

Art Appreciation in a World of Risk



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Last week I took advantage of an opportunity to combine two of my favorite pastimes: reading and relaxation. While on a short vacation, I read *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, by art world chronicler Sarah Thornton. In her never dull book, Sarah explores the themes of politics, kinship, and craft through a series of interviews with contemporary artists. The interviews, which took place over several years, occurred at art installations and exhibitions, coffee shops, and in several artist homes and studios.

As I traveled around the globe and art world with Thornton and joined her journey to ‘humanize’ and ‘demystify’ contemporary art, I gained insights into the unique histories and perspectives of her subjects. Unexpectedly, I also came to understand several potentially valuable lessons for [Center clients](#) and [Affiliate Members](#).

- **Celebrate your unique vision for risk management** – Over the years many Center clients have professed a preference to ‘avoid reinventing the wheel.’ While we discourage fixing something that ain’t broken, we strongly encourage clients to explore and celebrate their unique histories, circumstances and visions for risk management. For example, a current Center client recently expressed an interest in building risk assessment capabilities at the functional level in the organization. This contrasts with a more common preference to delegate risk assessment to a committee comprised of mid to senior level managers. We were excited to have a chance to teach the ‘art’ of risk assessment to functional teams and help this organization achieve its mission-centered vision for risk practice.
- **Embrace critical feedback** – During her interviews with celebrated and lesser-known contemporary artists, Thornton explores how they view the artistic visions and work of their peers, as well as how they view the reaction from journalists and others in the art world. In some cases, the artists shrug off negative feedback, while in other instances they counter with equally harsh critiques of their peers. During Center-led [Risk Assessments](#), our team offers candid feedback on existing risk strategies, and also invites candid responses to our recommendations and suggested frameworks. We have observed a vast continuum of how leaders invite and receive feedback. Some cultures suppress feedback by making it difficult or dangerous to challenge the status quo or long-standing approach. Other cultures warmly welcome critical feedback from insiders and outsiders alike; leaders in this type of organization embrace any ideas that will help their missions and programs evolve. One of the simplest methods for transforming feedback loops is to increase and simplify opportunities to provide feedback. Some nonprofits have found that anonymous reporting serves this purpose. Whatever tactic you choose,

remember that candid feedback is your forever friend.

- **Trust your instincts** – One of the lingering lessons from *33 Artists in 3 Acts* was the importance of trusting your gut instincts. Several of the artists profiled are considered controversial, even in the eclectic world of contemporary art. Yet the interviews suggest that artists are driven if not obsessive about following their instincts, even when everyone around them questions their motives, methods and results. In many Center [Risk Assessments](#), we are asked to ‘identify the risks we haven’t thought of.’ We frequently explain that internal stakeholders generally have the best instincts to identify and understand risks, from the strategic risks in the nonprofit’s stratosphere, to the mundane risks lurking in long-standing programs and services.

Sarah Thornton’s book offers a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ perspective on contemporary art-making and artists. Not every artist profiled will be flattered by the personas, habits and foibles revealed in her intimate portraits. Yet like an independent assessment of the risk function in a nonprofit, the perspective of the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ ultimately helps create a richer picture of what is and what can be.

Melanie Herman is executive director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about the intersection of art appreciation and risk management, and your questions about the Center’s consulting services and cloud applications. Melanie can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.