

Dear Syracuse University MFA Graduates,

In no time at all, you will receive a newly printed Master of Fine Arts degree. This will be a joyous moment, but if you are accustomed to thinking ahead, then you probably started panicking about what it means to have an advanced degree and how you will survive as an artist months ago. I would be lying if I said you had little cause to worry. The truth is that you are entering into a profession that will relentlessly challenge your mental and emotional strength. You, along with throngs of other recent BFA and MFA graduates, will fight for crumbs in an already overpopulated community known less affectionately as the art world. Post college, your self-esteem and confidence will take twice as many hits as the nail you use to hang your degree. However, not all is lost. This is just the beginning and an opportunity to enhance your dedication to your practice. Success, if it interests you, is obtainable. Through hard work, resilience and perseverance, you can move your career in the right direction, but these things will only get you so far. To properly navigate the art world, you will need various skills that transcend artistic proficiency and the impact of your work. Having said that, the following is a range of professional advice on artistic practice, marketing and professionalism. These suggestions are straightforward with quips about my own experience working in the art world. While these recommendations are not exhaustive, they do cover the bulk of how to get up every day and be an artist.

## ARTISTIC PRACTICE

“People begin to become successful the minute they decide to be.”

– Harvey Mackay

Life is full of things you cannot control; the state of your artistic practice is not one of them. The following suggestions consider art production, editing, peer support and how to stay connected to what is current in contemporary art.

## WORK ENVIRONMENT

Before you graduate, you should be thinking about where you will make art. Will you rent a studio or set up a space at home? Everyone is different. I rent a large studio share in downtown Brooklyn because my apartment is too small to work from efficiently and without distraction. In the past, I did some of my best work from home, in a 10' x 12' room in Bedford Stuyvesant. You will have to gauge what works best for you, but whatever you do, you need a space where you can make work efficiently, even if that means a place where you can spend a chunk of your time looking at Internet porn or watching 19-second clips of 30 Rock on YouTube.

## WORK SCHEDULE

If you have the privilege of avoiding a 40-hour a week job, then you should be spending most of your time in the studio. You are an artist; your job is to make art. For those of you who have to work full time, you will face a number of challenges depending on your situation. First, after working a full day, you will be exhausted. If you do manage the strength to go to your studio, then you have about 2–4 hours to produce. Here is a scenario on which to chew: Arrive at work at 9AM, leave at 6PM, arrive at studio at 6:30PM, maybe 7PM, work until 10–11PM, arrive home at close to midnight, sleep for seven hours and then repeat Monday through Friday. On the weekends, you will be tempted to rest, but the wise move is to spend at least eight hours in your studio. You will notice that this schedule does not include taking care of pets, spending time with your significant other, family, friends, enjoying time alone or the litany of other responsibilities that come with being an adult. It will not be easy, but you have to find time to make work no matter your schedule or lack of motivation.

In the movie *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Alec Baldwin, who plays a major douche bag, tries to frighten his fellow salesmen into increasing their numbers by famously telling them to ABC: “Always Be Closing.”

In your case, I ask that you ABM, “Always Be Making.”

## CHALLENGE YOURSELF

I dropped out of college 10 years ago, and when I did attend, I studied English (not Curatorial Studies, goddammit!); therefore, I cannot speak to the workings of undergraduate or advanced-degree art programs. But I do have enough common sense to know that artists should find their practice challenging. Whatever your medium(s), you should push your practice to a place where things start to get incredibly uncomfortable. Experiment, revisit ideas (works) and stretch the boundaries of your practice. Be extreme—try to make work that does not exist, and then bring it back to a place where it looks and feels new. I know it is easier to say than to do, but it is important that you make a sincere effort to contribute fresh offerings to art. Getting it right is not the point, yet trying is, which is why what you do is a “practice.”

