

Presenting yourself: artist's CVs and statements

Whether you are looking for an agent, contacting a public gallery, or applying for a commission, what you choose to tell people about yourself – and how you choose to tell it – is a vital first step in the process.

These notes are based on a training event run by Isabella Oulton, publisher and promoter of artists' books and prints, and Emma Hill, director of the Eagle Gallery, London.

Between them, they examined how galleries in the private and public sectors work and how artists should prepare themselves, and their documentation, to make the most of the opportunities offered by these sectors.

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.

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Commercial representation

Emma Hill set up and runs the Eagle Gallery in London; as such she operates within the private, commercial sector. She also acts as an agent for a small group of artists.

She describes her job as 'persuading people to buy art' – on the basis that people don't NEED art, have many other calls on their money and so need to have it presented to them in a way that encourages them to buy.

Persuading people takes many forms. It's not just the actual promotional material, but the whole professional set up and profile of the gallery.

For example, just to keep a gallery open in London can cost between £2,000 and £10,000 a month. That's before you've printed a single private view card.

It's also to do with the relationships the gallery develops with artists, clients and other galleries.

For example, contrary to general practice among agents, Emma does not issue contracts to the artists she represents.

Instead, she builds a relationship of mutual trust and respect, acting for the long term career of the artist. This is initially based on a full and frank discussion of ALL aspects of the artist's work, expectations and ambitions, in the context of how the gallery operates and what it can deliver for that artist.

Sole representation; choosing an agent

It is up to the artist to choose the right gallery/agent to represent them. Factors to be considered include: -

What type of work does the agent/gallery represent?

Do your research – get to know the gallery space, the work they exhibit, the general feel of the place.

If you write to the gallery saying you've never seen a show there but you think your work would suit them, expect to have your letter shredded; how could you possibly know your work would be appropriate?

If it's absolutely impossible for you to visit in person, get yourself on their mailing list, so you receive regular mailings and can build up a picture of how they operate.

What can the artist expect from the representative? Basically, you want them to increase the critical profile of your work, for example by getting it into museum collections.

How do they sell the work? Some agents sell work via the web or at art fairs, rather than setting up shows.

Corporate Arts Consultants – you can search for these on the web. Some run their own galleries but more often present artists' work on CD Rom to potential clients.

What level of commission do they take? Normally this is between 40 – 50% on the retail price. Galleries usually set the price, as they know the market.

Although some galleries pay a retainer to their artists, they are very few and far between – and very rich. It is not the norm.

Don't underestimate the importance of the commission rate; it allows galleries to negotiate on your behalf with clients and other galleries offering exhibition opportunities; it should be viewed as a valuable marketing tool rather than a drain on your personal income.

The Etiquette of Commission Rates: it is poor professional practice to have your work on show in a gallery at one price, and in your studio at another, lower, price. ALWAYS quote the same price for the piece; you can always then negotiate a special price for family, friends etc, if you want to – but you are not undercutting the gallery that is supposed to be acting on your behalf.

Approaching a gallery

Everyone has to start somewhere – so start from the basics and ask your preferred galleries how they operate. If they don't want to tell you, you most probably don't want to be represented by them.

Ask them how they like to receive information from artists, i.e. visuals on CD or transparencies, CVs etc.

Don't send emailed submissions unless you've established that they accept them; they are likely to be considered spam and deleted immediately.

And if they do accept emailed information, don't send large attachments that will take forever to download – they'll lose patience.

Send other relevant material such as catalogues from previous shows etc.

Prepare yourself for rejection. You can confidently expect that your first attempts at finding representation will fail – it just happens that way and as it happens to the vast majority of artists, at least you're not alone. Take comfort in that – and try again.

What can they do for you?

In your haste to find a gallery to represent you, don't forget that this is supposed to be a relationship; you need to know exactly what you can expect from them BEFORE you enter into any agreements.

Factors you need to know include: -

- how will they promote your work?
- Commission – how much?
- Insurance; what's the artist responsible for, and which parts are covered by the gallery
- Framing of work – who is responsible for this, what are the requirements
- Is this sole representation, i.e. can you show elsewhere independently?

