

STACY MILLER

CAREER MANAGEMENT FOR ARTISTS



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO
REPRESENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY
FOR YOUR STUDIO PRACTICE

A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Career Management for Artists

Both pragmatic and motivational, this book addresses what it means to have a successful long-term career in the arts, taking stock of the current landscape of the art world, introducing new venues in the field, reflecting on issues of social media and exhibition, and ultimately encouraging artists to take control of their professional lives.

Weaving conversations from a range of internationally based artists who have negotiated alternative paths to success, lauded artist and teacher Stacy Miller provides a practical, lively reflection on what it takes to be an artist in our new global landscape. This book covers practical needs, different approaches, and philosophical ways of creating a life and career in the arts. It lays out conventional and non-conventional means to representation, describes being an entrepreneur versus funding independent creative projects, and examines social media for the potential powerhouse it is. Most importantly, it gives artists a way to think about being a professional and the different paths to a successful career in the arts.

Perfect for emerging, mid-career, and experienced artists, this book encourages readers to redefine personal success and to act locally, nationally, and internationally in an expanding art world.

Stacy Miller, Ed.D., is an exhibiting artist, arts educator, and startup innovator with over 25 years of experience. She has worked as the first Curator of Education at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, USA; as Director of Research and Professional Development at the College Art Association, USA; and as the Director of Art and Design Education at Parsons School of Design, New School University, USA. She currently teaches in the photography department at Parsons and is co-author of *Starting Your Career as an Artist*.



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Career Management for Artists

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and Sustainability for Your Studio
Practice

Stacy Miller

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I dedicate this book to all the self-identified artists working with their imaginations to expand our idea of who we are as humans and to keep us accountable to ourselves and our communities.

And to all the anonymous artists who created such inspired works as the first paintings we know of in caves and all the millions of smaller and monumental works all around the world. They never signed their work, had an exhibition, nor sold at an auction house, yet left their indelible art on our hearts and minds. To appreciate the lessons they leave us about being an artist is to understand how art is an undisputed necessary part of our daily lives.

Closer to home, to my husband, Scott, who stands with me through it all and continually works to get it right in his creative life.



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Introduction: Re-Imagining Creative Lives



Figure 0.1 Head, June Leaf, Pen and Ink and Colored Pencil on Paper, 1975

When it comes to your identity as an artist, the key questions that come to mind are: what do you value as an artist? What are your core beliefs about being an artist? What are your artistic goals? How far will you go to accomplish these goals? What will you “give up” or “contribute” to achieve these goals? In other words, who are you as an artist?

This book will explore and promote the idea that one size does not fit all of us artists, nor should it. After all, there are many roles and categories for doctors, lawyers, and scientists. Why not for artists?

We were fed one narrative in our Bachelor and Master’s Fine Arts programs through the academic world, let alone by the art world. We know this narrative by heart; the toiling artist making it big or becoming famous by sheer raw talent, working away in the studio to be discovered by a high end gallery and thus becoming rich. Many of us live and work in our studios; hoping and wishing for the “big break.”

This mythical narrative has been perpetuated through the global appreciation of art as *commodity*. It is hard to say exactly when this phenomenon began but the now famous film of an auction, *America's Pop Collector: Robert C. Scull—Contemporary Art at Auction*, which took place in 1973, is a good place as any to start. The art auction was run and promoted by Robert C. Scull, a taxicab tycoon with a fleet of 400 cabs in LA called Scull's Angels, and documented in the film.

The film shows us how one of the first big global auctions took place. Scull made an international financial windfall by flipping art he had bought on a "friendly" basis from the likes of young artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and James Rosenquist, to name a few. The details of the amounts of money that transpired between the collector and auction house sales are worth noting. Scull said he paid an average of \$1,000 to \$2,000 for a Johns or a Rauschenberg, often buying several works at a time. At the actual auction a Twombly painting bought for \$750 sold for \$40,000 and a Jasper John painting, *Double White Map*, Scull bought for \$10,200 sold for \$240,000. Rauschenberg's *Thaw* combine, sold to Scull for \$900, went for \$85,000. No artist had seen that kind of appreciation in their work, nor benefited from it, before this auction in 1973. Today's prices for these same artists regularly reach tens of millions of dollars.

As a college art student I saw the film about the auction and I'll never forget a scene in it that changed my idea of what my life would look like as a young aspiring artist. Toward the end of the auction, in which there were bidders calling in from Japan for items they knew were "good investments," Rauschenberg was filmed looking utterly amazed watching his work which he had sold for a few hundred dollars become an object at auction, going to the highest bidder as a financial windfall; Rauschenberg saw absolutely no gains for himself. His work and other artists' work was being bought and sold in a calculated market for what today would have probably gone into the tens of millions of dollars.¹ The expression on Rauschenberg's face showed the recognition that things had changed in the art world, that it would never be the same, and he didn't look happy about it. During a news conference after the auction, Rauschenberg questioned Mr. Scull's "fidelity" to the artist and his "profiteering" from the work. Scull didn't deny any of it.

