

The Rise and Fall of the Louise Blouin Art Media Empire

A former employee looks back on his experience with the company.

Ben Davis, August 8, 2017



Louise Blouin speaks at the Fifth Annual Blouin Creative Leadership Summit at the Metropolitan Club on September 19, 2011 in New York City. (Photo by Thos Robinson/Getty Images for The Louise Blouin Foundation)

Last week, Louise Blouin, the inimitable publisher behind the self-branded Blouin art-media empire (blouinartinfo.com, *Blouin Modern Painters*, *Blouin Art + Auction*, etc.), sent out a triumphant press release announcing the launch of “the world’s largest lifestyle marketplace.”

Called Blouinshop.com, naturally, the new venture boasts more than 100,000 items that have been carefully chosen by industry experts to suit varied individual artistic tastes, according to the release. Objects on offer range from an [\\$8 Centre Pompidou tote bag](#) to a [\\$14,400 Erich Dieckmann armchair](#).

So far, it hasn’t made much of a splash.

Meanwhile, if you look away from this spotlight and instead train your eyes on the hulking publishing enterprise she has built over the past decade, you will see it is crumbling.

How many people out there still care about the implosion of the Blouin organization as we know it and its hail-mary mutation into an e-commerce hub? Not that many, it seems. And no one has done more than Louise Blouin herself when it comes to transforming her once formidable enterprise into a punch line.

To measure the magnitude of her fall from grace, maybe it's worth going back 10 years. Then, Louise Blouin—at the time, still Louise Blouin MacBain—was the toast of the art world, a fearsome new contender whose media ambitions were set to shake things up.

Then, she merited a segment on the BBC's *Culture Show*. “A new player on the British art scene is causing quite a stir with her combination of business savvy and visionary idealism,” the host reported, breathlessly. “But Louise MacBain is not an artist, nor a dealer, nor a critic. She's actually a highly successful magazine publisher.”

She had acquired her flagship magazines *Art + Auction* in 2003 and *Modern Painters* in 2005, and just launched her website, Artinfo.com. She was touted as a revolutionary out to modernize the art magazine business. “When she recently began to take an interest in contemporary art,” explained the *Culture Show*, “she found the world of art publishing to be a bit of a backwater, ripe for restructuring.”

The hosts say that Blouin “could create a €500 million powerhouse.” “We really have not had this model before,” the artist [Antony Gormley](#) enthused. Charles Saumarez Smith, then head of the National Gallery, compared Blouin's ambitions to the great art patrons of the 19th century: “I have every confidence that she has the capacity to do something of great significance.”

Of great significance, yes. But these days, mainly as a cautionary tale.

To a certain extent, her aura lingers. As late as last year, something called MoneyNuggets.co.uk (“Empowering Women Through Financial Education”) [listed Louise Blouin](#) as among its top inspirations for women, pegging her wealth at £420 million and offering the Louise Blouin Media group (actually renamed [BlouinArtinfo Corp](#)) as evidence of her business savvy.

But in June, after years of agonizing downsizing and freakish self-inflicted wounds—all of it chronicled lovingly by the New York Post, which has attempted to brand her the “Red Queen”—Blouin finally outsourced the last vestiges of her once-multitudinous New York editorial offices to India. The official address listed beneath the recent BlouinShop press release is in Bangalore.

You’d think the disadvantages of running a high-end luxury-art empire on cut-rate outsourced labor would be obvious. Yet it is truly unclear whether Blouin herself understands what she has done.

Scan the headlines on Artinfo, which has already for some time been populated primarily with badly rewritten press releases, all with “Blouin Artinfo” bylines to disguise the fact that they are largely written by writers in India who have never come anywhere near the things they are covering.

(A representative for Louise Blouin Media denies this, stating that the company works with 500 freelancers globally, from Hong Kong and China to Japan, Australia, Germany, France, and the USA, and that the staff has “close to 352 years of cumulative experience.” The company’s chairman, the spokeswoman says, is working to bring in “even more contributors across the world, with more in-depth knowledge, criticism, and specialists.”)

But does anyone besides Louise Blouin think that an article like “Wonder Woman at Cobble Hill Cinemas” represents “must-read” coverage of the New York culture beat? Features from the now-outsourced magazines had been the one thing keeping the site from being a total joke.

According to both the Post and everyone I have talked to from the inside, Blouin initially fired the remaining staffs of *Art + Auction* and *Modern Painters* with the clever idea of rehiring the key ones as freelancers.

The tiny problem with that scheme: Blouin has a long and notorious history of not paying freelance writers. This goes back to the cheekily named Writers Angry At Artinfo Not Kidding Around Anymore (WAAANKAA) coalition, formed by aggrieved freelancers to demand payment, in 2010.

“Her power and success, not to mention the Marie Antoinette splendor of her lifestyle, were aphrodisiacal,” former paramour Simon de Pury writes of Blouin on page 1 of his memoir, The Auctioneer. This “Marie Antoinette lifestyle” has

always very much included a certain “let them eat cake” attitude towards her employees.

At any rate, the terminated staff unanimously declined Blouin’s generous offer of casualized employment. (The LBM spokeswoman said that the terminated New York-based staff gave the company a counteroffer that “we could not accept.”)