## EDITING YOUR WORK

Once you have made a number of works with which you are satisfied, you must begin the editing phase. For some, editing is visceral, for others, it is a process of asking yourself questions. I do not make art, but I imagine that it comes from a very personal place, which can make it difficult to see your work objectively. There are ways to combat this, but the initial steps start with you. In the editing process, ask yourself:

- Does the work represent what I am after?
- Is there consistency among its aesthetic, conceptual and physical properties?
- Why is this piece important to the overall body of work?
- How does this piece challenge my practice, former works and other works in the series?
- Can I expand on these ideas?

The list of questions could go on indefinitely. The key is to initiate dialogue around your work. Editing is not easy, but it is just as important as making the work. You want to avoid a situation where you are incapable of editing the work you make. This can reflect poorly on your work and the way people perceive it once it leaves the studio.

Not all edits are equal. You will have to edit your work for critiques, which will be different from the way you edit for a studio visit, group exhibition or due to space constraints. Over time, it becomes less difficult, but you should continue the practice of asking questions of your work and perfecting each presentation.

## CRITIQUE GROUPS

Critiques do not have to end with graduation. It is common for artists to organize critique groups to continue the dialogues they enjoyed in school and to provide critical feedback on what their peers are making. If you know of a crit group, then ask to join. If the organizers secretly hate you and tell you to buzz off, then start your own. Oftentimes, art making happens in isolation; joining a crit group can help break up the monotony and get you out of your own head. Depending on the level of participation, a group can also help you develop your ideas and obtain feedback on important matters regarding your career.

## BE KNOWLEDGEABLE

The great William Shakespeare wrote in his play Twelfth Night, “There is no darkness but ignorance.” Avoid disappointing Bill by staying up to date on trends in contemporary art. Tactics include reading art blogs; subscribing to art publications, frequenting museum and gallery exhibitions and brushing up on the latest in art criticism and theory. You should try to read and see everything. This is not to influence your practice as much as to keep you informed on the goings on. If you find the current state of contemporary art discouraging, then make work, as John Baldessari did, that offers something new.

## MARKETING

“Marketing is the way your people answer the phone, the typesetting on your bills and your return policy.”

– Seth Goldin

Do not cringe at the thought of marketing. As it relates to your practice, marketing is simply about controlling your image and the message you send about your work. Below are a few tips on how to use marketing to your advantage.

## WEBSITE

The number of artists who do not have websites in 2012 surprises me. If you are participating in exhibitions, then you need to have a website. If someone is interested in your work and you do not have a website, then how will they find you? Lack of time and money are no excuse, a quick Google search will render results of dozens of affordable template websites that allow you to conveniently add and delete content. To not have a website is to ask to be overlooked.

If you have a website, be sure to take a minimalist approach and only include items that are necessary. A basic website should consist of captioned images (people need to know what they are looking at); concise, articulate statements about your practice and each individual body of work (if you work that way); a well written prose bio of no more than 300 words; your résumé or CV; and contact information. Some artists like to add blogs. I say negative if you cannot update it daily. Avoid colored backgrounds, image based-text and flash unless it is conceptually relevant.

A website is a living, breathing organism, which means you have to update it when necessary. This includes new work and all written material such, as your bio, statement(s) and CV. Further, the work on your website should be consistent with what you are showing publicly. If someone sees your work and is interested in a particular piece but cannot find it, you run the risk of frustrating them, resulting in their moving on to another artist and forgetting to come back. I do it all the time.

Your website is your virtual studio; it is where many first impressions are made, so do whatever is necessary to make the best presentation.

## NETWORKING

Major cities like New York offer networking opportunities in abundance, but you can network wherever the people are that you want to meet. In the art world, it is at artist receptions, dinner parties, cocktail events, art fairs, bars, dance parties

and various special events. It is important that you meet people you want to work with. Opportunities and talent are not mutually exclusive; sometimes you need to be in the right place at the right time. People have invited me to collaborate on projects simply because I was sitting next to them. Everyone has a different social style and some of you will read this and counter that you are not a social person. That is OK. My suggestion is to do what you need to do to meet the people you deem important so that you can access opportunities that will move your career forward.

