

**MAKING**  
YOUR LIFE AS  
AN ARTIST

By Andrew Simonet

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The role of the artist

Our punishing lives

Our skills

Planning

Mission

Money

Time

Principles





Thank

you

Thank you for being an artist.

Thank you for making your work.

Thank you for choosing this life which  
can be hard.

And hard to explain.

It is incredibly important that you are doing it.

The culture needs you to do it and do it well.

(Though the culture doesn't always know that.)



Many people don't understand what we do.

*"What's your REAL job?"*

*"Have you ever been (on the best seller list, on TV, at the one museum I've heard of)?"*

*"I'm an artist, too! I like to (make tie-dye shirts, do karaoke, brew beer)!"*

The role artists play in culture is essential.

But it isn't well understood.

So let's start there.

What do artists do?

A lot of people think of artists like athletes.

In sports, you have a tiny sliver of professionals - the ones you see on TV. Professional basketball players are the *real* basketball players.

Anyone else who plays basketball does it as a hobby. It's something you do after work.

This is why, after 20 years of working as an artist, my relatives still say things like:

*"How's that little dance thingy coming?"*

*"That must be so fun!"*

*"Are you getting in good shape?"*

To them, dance is a hobby, not a profession. It's not work, it's something you do after work. Unless, of course, you get on TV.

*"When are you gonna dance on that TV show?"*

This is completely wrong.

I think of artists like scientists.

Just like scientists, we begin with a question,  
something we don't know.

We go into our studio and research that  
question.

Like scientists, at the end of our research, we share the results with the public and with our peers.

Some research is “basic,” useful primarily to other researchers. Some is “applied,” relevant to everyday life.

Both are essential. And most artists do some of both, creating experimental work that pushes the form as well as work that is more broadly relevant.

Just as in science, a negative result is as important as a positive result.

Finding that a certain drug does not cure cancer is a crucial discovery. And an artistic experiment that fails produces important information.

When you are working beyond what is known, when you are questioning assumptions that haven't been questioned, you generate a lot of useful failure.

Failure in science and art is a sign that the process is working.

Though certain scientists win the Nobel Prize and get famous, all scientists know they are standing on the shoulders of thousands of researchers all over the world who have been asking questions.

And while some artists will get the fancy awards (and maybe even get on TV), we know they are standing on the shoulders of thousands of artists who have been doing artistic research for decades.

In art, as in science, there is an element of faith. Scientists don't enter the lab saying, "I will cure cancer." They say, "If I join the thousands of researchers asking rigorous questions about cancer, discoveries and breakthroughs will be made." In science and in art, you cannot say in advance that *this experiment* will lead to *this result*.

But we artists know that if we join the thousands of artists asking rigorous questions, the world will change.

It always has.

The scientific method and the artistic process are the *two most robust problem-solving methodologies ever developed*. Take either one away, and our world would be unrecognizable.

Look around you: every object, every surface, every technology was created, refined, and designed using the scientific method and the artistic process.

These two methods work on different things. The scientific method works on material questions. The artistic process works on questions of culture, questions of thought.

And today, especially in the “developed world,” many of our toughest problems are questions of thought and culture.

Artists are the only people who contribute new knowledge to the cultural realm. Others can refine, popularize, or synthesize our research, but we discover new cultural information.

That is a sacred responsibility.

We live in a time when we are inundated by images: pictures, language, videos, stories, music, bodies.

99% of those images are made for one reason: to get you to buy something. We artists are responsible for that tiny sliver of images that can be made for every other possible reason: cultural, spiritual, political, emotional.

In an age of image overload, this is a sacred responsibility.

Sometimes I think of art like food.

The Food Industry has decided that we should eat a tiny handful of plants and animals over and over. Corn, famously, is found in a huge amount of American food. Highly refined byproducts of corn are added to nearly everything, and the animals we eat mostly live on corn. They are even breeding salmon who can eat corn.

(Salmon don't eat corn. Obviously.)

Similarly, the Entertainment Industrial Complex has decided we should all consume the same limited, repetitive cultural diet.

Over and over, we see the same five stories.

The same three bodies.

The same four kinds of relationships.

With food, there have long been seed savers and farmers who reject the standardization of our diet. They grow things that don't fit with industrial agriculture. They preserve the seeds for plants we may need someday.

This is what artists do culturally. We provide the wide spectrum nutrition that the soul needs and the Entertainment Industry ignores. We save cultural seeds, the DNA of ideas and ways of seeing that we may need tomorrow.

Or in 20 years.

Or 2,000 years.

Making art demands a faith beyond each particular project. We don't know exactly how the cultural DNA we are preserving and recombining might be useful in the future.

But we do know that diverse ecosystems are more resilient, more able to respond to disturbance. The same is true of culture. Diversity of thought and imagination makes us more culturally resilient, more able to thrive in times of great change.

We live in a time of enormous and rapid change, a time that needs the wild thinking and making of artists.



Many people (including artists) are confused about the difference between art and entertainment. The Entertainment Industrial Complex wants to eliminate the distinction altogether.

Art and entertainment do different things.

Entertainment distracts our attention.

Art focuses it.

Entertainment is important, it allows us to check out, to give our attention a rest. I love action movies. But I don't want to watch them all the time.

Like eating sweets, too much distraction can be toxic.

pleasure ≠ distraction

Art is not cultural broccoli, something you hate but should consume. Art offers pleasure, the rich and deep sensations of laughter, change, and investment. Entertainment does not.

Entertainment satisfies cravings.

Art satisfies needs.

Its impact doesn't come from popularity. If you look at art history and you remove all the art that was disliked in its time, you lose much of what matters.

Today's cutting edge is tomorrow's mainstream.

One more thing: our *role* as artists is different from the effects we have on the world.

Artists have a lot of effects on the world: our work impacts education, citizenship, multiculturalism, urban renewal. But those are *effects* of our role; they are not the role.

Our role is to ask rigorous and reckless cultural questions, do our research, and share the results. When we do our role well, all kinds of other things happen. We invigorate cities. We spark important, difficult conversations. We educate. We inspire other fields. But if you evaluate (and fund) the arts based on those effects, you quickly distort the sector.

An analogy: addiction programs in a mosque or church or synagogue can be hugely successful. But what if we funded these places of worship based on their ability to treat addiction? What if we resourced them based on the effect (addiction recovery) instead of the role (center of spiritual life)? First, you'd get some pretty weird churches and mosques, bending over backwards to prove they were curing addiction. And, eventually, they'd lose effectiveness. The effect (addiction recovery) would diminish as their role (place of worship) was neglected.

Effects are great.

But our role is more important.



# BUT HERE'S THE THING

Despite the essential and sacred role artists play, I am constantly struck by how punishing artists' lives can be.

At every level of success, too many artists are exhausted, overwhelmed and broke, panicked about the present and disheartened about the future.

