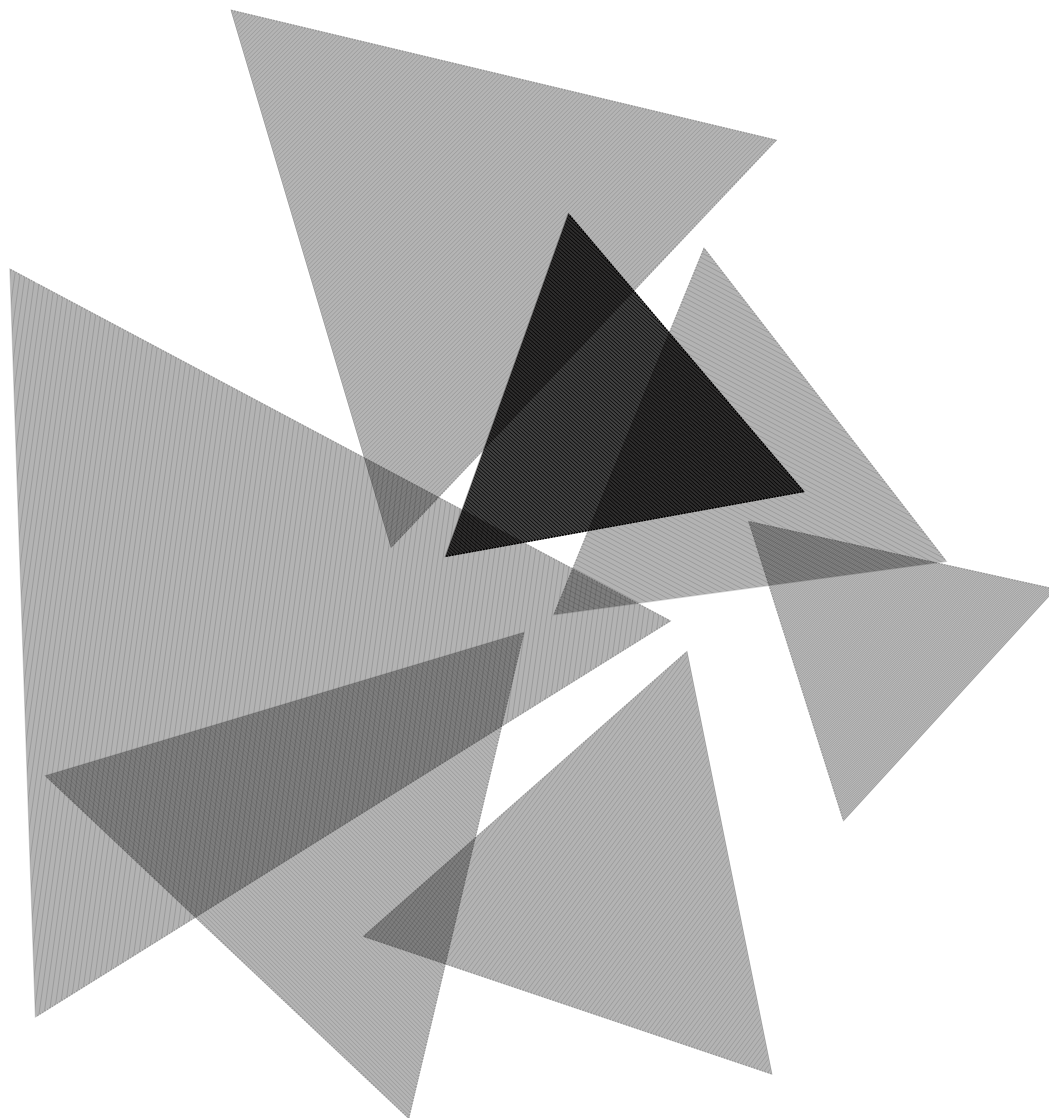
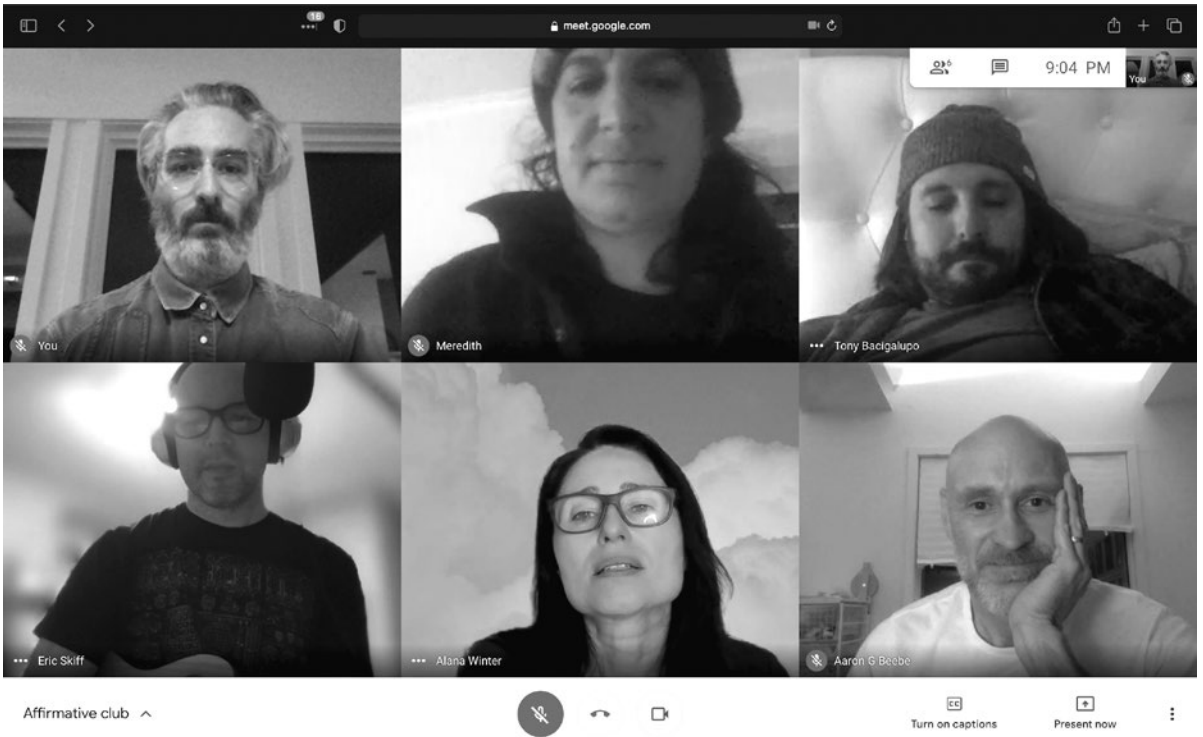


