

# The Washington Post

## 'Pop-up' gallery shows aim to sell condos as well as art

By Jessica Dawson  
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A Cinderella-like transformation of condos into art galleries -- one night only! three weeks only! -- has been going on in Washington's Shaw neighborhood for the better part of the economic downturn. Artists and developers link arms to throw art shows in unsold, high-design 2BR/2BAs along U Street and up 14th.

These pop-up galleries-in-a-condo are such a phenomenon that a new crop of impresarios has emerged to connect the creatives with the capitalists. Some are DIY veterans who aren't in it for the bucks. They might get a little cash, but the bulk of their rewards are notoriety and the satisfaction that their artist friends can pay the rent. Others hail from art consultancy backgrounds and are tweaking their businesses to serve developers.

Newest among these on-call middlemen is Wool, a roving gallery business that debuted on a chilly Thursday last month. It's a collaboration between Billy Colbert and Ryan Hackett, both artists and veteran DIYers. Hackett was a founding member of erstwhile collective Decatur Blue; Colbert has organized a host of artist-run events in the District and Baltimore.

Hackett likens Wool to Temporary Services or No Longer Empty, organizations in Chicago and New York, respectively, that fill fallow, mostly developer-owned spaces with art. The pair embrace the freedom from gallery overheads.

"We were not interested in money, only in throwing a show," Hackett says.

On the December night of Wool's debut, Colbert and Hackett invited the city's grooviest to the Lacey, a 26-unit condominium at 11th Street and Florida Avenue NW for an event they called "Bauble."

Guests milled near the Fisher & Paykel stainless fridge in Unit 101 (a 2BR/2BA

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w/den going for \$759,000) and chatted over backbeats pumped from a DJ stationed downstairs. One couple -- she in a Moncler puffy jacket, he in skinny jeans -- attempted a makeshift dance floor. Next door in Unit 102, real estate agent Debi Fox held court among Saarinen knock-offs.

Along the wall (and on pedestals), works by some of Washington's more interesting young artists were installed with all the professionalism of a gallery. Among the artists: Cory Oberndorfer, Kathryn Cornelius and former D.C. artist Jose Ruiz. Each work was priced to sell at \$250.

Was "Bauble" an art show or a dance party or an open house? Yes, yes and yes.

Yet for art partisans, it was a strange night. Yes, "Bauble" was one of the best exhibitions of this kind. The art looked good, artists made money and a charity benefited. (Wool designated that \$100 from each sale go to Project Create, which offers free art programs for at-risk children. Disclosure: I sit on the board.) But the focus that night was condos.

Though the building's developers deny that the event helped sell Unit 102 (currently under contract), the buzz about the Lacey and its art were clearly part of a larger business plan.

Similar art events are the specialty of the Art Registry, a six-year-old consultancy that specializes in the "excitement of the art world transported to unique marquis properties," its Web site says. The registry recently worked with Ernst Development and Willco Residential.

Co-founded by Erin Mackay, a Washington Project for the Arts board member, and photographer Jill Lubar, the Art Registry works like this: Developers donate space; Mackay and Lubar shoulder marketing and installation expenses. Art Registry clients -- young professionals earning enough to afford both art and real estate -- gather for a party and (it is hoped) pull out their checkbooks.

Mackay puts her group's gross from most events at \$15,000 to \$80,000. An event last April at Providence lofts on 11th Street yielded \$28,650 in art sales. Mackay says the artist "always receives 50 percent or more" of the sale price.

For the Providence project, Mackay called on [Philippa Hughes](#), an art impresario who links collectors with artists working in graffiti and street art. Hughes brought in District artist Decoy. Proceeds were split among Hughes, the Art Registry and the artist.

But who really benefits? The developers, that's for sure -- they get branding, foot traffic and buzz. The marketers behind the Providence were shocked by how many people the Art Registry pulled in.

"We had a tremendous turnout, and I think that we sold at least 50 percent of

the building because of that event," says Jeremy Aldridge, an agent for Urban Pace, the sales and marketing firm behind Providence. "It was hard to distinguish who was there looking at the units and who was looking at the art, so it created a kind of urgency. That was brilliant marketing."

Brilliant marketing for developers. But bad PR for art? One-offs forge dicey synaptic connections in the public mind: They reinforce the "art as decor" paradigm, divorcing artists from their highest calling -- creating work that challenges social and political norms. On art event nights, artists become another kind of interior decorator.

Then again, this is real life. Artists need to eat and developers need to sell. Not all art is created equal -- and neither are its venues.

The next *Wool* event is scheduled for March at an as-yet-named space on Ninth Street NW.

The *Art Registry* is at <http://www.theartregistrygroup.com>.

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