It does not have to be like this.

I have spent the past decade looking at the suffering of artists (and the last twenty years building a life as a choreographer), and I am happy to report:

Most artist suffering is in our control.

Building a sustainable life isn't simple. But it's not as hard as the things you are already doing.

Conceiving of, planning, creating, and delivering an original work of art is hard. That is a skill set very few people have.

So if you want to stop reading now, here's the short answer:

Apply the skills,  
creativity, and  
resourcefulness of  
your art practice to the  
rest of your life.

We can be as creative and brilliant in making our lives as we are in making our work.

And we can stop bragging about our suffering, the “onedownsmanship” where we try to out-suffer each other.

*“I worked 287 hours last week and I only made \$6.”*

*“Well, I just got 23 rejections and I’m getting evicted from my studio and no one understands my brilliant work.”*

## Three Things That Will Stop You

Why are artists’ lives so punishing? There are specific things I’ve seen again and again that make it hard.

### 1) Workaholism, and Its Mean Little Sibling, Perfectionism

Artistic careers are largely self-generated, so we can get stuck working all the time. It is always possible to do more, even at 10 pm on a Sunday. Artists don’t know how to stop working. And when we do stop, we feel guilty.

So we are workaholics: stuck between working and not working, forever doing one and thinking about the other.

I know this first hand. My wife (also an artist) and I decided we had to set a limit. We needed to make a time in the day when we would not work. No laptops, nothing. Here's the embarrassing thing: we chose 11:00 pm.

And then, *we failed*. We couldn't stop working at 11:00. At 12:15, I'd be madly typing, saying, "Yeah, I'm just sending this one last thing and then I'm really done."

And my wife, madly typing away herself, wouldn't respond.

Good God.

Working all the time is not a virtue. It's bad for our work and bad for our health.

No artists give themselves enough down time.

And we need more of it than most people. Our work depends on regularly refilling our well of inspiration, something that only happens when we have wide-open, unstructured time to follow our wildest thoughts and curiosities.

What is down time?

It's hours in the day, days in the week, and weeks in the year when you are not working. (And email counts as working.)



The way to get down time is: put it in your calendar.

And tell people about it.

*“You won’t get a response from me after 7:00 pm.”*

*“I don’t work on Saturdays or Thursdays.”*

*“I’m away the first two weeks in July.”*

Even if you don’t know where you’re going on your vacation, tell people about it, and it will happen.

Most artists say: “I’ll take time off when the work is done.”

The work is never done.

That’s like saying: “I’ll pay myself whatever’s left over at the end of the project.” There’s never any money left over at the end. So pay yourself first. And schedule your time off now.

By choice and by necessity, there are crazy busy moments in most artists’ lives. Because we know those moments will come, it’s crucial that our entire lives aren’t that way.

Another cause of workaholism: artists are astonishingly capable. We can figure out how to do just about anything. But when that ability meets our scarcity mentality, it leads us to do everything.

*“I’m a starving artist, so I have to fix my own car, do my own taxes, build my own website, grow my own food...”*

Just because you *can* do everything doesn’t mean you *should*.

Get help, especially with things you aren’t good at or don’t like doing.

## A Word about Perfectionism

(plus a side note about mentors)

I used to think of perfectionism as rigor: I’m being tough on myself; I’m going to expect the maximum. Now, I see perfectionism as vanity: the rules don’t apply to me; I’m not human like everyone else; I can do the impossible; I can be perfect.

It is crucial that we have the highest standards for our art. (Even with art, I stay away from the word “perfect.”) But we can’t have the highest standards about everything in our lives. An email does not need to be perfect. It needs to be Good Enough (or G.E.). Expecting perfection in everything you do will stop you.

Knowing what can be G.E. (most of the stuff we do) can free up mountains of time and attention.

Most of us have artistic mentors, people who inspired us and helped make us the artists we are. In addition to the beautiful artistic inheritance we get from them, we often inherit some not-so-beautiful work and life habits.

In dance, I call it Survival of the Bitterest. The choreographers who stick around are often the ones most comfortable feeling bitter and resentful. My artistic mentors were brilliant artists. But I do not want to live the lives they led.

Distinguish between artistic brilliance and life brilliance.

Or:  
Never talk to anyone about happiness who has less of it than you.

## 2) Competitiveness

Fellow artists are our most important constituency, our peers and partners. All too often, we distance ourselves from them because we feel competitive.

Here's a mantra:

*The success of other artists is good for me.*

I chant this because, first of all, it's true. If another contemporary dance artist gets attention in the world, it creates opportunities for me.

I also chant this because I don't want to live in a community of artists defined by competition and backstabbing.

Once in a while, another artist will get a specific opportunity or gig or grant that I want, and I may have to grit my teeth and say it.

But I still do.

Art isn't a race where the winner erases the efforts of others. Other art magnifies and enriches the art I make.

### 3) Poverty

Most artists who leave the field don't leave by choice. They leave because they can't work out the time and money equations.

Artists (and activists) are brilliant at leading amazing lives without a lot of money. That is a gift. Ask most people, "How much money do you need?" They will say: about 50% more than they currently make. If they make 50% more, and you ask them again, the answer will be the same: more. Most people need an unattainable amount of money called More.

Artists have a number that is enough, an amount of money that allows us to live well and not worry about money.

But living on 30% less than you need is punishing.

And that's what most artists are doing.



## Three Things That Will Sustain You

Despite all of those challenges, many artists thrive. Here are three things I've seen that make a difference.

### 1) Your Skills as an Artist

The best and most important news:

*You already have the skills you need to build a beautiful, sustainable life.*

The secret of artists who make it work: they use the skills, resourcefulness, and creativity of their art practice in all aspects of their lives.

Artists are over-skilled and work incredibly hard. We see value where others do not. We are brilliant problem-solvers and tool-users. We have the meta-skill of learning new skills.

If I said to you, "I want to make a performance that involves two hot-air balloons, a children's chorus, and some trained cats." You would say, "OK, let's figure it out." Because you are an artist and because you believe fundamentally that things can be figured out, transformed, adapted, and solved.

You have experience making the impossible happen.

All too often, we don't use those skills outside the studio. When it's time to make a budget or do our taxes or have a meeting with a fancy funder, we say:

*"Oh, no I can't do that. I'm an artist."*

## 2) Community (and a Bit about Saviors)

Artists are connected to intricate and resilient webs of community. Our communities give us resources to grow and stability to fall back on.

Making a sustainable life means depending on your community, calling on your network, something many artist don't do enough.

Because too many artists are waiting to be saved.

We have a saying:

# No one is coming

No one is going to knock on your door and turn you from the artist you are now into an artist who has *made it*.

That doesn't happen.

But there are many people who will partner with you to move your work forward.

And you already know a lot of them.