Affirmative Club



A Guide to Starting a Positive and Supportive Creative Community

By Eric Skiff and Bre Pettis



Our Affirmative Club gathers using google meet but we think most videoconferencing solutions will work.

Affirmative Club

One night in November of 2020, we were chatting about missing gatherings and people and wanting to find motivation to be creative. We started brainstorming and came up with a format that we got excited about for sharing creative work in a community with only positive responses allowed. We called it Affirmative Club because of its focus on positive responses to creative work. We invited some friends to join us and we've met every two weeks for the last 4 months.

It's been great. The bi-weekly rhythm of Affirmative Club is just the right push to not put off getting creative work done. We support each others' work with positive responses and the support we feel from each other creates a safe space to take deeper creative risks. Being relentlessly supportive creates a caring and positive place to grow individually and build community. Relentlessly supporting the creative work of others is empowering both for the receiver of support and it does something for the supporter too. There is lots of negativity and criticism that finds its way into the world and we've decided that it doesn't need to be time we spend together in Affirmative Club.

The structure of Affirmative Club is simple and powerful. Every Affirmative Club, we each bring creative work, we each have 5 minutes on a video conference to share our creative work and then we offer each other positive affirmative responses. Then the creator has a moment to say thank you and offer any background info on the creative work and then it's on to the next presentation.