If in doubt – ASK.

General notes

Art Fairs: these appear to offer a great chance to approach gallery owners, as there are so many collected together under the same roof.

However, this is NOT a good time to invite them to view your portfolio. They are there to sell work (exactly the kind of thing you would want them to do for you) and so will not have the time, or inclination, to look at your work right then.

But look at the work they are selling, get some information about them, and then, if they seem appropriate to your practice, call them when they're back in the office.

Consignment notes: So, you got your gallery, you got your show and now you've delivered your work. Have you got your consignment note? If not, then there's something wrong. These are vital and any gallery worth its salt would not accept your work without giving you one.

Why not? Just imagine this: -

You deliver your work for a group exhibition. That evening, there's an electrical short and a fire breaks out. You know the gallery is insured, because that's been established in your contract. You know that the retail price for your work amounted to £4,500. And you know that the work has been reduced to ashes.

So, how are you going to prove to the insurers that the pile of ashes in the corner had a value of £4,500? With a consignment note, that's how.

And if you think this is far fetched, just remember Momart ...

The next part of the training day was a self-assessment exercise, in which artists were asked to consider: -

- Do you anticipate that your practice has relevance within the commercial sector, the public sector or both?
- What is your current 'market'
- What is your ideal 'market'
- What do you intend to do with what you learn at this training session
- What is the ideal result of any further action you take?

Substituting these notes for the actual training day, perhaps you would like to do the exercise for yourself.

Developing your presentation materials

General issues: -

Your CV is NEVER a finished project – you need to keep updating it. Consider it as a work in progress.

Build up a database of information about yourself, so that you always have up-to-date material that you can call upon immediately. This way, saying that you never have time to apply for opportunities will become a thing of the past.

Consider putting it up on a web site – it will save time sending out material and also means people don't have to return it to you.

Preparing a CV

Write up each and everything you have done from 3 different angles.

Be creative, allow space for the information to evolve.

Start off with listing everything you have ever done as exhibitions. Then edit the list into solo exhibitions, public collections, etc.

Remember, one thing can be a residency, a solo exhibition and a workshop.

So, you can build a CV that is relevant to the particular thing you're applying for.

And once you've done all that, keep it short.

Don't put in GCSEs or hobbies – it's padding and everyone knows it.

But do remember transferable skills; even if you haven't done what they ask for, you may have done something better.

Don't miss out anything relevant, **they don't know what you have done**, so tell them, simply and straightforwardly.

Statements

Get 3 or 4 people who know you to write a statement for you – it's amazing what others see that you may disregard.

Then develop these by adding bits from press cuttings, catalogue entries etc.

Your goal is NOT one definitive statement but rather a collection of statements that reflect the variety of your practice.

Keep them all on file and keep adapting them – so they are ready to send out at a moment's notice.

Images

Last year, we were saying send slides. This year it's digital images – the point is that things are changing very quickly.

The best thing you can do is consult with the person receiving the images – ask them what their preferred format is, and double check that they can open the kind of files you might send them.

But the basic rules remain the same: -

Record all your work – you don't really want to spend your life asking people for a picture back so that you can take a photo of it.

Take proper photos – or get someone to take them for you.

Invest in the most expensive digital camera you can afford.

Read the manual – or better still get a child to do it for you, they seem to be born understanding this stuff.

Take simple, straightforward photos and don't try to get clever with Photoshop unless that is the format that your work takes.

If you send slides, make sure that there is a clear slide list accompanying them. Include dimensions, date, etc.

You should also write on the slide what they are – as it's quite likely they will be held up to the nearest window, rather than viewed through a projector.

Name them, date them and if in doubt, indicate which way round and up they go.

Do you want them to keep the images on file? – if so, tell them.

Do you want them back? – if so, supply a sae.

Digital images

If sending a CD, send some prints too – just in case their system crashes that day.

Use proper presentation software. Lots of people use powerpoint – this has the advantage that you can lead people through the images in a way that you want them to be viewed and you can also add bits of text, such as dimensions, media etc.

If you send a bundle of jpegs, people will not necessarily view them all, and may view them out of order.

