

Lia Gangitano A '90

Governors' Award for Outstanding Service to Artists

by Matthew Brannon F '13

When I was young it was very important to me that you knew that I hated everything you liked. My friends and I preferred a self-defeating revenge over acceptance to the mainstream. It wasn't healthy but we had our own real camaraderie and it introduced me to artists of all types and eventually led me to art school, where I met teachers who made it seem possible to be a professional artist. Before then I couldn't imagine it.

Art fairs especially, but galleries, museums, collectors, critics, journals, schools and even artists themselves have complicated what once made art interesting (and in this I include myself). Being uncomfortable isn't a feeling most people have the ability to stand for very long and the start of this century has been *very* uncomfortable. So it's understandable that when the "artworld" had the opportunity for mainstreaming itself, it willingly offered. Life on the outside is hard and the rewards are private. Sort of like when in the movie the school geek is somehow offered to be prom queen and takes the stage and lets her hair down and never looks back. Not inevitable but certainly understandable.

Interesting doesn't mean what it used to. When I went to art school, locating, dissecting and debating where and how transgression participated in a work was the central discussion. You weren't expected to understand what you were seeing the first half a second you saw it and you never, ever repeated yourself. Fast forward to the very commercially remodeled New York artworld and you'll find confirmation instead of curiosity, very little anxiety and tons of reassurance.

Lia Gangitano can't save us. She's not going to correct all that's wrong, and it's not her job to compensate for the tidal wave of boredom that's gassed our curiosity. She's just showing what she always has and following up conversations she started long ago. She's very aware of the position she holds—how can she not be with all the noise around her? I like to believe Lia would be doing what she does even if we didn't call it art anymore. When I go to PARTICIPANT I'm always reminded why I wanted to be an artist and how uncomfortable comfortable is.

Lia's fully committed and has taken very personal risks involved with running a not-for-profit in the most profit-oriented city in the U.S., and she's been doing so for over fifteen years. It's one of the most creatively indulgent spaces I've ever been to: every intellectual arrow, glamorous gamble, conceptual experiment, physical ambition, and difficult personality are entertained. Every show is no small feat and feels like it's the only place it could have happened. Just think of last year's Greer Lankton survey, a celebration of heartbreak that I can't imagine happening anywhere else.

What Lia does isn't something that anyone could do and very few would want to. We need to support such courageousness outside of the commercial endorsement. You never know who sees those shows that might become an artist, curator, writer, museum director, or future not-for-profit arts space founder. Imagine how sad it would be if no such models existed. If everything that made it to the table had already passed the approval ratings board. If only the dead or the collected where allowed to experiment or make mistakes.

It's 2015. No one could replace Lia but I wish there more like her.