We encourage brave creative folks to start your own Affirmative Club using these guidelines. This infrastructure is offered with none of the responsibilities of ownership. We are not trademarking or moderating Affirmative Club infrastructure. We are setting out a set of instructions that we have found works for us in the hopes that they will work for you. Our intention is that positive support of creativity in small groups is a good thing with potential long term positive impacts on the lives of creatives and the communities they exist in. This works for us, we hope it works for you, and your mileage may vary.

We have some experience creating infrastructure to support creativity and we come with experience moderating groups and have been in our share of flame wars on the net. Our experience with community and moderating contribute to the overall health of our Affirmative Club. If there are folks in your group who have experience moderating or gathering community, consider tasking them with the moderator role in your first meetings.

Starting an Affirmative Club

To begin an Affirmative Club, invite a creative friend to start it with you. With two people, you have a team and that helps to get things off the ground. Once there are two of you, choose a time and frequency that works for you both and invite a few other creative people you know or admire. We have found that you need at least 4 people to have a good community feeling and more than 8 makes the gathering too long.

Communicate to each member that everyone is required to bring creative work to the Affirmative Club and that they will be required to present that work in a presentation limited to 5 minutes. Everyone who comes to an Affirmative Club must present. This expectation is really important and it's one of the few things that you'll need to be hardcore about.

The frequency of your Affirmative Club could be as often as every week for a group composed of prolific creatives or for less prolific creatives you could choose to go as long as a month between Affirmative Club gatherings. For us, every two weeks fits in the sweet spot because we have professional lives outside of our creative pursuits and it just feels like a good rhythm. We also have found that meeting every other Tuesday at 9PM seems to be a good time to gather for our bi-weekly Affirmative Club. If it's all the same to you, go with our proven plan and have your Affirmative Club meetings every other Tuesday at 9PM!

On the day of your Affirmative Club gathering, it's a good thing to remind members and send them the videoconference URL for that evening. We text each other if someone is running late.

Invitation Email Example

Hey Creative Friend,

My friend and I are starting something called an Affirmative Club. The structure of Affirmative Club is pretty simple. We get together every two weeks. Each of us brings work and we have up to 5 minutes to share and then we support each other with positive responses. No criticism or negative responses are allowed.

We will meet every other Tuesday at 9PM starting next week. You're invited to join us in this adventure to create a safe and supportive community of creatives.

If this sounds like something you'd like to do, just respond saying "I'm joining the Affirmative Club" and I'll send you the calendar invite that will have a google meet link in it for you to click on to join the videoconference.

Remember, you've got to bring some creative work to share to each meeting that you will present with a maximum presentation time of 5 minutes. Poetry, drawing, painting, singing, music, photography and really any type of creative work that you can share in a video conferencing format are welcome. Hope you can join. Let me know ASAP!

Reminder Email Example:

Hello Creative Friend,

Tonight is Affirmative Club and we will gather to share our creative work and support each other with positive responses. Remember to come prepared with creative work. See you tonight!

Here is the link: [Video Conference Link]

Affirmative Club Agenda

- 1. The Beginning** - No intros, just a little light chitter chatter till everyone has arrived. Be on time or early!
- 2. House Rules** - Code of conduct, confidentiality, and a reminder that we don't interrupt each other and that it's important to hear everyone.
- 3. Presentation Order** - The Moderator chooses a presentation order randomly and invites the first presenter to begin. It can be handy to jot the order down or use the order of thumbnails in your videoconference to keep it simple.
- 4. Presentations** - The first presenter shares. It's important that they don't go over the 5 minute mark, but shorter is fine! It's the moderators job to let the presenter know when they have used up their time. Presenters should resist the urge to discount their work, engage in negative self talk, or set up context before presenting. When in doubt, just start!
- 5. Positive Responses** - After the presentation, each member offers a positive response to the work. These are best kept to about a minute. It's important that each member responds with a positive response. The moderator may need to prompt next responder.
- 6. Gratitude & Postamble** - After the responses the presenter has a moment to offer gratitude for the positive responses and has a short opportunity to explain the background or story behind their work.
- 7. On to the Next Presentation** - The moderator prompts the next member to present their work and this continues until everyone has presented their work and everyone has had positive responses to their work and responded to those responses. The moderator presents too!
- 8. General Post Presentation Discussion** - After all the member presentations, the moderator opens the conversation up to any general feedback on how it went.
- 9. Pass the Moderator** - The moderator chooses the next moderator for the next Affirmative Club and closes the meeting with a reminder of the date of the next meeting.

