

Modes of Practice in an Age of Austerity

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Introduction

I am primarily a sculptor producing installation work. I graduated in 1998 and have been exhibiting regularly ever-since. I have had full-time jobs, part-time jobs and periods of unemployment (although as an artist I never really feel unemployed, I just don't have another job to do). I became self-employed in 2004 and have been surviving since then on a mix of part-time and casual work in art-related fields such as being an artists' assistant, making websites for artists, picture-framing and taking part in events such as this. Sometimes I get paid for the exhibitions I am in, sometimes not. I have never really sold any work - but then my work is not really salable.

I don't really consider myself 'successful' in the sense that I make loads of money and always get accepted for the shows and commissions I apply for; I don't. I think Anna has chosen me for this because it keeps it realistic - if an incredibly famous and successful artist came to talk to you about their incredible fame and success I think it would be a bit patronising. This is a tough, over-subscribed business and if current events play out as expected it's going to get tougher. I think it's more helpful to hear about how artists of all kinds are making a living. Through this we can share ideas and develop a supportive environment.

In the following presentation I'm going to describe how I work, and how I decide what opportunities to apply for and give my time to. These decisions are made with various aims, requirements and caveats in mind. I'm also going to outline other aspects that interest me regarding art making and how these have a bearing on my practice and career, and also how I envisage the survival of my kind of practice.

I'd like to point out that these views are specific to my way of working and not necessarily the *right* way, just a particular way, and you are free to take from them what you will.

Working Without a Studio

Since graduating I have not had a studio. For the past five-to-six years I've been making work in response to specific locations - reacting to the events and stories that shape a place - and trying to create something which draws out that narrative and resonates with the viewer. I build these works entirely on-site. This grew from two circumstances:

1. I cannot afford a studio.
2. I want my work to be about the location - influenced by it in a very immediate way.

The pros of this are: it's cheap, flexible, exciting and challenging. The cons: I have no constant practice - it relies on regularity of exhibitions, no legacy - work is temporary and dismantled after the exhibition. All that remains is the documentation. I personally have no problem with this but I can see how it can be a problem commercially.

Found Materials

Much of my work has been made from found materials, and material left over

from other artists' shows. This also grew from the circumstances mentioned earlier: I can't afford materials, and using materials sourced from the location informs and influences the work. The pros of this are again: it's cheap, challenging and can create unexpected results. The cons: It relies totally on chance, if you're not careful it can look like you've just made it out of rubbish, which is OK if that's what you want, but I'm quite keen on transforming the materials in some way.

When circumstance demands it I do use bought materials - sometimes you need to create a certain kind of experience and you won't find the quality or quantity of material you need just lying around.

Networking

I'm rubbish at networking. I'm not one of those people that can go to a private view and 'work' the room. But most of my work comes from people I already know and a lot of other work comes indirectly through having met people at other events, so I'm doing something right. Building working relationships with other artists and curators is important. You need to get your work seen - if no-one knows who you are or ever sees your work then you won't get approached to show in exhibitions. I know it might sound a little trite but be professional and always do your best - people remember it and will call on you again if something appropriate turns up.

Working for Free

This has recently become a bone of contention for me. I want to eliminate the broadly accepted image of the 'struggling artist' who has pay his dues by working for free. It is a negative stereotype that perpetuates an idea and makes people (artists and others) think that it is OK to not pay artists (and to not *be* paid). This is wrong. When you spend a week setting up a show this is time that you should be paid for - you are doing a job.

Working for free can have its benefits though: it can be part of networking, of building relationships. You may also gain exposure if the show is well promoted. These things need to be taken into account and thought about carefully when you are approached or apply for a project.

Not Working for Free

I've tried to stop working for free - I think it's an important step in professionalising yourself and also not being taken for granted. It's part of taking a stand against the exploitation of artists and free labour. It is difficult though. As mentioned before, some work *is* beneficial.

I'm also aware that it might sound hypocritical because I have done shows for free and now I'm saying 'don't do it'. What I want is for curators and exhibition organisers to stop exploiting artists and offer even just a token fee. I want there to be an agreement between artists and organisers where this happens. I feel that this would benefit everyone involved as the artist would feel valued and the organiser would help to ensure an even better quality of exhibition.

Having Another Job

It also seems accepted that most artists are to have another job (or sell their work) to pay for their time and to make a living. There is nothing wrong with having a day job. Just because you don't earn all your income from your artwork does not make you any less of an artist. This is another attitude we need to change - how

many of us, when we tell people we are artists, are asked 'do you make a living from that?' And if you don't it is sometimes perceived that you are a hobbyist or not serious. Money does not mean proper art.

I would recommend having a part-time or flexible job, if you can bear it, as it provides income. It can also provide inspiration or extra knowledge about matters relating to your practice. I spent a large amount of time a few years ago helping a sculptor that I work for build a three story steel structure for their house and studio redevelopment. It was an incredible experience, full of interesting insights into structure, engineering and planning. This has fed into my own work and given me knowledge and skills that are useful when devising projects and working out budgets.

There is no point starving and struggling. Artists have diverse skills - put them to use.