Sometimes artists are like that obnoxious person at the party who's talking to someone but actually looking around for someone more important to talk to.

There are people close to you right now who are ready to partner with you, and you probably aren't giving them the chance.

Taking power as an artist means going from beggar to partner. Artists who are strong partners thrive. They find resources, connections, and audiences. They don't wait for opportunities; they create opportunities

Everyone we deal with is a partner (not a parent). Funders, presenters, museums, record labels, and critics are all partners. When we step up as responsive, responsible partners, we can go anywhere.

A partner thinks about what the person on the other side of the table needs. A partner asks for what she needs without apologizing. A partner puts himself in the other person's shoes and works to create a partnership that's good for everyone involved.

A partner responds to emails and phone calls, is honest and proactive when problems (inevitably) arise, and looks to long-term relationships beyond the immediate project.

When you see yourself this way, you can find partnerships beyond the Art World. The world is full of potential partners who need the insight and creativity of an artist. And when you go outside the Art World, the money is often *much* better.

### 3) Your Mission

Every artist has a mission, a purpose bigger than yourself, a generosity. No one gets into this work for the money or status. Not for long, anyway. Artists begin with something to give to the world.

It may be a way of seeing or listening.

It may be pushing embodiment or questioning Big Cultural Narratives.

When we lead with our mission, more people connect with us.

And it makes us more powerful and more fulfilled.

*CIVILIAN: "What do you do?"*

*ARTIST: "I make postmodern dances for the stage."*

*[AWKWARD SILENCE]*

*CIVILIAN: "What do you do?"*

*ARTIST: "I'm interested in what is happening to our bodies in this age of digital devices. Are we connecting or disconnecting?"*

*CIVILIAN: "That's so interesting because I was just..."*

*CIVILIAN: "What do you do?"*

*ARTIST: "I make large-scale figurative paintings and installations, often site-specific."*

*CIVILIAN: "..."*

*CIVILIAN: "What do you do?"*

*ARTIST: "I'm looking at all of the stuff we own, the things that fill up our homes. Where does it all come from? Does it keep us safe? Does it overwhelm us?"*

*CIVILIAN: "Yeah, I was just telling my friend the other day that..."*

Some artists begin as mission-driven but get tricked into being career-driven. The world of art-making doesn't have an infinite supply of money or opportunities, so it is easy to start making our decisions based on status or resources, furthering a career instead of a mission.

We worry: *"How will I get the recognition I deserve?"*

Instead of: *"How can I best connect with people?"*

We think: *"I wish I had a show at \_\_\_\_\_."*

Instead of: *"Since my work is already getting traction in certain places, I can build on those partnerships."*

I think of careers like scaffolding, those metal and wood structures you put up when you are building a house.

The scaffolding is important. Pay attention to it. But it is not the house. If you focus all your efforts on the scaffolding, you end up with a lovely scaffolding and nowhere to live.

Your career is not your work; your career supports your work.

One way to discover your mission: look at the things that are important to you beyond art-making.

Your mission can lead you to all sorts of work, and for most artists it does. I know artists who teach, who do body work, and who raise kids. I know artists who are political activists, journalists, health workers, community organizers, coaches, fundraisers, personal trainers. These people are all fulfilling their mission, even when they aren't making art.

Even a spreadsheet can be part of your mission. I know an artist who is an accountant for artists; that's one way she helps artists thrive in her city.

Another way to say it:

It's better for the world if you keep your mission and change your tactics (become an educator or a journalist) than if you lose your mission and keep making art.

Our challenge:

Build lives as  
artists that are  
balanced,  
productive, and  
sustainable.

We are good at productive. Artists will stay up all night to finish a project. We'll go from a teaching gig to a restaurant job, then home to work in the studio.

But we're not as good at balanced or sustainable.

Balanced means you have things in your life other than working: friends, family, hobbies, community. (If you can't quickly think of three, you're out of balance.)

Making art will never be an entirely reasonable, rational pursuit. Excess, immersion, wildness, and obsessiveness can all fuel our work. But that doesn't have to be the way we deal with all aspects of our lives.

Protect the wildness of your art practice.

Keep the radical parts radical by cutting out the chaos.

Sustainable means your life can work over the long term.

A lot of artists' lives are built for 23-year-old single, frenetic, healthy, childless workaholics. That doesn't last. Our lives change and our needs change.

Sustaining is radical.

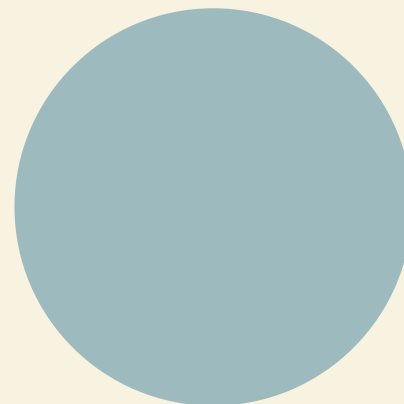
(Starving is not.)



In dance (my field), there are this many choreographers in their twenties:



This many in their thirties:



And this many in their forties:



This “brain drain” hurts our field and our culture. Imagine what would happen to medicine if most doctors stopped practicing in their thirties.

Most of these artists are not leaving because they lost interest; they leave because they can't make it sustainable.

Building a sustainable life is political. You are committing to keeping your voice strong in our culture.

Our culture needs you to make your most visionary work for as long as possible.

The culture may not act that way by showering you with money and attention. But that's what it needs.

The key to making it sustainable is to make it easier.

*I have never met an artist who needs to work harder. (But all artists think they do.)*

Artists need to work less and work smarter. A lot less.

I cannot stress this enough: you are doing too much. And you are probably doing it inefficiently.

Exhausted? Overwhelmed? Feel like you're constantly behind and there must be something wrong with you?

There is nothing wrong with you. You are doing a heroic job in an unmanageable situation. You don't need to *do better*. You need to change the conditions.

*Nothing you do from here on out should be as hard as what you have done to get here.*

We get so accustomed to frantic, overwhelming lives, we keep recreating them even when we have the chance to be balanced.

Outside the studio, with every task, we should ask: how can this be easier?

I am going to say that again.

How can this be easier?

*There is no model.*

Your work and your career won't look like anyone else's.

Instead of griping that your career has not followed the trajectory of Basquiat-Bjork-Bill T. Jones-Cindy Sherman-your best friend (and trust me, they also gripe about their own careers), think about the balance that you want.

Small, incremental changes in your time and money equations (working one day less a week at a day job, or making 20% more money next year, or reserving two days a week exclusively for your art) are the difference between suffering and sustaining.

Any time spent comparing yourself with another artist is wasted time.

Comparisons are odious, as Oscar Wilde said.

*Define success for yourself.*

If you don't, you're in for a world of hurt. Forever. Because there will always be more rejection than acceptance.