It remains unclear what will happen to the magazines. The spokeswoman says that new editors have been appointed, and that the staff includes unnamed *Bloomberg* and *New York Times* alumni. With the launch of the shop and a companion magazine called *BlouinShop*, the company is not contracting, but expanding, she claims.



The goal, it appears, is to seamlessly integrate the editorial products with the shop itself. “This is essential in today’s world where content is king, and the same teams should be involved regardless of the platforms,” the spokeswoman said. “Like always, we will have a top editorial team working on it. The only difference is that we are large and have a greater international reach and using hard-core globally known critics.”

I worked as Executive Editor at Artinfo from 2011 to 2013, towards the peak of its influence. The war stories from my own tenure await another essay; I have always said they are hard to tell, because they sound like parodies or exaggerations.

But the facts are out there, if you want a sense of what it is like working for Louise Blouin. I actually think de Pury’s description is not bad: “Her dialogue was a cross between Carlos Castaneda and the *Wall Street Journal*, spiritual New Age meets the Fortune 500.”

A few years ago, the *Observer* published one of her frenzied email directives, which gives you an idea. Sample: “To go to old master and see frieze masters in the home page is not goodink the old master Aa online link the experts to be stronger....”

Outsourcing her art-media empire to India may sound implausibly poorly thought-out. Yet, as a scheme, it stands as both the consequence and logical conclusion of all her other schemes.

Asked once by the *Guardian* what her dream was, Blouin gave an answer as grammatically strange as it is revealing: “International. The world.”

The idea of herself as a global visionary seems to be Blouin’s version of Antoinette playacting as a shepherdess. Every year, she hosts the obscure Blouin Creative Leadership Summit, a senseless “Art Davos” built to flatter this self-image. Her media properties are also, it seems, less a business proposition than a vehicle for that fantasy.

Thus, anyone watching from the outside around 2012 or so would have seen a site explosively expanding into new countries, launching Artinfo Brazil and Artinfo Australia and Artinfo Russia and Artinfo Southeast Asia, and so on.

The parts expanded without any sense of how they might fit together, just the simple idea that “international = good.” The new, parallel-universe foreign

Artinfos all cut-and-pasted articles from one another, confusing both readers trying to navigate them and Google with the duplicate content.

Instead of expanding Artinfo's influence, Blouin's impetuous internationalization actively weighed it down.

I can't speak to the accuracy, but a report by Joe Pompeo, quoting someone who saw the books, said that the foreign sites were costing about \$60,000 a month to run. (The spokeswoman says that figure is "baseless and incorrect," but declined to share specific numbers.)

At a certain point, Artinfo seemed to be on steroids, expanding haphazardly from its strength in art into the much more crowded Design, Architecture, Fashion, and Performing Arts sectors—the very definition of a "red ocean" business strategy, expanding into areas where competition was fierce and there is no chance to profit.

Still, in time, Blouin even came to find culture too small for her ambitions, and launched Blouin News, a freestanding Blouin-branded CNN rival.

Did you even know it existed? No one does. Can you figure out what it is for? I can't!

Yet far and away, the decision that took the cake was the rebranding of "Artinfo" as "BlouinArtinfo." This misplaced play to compete with Arianna Huffington and Michael Bloomberg made the site a laughingstock, baffling readers who couldn't figure out how to say "Blouin" or what a "Blouin" was, and further inflicting violence on the site's architecture with the URL change.

It was a short while later, in a further twist of brilliance, that Blouin chose to nonsensically rename her print magazines after her already nonsensically rebranded website: *Modern Painters* became *BlouinArtinfo.com Modern Painters*; *Art + Auction* became *BlouinArtinfo.com Art + Auction*. (The "Artinfo.com" has since been dropped from the official titles of the print magazines.)

I can't imagine what casual art-magazine buyers made of the non-sequitur on the newsstands. From the editorial staff perspective, the name change at least had the merit of putting front and center the cause of all the magazines' increasingly strange character: Louise Blouin's delusions of grandeur.

What goes up must come down. The present crash is the direct result of Blouin's zany, ego-driven expansionary drive. Perhaps on some level, she actually believes that somehow India is a better beachhead for her global empire. I can't tell. (Incidentally, Blouin already has a history of non-payment in India that has provoked its own protests, so how long that will last is an unknown.)

Still, Blouin Corp has limped along for all this time, muddling through. The sites muddle on still today. (The spokeswoman notes that Blouin's portfolio also still contains Blouin Gallery Guide, the Blouin Art Sales Index, the art-catalogue publisher Somogy, and the Louise Blouin Foundation.)

So why are these latest layoffs different than the last wave, or the last, or the last before that?

Because, whatever Louise Blouin thought she was doing, the key to her influence was the people who actually did the work.

I'm actually proud of what I accomplished there. I worked with great people.

A tremendous number of talented writers and editors passed through Blouin properties in their different configurations, both before my time there and after.

Any goodwill and prestige Blouin's media properties have garnered, apart from the rank sycophancy inspired by her wealth, she owes to that flow of people who wrote the stories, edited the copy, laid out the magazines, sold the ads, built the websites, and everything else—even as the environment became more and more surreal, inhospitable, and out of whack with reality.

When that tap dries up, there is nothing left—though there is every indication that Louise Blouin will never admit that to herself.