

# The Art Lover: On Valentine's Day, Internet Etiquette, and the Garbage Art of Relationship Problems

by [Ben Davis](#)

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(Illustration by ARTINFO)

**Dear Ben:**

**I have a problem. My artwork is ruining my love life. My work can be seen at [www.rdupree.com](http://www.rdupree.com) (a quick heads up there is nudity). I do online dating and when women ask about my work I send them a link to my site and never hear back from them. Do I hide my work? I like my work. I feel it is honest and a big part of who I am. What do I do? Thanks,**

**—rdupree**

Let me ask you a question, rdupree: Do you usually preface your work to your online paramours in this kind of casual way? Because I am not sure “a quick heads up there is nudity” is sufficient warning.

It is possible — just possible — that such works as “Condom With Rice” or “Sex on Glass” from your “Torture Me / Torture You” series might frighten off a few potential romantic interests. It might not be a bad idea to feel things out in advance with a casual, “What’s your take on the performance art of Chris Burden?” or, “You know when [Marina Abramovic](#) carved a star into her stomach, drank a gallon of honey, and went to bed on a block of ice — that was awesome, right?”

Should you, then, avoid the subject of your art? Clearly not — the tone of your question suggests that you want to make a real connection with someone, and since your art is, as you say, a part of who you are, there is little point in keeping it hidden. It’s just that the process of finding the right lady for a guy like you might be, for lack of a better word, torturous.

Then again, maybe you are not looking in the right place. And so, rdupree, I offer [a link of my own](#) for your consideration. The very smart contemporary artist Luke Dubois — [a veteran](#) of the recent Prospect 2 New Orleans biennial — created his project “A More Perfect Union” by trawling through the data on a vast number of online dating sites, building maps that show geographically the most commonly used words from around the country, including such words as “kinky” and “submissive.”

Now I have no idea if just because your art has you hanging upside-down naked and having a woman shave your legs that you are actually into that sexually. I wouldn't assume that. (The kinkiest people may be those who are into Anne Geddes — who knows?) But if you are looking for an audience that might be a little more receptive to your art, Dubois suggests a couple of the “alternative dating sites” that he mapped for his project, [alt.com](#) and [collarme.com](#), as well as [fetlife.com](#), which he tells me is a “Facebook-style” social network for sexual daredevils.

Here is Luke’s advice for you, based on his own artistic adventures on these sites:

when i was making 'perfect union', one of the things that i thought was fascinating about the alternative dating sites was the level of transparency in the profiles... with kink there's very little need to lie about, fudge, or gloss over what might be seen on vanilla dating sites as unusual aspects to your personality or lifestyle. folks on those sites express themselves in a much deeper, and more honest way, and eschew platitudes... chances are if your reader puts up an honest profile of what he's into and

how he integrates it into his artwork, he'll get plenty of interest. he might even find a muse for some future art.

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**My young and handsome boyfriend runs a very new and successful art fair and he travels around the world meeting rich and important art collectors who are all very glamorous, sophisticated, and beautiful. I feel very left out but he categorically refuses to take me with him or even introduce me to his new scene. I am convinced it is because I am not glamorous enough for him and his new found friends and I am afraid he is going to leave me. Help!**

—NO FAIR

This is a serious question.

Let me say at the outset that there are plenty of reasons why someone might not want their significant other with them on the contemporary art fair circuit.

Art fairs may look fun from the outside, but for those for whom they are work and not play, they are the most dismal circle of art-world hell, a non-stop high-stakes social roller coaster. And those “glamorous, sophisticated, and beautiful” art collectors your beau depends on can also be superficial, entitled, and vain — just because people know what the “Cremaster” cycle is doesn’t keep them from acting like “Mean Girls.”

So, there are reasons why someone might either feel they can’t do their job right if they had to think about their S.O., or simply want to keep the authentic part of their life apart from the work part. As an art critic, my main concern is that he has been unable to *paint you a convincing picture* of why he doesn’t want you around.

There’s no right way to be as a couple, and any type of arrangement can “work” depending on the desires of the people involved. But imagine that your boy brought you back a piece of garbage art from one of his art fairs. Just because he loves garbage art doesn’t mean that you have to like it, especially if he can’t explain to you why he likes it in a way that convinces you.

What you have here, NO FAIR, is the garbage art of relationship problems. Surely, your art fair director must know the value of convincing explanations; he spends all day explaining slippery, difficult-to-value things to people. I would suggest that if your lover makes you feel under-valued — that he doesn't make you feel truly “glamorous enough for him” — then it may be time to junk him.

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### **Any suggestions for the single on Valentine's Day?**

— Identity Withheld by Request

Valentine's Day, according to some [accounts](#), began as an attempt by the Christian Church to displace the Roman fertility celebration of [Lupercalia](#), a ritual which involved men sacrificing goats and dogs, and then flogging the bare buttocks of women with their bloody hides. (Sounds a bit like a rdupree work, doesn't it?)

Today, little of this primal pagan spirit remains. V-Day has become sublimated into the flagship holiday of what the German aesthetic philosopher Theodore Adorno called the “culture industry,” capitalism's manipulation of human desire through consumer culture so that it crushes the very humanity of humanity itself!

“Everywhere bourgeois society insists on the exertion of will; only love is supposed to be involuntary, pure immediacy of feeling,” Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia*. “In its longing for this, which means a dispensation from work, the bourgeois idea of love transcends bourgeois society. But in erecting truth directly amid the general untruth, it perverts the former into the latter.”

Now that is poetry! The man must have written some amazing Valentine's cards! (It must be mentioned, however, that his retirement from philosophy was triggered by what the Germans call "[der Busenaktion](#)," or the "bared-breast action," when female students interrupted his "Introduction to Dialectical Thinking" class, flashed him and showered him with flowers and kisses. He never recovered.)

As an art critic, I will not — cannot! — deny that romance has been one of the great motive forces of art. But as a student of visual culture, I also know that romance is romanticized, the star emotion of the culture industry.

Yet modernist art teaches us that solitude and rupture are as fertile forces as union and synthesis. Modern art itself arguably begins with an act of rejection: the Salon des Refusés of 1863, which spurred the spurned artists — and the generations after who took delight in breaking up with tradition and declaring their independence — on to legend.

I do not recommend that you follow Adorno down the path of sexless philosophical misanthropy. But the man was quite right to theorize that love is part of a DIALECTICAL WHOLE, existing in tension with solitude, and that its true content is annihilated by the one-sided overemphasis on it. If Valentine's Day is the great holiday of the lover, yielding and attentive, then it can also be the great holiday of the self-sustaining individual, in command of his own desire. Those two, together, are the ideal couple.

*"[The Art Lover](#)" is a column by ARTINFO chief art critic [Ben Davis](#). If you have a question about love and/or art, write [bdavis\[at\]artinfo.com](mailto:bdavis[at]artinfo.com). Don't be shy.*