~~*No gig or grant or review is a verdict on your work.*~~

*Nothing is a verdict on your work.*

Here's the one time (I promise) where I quote Bono:

*"You can never get enough of what you don't really need."*

Things you need (food, sleep, love, art) you can get enough of. Things you don't need (sugar, cocaine, possessions, good reviews, adoration from random strangers) are addictive. And you can chase them your whole life.

Praise is nice, but it's not what we need.

you will  
never feel  
adequately  
recognized

No one who creates feels adequately recognized.

The journey of creation is long and deep and spiritual and messed up and glorious. By the time our work is actually shown in public, there's nothing anyone can say that will equal the journey we went on to get there.

I've seen artists deal with this in three ways:

*Some artists obsess about recognition so much it interferes with their art.*

*Some artists keep making their art but with a constant, low-level grumble (to partners, collaborators, students) about their lack of prizes, funding, and adoration.*

*And some artists get over it and get to work.*

As I tell performers: make friends with your desire to be loved by the audience. It's human to want that. But don't let it control your choices.

*Artistic success, unlike other success, is usually an opportunity to do a lot of underpaid work.*

Congratulations! You got the gig or commission or residency! Now work your butt off for six weeks for a tiny fee.

Artists don't use moments of success to reward ourselves. If anything, we reward ourselves when things get really bad.

*"Damn, I didn't get that gig and my website is down and I was late getting the grant in. Screw it, I'm gonna go out to dinner."*

*Artistic success doesn't bring balance.*

At every level of success, artists feel the same pressures, anxieties, and doubts. Whatever level of success you are dreaming of, I have met artists that successful who are overwhelmed, panicked, and insecure.

Now is the time to build a balanced life. If you wait until you've "made it," you'll be waiting forever.

*You already have the skills you need.*

There are people who don't work hard.  
There are people who can't handle complex  
problems. There are people who don't put  
in the time.

Artists are not those people.

Artists work incredibly hard, and they know  
how to do something very few people can do:

*Imagine something that doesn't exist;*

*Make a plan to create it;*

*Do the hard work of creating it, learning  
from mistakes and changing as  
circumstances change;*

*And deliver the finished product.*

In the for-profit world, that's called being an  
executive, or a project manager, and very few  
people do it well.

It also means you already have real-world  
experience with the most important tool.

And that is planning.





Most artists spend the vast majority of their time dealing with immediate problems. The PR package that was supposed to go out two days ago. The grant that's due Friday. The communications that stream in all day every day.

Planning lets us spend a small amount of time on the big, long-term things that are most important to us.

And that means those big things will actually happen.

Planning shifts artists from reactive to proactive.

Planning patterns unconscious thought.

The vast majority of brain activity is not conscious thought. Left alone, these unconscious thoughts are scattered or negative.

*"What ever happened to that project I did four years ago?"*

*"Why hasn't that curator called me back?"*

*"I suck I suck I suck."*

Planning helps you align these thoughts with something meaningful.

*"I'm getting my own studio."*

*"I'm building partnerships for my next big project."*

Planning is the opposite of hoping.

*“I hope I make more money next year.”*  
(vague and passive)

*“I have a plan to increase my income  
by \$5,000.”*  
(specific and active)

### *How to Make Your Plan*

Go somewhere by yourself, no phones, no computers. Write responses to the following:

*What do you want personally, professionally, and artistically in the next two years?*

You have to write about all three.

*Personally* means everything in your life that does not have to do with working or making art.

*Professionally* means how your career unfolds, and how your work is delivered to the world.

*Artistically* means your art practice and the skills and collaborations that make it possible.

Don't censor. Don't “preshrink” the goals to make them easier to accomplish. Eliminate any “shoulds.”

~~“I should get an MFA.”~~

“I want to get an MFA” is fine if that's true for you.

Dream bigger than you think you should.

Leave it alone for a week.

**After a week, get out the list. You can add new goals and cross off any that don't feel important anymore. Then sift through it for what feels most important. Choose your top three goals.**

That means three goals total. And you don't have to choose one from each category. Choose three that will have the most positive impact on your world.

This part is hard. Most artists aren't good at prioritizing. We like to work on 27 different things at once.

But I have seen over and over that artists who do a small number of things fully and excellently go further.

**A list is the opposite of a plan.**

Many artists have long, scrolling lists of all the things they want to or should do, everything under the sun, a huge catalog of to-dos that will never be emptied.

95% of your plan is the things you are choosing not to do, the things you won't devote attention to.

When you prioritize, you massively concentrate your focus and energy on a few things that will make the most difference.

**Break your three priorities down into doable steps, the smaller the better.**

**Keep the steps on a piece of paper or on your computer and move a couple of them onto your to-do list each week.**

That's it. That simple practice can be the difference between chaos and balance.

Breaking it down into steps is the other part artists struggle with. An artist will have a goal like: "I want to present my work in New York" and break it down into steps.

*Step one - get a gig in New York.*

But that's not a step, that's the goal.

A step is a tiny action that you can put on your to-do list today and accomplish. One way to tell if a step is small enough: you look at it and you have an urge to get it done. If a step makes you want to procrastinate, it's too big.

So what is a small first step for the goal: "I want to present my work in New York"?

*Contact presenters who might be interested.*

How do I do that? Who are "presenters?"

*Make a list of potential presenters.*

Still too big. I can't make a list if I don't have information.

*Talk with artists I know who have been presented in New York.*

Getting there. Still too vague. Who are these "artists?"

*Talk with Nancy, Charles, and Mikhail about showing in New York.*

Almost. How can I talk with all of them today?

*Email Nancy to make a time to talk.*

Bingo. That's a step. Tiny, doable, specific, and it moves things forward.

A few more things about planning.

Focusing on personal goals can be hard. Many of us sacrifice our personal lives for our work. Be a little selfish. What would make you feel balanced?

Many artists struggle to distinguish artistic goals from professional goals. Artistic goals are what you want for the work itself: your process, your studio, collaborators, research, travel, new skills. What will deepen and strengthen your art-making? Professional goals focus on how the work gets out into the world: funding, getting the work shown or produced, building administrative structures. Make sure you write down some purely artistic goals.

Artists' goals are often external and qualitative.

An internal goal is something I can do myself.

*I want to spend nine hours per week in the studio.*

That might be challenging, but no one can stop me from doing it. An external goal is one that requires the support or consent of others.

*I want to show my work at the \_\_\_\_\_ Festival.*

I can do a lot to make this goal happen, but in the end, someone other than me has final say.

If possible, make at least one of your goals internal. And make your external goals as broad as possible.

*I want to show at one of these four festivals: \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.*

A qualitative goal has no numbers in it.

*I want to perform more often.*

How much more often? Make it quantitative.

*I want to perform eight times per year.*

That clear focus lets you know when you've accomplished it so you can take yourself out for a fancy drink and say, "I'm awesome."