Whatever your job is, whoever you're connected to on your LinkedIn profile, or whatever way you measure yourself doesn't make us think about your creative work any differently. We are going to relentlessly support each others.

The Beginning: No Introductions. No Credentials

When we began our club, we never had a time where we introduced each other and in retrospect, we recognize that was because it is our goal to have the space we create during Affirmative Club be "non-credentialed". Whatever your job is, whoever you're connected to on your LinkedIn profile, or whatever way you measure yourself doesn't make us think about your creative work any differently. We are going to relentlessly support each others' creative work with positive responses regardless of credentials. We suggest you give this a try and resist the temptation to introduce each other and just let each others' creative work speak for itself.

Show up to Affirmative Club early or on time. During the few moments while we gather, show support for the time challenged and text anyone who isn't there to make sure they didn't lose track of time. After we are together, we remind ourselves who is moderating and if that moderator isn't there, a volunteer moderator steps forward.

Presentation Order: Without further ado, the moderator begins Affirmative Club officially by choosing an order of presentations and responses.

The Big Picture

We are here to share our creative work and support each other with positive responses. We don't interrupt and everyone contributes. We only respond to each others' creative work with positive responses. We don't record video or screenshot without advance permission of the presenter. We share vulnerability but not secrets and agree on the Chatham House Rule for confidentiality unless a presenter requests we use a higher level of confidentiality. In our Affirmative Club we have agreed that it's ok to share that we are in Affirmative Club together and that it's ok to say who else is in the club. We each feel comfortable sharing our work with these guidelines and if you're not comfortable, you should identify why and create your own guidelines.

Guidelines for great Affirmative Club meetings

Share the Preamble in the Postamble

Lots of us were taught to disqualify our work or talk down about our own personal work. Resist the temptation to criticize yourself in your presentation. We found that some of us were getting into the habit of criticizing or downplaying or disrespecting our own work as an introduction before presenting it. After identifying this pattern, we agreed that the only time we allow interruptions in our group is to remind a presenter that negative self speak is not allowed. We have found through experience that it works best to just present the creative work during the presentation and leave any explaining to the postamble. Many presentations in our Affirmative Club begin with "I'm going to do the preamble for the postamble!"

The Moderator Prompts Responses

A creative work may send the group into a non-verbal space and folks can forget the order of responses. After a presentation, the Moderator will remind folks of the order of responses. In some cases, it can be helpful for a Moderator to say "Next up is so-and-so's response."

Gratitude and Postamble

After we present and after everyone has reacted positively to the creative work, the presenter gets a moment to show their gratitude for the responses and share any details about how the work was made. This is generally no longer than a minute and effectively closes conversation about the work before moving on to the next presentation.

Examples of Positive Responses

- When you were sharing your work, it made me feel...
- My favorite part of your work was when...
- I noticed that...
- Your work took me to a place...
- Your work made me wonder about...
- This work is so YOU...

Almost Affirmative Responses

Responses like this *might be* okay, but be sure to focus on the presenter and their art, and that any comparisons are complimentary. Try to avoid them when possible.

- "Your work reminds me of a childhood story..."
- "Your work reminded me of my work..."
- "Your work is like somebody else's work..."
- "I think your work connects to this cause that I believe in..."

Accidentally Dismissive Responses

Watch out for statements like these and try and call them out to disperse old habits of criticism. Anyone should feel free to remind members to keep it positive and affirm the art and the artist.

- "I like it, but I wish you had done it some other way..."
- "Your work will be great when you get more practice."
- "That's a great song. Have you thought about having someone with a better voice sing it?"

It may be helpful to think about your fellows' creative work at Affirmative Club as if their work is a baby bird you are holding in your hands. Someday it will fly but your job is to just hold it for the moments that it is with you. No judgement and no pressure. Acceptance and encouragement.

