

# Akron Beacon Journal

---

## LOCAL

# Couple launches online community for Northeast Ohio artists to exchange their work



**Abbey Marshall**

Akron Beacon Journal

Published 5:55 a.m. ET April 9, 2022

Stepping into Jess Fijalkovich and Chris Harvey’s home is like entering an art gallery: a colorful, eclectic curation of photographs and prints in gold frames hanging on the walls.

Most of their collection highlights local artists, a culmination of their own work and purchased prints — but some of Fijalkovich’s favorite items are the ones she gathered from exchanging her own photos regionally and internationally, a practice she began at the start of the pandemic when she had more time to dedicate to her art.

“Bartering has been a way to exchange goods and services, and I found that idea fascinating,” she said. “I amassed a collection that is personally meaningful to me. It’s not only cool to have the art, but to connect with people and hear the story about how a piece I now get to live with was made.”

The couple decided to take the idea and launch a new endeavor specific to Northeast Ohio: an Instagram-based project that facilitates connections between local artists interested in exchanging their products with one another at no cost.

bARTer’s Instagram (@barter\_barter\_barter) launched last month, highlighting artists of various mediums: everything from graphic novels to fiber art to textiles and more.

The hope, they said, is to remove gatekeeping and barriers that often exist in traditional curation spaces and bolster community.

## **bARTer founders want to disrupt traditional art space practices**

Harvey, a graphic designer, said the idea was inspired by studying ancient civilizations and indigenous cultures that exchanged goods and services.

“Before we even had money, bartering has always been around,” he said. “I wanted [bARTer] to be in the spirit of a trading post where we facilitate the connections and community and they can work out the trade.”

Though they were unsuccessful with an application to receive Knight Foundation funding in the latest arts challenge, they were determined to pursue the project on their own. Harvey said that “do-it-yourself” approach was very much in the spirit of bARTer.

The couple first met while working previous positions at the Akron Art Museum, Fijalkovich said, and they discovered a common goal “to disrupt our little corners of the art community in Akron and beyond,”

In 2020, the museum's top management was rocked by claims of racism, sexism and intimidation — a controversy that Fijalkovich said was a microcosm of a larger art world that is not always inclusive.

Harvey and Fijalkovich wanted their project to be different: a place for anyone, regardless of experience, training or background to feel legitimized as an artist.

“We wanted to get away from a lot of the gatekeeping that happens [with traditional art institutions],” Harvey said. “If you don’t follow a ‘traditional’ path it feels like a lot of things are out of reach. I went to school for graphic design at [Cuyahoga Community College], but I don’t have a traditional four year art background, and it feels like there’s not always opportunities for people who don’t have that university tag. It’s cool and it’s helpful, but you can learn a lot in other ways.”

Any artist can submit an application to be highlighted on bARTer via an online form linked on their Instagram page.

“A lot of these places can stifle creativity and get hands in a lot of the stuff and there’s so much control there,” Fijalkovich said. “I’m more interested in the bottom-up approach where it’s the people who are fueling what’s going on running the show without any daunting requirements.”

## Connecting Northeast Ohio art scenes through social media, events

Fijalkovich now works as the art liaison at the Cleveland Print Room, an art gallery and dark room facility for photographers. She noted that despite the cities' proximity to one another, Akron and Cleveland's art communities feel "disconnected."

"It's a really fragmented art scene," she said. "It's hard to understand why that's happening, but we want to bring together what feels like a disconnected community."

In addition to the Instagram page, bARTer will expand its reach through live events in the region beginning later this month with a print exchange at the Community Darkroom of Akron, 540 S. Main St., on April 30 at 7 p.m. Any photographers, printmaker or found photo collectors are encouraged to print a pride to trade, connect with other artists and build their art collection.

"What I like is the chance to build your collection," Harvey said. "When you buy local art, it's usually cheaper, more unique and you can point to something and say somebody down the street made this and here's the story behind it."

They plan to host more events for other mediums soon as more artists participate.

"What I love about this project is you can also learn about local artists in the city," Harvey said. "It introduces you to new art you might not know about, and you can support someone in the same area and build that community."

*Reporter Abbey Marshall is a corps member with Report for America, a national service program that places journalists into local newsrooms. Learn more at [reportforamerica.org](https://reportforamerica.org). Contact her at [amarshall1@gannett.com](mailto:amarshall1@gannett.com).*