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Art Market

Postmasters's Magda Sawon on Closing the Tribeca Gallery to Go Nomadic

Brian P. Kelly

Jun 29, 2022 6:47PM



Founders Tamas Banovich and Magda Sawon in front of Postmasters.

On Tuesday, storied New York gallery Postmasters announced in an email that its current exhibition would be the last at its Tribeca space. Magda Sawon and Tamas Banovich, who co-founded the gallery nearly four decades ago, wrote that they would be vacating “on very short notice” after “losing a protracted legal battle with our landlord over a Covid rent settlement.” There are no plans for a new storefront, but the gallery plans to go nomadic in a format labeled Postmasters 5.0.

Speaking with Artsy, Sawon didn’t want to go into specific details about the real estate situation as legal proceedings are ongoing. However, she pointed out the irony that Tribeca’s booming gallery scene—and the accompanying sky-high rents that it entails—is due at least in part to Postmasters’s longstanding presence in the area.

“We were one of the very first [galleries] here in Tribeca in 2013—basically the first resettling gallery from Chelsea. There was nobody here, so we were a destination ourselves, and then gradually the neighborhood came to be filled up with more galleries,” she said. “Now it’s saturated with galleries, and there’s more coming,” she added, explaining that the influx of eager renters means landlords have lots of power.



Installation view the exhibition "Can You Digit?" at Postmasters in 1996. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery.

The gallery has consistently been at the vanguard of digital and conceptual art in New York. In addition to being a pioneer of the Tribeca scene, its previous locations—first the East Village, then SoHo, then Chelsea—were at the forefront of various neighborhoods’ artistic makeovers. Similarly, the gallery has a proven track record of being prescient in the kind of work it shows. It gave early shows to acclaimed conceptual and new media artists like Paul Ramírez Jonas, Alix Pearlstein, Spencer Finch, Omer Fast, Rafaël Rozendaal, Austin Lee, and Hugh Hayden, among others. Furthermore, its 1996 exhibition of screen-based art, “Can You Digit,” was historic for presenting digital art with the same seriousness as more traditional forms. It included work from Craig Kalpakjian, George Legrady, Lev Manovich (now better known for his writing on digital culture), and Erwin Redl, and a still-living website for the show is a digital artifact itself, including its information for prospective collectors: “Most work available on floppy discs or CD-s, special editions. please inquire through e-mail, fax or phone.”

It also bears emphasizing, particularly now in 2022, that Postmasters has had a long-standing digital art program—which will continue without change after the gallery vacates its physical space. The gallery was an early adopter of NFTs and has worked with leading artists in the field, such as Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, who created one of the first art NFTs.

Postmasters’s departure might call to mind similar high-profile shakeups caused by the pandemic: Gavin Brown’s Enterprise closed in July 2020, with its founder joining the team at Gladstone Gallery; and in December 2021, Metro Pictures shuttered after 40 years. However, Sawon is clear that this is simply the birth of a new iteration of the gallery, calling it “a hopscotch.”



Installation view of Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung's exhibition "The Travelogue of Dr. Brain Damages" at Postmasters in 2011. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery.

Finding a smaller space was never an option for Sawon — “shrinking,” she called it, wouldn’t feel right “after 38 years of kind of pushing varied envelopes all the time.” She believes that nomadism offers a more sustainable model than maintaining a stationary space. “I’m sure many other galleries are of similar mind right now,” she said, noting that “there’s this struggle between showing what sells and what you think is amazing. The Venn diagram between the two is not always that great.”

She also explained that the decision to go nomadic sprang from her refusal to compromise the gallery’s programming. “We really have a very fixed idea of what kind of art we’re interested in and what kind of art we want to show,” she said, which requires “some sort of a new model of running a gallery—and especially running a gallery that shows challenging and forward thinking art.”

In practical terms, Sawon plans to search for vacant spaces that complement the particular shows she's planning – smaller spaces for more intimate presentations, larger ones for more sprawling displays. She was quick to point out that these would be extended exhibitions, not pop-up shows, which she called “flash mob exhibitions.”

While she hasn't finalized venues for any future shows – she said she's currently planning on containing her search to Manhattan – a pair of exhibitions has been announced for the fall: “a monumental, groundbreaking show of BarabasiLAB on networks and data as new realism...and a large-scale multimedia project by the remarkable collaborative team of Jen Catron and Paul Outlaw.” The former, also known as the Center for Complex Network Research at Northeastern University, will be collaborating with the gallery for the first time, while the latter duo has been represented by Postmasters for several years.



Installation view of LoVid's exhibition "hold on," with digital tapestries and NFTs, at Postmasters in 2022. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery.

Sawon said she's most excited about the opportunity "to be a little bit more improvisational and a little bit looser." Now that she's free of a static physical gallery, her calendar can be less regimented, she can seek out spaces that best fit the work she's showing instead of being confined to a set architecture — and she'll be free of the "exorbitant" rent, which she called "an albatross."

But being on the move also presents its own challenges, specifically keeping visitors informed and getting them to show up. She hopes that Postmasters's track record will pay dividends on that front. "I think that we have built a specific audience for the gallery over these years, so we do have a certain currency that will give people enough curiosity to see the next thing that we're doing," she explained.

Just as important in her mind, though, is to use this model to maintain the sense of community that's grown around the art itself. "A gallery [is] more than a place to sell art to collectors," she said. "I love [the] audience. I love the fact that people come, and they see, and they're not here to buy." It might not be the sentiment that one would expect from a gallery that's going nomadic to help cut overhead, but it is an indication of Sawon's dedication to elevating the profiles of the artists she cares about. "They're here to see and experience the artwork," she continued. "I think that's the most amazing and engaging thing you can offer, and somehow I have to support that notion if that's something we consider important." With Postmasters 5.0, she's trying to do just that. ■

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