Be aware when your response tells your own story as a reaction. Keep your own storytelling to a minimum

and talk positively about the art. Keep an ear out for critical or negative responses wrapped up in a seemingly positive response.

Be patient with each other around this. We have all had an abundance of exposure in our life to critical and judgemental mindsets. Be generous with “Do-Overs” if things don’t feel right.

Things Can Get Real

Sometimes we may be presented with work by another member that can bring up past trauma or evokes powerful feelings that could include disgust, anger, frustration, rage, loss, grief, or sadness. If we are struggling to find a way to respond positively, we agree that it’s always ok to keep it short and say “That was powerful for me.” and leave it at that.

As a creative, the work you bring isn’t expected to be “pretty” or “happy” and some of the best creative work engages parts of ourselves that we aren’t comfortable with. Your work can have an impact on others and not have anything to do with your intention. Some work will bring up strong memories or related experiences and you may have to remind yourself that the work is not the same as someone’s reaction to it.

Humans are trauma processing creatures and it can be hard to set that aside and give a positive reaction to something that touches a trauma.

No Negative Self Talk

“All I wanted to do was tell you how imperfect my work was. I stopped and said I’m going to do the preamble in the post-amble.” - Eric Skiff

“It is more interesting when you don’t give the preamble and you talk about the work after others’ reaction” - Alana Winter

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We noticed a pattern around negative self talk before presenting. No negative self talk is a good rule and we make an exception to our no interruption rule to interrupt others to remind them of this rule. No negative self talk aligns with the focus on the positive responses to others' work. Negative self talk can be a powerful internal limiting factor and can be just as bad or worse for our process as someone else saying negative things. Sometimes we need help to short circuit a negative self talk pattern.

New Work, Old Work, and No Work

One of the great things about Affirmative Club is that if trust is developed, it is a safe place to share new work. This work might not be pretty, it may not be polished, it may not even be finished. It's still work and it's welcome at an Affirmative Club. It's worth mentioning that not all work presented is positive. We've had poems that evoked sadness, songs that channeled rage, and art that has explored loss, mourning and other powerful feelings that are not always associated with positive vibes. The Affirmative in Affirmative Club is about the positive responses to the work regardless of the creative work's emotional content.

Sometimes life intervenes in our creative process. We can't find a way to make even a haiku that is fresh and we still want to share work and support each other. We have found that sometimes, members surface work from their past. There are good things that can happen when you revisit and share old work. Sometimes old work is very important and hasn't been heard or seen by anyone and by letting it free in an Affirmative Club presentation, new discoveries can be made. For some, curating or updating or editing old work is a way of creating new work.

Sometimes creative work doesn't take the form of traditional artwork.

We've found that there can be great work in quick work and some creators have revealed after presenting that they made their work right before our Affirmative Club gathering. While creativity may exist beyond the bounds of space and time, it surely loves a deadline.

Each group at some point will likely have members that will show up without work to test the rule that everyone needs to bring work to share. The first option when confronted with a no-work-bringer is to give the no-work-bringer a one-time option of presenting last and creating a quick work, like a haiku poem or something else quick while others are presenting. A second option is to encourage the member to pull up some old work and present it. The last option would be for the member to sign off and return to the next meeting with work to share. It is interesting that when we have had this happen, the work presented as quick work and old work was powerful despite the on-demand nature of the creation time. There is a communal cost to the quick work. Work created while others are presenting means that the member creating quick work will not be giving their full attention to the other members as they present.

It is very important to remind folks that they must show up with creative work to share and not let folks show up without presenting. If no-work persists or becomes a habit, the no-work bringer has shifted from a creator to an audience member and the meeting is no longer a meeting of creatives sharing work, but a performance with audience members. There will be an imbalance of power. If you've ever been in a meeting where there are members who don't contribute, you know there is a power dynamic or there is an imbalance of power that isn't healthy.. Groups where everyone is heard and respected are the most powerful groups.

Above all, it is core to the Affirmative Club experience that everyone brings and shares creative work. New work, old work, quick work and no work are good things to discuss as an Affirmative Club together.