Identifying your market

You know your current market – now consider your potential market.

Think carefully about what you want to do – and how best to do it in the context of your work and current experience.

You've got to do the research – start with the internet, then get out there and visit the places.

Ask your colleagues where they show, get yourself on mailing lists for galleries, read the press and arts journals, make sure you know what's going on.

Networking

Nobody likes cold calling – so try tepid calling, first.

Make a very, very long list of everyone and anyone you think might be able to help you achieve your goal.

As the list develops, you will begin to identify 'warm' calls – people you may not know personally, but who you feel could answer some basic questions for you. Call them.

Develop a network – one call will lead to another.

General points

Just before you finally launch your brand new CV, statement and set of impeccable images off to the gallery/agent/commission of your choice, remember ...

Don't waste your time applying for things that aren't appropriate, e.g. if a commission requires an element of public workshops/ consultations and you don't like working with the public, don't bother.

Don't undersell yourself. You won't necessarily get the job just because you commit to working 7 days a week for £50 a day – and if you do, you will have compromised every other artist striving to earn a living wage.

Make sure it pays. This doesn't mean just hard cash – although that would be good. There are lots of reasons to take on a commission or exhibition, not all of them related to earning money. You have to take an objective view on what you will get out of any given opportunity – and whether it's worth what you'll have to put into make it work.

Public galleries

Contrary to what you might imagine, you can approach them.

However, as they solicit material, any unsolicited stuff will take second place – so talk to the curator, build up a relationship so that when your package arrives on the desk, it's as good as solicited.

Keep a clear eye out for what they do, their exhibition programme, the commissions they run, etc; it will help you build up a picture of what you could do there.

Work out what you could actually offer them that is different and interesting.

So, what's your specificity?

- Maybe you have great education experience
- Maybe you are a fantastic printmaker

Keep it simple, make it easy for the staff see what you do, and to say 'yes'.

Phone them up and go in for a chat.

Don't send originals of work – they might want to keep it on file. More to the point, you may want them to keep it on file – while sending similar material to other galleries.

Commissions/competitions/public projects

Again, there is no substitute for rigorous, objective research into who does what, with whom and why.

Same basic rules apply – read the journals, visit web sites, speak to friends, and make it a point of good practice that you know the family tree of arts support, from local authority arts officers, studios and arts centres, through commissioning agencies and professional development organisations to the Arts Council and beyond.

E.G. Commissions East is the regional public art agency, with a remit to get as much information as possible about artists in the region. They have a slide index and an Artists' Services Manager, who is there to answer your questions. So go on, introduce yourself (see final page for contact details).

Officers within Arts Council England East have a similar brief, i.e. to know about the artists on their patch.

If you're thinking about applying for a competition, don't hesitate to call the organisers, to chat through their requirements.

Send only the material they ask for, don't be tempted to add more stuff – they most probably won't read it, and may indeed not be able to, because of their equal opportunities policy.

Equally, please don't send catalogues, brochures etc and expect them to find the relevant pages, wade through loads of text and pick out the relevant bits; that's your job, to make it as simple as possible for them to select your application, over everyone else.

Self generated projects

If you have a particular project that you wish to run, then it's a question of finding a host or venue that suits.

It's not enough to say that it's a great project and anyone should welcome it with open arms – look for hosts or venues that can really engage with what you're doing.

This could be a shared vision, a particular location, a common audience for the work – whatever it is, there's got to be something in your project that the host or venue can identify with – otherwise why would they take on your work?

Then, of course, you have to find the funding for it. You stand a much better chance of success if you go to a host, having first found out about possible grants, funds etc.

They may have some money they can put in to it – but it's unlikely it will be enough, and anyway, by having thought about the funding up front, and being able to demonstrate where you might get it, will show the host that you are really committed, and professional, about running the project.

Web sites

www.emmahilleagle.com/home

<http://www.commissionseast.org.uk/>

www.a-n.co.uk

www.artquest.org.uk

www.artscouncil.org.uk

www.awardsforall.org.uk

<http://www.dsc.org.uk/> - the Directory of Social Change, useful source of funding news, as well as other general information.