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Can Art Save Lives? For the Many Artists Who Trade Their Work for Medical Care, the Answer May Be a Resounding Yes



Avo Samuelian is a Manhattan dentist famous for exchanging dental treatment for art. In 2018, it was reported that Samuelian's office features pieces by Matt Connors, Nicolás Guagnini, Karin Schneider, and Terence Koh.

Several dealers have informed me that they only see Samuelian (as paying clients) and that he has cemented his position as a revered figure in the art world.

"Being his patient is a mark of status. So is having your work on his walls," the New York Times declared.

Since then, I've learned that artist David Benjamin Sherry traded two paintings with Samuelian, who eventually donated them to the Whitney.

Carolyn Utigard Thomas, a watercolor artist from Pennsylvania, exchanged two full-sized paintings for braces for her two children. "I've bartered for services for decades," she told the website Artists Network.

These are stories of both charity and greed. It is exciting that there are people ready to offer pricey services to artists who would not be able to afford them otherwise. Even yet, it's terrible that our capitalist system makes medical treatment so expensive that artists can't afford it, while the luxury goods market is so bloated that the affluent don't even need artists' money, only their commodities.

According to the group's website, in 2010, a group of artists and activists founded the O Positive Festival, a weekend-long event during which artists and musicians without insurance contribute their creative exploits in exchange for "care from nurses, doctors,

dentists, body workers, and mental health professionals" at an on-site clinic.

Since its establishment, the group has allegedly processed 4,801 medical procedures and 1,367 dental treatments at the clinic. This year's event will take place in Kingston, New York, in October.

For some medical experts, the transactions have paid off handsomely. Last year, Bonhams made more than \$15 million from the sale of Japanese surgeon Teruo Hirose's private collection, which included 11 pieces by Yayoi Kusama that he obtained in return for medical operations during her life.

Whether the long history of exchanging art for treatment is moral or not is a question for another day, but it may show the old cliché truth: that art can save lives.

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Teruo-Kusama-2007.jpg (1000×704) (artnet.com)