"Time off" is a hope.

"Three weeks off" is a goal.

Battered by the challenges artists face, we often make our dreams smaller to avoid failing at them. But here's the good news:

## A big dream is easier to achieve than a small dream.

A big goal catalyzes our energy and excites those around us.

*"Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and Creation) there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: The moment that one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred.*

*Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

More good news:

*All you have to do is keep the ball moving.  
That's what small steps do.*

You don't have to make it all happen today or this week or even this year. Small, regular steps toward your big goal will get you there.

No all-nighters needed.

When Amy Smith, David Brick, and I started Headlong Dance Theater, we used to take little getaways every year. We would head to a cabin in the woods, talk about the past year, and think about what we wanted to do next. We started writing down what we wanted on a piece of paper. The next year, we got out the paper and discovered that everything we wrote down had happened.


We thought: *this is a magical piece of paper.*

So we tested it, writing down unrealistic goals that we thought could never happen. And then those things happened too. We had stumbled on strategic planning.

As my mentor and all-around genius Colleen Keegan says: you can get anywhere you can see.

Once you see it and name it as a goal, you can get there.

Make the  
dream bigger,  
and the steps  
to get there  
smaller.





Reluctant to plan? Most of us are. Here is a preemptive list of reasons artists have given for not wanting to plan:

*I don't want to fail.*

*Plans are too limiting.*

*If I sit down and think about what I really want, it's going to wreck my relationship or job or collaboration. (That's mine, by the way.)*

*It's easier to respond than to choose.*

*Thinking about the future fills me with dread.*

*I'm too cool to plan.*

*I'm too busy to plan.*

Get over yourself. And get to work.



Artists are mission-driven.

We do this work because we have something to give.

We have itches and visions and a drive to offer them up.

It's what makes art-making different from keeping a journal or singing in the shower.

There is a fundamental generosity to making art, a giving.

But many of us get tricked into being career-driven.

The markers of achievement for artists are scattered, few, and sometimes contradictory.

(My company won the biggest award in the dance world for a piece that the New York Times called “the greatest disappointment of the evening.” Yup, contradictory.)

Instead of defining success for ourselves, artists obsess over these inconsistent and ultimately not meaningful markers.

We had enough external success as a dance company to learn that it doesn't save you. I can't tell you how many times I thought:

*"If we can just get \_\_\_\_\_,  
we'll have it made."*

Fill that in with whatever you want: a gig in New York, a grant from X, touring support, a space.

And if we got that thing, guess what happened?

We were still the exact same people, working every day to create our lives as artists.

External markers of success are great, but they won't save you.

In the end, we artists need to save ourselves. And each other.

We need to lead with our mission, our purpose.

We need to tell ourselves and others why we do what we do, what we have to give, and the big generous questions that provoke us into action.

And we need to say it in words, in what I call an artist mission statement.

We need artist statements of different shapes and tones for different purposes: programs, press releases, grant applications, websites. Underlying all of these, we need an *internal* artist statement, one that speaks honestly and passionately without worrying about who it's for.

If an artist says:

*"I make experimental dance theater, both site-specific and for the stage."*

There is a very small number of people who will connect to that mission, mostly people pre-disposed to care about me or care about "experimental dance theater." This is why many dance audiences consist largely of the artists' friends plus other choreographers.

But if the artist says:

*"Americans have bodies when they eat, have sex, and exercise. In between those islands of excess, we are passengers in our bodies, burying sensation with distraction, drugs, and vanity. My dances explore the 24-hour body, recovering the things we have traded for a cycle of numb appetites: our touch, our mortality, our empathy."*

Meg Foley

Now there are lots of people and organizations that might connect to her work and her mission. They don't have to care about experimental dance theater, they just have to care about bodies and our increasingly disembodied culture.

The three questions to answer about your work in an artist statement (also in a grant application or press release) are:

What?

Why?

So what?

**What** is it? You'd be surprised how many artist statements don't clarify what the artist actually creates. Examples help.

**Why** is it important to you, the artist? What is your passionate connection to the work?

**So what?** That's a cranky way of saying: why does it matter in the world? Why does it matter beyond your interest? Why might other people connect to it? This can be the hardest one to answer, but also the most important.

It's hard to write about your own work. My friend Asimina said, "It's like trying to see your own face."

So don't do it alone. Get together with another artist (or a few artists) and try this exercise.

## The Language

Take turns interviewing each artist. Try to get to the bottom of how each of you became an artist, and why you do what you do. Here are some questions that help:

- When and how did you decide to be an artist?
- Tell me about an early artistic experience that inspired you.
- Are there any teachers or mentors who were formative for you? How?
- Name three artists whose work you admire. What is it about their work and process that you love?
- What is the most meaningful project you've ever created?

- What is the most meaningful connection with an audience/public you've ever had?
- If the whole world saw your work, if it was everywhere and kids studied it in school and towns brought it to the village green, how would the world be different? (This gets at the “so what” question. If answers to this start to feel hokey – people would slow down, there would be more empathy – you are on the right track.)

Everyone takes notes on the answers, especially any phrases that are particularly resonant or eloquent.

Next, working alone, write a list of ten words to describe your work. This is the tiny haiku/ telegram version of your artist statement. Nouns and verbs are especially good. Adjectives are okay, as long as it isn't all adjectives. Read these aloud to each other. Steal words from others that you like.

## The Writing

Next, write a one-paragraph artist statement in the first person (“I”). It's easy to transcribe into the third person (“she/he”) later as needed. Use phrases or sentences from the interview that you like. Use some of the ten words from your list (but you don't have to fit all of them in).

Answer the what-why-so what questions with juicy language and total honesty.

Read your paragraph out loud, and discuss it with your artist partner(s).

- What is the strongest language, the words or phrases that linger?
- Does it answer the what-why-so what questions?
- And does it make you want to see the work?

After discussing it, go back and edit.

**Start with a clean slate.** If you have an existing artist statement, put it out of your mind during this work.

**Even if language is not your medium, dive into the particular power of words.**

**Your artist statement can speak in the same voice as your work.** If your work includes collisions, humor, contradiction, or playfulness, your statement can, too. I know too many artists whose work is wild and quirky but whose artist statements are dry dry dry.

**Lead with what is most distinctive about your work, not with things that other artists do.** A lot of choreographers say their work is “highly physical.” Yeah, that’s dance. Every choreographer could say that. Tell us what distinguishes your work.

**Give an example,** especially if your work is between genres or hard to pin down.

**Strategically simplify.** A lot of artists tell me, “Yeah, I do paintings but I also make installation work and digital projects and public art and I might record an album so DON’T PIN ME DOWN, MAN!” No writing will ever capture the full complexity of who you are as an artist. So simplify. And bring the reader close to your work.



