

Here are hundreds of Chicago artists posing for a group photo



Outgoing Chicago artist Jason Lazarus uses a megaphone to arrange hundreds of area artists that showed up for a group portrait on the steps of the Museum of Contemporary Art on June 20, 2015. (Michael Noble Jr., Chicago Tribune)



By **Steve Johnson**
Chicago Tribune

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Hundreds of Chicago artists, plus a pigeon, add up to a great day in Streeterville.

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When hundreds of artists get together for probably the largest group photo Chicago's community of makers has seen, what burst of creativity do they come up with to utter at the moment the shutter is opened?

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Not "Camembert." Not "Gorgonzola." Not, say, "Tomme de Savoie." Also not "olives" or "merlot" or a dozen other words you could think of to bring a smile to the face.

Just good old "cheese," like hundreds of millions of Americans have done before while holding billions of not-always-persuasive grins for life's endless parade of snapshots.

But if the word was ordinary, the event was not. More than 600 Chicago artists filled the front steps of the Museum of Contemporary Art early Saturday afternoon while a man with a borrowed bullhorn and another man on a 12-foot ladder guided their collective pose.

The aim was to record, for posterity, the Chicago artist community, circa 2015, or at least that portion of it able and willing to get downtown on a bright, late spring Saturday.

And the mood was festive, almost buoyant. The lack of clouds wasn't necessarily great for the image, said Jason Lazarus, the Chicago artist who organized the group portrait and was wielding the bullhorn, "but at the same time, the weather is starting to be as welcoming as the camaraderie."

The word "awesome" kept coming up.

"Oh, this is so awesome. I've got to, like, stand to the side and look for people," said Summer Coleman, 36, a sculptor and graphic designer from Maywood. "It's awesome getting all the artists together, learning there's more than one little community."

"I've been part of smaller photos within our communities," said Paul Branton, a partner in the Chicago gallery Aplomb. "It's fantastic to be more inclusive."

"I was joking with Ken up there, in black, 'I see you every 10 years,'" said Maja Bosen, who works in the Bridgeport neighborhood with encaustics, an art form involving beeswax.

"Artist are a bunch of posers, anyway," said Mark Swindle, 56.

"I don't get out of the studio very often," said Rodney Pointer, 47, a visual artist from Rogers Park. "The invitation said 'all Chicago artists.' I figured this would be a good time to come and see the heart and soul of creativity in this city."

So did another creature.

Smack in front of the ensemble, stubbornly, amusingly, then almost eerily, sat Earth's most unflappable pigeon. It was at almost the exact center of the wide expanse of steps and people. It turned at one point to pose in right profile.

l, sometime in the middle of all the photos being
pht of field.

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Of course the bird would be in the photo, Lazarus responded. Artists do not take a compositional gift such as this and crop it out.

People later would debate the metaphorical significance of the pigeon. Did it represent the Chicago artists who could not be there, whether by death or other, less insistent commitment? Did it stand for the stubbornness of the artistic pursuit, of a vision chased down when it would sometimes be so much easier to just cap the paint tubes and yield to the day job?

Or was the bird, which didn't move during loud bursts of applause and other moments that would spook any ordinary wild animal, a kind of benediction from the spirit of surrealism?

A butterfly, after all, was flitting about on the bags of camera gear just before the photo was taken. And a huge dragonfly affixed itself for multiple minutes to the left shoulder of the sleeveless top worn by Chicago artist Diane Christiansen, also known as frontwoman of the band Dolly Varden.

Then again, maybe the pigeon was so patient because of the delicious human foodstuff that seemed to be on offer. When, you could imagine it thinking, will all this promised cheese finally show up?

"I have a feeling the bird will be a meme on the Internet," Lazarus said.

Much of the applause was for Lazarus, whose idea for this world's-largest-photo-booth was born of an impending departure from the city of his adulthood.

"Get in the picture!" people kept shouting to him. For the last of maybe 20 shots, he did, along with official photographers Aron Gent, who had been using a Nikon D800 up on the ladder, and Patrick Putze, shooting from an adjacent stepladder on a vintage Burke & James 4-by-5-inch-negative field view camera.

(Many, many others took their own snapshots. Via Facebook and the Library of Congress, Lazarus plans to freely share the resulting "official" image, he said, once it is ready in, he anticipates, a couple of weeks.)

Lazarus, 39, is a well-regarded conceptual artist who has been shown, among many other places, in the [MCA](#). He is taking a teaching job in Florida and wanted to leave a sort of parting gift.

Inspired by such famous group photos as "A Great Day in Harlem," which immortalized jazz greats in a 1958 shoot, and an early 1920s portrait of Dadaist artists in Paris, Lazarus proposed a Chicago artists' assembly.

He talked to the MCA, which said yes right away. He posted notices on Facebook and reached out through other art world channels. The goal, he said, was to try to be inclusive in ways that the art world isn't always: If you considered yourself a Chicago artist, whether you live in Pilsen or Wheaton, whether you've shown at the Art Institute or to a handful of friends, come on out.

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he flourish was thick-framed glasses, a colorful
s. But there were people who looked like soccer

moms, too, or kindly, doting grandfathers. They wore cycling gear, fancy hats, dramatic linens, prosaic cargo shorts. One artist unabashedly used a selfie stick; another drove to the museum in a car with the license plate "SCLPTOR."

Some 1,200 people had replied on Facebook that they would be there. That about half of those actually made it is probably one of the better intention-to-execution ratios for a Facebook event.

Also impressive for artists, said more than a few on hand, was that the photo more or less came off on time, starting just a few minutes after the announced 12:30 p.m. target.

"I was expecting us to be late," said Allen Vandever, 42, who said he paints in "an op-erotic expressionistic style."

They did, however, cut close to the deadline. A half-hour before go time, Lazarus had worried that the Facebook response was going to be closer to "X times point-three," he said.

"Ten minutes ago, there was more gray than there is flesh" on the steps, he said then, meaning the steps' stone cladding was showing through. "Now there is more flesh than gray."

As they arrived, people checked in at a folding table, wrote their names on a sheet of paper and held them up for iPad snapshots. The goal, Lazarus said, is to create a legend for the finished photograph.

"It reminds people they do count. They are being acknowledged," said Lazarus. "That's what this event today is all about."

Ahead of the shoot, the artists mingled vigorously, both in front of the steps and on them, before settling into place. Passersby pulled up on bicycles or stopped on foot to try to figure out what was happening.

The gray of the steps disappeared, and Lazarus took to the megaphone. "I saw a little test shot, and everyone looks great," he said. "My heart is exploding, seeing all these people."

The people clapped.

"I see multiple teachers, who've brought me many hours of stress — and growth," Lazarus said.

The people laughed.

Then: "One, two, three, boom," said Lazarus. "Three, two, one, cheese."

After all the picture were taken, the crowd broke up, slowly filtering back into their separate worlds. A couple of kids chased the pigeon around the plaza. The museum steps went back to their native color.

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aphs that will demonstrate it had been a pretty

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Here's what it looks like when more than 600 Chicago artists pose for a group photo - Chicago Tribune

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