## BUSINESS CARDS

Social or not, when you meet the right person, you need to be prepared with a business card. Let us dream for a moment. It is Tuesday night; you are feeling great because you currently have some work in a group show about which critics are raving. You are at a party with the gallerist that is showing your work and in comes Klaus Biesenbach. He knows the gallerist, and through the exhibition at her gallery, your work. She introduces you to him and you discover that he is a fan. He wants to visit your studio and asks for your contact information, but you do not have any. Fail. In the real world, you would still be able to connect with him—if he likes your work, he will be sure to be in touch—but why create extra steps for him and increase the time it takes to get him in your studio? Do yourself a favor and get business cards printed, and do not forget to buy a case to keep them crisp. It beats asking the bartender for a napkin and pen.

## THE STUDIO VISIT

Studio Visits are like interviews for artists. In other words, they are very important. Every visit is different, and can consist of meeting with peers, collectors, dealers, curators, journalists and other art world types. If someone is in your studio, then he or she is seriously interested in your practice. This is your moment to shine. I have been on my share of studio visits, some inspiring and others terrible. Below are some suggestions on how to make the best impression.

1. Exchange phone numbers with your guest when you make the appointment.
2. Provide your guest with detailed directions and information. For example, if your studio is in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and the L train is not running, be sure to tell your guest.
3. Confirm with your guest 24 hours before the visit. I pay close attention to my calendar, but I still overlook appointments from time to time.
4. Call if you are running late. Do not keep people in the dark.
5. Prepare your studio for the visit. There is nothing more frustrating than traveling to an artist studio only to discover that they are unprepared. Artist studios are not generally located in convenient neighborhoods, unless you think Sunset Park is convenient. Please respect people's time and prepare accordingly. Preparations include having an edited and thorough presentation planned; printed materials such as a bio, CV and text supporting the work and making the studio comfortable for your guest.
6. If you instruct your guest to call when he or she arrives, be sure to have your phone handy and check it repeatedly until they arrive. I once went on a studio visit where I had to call the artist when I arrived. I did so, but she never answered. I waited outside in the cold for 30 minutes before she checked her phone; she was in the studio the entire time.
7. Offer your guest something to drink; hot tea or water is fine, scotch is better (for me), but that depends on your style and the guest.
8. If your guest is struggling with your work, then do your best to explain it and do not be afraid to defend it. But

do not under any circumstances argue with your guest or become visibly frustrated if they are not responding positively to your work. This is your opportunity to listen and potentially learn something new about your practice. As someone once said to me, “You can’t learn with your mouth open.”

## THE FOLLOW-UP

After your studio visit, be sure to send your guest a thank-you note within 24 hours. If they asked for additional information, this is the time to send it along.

If you have a positive exchange with someone at a social event where you exchanged contact information, be sure to follow up within 24 hours with a “pleasure to meet you” email. If they want information about your work, send it in this email. If this is someone you are interested in having in your studio, use this time to make an invitation.

One follow-up email is fine. If the person is interested in continuing the conversation, they will be in touch. Do not follow up a second time. You do not want to be that artist.

## APPLY

Another marketing method is to apply for artist residencies, grants, competitions and any other opportunities that you believe will help advance your career. Applying for relevant opportunities is a great way to get your work in front of established dealers and curators, as they often serve as jurors on selection panels. Before you apply, though, be sure to research each opportunity thoroughly to make certain that your work is appropriate. Basic research includes reading about the organization and becoming familiar with past supported artists. Call if you still have questions. You want to avoid applying for a grant awarded only to sculptors when you make video art. Use your time wisely and apply for relevant opportunities.

You will hear mixed opinions about applying for opportunities, especially if they are pay-to-play or involve other fees. As the co-founder of Humble Arts Foundation, a 501c3 committed to supporting new art photography, I can say with certainty that applying for the right opportunities are effective even if you do not “win.” At Humble, and I suspect at other organizations, we discovered artists we liked, though they may not have been a good fit for the opportunity in question. But that did not stop us from making a note about their work and reaching out to them when the time was right. It happened often. On the other hand, if you find that you are consistently applying for the same opportunities with little results, you should reconsider applying in the future. Most organizations will not provide feedback (we did not), which means you will have to take a critical look at your work to figure out what is not working. This may also be a question for your crit group.