For your viewing pleasure, here are a few artist mission statements I particularly like:

*I create puppets, masks, piñatas, parades, pageants, clown acts, suitcase theaters, magical lands and other spectacula, on my own, and in collaboration with other humans of all ages, abilities, and persuasions. I use cardboard, science, and the imagination to explore sloths, symbiosis, gentrification, ATMs, Pterodactyls, pregnancy, disaster, and canoeing. I have performed in living rooms, parking lots, and on stages up and down the East Coast and been an artist-in-residence at dozens of schools, senior centers, addiction recovery and mental health programs. I believe in the power of bike helmets, cornstarch, tide pools, emancipatory pedagogy, utopian performatives, and snacks. I fill suitcases with cardboard possibilities, perform words in wigs, and give guided tours to places that don't yet exist.*

Beth Nixon

*I lived in 21 different houses before I turned 18, in the richest and second-poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. I have friends in Honduras who live twenty miles from the ocean but will never see it, and friends in the US who will never learn how to cook beans.*

*In Honduras, I saw the disparity of opportunities given to me and to my Honduran friends. And in California, I saw the emptiness of the material wealth Honduran villagers dreamed of.*

*When I see a boundary, I try to cross it. Groups that don't speak to each other. Histories that have been paved over. Literally. I discovered train tracks outside a gallery in Philadelphia, and built a train car, to resurrect for a night the erased industrial history of North Philadelphia.*

*I provoke local rituals of remembering and delight, in a culture that has forgotten how to mourn. You are not alone. You are not the first. To be hated or excluded. To hate or exclude.*

*Artistic practice matters when it connects us, when it makes us hesitant to kill each other.*

Jeb Lewis

*I make feminist flamenco. Flamenco has traditionally placed women as seductress, sexual object, love object, and always last in the art form's hierarchy. My work challenges these rules, uncovering the true heart of the tradition—strong women.*

Elba Hevia y Vaca

*Dancing is the anti-text message, a full-bore, 360-degree telling that has little to do with being productive and everything to do with being alive.*

*My dances offer the unmediated body, a physicality that is present, accountable, and unplugged. In a culture that values information over sensing, I quietly hoard the body's knowingness, the connectivity that has no wires.*

Michelle Stortz

Once you have a strong articulation of your mission, lead with it. Let people know why you do what you do, and more people will connect and partner with you. You don't have to have a "social mission" to have an artistic mission (that last artist statement you just read is from an artist who makes abstract experimental work).

*"But I want the work to speak for itself."*

We owe it to the work to represent it well in language. More people will see representations of your work (writing, images, work samples) than will see the work in person.

*"But I just make my work. I don't know why it's important to me or the world. I just do it."*

Bull. You are astonishingly competent, hard-working, and focused. Like most artists, you could probably do whatever you wanted to. You chose to devote your life to creating art, a choice that isn't easy. There are reasons for that. Write them, and tell the world.



## Jobs I Have Done for Money

High school dance teacher

Tea shop manager

Editor

Co-Director of a dance company

Busboy

Lifeguard

Caterer

Videographer

Grant panelist

Waiter

Coat check at a gay club

Bartender

Strategic planner

Professional development workshop leader

Golf tournament security guard

Choreographer for a musical

Garden store laborer

Librarian

Stockboy at a snack bar

Babysitter

Director of high school dance program

Model for drawing classes

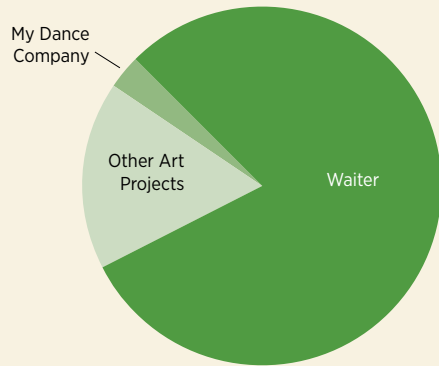
Grant writer

Elementary school educator on physical and sexual abuse and conflict resolution

Guest choreographer at colleges

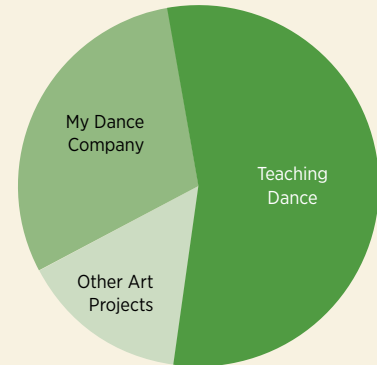
Stage manager

Here's the pie chart of my income in 1994:



My first goal was to stop waiting tables. It was a great gig for getting settled in my new city, but I'd been doing it since I was 15, and it exhausted and discouraged me.

Here's my income for 1999:



Teaching dance was amazing until it wasn't anymore. My next goal was to stop teaching and focus more on my company.

My income in 2007:



Artists' financial lives are non-linear (you don't get hired as assistant artist then promoted to managing artist and then executive artist) and hybrid (more than one money-earning activity at a time).

### Two things I have seen help sustain artists:

1) Incremental changes in the pie chart (e.g. 20% more income from my art or cutting down on a stressful day job.) This is different from I-just-wanna-quit-my-day-job-and-make-art-all-day. Small, strategic changes free up time and attention for your work.

2) Over time, the pie gets bigger. My income in 2007 was twice my income in 1994.

Let's look at some things that are not true about money, things a lot of artists believe.

### Artists are bad with money.

This is the Big Myth.

It started because artists, unlike much of the world, are not primarily motivated or controlled by money. Artists are actually amazing with money, but we usually don't have enough of it.

In the for-profit world, someone gives you a project and 100% of the budget necessary to complete it. If you deliver the project on time, you are *a genius, a brilliant manager, and you have a job for life.*

In the arts, you have a project and somewhere between 0% and 50% of the budget needed, and you still deliver the project on time. That makes you a double genius.

Making art with limited resources requires incredible financial skill.

Someday I will make it, and I won't have to worry about money anymore.

No one is coming.

And, as you succeed and get additional resources for your work, it's more crucial to spend a small amount of time managing it.

I am lucky to be an artist, and I don't deserve to be paid well for my time.

This belief is so pervasive inside and outside the art world that we must constantly confront it.

Artists are the executives of the art world. We are the ones who envision projects, plan them, implement them, and deliver them on time.

We need to think of our work at that level.

**Everything will turn out better if I never take an honest look at my finances.**

No, it won't.

A small amount of regular attention to your financial situation can bring huge changes.

No one should spend more than 45 minutes a week on personal finances.

I don't want to put money at the center of our work. I want to take it out of the center, to stop it from being a constant, low-level stress.

Everyone has principles about money. I don't think principles are necessarily true or untrue; rather, some principles support you and some don't.

