

Exhibition: know your work, your galleries – and your goals

Could you tell someone about your creative practice in 15 words? Do you break into a cold sweat every time you pick up the phone to a new gallery? Do you plan your professional development – or does it feel like someone else is in charge?

These issues, along with many others, were covered by arts consultant, Rod McIntosh, during an 'Exhibitions' training day. Rod was educated as a sculptor and has extensive experience of providing training for those in art and design. He has worked using the arts in education, residencies in health and collaborations with businesses, as well as providing training for artists and makers with Digswell Arts Trust, the Florence Trust Studios, The Artists Information Company, SPACE studios, and other organisations.

This training event was held as part of **making art work**, the professional development scheme for visual artists in Suffolk. For more information about the scheme, please visit the Suffolk County Council web site at www.suffolkcc.gov.uk and follow the link from Leisure and Culture to the Arts.



making art work is a professional development scheme for visual artists in Suffolk, devised and managed by Suffolk County Council and part financed by the European Union European Social Fund and Arts Council England Grants for the Arts.

Your statement

Could you tell someone about your creative practice in 15 words?

The following exercise will not help you reduce it that far – but it will help you understand your motivations, context and priorities. After which, if you need to pull out 15 words, they'll be waiting for you.

Exercise 1: Free writing

Give yourself a title – such as 'My practice' Now write 4 sides of A4 paper, as if you were speaking, about your practice.

DON'T TAKE THE PEN OFF THE PAGE – if you get stuck for words, doodle until you start writing again. It doesn't have to be proper sentences, but it must be continuous, and on the subject you've given yourself.

Now repeat the exercise, only in a different place – your studio, kitchen, a field, on the beach, in front of a picture – so you change the parameters of influence.

Now read and edit. Begin by grouping bits that deal with similar issues – it could be bullet points, or clusters of paragraphs dealing with similar issues.

Prioritise the bullet points, re-edit. The bullet points are sound bites. Now, write a 150 words statement, using the bullet points.

Use this exercise to write about different elements of your professional practice – exhibitions, residencies, workshops, commissions, collaborations, etc.

If you're doing the final edit on computer, you can drop in thumbnails of your work. This acts as reminder, and you can edit and drop old work as and when it's appropriate.

Exercise 2: Skills audit

How confident do you feel about the skills you possess? Do you value them? Do you think there's more you need to know or do? Try the following exercise to focus on the skills you have – and the ones you want.

Get a pack of post-it notes.

Write one skill on each sheet – these can be hard skills, such as foundry work, or soft skills such as enthusiasm.

Stick them up in front of you, using the notes as bricks to build a wall of your skills.

Keep reminding yourself of what you are and what you have – get as much detail up as you can.

Then group the 'bricks' into different areas, e.g. arts practice.

Are there gaps, if so, what are they and how can you fill them?

What do you want to achieve?

You want a new show?

Start by looking at a previous exhibition (residency, commission, whatever).

Identify the genesis - where the idea came from, the route - how you arrived at it, and the critical success factors - what worked for you, and what didn't.

In short, **interrogate the product until it confesses itself.**

Routes/genesis

This is not about what others did to help but what you have and what you do. Otherwise, you become passive and expect others to take responsibility for making things happen.

The genesis could be

- Seizing an opportunity
- Self-initiating a project
- Finding a suitable venue

Routes could be

- Winning an award
- Making an application

- Approaching a gallery
- Seeing an opportunity
- Being part of a network
- Making an open submission

Once you have identified a successful project and really gone through where the project came from and how you got to the point where you could make the project happen, consider the critical success factors. Ask yourself what was successful – and why.

It could be that your work sold well. Ask yourself, why did it sell? Was it that you had a lot of readily-available price lists. Were your prices realistic? Were you selling a particular sort of work at a particular time – seasonal appeal. Was it because the audience was absolutely right for the work?