Rights

Artists' rights are important and a lot of the things I've been talking about are part of your rights as artists - your right to be treated fairly, your right to fair pay, your right to *be* an artist. The amount of free time we give - the amount of chances we take - we do for art; to create something, to provide society with culture. And only a select few get recognition and financial reward. The structure of the artist-to-opportunity relationship is very uneven. There are a lot of artist and not very many opportunities.

My vision is for a society where art is accepted for its inherent worth *as art* - not just because it might make money. With the cuts in education and funding the government is sending the message that the arts are not important. We have to change their minds.

Practice

Your practice is what defines you as an artist, and when you are applying for projects it is important to show that you have a clear working method and that *you* understand what it is you are doing. Know what it is that you want your work to communicate and have methods and techniques that have reasons behind them for why you use them.

I have a statement that I regularly use which has been honed over the last few years. I sometimes alter the wording slightly when filling in application forms or writing proposals - depending on what the project is - but the core of it remains the same.

This piece of writing should be clear and easy to read. I find nothing more off-putting than an impenetrable, long-winded text. Your practice may well involve very deep philosophical ideas and draw on obscure or little-known high-brow elements of culture, but it doesn't have to become confusing with stodgy writing and art-speak. A major part of art is communication and enlightenment, and if you can't communicate your ideas to a curator they're not going to believe that your work can communicate either.

As I mentioned earlier, my practice mainly happens on-site. In order to secure shows I have to rely on the strength of my proposal and the quality of my documentation from previous shows. I have to communicate clearly to exhibition organisers in order to create the trust that will allow me to say to them 'I'll make you a work, but you won't know what it'll be until it's about to be built'.

In the age of austerity we may be forced to compromise our practices. In order to make ends meet we may need to adjust what we do and how we do it. I'm trying to resist this as I, personally, don't want to make things just for the sake of selling them. I see a difference between making because you want to make, and making because you want to sell - I don't mean that one is better than the other - I just don't want my practice to become driven by how much money it makes. However, I'm aware that I have to pay my rent so compromises have to be made. I just try not to be pushed too far. Your practice is your unique selling point, as it were. Stick to your principles as much as you can.

Survival

So, how to survive? How to keep going? You have to want it, to want to do it. There are a lot of artists and not enough opportunities to go around. If we are to believe the effects of the cuts these opportunities are going to get even fewer.

Hans Abbing (artist, economist and author of 'Why Are Artists Poor') proposes a possible solution - have fewer artists by making the arts less attractive as a career choice. At first this sounds a little extreme - fascistic or totalitarian even? But maybe fewer artists will be the result of the cuts to arts education and funding. If it becomes less easy to be an artist fewer people will be compelled to try it - leaving only those with determination and ambition enough to continue through these lean times. Of course with fewer artists *and* fewer opportunities the ratio might just stay the same.

There is a mythology attached to being an artist which should also be addressed: I think we are falsely led on: by films, TV and apparently 'true' stories, that if you try hard enough, work hard enough and stick at it long enough you *will* magically succeed. I think we need to be more realistic. You definitely have to work hard, but most of us will not be famous, or make a fortune. I would personally be happy with just making a comfortable living and having the opportunity to make good work regularly - and through this be able to contribute to our cultural environment. To facilitate survival I'd like to see the creation of more even fi eld.

Making Choices

With all that in mind, how do you decide which opportunities to go for? Which opportunities will benefit you most, and which opportunities will send the right message? The order of importance to me are:

1. Suitability: Does the opportunity actually ask for the kind of work that I do and does it complement my practice? I know this sounds obvious but it does happen - I've done it, I've spent ages on an application and then realised that they're not really asking for what I do. Read the brief very carefully. It takes a lot of time and effort to write up a proposal and assemble all of your visual material, and if it's not really right for the project you're wasting your own time and that of the poor souls who have to go through all the submissions.

2. Fee: Does the project pay a fee? If not, does it pay expenses? As I mentioned earlier, I'm trying to stick by this one and regularly pass over calls that do not offer any money, but sometimes a combination of the first, third and forth points get the better of me. The third point being...

3. Artistic Worth: Does the opportunity promote development for my practice? Would it provide me with a fantastic new work? Is the space really exciting and inspiring? Does it fulfill a burning ambition to create a particular work? All these

things I find really important.

4. Career Prospects: Does the opportunity have the possibility of furthering my career? For example, is it at a venue, or with an organisation, with the kind of reputation that you respect? Research the organisation, find out about previous shows and who they've worked with - what happened to them afterwards? If you like what you see then go for it.

5 (although rapidly moving up the list). Political Impact: Political in the sense that will the work produced be able to add to, and compound, the argument for the value of the arts to society? I'm interested in the idea that through our work we can make a case for our survival. I'm not talking about an overt message (although if you want to do that you can) but a subtle undercurrent of dissent about the situation coupled with a positive value-led approach. Your work itself does not really have to change that much, and I don't want to tell you what work to make, but if you have this idea in mind whilst working the art you produce might just have that little extra edge that makes people realise what it is about it that they need, and why we shouldn't let it wither.

Final Thought

What I would like you all to think about when writing proposals, devising works and developing your practice is not only what will this achieve for me, but what will it achieve for all of us?

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