## EXHIBITIONS AND CONTEXT

Finally, one of the most important forms of marketing is participating in exhibitions. Depending on the space, exhibitions allow hundreds if not thousands of people to see your work, which is why context is important. Context is a code word for establishing and judging professional and aesthetic hierarchies. For example, an exhibition at Joe the Art of Coffee will have a different context than one at Gagosian Gallery. What this means is that you will have to decide what context is best for your work. It is possible that at different moments in your career you will exhibit at venues that run the gamut. What you want to be concerned with is progression. If your work is included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, you may want to avoid

working with venues that are less than reputable. Decide early on which context will best maximize the presentation of your work and the ideas you are vying to put forth.

## PROFESSIONALISM & LIKABILITY

“A professional is someone who can do his best work when he doesn’t feel like it.”

– Alistair Cooke

The artists I continue to work with are the ones who are professional and likable. The same goes for the artists I recommend to my colleagues. If you make good work and are professional about it, then you will have a great career. I hear people talk often about how an artist will do well because they are professional and “super nice.” Unlike most industries, where professionalism is required and nonnegotiable, it is a celebrated rarity in the art world. It should be natural to respect your work enough to exercise professionalism when dealing with people, but since this happens so seldom, use it as a competitive advantage.

In a nod to Sol Lewitt, Sentences on Professionalism and Likability:

1. When someone supports your work in any form, small or large, say thank you, and the sooner you do it, the better.
2. Despite crowd density, make eye contact at social events.
3. Avoid social climbing.
4. Never ask this question: “What was your name again?”
5. At art fairs, do not bother dealers; wrong time, wrong place. No exceptions.
6. Give a firm handshake and smile when you meet new people.
7. If you agree to participate in an exhibition or any opportunity afforded you, then follow through on your commitment. If for some reason you cannot, let the interested party know as soon as possible.
8. Avoid being difficult. There is nothing worst than working with a difficult person, no matter how talented and respected.
9. No style of pajamas is acceptable in public or at social events.
10. Be appreciative.
11. If you see someone you know, say hello, even if that person is pretending to not see you.
12. Look out for your artist friends.
13. Respect everyone, even the intern; you never know who will rise to power.
14. Do everything with grace. Just because someone is being a jerk does not mean you have to respond in kind.
15. If you are with an associate and you run into an acquaintance, always make an introduction. Otherwise, it is awkward for everyone.
16. Do not alienate people with unprofessional behavior. If you have no place to hang your hat, then how do you expect to show your work?
17. Stay in touch with the people who have supported your work in the past, especially in the early years. It is the right thing to do, and you never know when you will need their help in the future.

18. Be honest about what you want from people and your expectations.
19. Get it in writing.
20. Stay humble and hungry. To quote Sean Combs, “Treat every project like it was your first.”

## EPILOGUE

“An acquaintance merely enjoys your company, a fair-weather companion flatters when all is well, a true friend has your best interests at heart and the pluck to tell you what you need to hear.”

– E.A. Bucchianeri, Brushstrokes of a Gadfly

I asked my fiancé, a former Pratt Institute BFA, to read the first paragraph of this letter to get her opinion. She said it was tough on the love and that she was not sure how it would function in an exhibition catalog. The former did not surprise me, but the latter did. Writing this piece was partly my attempt to challenge my own practice, but my real motivation was to prepare text that could live outside the catalog, a primer that you could reference in the future.

At the risk of sounding overly romantic, I wrote this letter because I sincerely want to see you succeed. I have spent 10 years dedicating my professional career to the advancement of artists and their ideas. With commitment, passion and practical tools, you can reach unfathomable heights of success. The question is, do you want it? And if so, what are you prepared to do to make it happen?

Yours truly,

amani olu

March 2012