Was it because you got the commission. Why? Was it because you had all your documentation prepared and ready to go? Was it because you understood the brief, and could respond appropriately?

Other possible critical success factors include raising your profile, gaining experience, extending your network, taking a risk, rising to the challenge, feeling valued.

Next look at the pitfalls, why things failed or didn't work too well.

It's by recognizing and understanding our disappointments and perceived failures that we can prevent them happening again.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS FAILURE – JUST FEEDBACK

Among the potential pitfalls might be: -

- not enough time – either to apply, or complete the project
- not being prepared
- compromised professional practice
- loss of artistic integrity

Or maybe just not being able to say 'no' to a bum deal.

This model provides a strategy - a flexible framework, or skeleton, that you can then flesh out appropriately.

Strategies are NOT straight jackets, externally imposed, but are your way of maintaining professional control.

And it doesn't exclude luck from the equation, either, it just means that you will be able to recognize real luck when it happens – and take full advantage of it – rather than seizing on everything that looks a bit 'lucky', only to find that you should have said 'no' to that bum deal.

Research

If you always do what you've always done you'll always get what you've always got.

It's up to you – it's your responsibility to make things happen and thorough research into your own motivations and priorities and those of the people you want to work with is key to making the right things happen for you.

Internal research

This is to do with your motivation, desires, and ambition.

It helps you develop a critical understanding of your work and contextualize your work, within frameworks that are appropriate for you.

Ask yourself: -

- What do I want from my artwork?
- What do I want for myself?
- What are my motivating forces?
- What are my values – for myself, the idea, the work the project, outcomes and benefits?
- Can I change my attitude?
- Am I clear, focused? If not what do I need to do to become clear?

The importance of being CLEAR

If you are clear about what you want for your work, and what you want for yourself, you will be able to plan appropriately to achieve those goals – which in turn gives you control over your professional progress.

For example, are you clear about the value you ascribe to your work. Where does it fit in the contemporary aesthetic? How does it connect with other agendas – curators, funders etc?

Once you have achieved that clarity, make it part of your professional practice – how you present yourself, document your work, deal with other professionals.

Treat your practice professionally – and yourself and other professionals, too.

External research

How to find out who is doing what and why out there.

Use the six basic journalistic questions – with one more for luck – to get the information you need from galleries.

Don't be afraid to be rigorous in your research – it's part of being professional. And if you break out into a cold sweat at the very idea of cold calling a gallery, write yourself a script, prepare what you want to say about yourself and the questions you need to ask them.

Those questions include: -

- Who
- What
- Where
- Why
- How
- When
- Then what?

On one level, you want to know who to speak to, what they will look at, where you should send it, why do they show the artists they show, how they select them, when selection/programming takes place.

If you're not already, ask to go on their mailing list.

Ask them if you can put them on your mailing list

And thank them for their time and information

Now you've started to look for appropriate partners.

Bear in mind that London galleries receive between 30 – 60 unsolicited applications a week. If you're lucky, they may spend 2 minutes looking at it, before they 'file' it.

So you really want to be sure that you're sending the right material to the right person – and that they are expecting it.

More external research – visiting shows with intention

On another level, you want to know who the gallery shows, what kind of gallery it is, what will it do for you, what you can do for them, why would they be interested in showing your work, and vice versa, how can you best approach them, when might you get a show, what happens after you've had a show with them.

When you visit shows, ask yourself: -

- Do I rate the work of the artists already represented? *If not, why would you want to show there?*
- Does my work have an aesthetic affinity with the present/past shows and artists represented? *If not, why would they want you to show there?*
- What are the gallery forthcoming exhibitions? *Does your work fit into their plans*
- What is the gallery's ambition? Where will it be in 5 year's time? Will it still exist? *Will my work be part of their development?*
- What would I contribute to the gallery's future programme and profile? *Maybe it fills a gap, or compliments current programme*
- What can the gallery do for me? *Will it be sales, promotion, critical review?*

- Can the gallery do what I want it to do for me? *Does it have the profile, audience, scope, funding?*

Don't be afraid to ask what they can do for you – remember, you have a clear idea of where you're aiming with your work – is this gallery a stepping stone to achieving that goal?