So what happened? Why was this auction so calculatedly "successful?" Scull used some now tried and true practices we think of as routine for auction houses, fairs, and galleries but which back in 1973 were never applied to selling art. Much like growing his cab company, Scull was well versed in marketing and publicity, but his unique surprise element was delivering art as spectacle and entertainment to the speculative buyers. Scull had pulled off a fully-fledged media event, one of the first of its kind in the art world.

But there is another side to this story. Scull's first auction was held further back in 1965 and was intended to raise money to help unknown artists, such as Michael Heizer and Walter de Maria, get started with small stipends, sometimes for food and clothing plus art materials, through the Robert and Ethel Scull Foundation. The second foundation, the Robert C. Scull Foundation, was established in 1978, which gave money to young artists and institutions committed to contemporary art.

So what happened between these two narratives? One idea is that when the art became detached from "everyday life," the author, Richard H. Brown wrote, "the environment in which artists lived and worked, the function of art and the role of the artist in society" became removed from the discussion "of what it is like, and what it means, to be an artist." The values artists tended to hold dear were not the values the art market promoted; therein lies a crucial disconnect. Though apparently Scull had a true appreciation of the artists and their art, he also saw how to personally profit from them; perhaps as no coincidence he was, after all, a businessman. We artists have been living in these two distinct worlds for some time and the distance between them is getting more and more vast.

Once artists' values are divorced from their work and one's studio practice has entertainment value, becomes a brand, or becomes an investment, a truly divided landscape emerges between the maker and the market, one few artists can navigate easily or reap rewards from. As the American educator and philosopher John Dewey wrote in his seminal book *Art as Experience*, "We must recover the continuity of aesthetic experience with the normal processes of living."² He continues, "The task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience."³

The two narratives embedded in the Scull story, one of which is about profiteering from artists and the other a just as powerful narrative of support and inherent value of the work, are stories deeply embedded in our cultural landscapes; to find the latter we have to know where to look for it. And that is one of the main purposes of this book: to find and shine a light on the better angels of the art world.

Yes, the calculated and difficult "art world" could define us artists to some extent but I propose we take this "bidder takes all" narrative back as creators and place it properly into a much larger and more interesting narrative of our own to reclaim and reshape it. I propose to lay out a new narrative in this book. Let's broaden the landscape and hopefully the discussion of our field, our values, and our expertise, which I trust will continue to expand.

The second layer of this book is based on the many "pioneers" we can draw from who shaped "alternative" narratives for their lives as

artists. We'll explore narratives such as the "newly discovered" artist Hilma af Klint, or the profound trajectory of the artist Bill Traylor, the multifaceted work of community based Mark Bradford, or the collective of the Gee's Bend quilt makers. What *life lessons* do these artists and others who follow in their footsteps hold for us?

Some of us in the arts know from an early age that we will be, without a doubt, an artist. But we all struggle with what it means to be an artist and how to evolve into one. The idea that we may ultimately drift into our identities is a possibility because of how complicated all our lives are or have become. There is no one easy storyline that covers all aspects of what we do as artists (was there ever?) because of what space and time allows us, what cultural environments we've been brought up in, and what economic realities we've had to struggle with; even a gender framework has been defined for us, among other things. Therefore, what our "wanderings" can reveal to us and what explorations out at the margins are worthy of cultivating and protecting will often define who we are as artists. All these experiences lead us into our lives as makers and create in us our unique viewpoint as artists.

In this book we will explore different approaches to being an artist and offer narratives to shape your own individual stories; whether they are outside, inside, beside, overhanging, or overlapping the now clichéd artist's success story. The book will alternate between practical information and new ways of thinking about managing and advancing your studio practice. We'll look at issues within the field to understand the challenges facing our careers and creative lives. Covering a wide range of topics, often juxtaposing different ways of thinking about them, questions will be posed about what you need to consider for gallery representation, less conventional ways to exhibit your work in not-for-profit settings or off-beat spaces, networking strategies, starting a business, going out on your own for a project, and more. We'll also look at what it means to be a professional in the field and examine social media in order to leverage this powerful tool. Ultimately, understanding the environments each of us works in with the pressures as well as the positive forces within them will help to find, navigate, change, or re-imagine your course so you can accomplish specific goals toward sustaining your studio practice and managing your career in the arts. Take what you need from this book in order to create your vision based on your values for a full life in the arts.