My dance company was a collaboration, so from the beginning, we had to talk about things. We talked a lot about money, and that forced us to put our beliefs on the table, where we could discuss and make choices about them.

I made a full-time living as a choreographer with benefits for 10 years. I don't think this happened because we were the Best Choreographers, though our work was strong. And I don't think we were just "lucky." There were dance artists more successful and "lucky" than us who didn't make a full-time living.

We got paid because we started with principles that made it possible.



## Headlong's Principles about Money

(an example for thinking about principles)

### **We will make our work no matter what.**

We didn't wait for money to create our work. We set up our lives so that we could make dances regardless of what happened financially. We had our own studio where we could rehearse and even perform, and we had each other as dancers. Money would make bigger projects possible, but it would never prevent us from creating.

### **The financial priority of the company is to pay the artists well for their work.**

The reason we formed an organization and a nonprofit was to compensate artists. Everyone who connected with us – board members, employees, presenters – had to understand this. And no one ever disagreed. But people were surprised: “But you're artists, and you're doing what you love...”

Yes, and to continue doing what we love, we have to make the finances work.

So when we had a \$9,000 annual budget, \$5,000 went to the artists. Too many artists say, “I'll pay myself when there's more money.” And then when there is more money, they say it again.

**We consider our whole lives as artists: taking time off, life changes, children, injury, illness.** All of these changes played big roles in the company's life. If you build your time-money equations for your 23-year-old self, it won't last.

My friend Esther talks about the Three S's:

*Solvency: You can pay your bills.*

*Stability: You can pay your bills, and you have an emergency fund: 3-6 months of living expenses in your savings.*

*Security: You have an emergency fund, and you are building other long-term assets: home ownership, retirement savings, saving for a child's education, etc.*

Most artists never think beyond solvency. Considering stability and security – just putting them on the radar screen – changes things.

We look at what our work actually costs.  
As a result, we charge a lot.

Actually, we spent a lot of time at two price points: free and really expensive.

We always did free programming, things that were close to our mission and that we controlled. But if someone wanted to pay us to perform or teach, we charged high rates, rates that didn't just cover our costs, they put money back into the company. We didn't spend much time in the starvation, not-worth-it rates we often saw in the dance world. "My dance company will perform for \$300!" "My dance company will *pay you* to perform!" That's a race to the bottom.

When you ask for sustainable rates, you raise the bar for everyone who comes after you. Presenters offered us \$300 for a week residency because some artist in the past accepted that fee. If that artist had demanded \$3,000, the presenter would have built that into their budget and fundraised for it.

## Five Things You Can Do This Week to Change Your Financial Life

### 1) Get your credit report.

Go to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). It's free. (Don't google it; people try to make you pay.) A credit report is a living document: mistakes can be corrected, problems can be cleared up, and positive steps can be taken to improve your credit score.

### 2) Have a meeting with a realtor if you don't already own your home.

Just a meeting. Realtors make money when someone buys or sells a house, so they want to meet with you. Ask artist friends for a recommendation.

Owning real estate is not for everyone and not for every moment in your life. But we miss out on huge financial advantages when we say, "I'm an artist so I can't own a home."

### 3) Write down everything you spend for one week.

Do this with unconditional friendliness toward yourself. Most artists don't have expense problems, we have income problems. But knowing where your money goes helps you make decisions.

I used to worry about buying a bagel or a coffee. Then I tracked my expenses and realized that all my money (a lot of it anyway) was going to childcare. Bagels didn't matter. By adjusting our schedules, my wife and I eliminated 9 hours of childcare a week, saving us thousands of dollars per year.

And I stopped worrying about bagels.

### 4) Write down the annual income you need to live without financial panic.

This is transformative.

Here's how to figure out that number: go to last year's taxes and take the "gross income" number, the number before taxes are taken out. Add to that number any money you earned that was not on your taxes.

Then think about last year. Were you strapped for cash? Did you have trouble paying your bills? If so, add money to make it panic-free. Also add money for things every artist needs if you don't have them: health insurance, paying down debt, putting money into savings, and taking time off.

Write this final number down on a piece of paper.

If you live in a household or shared economy, there will be a big number for the household and a portion that is your contribution.

Even if you rip this paper up immediately, it will change the way you think and the way you hear information.

**5) Once you know your annual income needs, you can figure out your hour, day, and week rates.**

Artists don't know what our time costs. People ask us to do residencies, workshops, artist talks, etc., and to make our lives sustainable, we need to know our rates.

Take the annual income number you just figured out and divide it by 1500 to get your hourly rate.

Why 1500? If you work a "normal" job for a year, you'll work 2,000 hours (40 hours per week for 50 weeks.) Artists don't have 2,000 hours to earn our living. A lot of our work is piecemeal, a teaching gig here and a day job there, with lots of prep, travel, and transition time. And we need more down time than most people to feed our imagination and vision. Artists who earn their living in 1,500 hours find sustainability.

Once you have your hourly rate, multiply it by 8 to get your day rate (8 hours in a work day), and multiply your day rate by 5 to get your week rate (5 days in a work week.)

Here's an example. It's *just* an example. I have no opinion about how much money you should earn. I know artists who live wonderfully on \$12,000 a year and artists who live wonderfully on \$150,000 a year. I have no doubt you can get to any number you set as your goal.

Suppose I decide I need to earn \$45,000 per year to live without financial panic.

$$45,000 \div 1500 = \$30/\text{hour}$$

$$30 \times 8 = \$240/\text{day}$$

$$240 \times 5 = \$1200/\text{week}$$

These are *internal numbers*. You can ask for more and you can work for less. But knowing these numbers gives you a basis for pricing your time and negotiating.

The reason to know your time cost is: artists have revenue problems. Think about your revenue, all of it: day jobs, art money, money you earn, money you don't earn.

### Where are your skills needed and valuable?

Too many artists think only of the fine arts world and the low-skilled service sector. You likely have skills as a project manager, planner, convener, teacher, etc. Those skills are valuable in a lot of sectors beyond the arts.

This Venn diagram helped me:



The center is ideal. But most artists don't consider the third circle enough: what people pay a lot for.

**What is the most that people get paid to do what I do?** In Headlong, we loved teaching. But people generally pay \$10 or \$15 for a dance class, maybe \$100 for a longer workshop. Not a good revenue model. But people pay thousands for a college credit. The exact same teaching is suddenly worth fifty times more because it's accredited. So we got ourselves accredited, starting the Headlong Performance Institute in partnership with Bryn Mawr College. We designed the curriculum and taught, and they awarded the credit.

### There are no good or bad dollars.

A lot of artists have hierarchies of money, something like:

1. Money I make directly from my art
2. Money I make doing something related to my art
3. Money I make from an unrelated day job
4. Money I get from my family or spouse

Every dollar is a good dollar. Put it on the horizontal, as Liz Lerman says.