If you like a particular space, collect CVs from shows, as they will provide a barometer of what stage in their career the artists got shown there. Use it as a template for your own professional development.

Remember the critical mass of public profile – don't underestimate the importance of putting yourself about a bit, being seen and heard of. When you attend private views, set yourself the task of talking to at least 2 people you don't know.

When galleries take on newcomers, they often organise a group show, or take your work to an art fair, to test the water and see what the public response is like. Maybe you're already part of a group

Categorise what's in it for the gallery. It could be

- Money – it knows or at least thinks it can sell your work, at the right price for them
- Profile – it believes it cannot sell your work, but you will make the gallery appear more interesting/special and receive recognition for this
- Career – your rise will contribute to their and vice versa. Maybe working with new gallery, new curator may be mutually beneficial professional development for all
- Association – you are already 'hot'
- Diversity – you fill a gap for them
- House style – you compliment their programme
- Passion – how your work is like them
- Personality – they like you
- Deliverable – you will do what they want when they want it

- For the allusive unknown reason - sometimes, it just happens

BUT BEWARE, DON'T BECOME 'TO RECIPE', BELIEVING YOU CAN NEVER CHANGE YOUR WORK BECAUSE THE GALLERY SAYS ONLY ONE TYPE OF THING SELLS.

Relationships

Direct approach

This is a heady mix of personality, ambitions and ego; the artist as pop star

At one end of the scale, you have an artist, sitting in the studio, waiting for the knock on the door and to be discovered.

At the other end of the scale, there's the artist as pop star, where the personality, art work and marketing all blur into one.

The good news is, there are lots of points along the way, between those two extremes, and now that you know your work so well, and have the confidence that brings, you can position yourself where you feel most comfortable.

However, the reality is that most people go for the

Indirect approach

Which requires a master marketing plan,

- To raise your profile and appear on the radars of the decision makers. *Profile, track record – they'll get you noticed*
- To develop and promote your track record, so your CV presses the right buttons. *Keep editing your CV, get it down to the 15 lines/15 seconds, remove anything that isn't appropriate to a given situation*
- Includes being patient – waiting to be invited. *This is not passive, you're working the system with the*

longer term goal of them coming to you. Know your time line – and theirs.

- Be known, be seen – develop connections and relationships and get an introduction or recommendation. *People knowing and talking about your work develops a critical appraisal which in turn pushes other peoples' buttons*

Remember, the art world is small and so are the degrees of separation. As you learn more about how people fit in, your powers to influence and engage increase.

You're in this for life, so don't be impatient, the stuff that keeps us stuck in one place should be kicked out, maybe you should be out of the studio more, get to see, visit, it will have value on your work and practice.

Relationships

The term 'networking' has become a modern day mantra for those involved in professional development.

In reality, we're talking 'relationships' – with galleries, funders commissioners, artist groups, etc.

However, before we drop all reference to 'networking', consider the following LINK model, as an example of how networking can function.

The **LINK** networking model

L is for Learning – about the type of person you are – and the types of people you meet up with. Generally speaking, there are 4 categories: -

Loner – someone who doesn't automatically mix with others. This is not totally negative, because they may be observing from the periphery.

Socialiser – someone who is gregarious and enjoys meeting others; only this can make it difficult to shift on to a one-to-one relationship.

Users – people who work at meeting their own needs, emphasizing only what they can get from others, rather than thinking about what they can offer others, too.

Builder – someone who builds connections, appreciating and working at the creative capital in relationships.

I is for INVESTING

To build relationships, you have to give – often before you have any real idea of what you might get back. You need to invest in people, places, ideas, dreams. Give a bit more of yourself before you expect to get anything back.