Notes

- 1 Robert Rauschenberg, *Buffalo II* (1964) sold for \$88.8 million at Christie's in May 2019. Eileen Kinsella, artnet, May 16, 2019.
- 2 *Art as Experience*, John Dewey. New York: Perigee, 2005, p. 3.
- 3 Ibid.

The Foundations

A Basic Tool Kit



Figure 1.1 Motor Scooter Hardware Store, Cambodia, 2017

This chapter outlines the basics you need to have in your artist “tool kit.” What follows is information on documents and systems you may not already have as you emerge from a school environment, or have been working for a number of years, or are well on your way with your body of work.

What this list below is not is a complete overview of each category. It’s an aerial view of the landscape or ecosystem for your practice and what you need to maintain and support it. These systems and documents references are the basic foundations to your creative work. Pick and choose what you need where there may be gaps. I have built in some resources for you to use for more in-depth inquiry into the subjects and issues.

The Business of Your Creative Career

Basic Contract for Sale of Your Original Art

A simple “Bill of Sale” should be made for every sale transaction an artist has for their work. On it should read: artist’s name, purchaser’s name, the date of the sale, the title of the art work and a brief description of it, the price of the piece, any sales tax (if due), the total amount due, and finally the signatures of the artist(s) and purchasers.

This is the simplest form of a sales contract. Many more items can be listed on the contract such as a clear statement that the artist is the sole owner of the copyright of the artwork, that the purchaser can make a certain amount of copies of the artwork under a “fair use” clause, a transfer of sales notification, or a clause that the artist will be notified if the artwork needs restoration of any kind.

The following types of documentation of your artwork and issues that may occur over time are important to consider and can be a short term task that will be beneficial over the long run.

Invoices

An invoice is a record of a list of your artwork with a statement of the sum due or the bill. A document of this kind can be kept updated in a notebook or online in a spreadsheet.

Invoices are important for the following reasons:

- a. Knowing where your artwork is initially located and over time where it moves to.
- b. A record of your sales over time.
- c. A record of who is buying your work.
- d. Finding your past work for a show or retrospect.
- e. Tax purposes.

A good resource for helping you with legal forms is the book *Business and Legal Forms for Fine Artists*, 4th ed., by Tad Crawford, Allworth Press, 2014.

Taxes and Resumes

On a similar topic, however you want to, keep a system for records such as receipts, bills of sale, show notices, gallery letters, etc. Figure out a way that works for you such as using a large shoe box, a designated desk drawer, or an Excel or online spreadsheet, so you can update your records regularly. This task includes your resume with

shows and events or, just as important, being able to itemize expenses for your taxes. More on resumes and CVs later in this chapter,

Tax codes differ in every country so it is important to keep up with any changes that may be taking place in your respective location. One way to get your taxes done is to hire an accountant or tax preparer. Generally, it is not a great expense to have someone in the tax code business do the work for you and it gives you precious peace of mind and more time to make your work. The fee can be covered by your tax returns.

Here are some suggested items to record if you can itemize your taxes as an artist (be careful to keep up with all the changes going on with tax codes in the country you reside in): travel (bus, bike, car, subway, boat, plane, etc., and receipts for repairs when applicable), books, technology, hardware, and other miscellaneous materials as they pertain to your art making, including supplies, assistants, researchers, entry into art museums and art fairs (these museums and fair visits are your lifelong professional development as an artist), refreshments or meals as they pertain to your professional career, art related meeting costs, studio rent, and studio expenses. All costs are valid if you can itemize your tax returns, and so long as these expenses can relate directly to the business of being an artist. Note: Keep all receipts for a year just on the off chance you may be audited by the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) in America which requires proof that you, the artist, paid for the expense.

It doesn't matter how you start keeping your records, whether using a drawer to throw receipts into or buying an online program to start you off. Just start! If you have a system already in place, refine it until it has the kind of detailed information you need to feel like you are in control of your expenses and taxes, which are a crucial part of your long term financial security.

Seek Out Help If Need Be

Case study: Artist X has been using an accountant/tax preparer to do their family's taxes with all the itemization of the business of making art. The tax preparer was recommended by a friend when there was a need for help one year. The work was excellent, so Artist X used the tax preparer every year afterwards. They communicated only through emails and by phone. Twenty years later they are still working together. They have never met in person. The tax services cost a few hundred dollars and are paid for from the tax return check. It has saved Artist X studio time and gives the family security and peace of mind that their taxes have been prepared by a professional who has stayed updated with the changes in rules and regulations of taxes that may occur year to year.