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The Business

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The Aristocrats

Wesley Kimler starts his own art club—and not everybody's welcome.

By Deanna Isaacs

David Roth says it's just a coincidence that Sharkforum, a new culture blog he's launched with painter Wesley Kimler, surfaced right after Kimler's man-eating prose was banned from Art Letter, the Chicago art site run by former dealer Paul Klein. "Klein's forum is where I met Wesley," says Roth, an artist and musician, "but this is not meant to be an alter ego to Art Letter. Paul's providing a venue for a really big party; we're trying to run Sharkforum more like a magazine. One analogue would be the Huffington Post." Unlike Klein's forum, which until recently was wide-open, Sharkforum will give a select few people the "means to think in public" and field comments from the peanut gallery. "It's more like a brain trust," Roth says.

The contributors' circle consists of a dozen or so friends of the founders. They include MCA curator Lynne Warren, *NewCity* film critic Ray Pride, poet Simone Muench, Louisville writer and musician Paul K, and, from Europe, critic Mark Staff Brandl. "We wanted a blog where people are using their own names," Roth says. "And we wanted to bring together different creative disciplines, get some freedom and heat going." Recent posts include Warren's advice to artists and curators to broaden their cultural horizons by, for example, tuning in to Rush Limbaugh; Nancy Bockoven's account of baiting Kimler with Linzer cookies to get him to help her pick up a mattress; and a word-of-the-day feature by Muench. This cyber salon is also meant to be a springboard for events the group plans to host, including a quarterly music party at Kimler's studio.

Kimler, who's taken to referring to himself as the Shark, says the new blog is what the Chicago Art Foundation, launched earlier this year, was meant to be—back when it was an idea he and artist Tony Fitzpatrick were kicking around. "A lot of the original ideas were mine," he says. Kimler says he and Fitzpatrick, looking to join with a few others to raise the profile of the Chicago art scene, called a meeting to which Klein was invited. Shortly thereafter, he says, "Paul was made director of CAF, voted in by the original board, which I reluctantly agreed to. He immediately proceeded to fire members of the



Kimler (right) and Sharkforum cofounder David Roth

board"—namely Kimler and Fitzpatrick—"and dumb it down." Kimler disagreed with Klein's "democratic" approach to CAF, which he described on Art Letter as inviting "the CAC [Chicago Artists Coalition] bunch to the party... thus creating for yourself a multi-headed hydra of egalitarian beige mush"; he says he was booted because of his objections to ideas like the building of an expensive new museum with a guaranteed director's job for Klein. (Fitzpatrick, who became cochair of the CAF artists' advisory board, says, "I regret that we don't still have Wesley, because he had some amazing ideas.") Kimler also claimed on the Art Letter forum that Klein, who's in charge of commissioning works for the McCormick Place expansion, "threatened me with a loss of a commission if I made any trouble... after the CAF firing," and showed me an e-mail from Klein suggesting that battling him wouldn't be good for his pocketbook.

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Klein says Kimler was asked to leave the board—and also to skip the artists' meetings—because members felt his "interests were not concurrent with those of the board." He adds that Kimler misinterpreted the aforementioned e-mail: "I was alluding to how a commission involves an on-going relationship between a curator, an artist and various committees. It is not only about the art and aesthetic considerations but about the personalities involved... Art committees don't want to have unpleasant tasks. I wanted Wesley involved and was trying to get him to see the light."

According to Kimler, Klein's idea of a bricks-and-mortar institution is "incredibly provincial" (and not "what museums of the future will be"), when what's lacking is a means of getting Chicago art known outside the city. "I felt we needed a cyber site that would target specific events and that people all over the world could immediately

access," he says. "I wanted to do something modest, smart, and light on its feet, for maybe \$50,000 or \$100,000 at most. That got turned into 'Well, we're going to raise \$100 million and build this new museum.' Of course [now] that's all been downsized, 'cause it's preposterous." (CAF has tabled its plans for a large, centrally located freestanding museum; Klein says it was taking too long to get off the ground. They're now looking for a smaller space that could be open by midsummer.)

Sharkforum "isn't about everybody," Kimler says. "It's an aristocracy in the best sense of the word. The people gathered around to be part of this are the people that we think are the best in their fields." And who decides who those people are? "Dave and myself"

Miscellany

Chicago Jewish Theatre will move to the hood this summer, trading its 50-seat Andersonville storefront for the 260-seat auditorium in Skokie's Mayer Kaplan Jewish Community Center, original home of the now defunct National Jewish Theatre. It will rent the space and operate as an independent entity, though the Center's board will get to approve plans for each season's lineup. The current digs, at 5123 N. Clark, can be had on a four-year sublease; rent is \$4,300 per month... Former League of Chicago Theatres head Marj Halperin says the biggest difference between running the league and managing Forrest Claypool's campaign for Cook County Board president is "I don't see as many plays." Another difference: everything's riding on the political equivalent of the audition—the March primary. The main event next fall? A mere encore... Funding a lost cause: Little Pyewacket Theatre had trouble attracting money while it was an active operation; now, announcing its own demise after more than eight years, the company is looking for donations to help erase a final debt of \$18,000 by the end of February... Wanna make art for the el (and get paid for it)? There's a first-phase deadline coming up on January 20 for the Arts in Transit program; info at 312-742-1161. **■**

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