple of hundred pounds yourself for various things. We used to split our immediate costs between all artists exhibiting in the house (i.e. advertising costs, trail fees, all equally split) and then take a 10% commission on any sales made. I never had an artist who thought this was unfair – because it isn't. Some houses hire a carpet cleaner at the end of the Festival to re-clean their house carpets and charge that, too. It's up to you but make sure you and your artists know well in advance what the charges are going to be.

I really think a commission charge is the best way to do things. Most artists appreciate the upheaval you're going through on their behalf and are happy to agree to splitting the immediate costs upfront allied with a commission payment.

Golden rule number five: **Agree installation dates.**

Arrange one or two days prior to opening for your artists to come and install their work. I would advise doing this a few days before the event, too, to allow for the inevitable 'oh, I forgot to bring...' scenario which will require the artist to pop back before the first opening weekend and put in that vital piece of work or the price list that they forgot. Everyone forgets something.

Golden rule number six: **Arrange a rota for invigilation.**

Avoid the 'I thought you were supposed to be here on Sunday morning, not Saturday?' type of conversation. Give all your artists a Rota sheet and ask them to fill in the dates they will be available. Most houses open for six hours on the weekend and split each day into two, three-hour shifts. We used to allow one person per open room and one other 'floating'. The floating wasn't easy but meditate enough and you'll get it...

Golden rule number seven: **Decide how you are going to take and process payments.**

This causes house owners more stress than most. You may decide that you want cheques made out to the individual artist, which means you have to keep a tally of what your commission is and get the artist to pay you it at the end.

Now, I always felt responsible for money that changed hands in my house, meaning that if money was short at the end of the day (not that it ever was, I'm delighted to say), then that should be my responsibility. So we had a tin in which money was kept and we kept a note of all sales on a list, what artist, what piece, price and whether cheque or cash, etc. Either myself, my wife or a trusted artist entered sales. It's only common sense to let people you know well take responsibility for the money. In the end, as house owner, it's your responsibility.

At the end of the day, we totalled the money on the list and totalled the money in the tin. They always matched, ensuing happiness. Like most Open House owners, I never had any money woes and as long as you are sensible about such arrangements, neither will you. In addition to this, I also kept an Excel spreadsheet listing all artist sales which I would update every Monday. It would work out sales minus commission, final balance, overall takings, all the clever things you'd want it to do. At the end of the Festival, I would write the artist a cheque, minus commission as detailed on this sheet. Simplicity itself.

The very good news for you is that the rota forms, sales book and Excel Spreadsheet I refer to here are available for download so that you can use them too.

Golden rule number eight: **Label everything clearly.**

It helps the visitors and artists trying to sell another's work. Clear descriptions and prices on the pieces and signs saying 'PRIVATE' and 'MORE WORK THROUGH HERE', 'TEA, COFFEE & CAKES £1.00 EACH' let visitors know immediately what might seem obvious to you.

When you think you've got your exhibition ready, count to ten and then walk around trying to look at it through someone else's eye. It does help.

Golden rule number nine: **Realistic expectations.**

An artist can do very well through selling in an open house. That same artist can show again and do very poorly. Why? Who knows, it's just the way of the thing. There's no rhyme or reason to it but some artists do think that with all those people filing through your house, greatness is assured. We always used to encourage artists to think of it as an exhibition first and a chance to show their work to a wider audience, rather than a selling venue. Sales are the icing on the cake and it is an inevitable quirk of fate that the artist who really expects to sell, won't. Fate is a fickle mistress.

Golden rule number ten: **Make it enjoyable.**

Because if you don't, then you won't want to do it again and that would be a great shame. It's great fun when you get it right and a huge artistic opportunity. It is, in fact, a unique opportunity and life doesn't throw up too many of those. So make sure you enjoy it. That's it for me, the last of my articles for Open House Online. I hope you've enjoyed them and that they may have been helpful. If you have any questions, just email the site and some helpful soul will sort you out.

In the meantime, have a happy Festival.

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