General Discussion after Presentations and Moderator Change

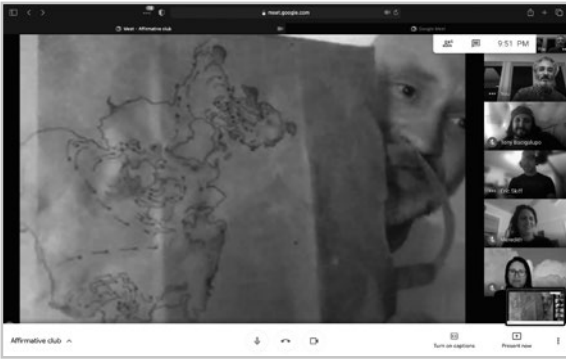
After all the presentations, it can be good to open it up for general discussion. This is a good time for any reflections on the process and a good time to share what is working or not working. We also use this time to confirm the next meeting date and figure out who will be moderating at the next Affirmative Club gathering. Then we all sign off until the next time.

New Members

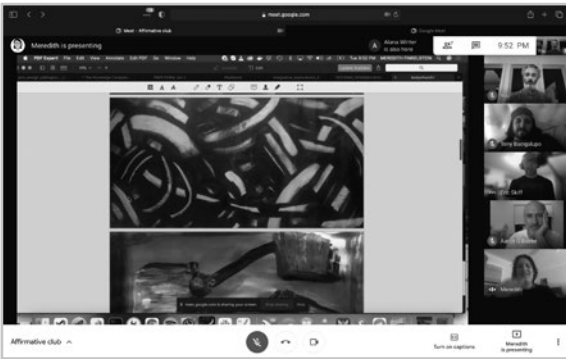
Check in with everyone in the club before inviting new people to avoid accidentally inviting someone who might make someone in the group feel uncomfortable. You could open a conversation with, "I'd like to invite Marjorie, does anyone have any objections?"

Keeping In Contact

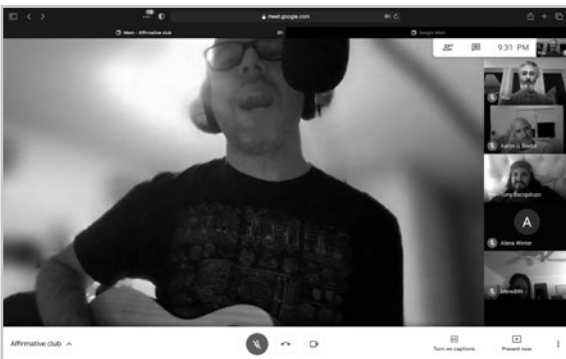
Our group doesn't feel the need to meet or communicate other than our regularly scheduled Affirmative Club time but other Affirmative Clubs may want to experiment with a Slack or Discord group or group email thread for everyone in the club to stay connected or share work that has been done between meetings. Some may find that they like to hold their creative work for Affirmative Club because work shared outside of Affirmative Club doesn't get the same intentional and immediate positive response.



