

## **The New Arts Insiders**

New York's cultural influencers are finally being treated like professionals

By Kelsey Martino

Imagine a group of go-getters whose passion helps them find their voice and their community. They might sound like the leads in a Broadway musical, but they're real people who have made their mark by talking about Broadway musicals. They also talk about plays, live events, and attractions across New York City, and because they do it with such flair, hundreds of thousands of people listen to what they say.

These cultural powerhouses are the founding members of The Arts Insider, a digital community curated by AKA NYC. All 20 of them are New York-based social media influencers who have distinguished themselves with their distinct content, large fanbases, and high levels of engagement. They care about arts and entertainment, and they make other people care, too.

New York's cultural sector reaps massive rewards from what these influencers do. "They have authority with their followings, so when they say they like something or they encourage people to check it out, it has a very clear impact," says Grace Aki, AKA's Associate Director of Influence Marketing. She notes that along with an increase in brand awareness, social influencers often generate significant sales: "In case studies we've done, we've even seen influencers with micro followings generate thousands of dollars in ticket sales with just a few posts. That's how connected they are to their audience."

Collectively, the Arts Insider cohort has over 6.3 million followers on TikTok and Instagram alone. They have been curated for diversity across multiple axes, which means their content reaches a vast spectrum of potential audiences. Aki says, "We've hit pockets in tourism. We've hit pockets in arts and culture. We've hit makeup influencers and theater influencers. If everyone in the group had the same focus, then this wouldn't be a diversifying opportunity. But this mix is exciting because it covers so many communities."

The influencers will be trusted to speak to their audiences with their own voices. That way, if five people create content about a single show, those five pieces will all have a distinct point of view. "Even though we give them the brief, they still have the creative freedom to do whatever they want," says SJ Arnegger, AKA's Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement. "We don't want them to stop being themselves. We want them to speak about what they're experiencing with the same authenticity that got them a following in the first place."

That's one reason Gen Nakamura joined the program. He's built a following by explaining the basics of theatergoing, from how to score hard-to-get tickets to understanding the difference between Broadway and Off Broadway. He says, "I'm grateful that I can keep doing what I do, because I'm not trying to influence people who are already experts. I'm trying to bring more people inside. Being an Arts Insider will give me more access than I'm able to get myself, just by fighting for it and paying for it out of my own pocket. And then I can pass the information on to people I'm trying to reach."

That access is crucial. By working with cultural properties via the Arts Insider program, the cohort will be able to create even more robust content about the institutions they love: Broadway shows, museums, destination-based entertainment, and more.

It's hard to overstate what a change this will be. Despite their enormous reach, most of the influencers in New York's cultural scene stand outside the industries they cover. "People don't realize that someone they deeply trust and follow in this small, creative field is very often paying for everything they do themselves," says Katie Oxman. She's amassed a passionate following thanks to her #DressedForBroadway project, which finds her designing outfits inspired by shows she loves. But even though it requires as much attention as a full-time job, her social media work has never been lucrative. "You make no money," she adds. "You're usually just doing it on your own time."

All 20 founding members of the Arts Insiders receive a monthly fee to produce an agreed-upon number of content pieces inspired by the agency's clients. They will also be granted inside access to shows, experiences and destinations. Arengger explains, "We're saying, 'How can we work with you? And what do you need to be successful?' They have built their channels and their followings up from nothing, which is incredible. But they deserve support."

Katie Oxman adds, "We're all striving for access and accessibility. We all care really deeply about getting people to the theater and to live events, and this program is saying, 'We see what you're doing. We think it's valuable.'"

Given how important influencers have become in shaping our lives, it's easy to imagine a program like The Arts Insider as a sign of things to come. "Influencers are only becoming more impactful," says Allison Peters, AKA's Head of Digital Strategy and Social Media. "A site like TikTok is taking the place of Google as people are searching for information or trying to plan events. On TikTok, you can watch someone experience something first hand. That can help you gauge what your experience will be much more effectively than going to a site, reading a description, and hoping for the best. That's incredibly important for a cultural space like Broadway, whose audience has been very niche for a very long time. If an influencer from outside that niche makes Broadway seem welcoming, then people who trust that influencer are going to believe them."