N is for NURTURING

Once you've established contact with someone, you need to nurture the relationship, taking it forward to bigger and better things.

K is for KEEPING

Keep working at it. Once the project/show is over, keep in touch with the people you worked with, don't let them go months without hearing from you. Respect and value the relationship you've developed.

Responsibility

Throughout this training session, Rod stressed the need for artists to take responsibility for themselves.

You've spent a lot of time thinking about your work, what motivates it and where you want it to go.

You've spent a lot of time thinking about who you want to promote it to, how you're going to do that, and how you'll develop relationships with the people you've contacted.

Now, think **strategically** about what you want to achieve, who can help you – and how long you're prepared/able to spend achieving it.

Be SMART

Specific:

What do I want? (goal or ambition)
Why is this my goal?
What do I need to do to achieve it?

Measurable:

Naming it – who & where
Numbering it – dates, when, how much?

Achievable:

Can I do it?
Set yourself up to achieve – not fail

Relevant:

Should I do it?
How does it relate to my work and ambitions?
Is it an avoidance tactic – i.e. there's something else I should be doing instead, but don't want to.

Time:

Put a time line on it ...
Think of what you need to do now – what you'll need to do when you achieve it – and what you'll need to do afterwards, to maximise the opportunity.

& on the subject of time management ...

Head full of things you keep meaning to do?

Either –

- Do it NOW
- Defer it – to a more appropriate (possibly specified) time
- Drop it – stop telling yourself you'll do it one day when you know deep down inside you never will
- Delegate it – can someone else do it for you?

Doing the paper work

- Keep a diary
- Keep a record of who you've called and what the outcome was
- When your desk is awash with paper – apply the 'one touch' policy. Don't put it down until it's done, i.e. instead of starting 6 different tasks and not completing any of them, work at one thing at a time, until it's finished. Then, and only then, can you move on to the next.

Contacting the people

A great deal of time can be wasted, trying to contact people and build up relationships.

So, try the following 4 point contact rule.

1st point of contact – gather the information. This could be picking up the PV or business card with the contact details, or a referral from someone else.

2nd point of contact – follow this up, with either a letter, phone call, email or meeting.

3rd point of contact – follow up contact, possibly using a different method than before, to get a response, answer, agreement, offer, whatever.

4th point of contact – if all this has not produced the results you wanted, it's time to call it a day. Contact them once more, politely point out that you've tried to contact them etc, etc but that you are now leaving the situation, and that the ball is in their court if they want to get back to you.

Results

It will be apparent from the previous pages that relationships are something that you need to work at. They require a great investment of your time, effort and creativity.

So once you have established a relationship you'll want to nurture it, keep it, develop it – and move into the area of contracts or letters of agreement.

This will possibly involve a deal of negotiation, on both sides. Make sure you're as well informed as you can be, before agreeing to anything.

Ask friends and other artists about the types of agreements they use.

Visit the a-n web site. It has a number of practical guides that are invaluable in drawing up contracts etc.

Ultimately, you just need to keep on looking after people – keep the good going well.

And a final word – on rejection

- Get used to it
- Change your attitude to it. See it as an open door – to greater information, lessons learned, rather than one slammed in your face.
- Use it to get feedback, particularly from funders.
- Don't be afraid to ring and ask for feedback – once you're sure you're in the frame of mind to receive it.
- Use it as a signpost – ask them to recommend a way forward. If it's a curator turning down your submission, ask for their advice on how you could represent to them – what you need to do to gain the experience, etc for them to consider another application from you.

And thank them – for their time, consideration, etc. After all, you do appreciate their advice, don't you?

Useful web sites

www.a-n.co.uk

www.spacestudios.org.uk

www.artquest.org.uk

www.commseast.org.uk

www.creativeartseast.co.uk

www.craftscouncil.org.uk

www.thisisliveart.co.uk

www.momentumarts.org.uk

www.public-arts.co.uk

www.art-shopper.com/counties/suffolk