Drawing by Aaron Beebe



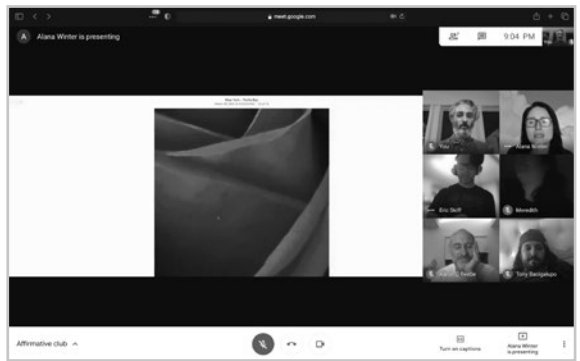
Paintings by Meredith Finkelstein



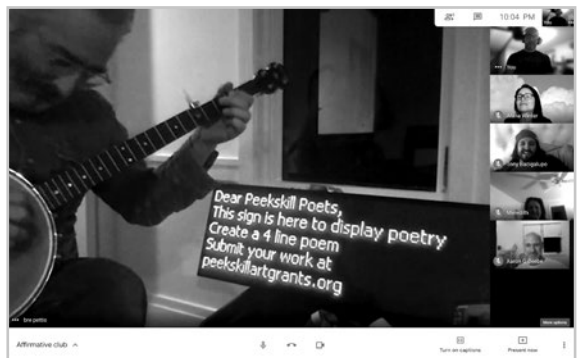
A performance by Eric Skiff



A character driven community gathering initiative by Tony Bacigalupo



Photography by Alana Winter



Bre Pettis performing banjo in front of a poetry gathering LED display.

Our Reactions to Affirmative Club



Paintings by Meredith Finkelstein

Affirmative Club has quickly become one of the most powerful creative and connective forces in our lives. We've shared some of our quotes here to give you a sense of the impact it's had on us. We hope your Affirmative Club does the same for you!

"Because of Affirmative Club, I got back in touch with my creativity that I had not been in touch with for a long time. Knowing that I have to show up with something makes me take the time to give myself the gift of play and creativity. So often we self edit. Bringing something here and getting the kind of feedback and encouragement that I get here takes me out of myself and my head. It makes me feel freer when I'm creating." - Alana Winter

"I love to come to the Affirmative Club and see my fellow humans in their full glorious creative selves that is their birthright." - Meredith Finkelstein

"I love seeing the joyful art that is inside my friends. Everything from surrealist poetry to incredible photography, music, comics, characters, computer art, and even community organization. The freedom to bring creativity and show it to each other has created more connection for me than anything else I've done this year." - Eric Skiff

I want the affirmative club of all the affirmative clubs where we all get together for a big affirmative party in a field. - Meredith Finkelstein

I was sitting on a 15 year musical writers block. The belief that I had a safe space to have positivity reflected back about that work got me over myself and allowed me to move that work forward in a way that I haven't since I was a teenager." - Eric Skiff

“I did a performance for a recent Affirmative Club and many of the response to that were, ‘This is so YOU.’ I felt so seen and embraced by those comments and I feel like my fellow Affirmative Club members really know my creative self. Positive support is one of the most powerful and healing experiences in the universe. I want every creative person to have the kind of support I feel in Affirmative Club.” - Bre Pettis

“Part of my creative practice is creating infrastructure as art. I like to create opportunities and collaborations and new ways people can creatively work together, like Affirmative Club! I was a little hesitant to share these endeavors in our Affirmative Club, but I got great positive feedback. The support I’ve received has helped embrace my non-traditional creative practice and it’s added fuel to my creative fire.” - Bre Pettis

Invitations Not Obligations

By default no member is expected to promote the work of other Affirmative Club members and there will be no proselytizing, recruiting, or any other type of obligation incurred by participants beyond bringing creative work and offering positive responses to others’ work. Any events or experiences outside of Affirmative Club should incur no obligation. Invitations are ok. We have had members post to our email chain about opportunities to chat about things together on Social platforms and we have had folks post when their work is available for sale and these invitations have felt ok.

If you really like a person’s work and want to buy one or trade or something, it is best to reach out to them personally with an email or a txt outside the context of the Affirmative Club video-conference gathering time. This avoids anyone in the group feeling like their work could be valued less and avoids invoking the “last one chosen in the dodgeball game” feeling.

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Bre Pettis

Code of Conduct

Affirmative Club is a club started by a leader or two friends acting as leaders and then it should move to essentially run itself with members acting as equals and sharing the moderator responsibilities. If you have members with a lot of experience with group dynamics, having a code of conduct may feel excessive. We suggest doing it anyway as a strategy for setting the tone explicitly. There isn't any organizing organization for Affirmative Club and nobody is paying for anything, so the reality is that if you don't like how a group is going, you can always leave and start your own with other people or reform the group with less of the current members. As the creator of your Affirmative Club, you have an informal responsibility for setting the tone and enforcing the code of conduct and spreading the responsibility to all members of the group. When new members join your group, it's good to review the code of conduct so everyone is on the same page.

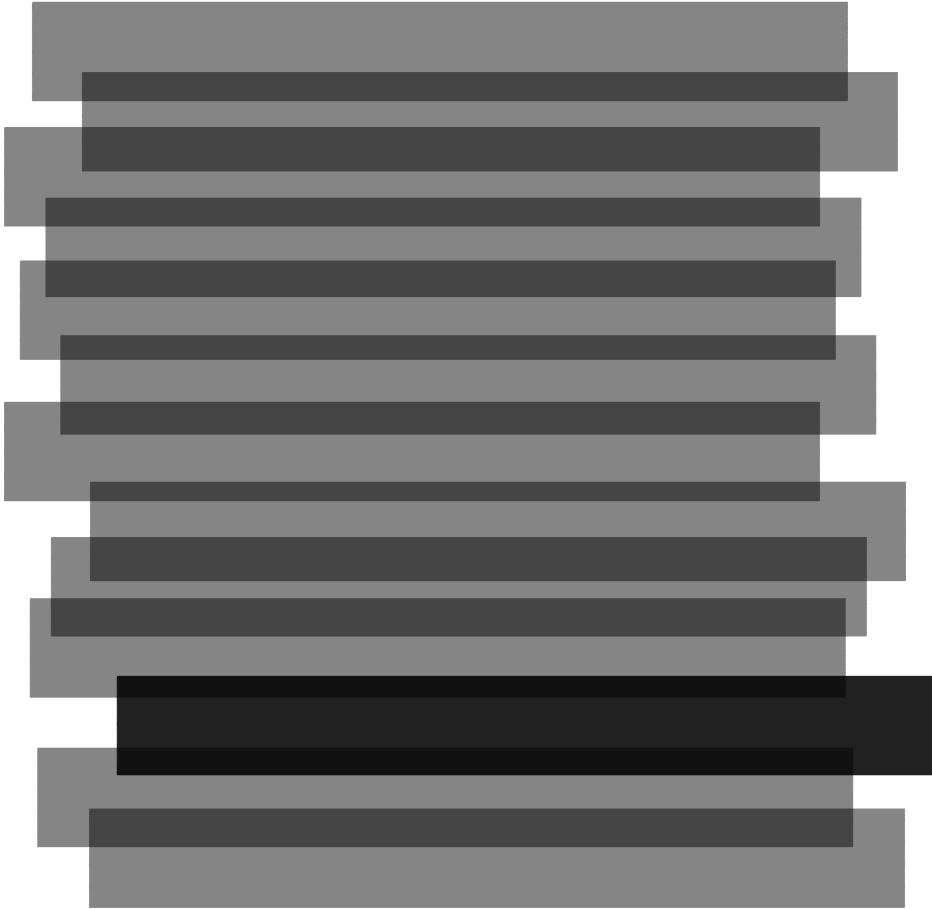
Our Affirmative Club is dedicated to an inclusive, harassment-free experience for everyone regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, appearance, or religion. We do not tolerate harassment of Affirmative Club participants in any form.

Harassment includes offensive verbal comments [related to gender, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, religion], deliberate intimidation, stalking, following, harassing

photography or recording, sustained disruption of presentations or other events, inappropriate physical or online contact, and unwelcome sexual attention. Participants asked to stop any harassing behavior are expected to comply immediately.

We expect participants to follow these rules at all Affirmative Club gatherings both virtual and in person at venues and related social events. If a participant engages in harassing behavior, the other members may take any action they deem appropriate, including warning the offender or expulsion from the Affirmative Club or reforming the club with everyone except the offender. If you are being harassed, notice that someone else is being harassed, or have any other concerns, please share with other Affirmative Club members that you feel safe with immediately.

Affirmative Club is a structure for having a virtual club and isn't an official organization with any governing legal body and so any member of a group may endeavor to help other members cope with harassment which could include contacting local law enforcement or otherwise assisting those experiencing harassment to feel safe. We drew from the Eyeo Festival Code of Conduct and were inspired by the Ada Initiative Code of Conduct Post here: <https://adainitiative.org/2014/02/18/howto-design-a-code-of-conduct-for-your-community/>



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