Earning money from your work feels great, but it doesn't make you a Real Artist.

Nothing  
makes you  
a real artist  
except your  
devotion to  
making.

Back to Headlong.

We did two things that artists don't do enough.

We negotiated.

And we said no.

Negotiating is wonderful. And everyone does it except artists. Negotiating does not mean haggling stingily over every last dollar. It means finding agreements that help both sides reach a common goal.

I always lead with excitement about the opportunity. "I'm really thrilled about this residency..." and then I use one of my favorite phrases:

*"And here's what will make it possible for me..."*

OR

*"Here's what will make it easy for me to say yes..."*

Most of the people and organizations we negotiate with (museums, festivals, arts organizations, presenters, schools) are 95% aligned with us. Their missions are truly in harmony with ours. But there is one crucial place where our interests diverge.

# These organizations want to do this much stuff

and they have this much money.

And they want artists to make up the difference by working for unsustainable rates. We can say no to that while saying yes to the shared mission.

Other things about negotiating:

*Make them name a number.* If it's higher than what you need, then great, you're done. If it's lower, you can negotiate up. People often ask artists to name the first number because they know that artists will give a number so laughably low that they would be embarrassed to say it.

*No one will pay you more than you ask.* So if you name a number, make sure it's one that will support you. Some people add 40% to their best number so there's room to negotiate down.

*There is no such thing as a "going rate."* That is a term used to underpay people. People get paid radically different amounts of money to do the exact same work. Similarly, promises of "valuable exposure" are often used to justify inadequate fees.

*There IS more money.* That was a mantra in my dance company. People will say, "Sorry, there's no more money." But there is.

*If you can't negotiate on money, negotiate on time. Once you know your rates you can say:*

*"For \$500, I won't be able to do a week-long residency, but I could put together a great two-day residency."*

*And if it doesn't work for you, say no. Generously.*

*"Financially, that won't be possible. But I really hope we'll work together in the future."*

Saying no does not sever the relationship. In fact, it often makes people think highly of you. We have said no to gigs, and then had them come back to us later when they had more money.

Artists need to say no and hear no a lot more. Demystify no. If you're not hearing no fairly often, you're not reaching far enough. And if you're never saying no, you're probably stuck in the overwhelming, underpaid work that is the artist's downfall.

There is a cost to saying no, the connections or opportunities that would come from doing the gig. Economists call this the "opportunity cost." But there is also an opportunity cost to saying yes, the things you can do if your time is not taken up with an exhausting, underpaid gig.

And again, when you say no to unsustainable fees, you raise the bar for artists who come after you.





Here's something that surprised me.

For artists, your relationship to getting non-artistic work done (administrative work, structural work) determines your day-to-day state of mind more than almost anything else.

More than the growth of your artistic work.

More than "success."

Artists who learn to handle their finances find sustainability. Artists who learn to handle time find balance.

So let's begin with three things that are not true about time and productivity.

**I have to do everything myself perfectly right now.**

This is the quiet mantra that drives artists into constant low-level panic.

Question every one of those qualifiers:

*everything*

What is the priority and what can be left undone?

*myself*

How can I get help?

*perfectly*

What can be done Good Enough?

*right now*

What can be done later?

**If I punish myself, and keep an impossibly long to-do list, I will get more done.**

The for-profit world has studied this extensively.

Punishing yourself makes you less productive.

And procrastination is a rational response to an unrealistic to-do list.

**I'll just make more time.**

Time, unlike money, is finite. When we say we will “make more time,” we mean we will take time away from other aspects of our lives: sleep, health, relationships, and making art.

Three structures that help:

**Make a space.**

Your admin space can be a room or a desk or even part of a desk. Don't put it in the room where you make art. Put all of the admin materials there and go there to do that work. By making a space, you ensure that your administrative work isn't everywhere. It's not in your studio, at your kitchen table, or in your bed.

**Make a time.**

Schedule office hours. Save non-urgent work until those times. Set aside time to do this work so you aren't doing it *all the time*. Too many artists are sort-of working and sort-of avoiding working all day every day.

**Get a big wall calendar.**

Dorky but important. Get one of those poster calendars that has all 12 months on one sheet. Date books and computer calendars are great for tracking a day or week, but they make it hard to see the big picture. Put vacations, travel, and big events on your 12-month calendar. You will spot conflicts and rhythms that don't show up when you just see one week.

*“But I just wanna be in the studio all the time, man.”*

Ah, yes. That refrain.

All mission-driven people (teachers, doctors, social workers, clergy, etc.) say the same thing:

*“I do so much dumb stuff to get to the good part, the work I love.”*

This is a conundrum of mission-based people: we all underestimate the amount of structural work. While we should always strive to minimize the dumb stuff and maximize the art-making, we might also accept that the structural work will always be there, probably more of it than we'd like.

Here are some strategies I've seen artists use to great effect. You, of course, will know what's best for you.

### **Track your time.**

Write down everything you do for one week. Be specific. So, rather than:

*9:30-10:30: administrative stuff*

Break it down:

*9:30-9:50: answered today's emails*

*9:50-10:10: wrote email to funder*

*10:10-10:20: read news online*

*10:20-10:30: phone call with Angela about July show*

You'll say, "but this is not a normal week." It's okay. No week is normal. Try to get a sense of your working rhythms, and where your time actually goes. At the end of the week, take a look and see what you can learn. The goal is always to build on how you actually work, not how you think you *should* work.

**Use your best working times to do the most important work.**

If you are a morning person, schedule studio time and writing time for the morning. Do emails and finances at your low-blood-sugar times.

**Create timelines and to-do lists that begin with the time you have available.**

Most artists start with the demand: the incredibly long list of things that are supposed to get done.

Instead, start with the supply of time: this week, I'm going to do X hours of administrative work, what should I focus on?

Make a to-do list that can be emptied each day. And when you empty it, leave the office (or the desk or the part of the desk).

You are done. Nice work.

**Begin each week and each working session with a 10-minute meeting with yourself.**

The only rule for this meeting is: you can't get anything done. No emails, no work.

Most of us jump into reacting, answering emails or responding to the crisis of the moment. Use these 10 minutes to take a look at what's most crucial, and to set priorities. Given the amount of time you have to work, what are the most important things to focus on?

**Eliminate the time when you are "working" but not getting anything done.**

My wife and I are big procrastinators. One of her procrastination techniques was particularly brilliant: she would go online and order books about procrastination. So we accumulated a vast library of time management books, a beautiful monument to hours not working.

Most of these books were crap. But there was one idea that many people talk about that is worth repeating.

Most productive work happens in short 15-30 minute bursts surrounded by hours of preparation, procrastination, and avoidance. Cut out all those extra hours, and you can get a hell of a lot done in a short time.

I have used this idea to write grants. I used to sit down and say, “I’m going to write this whole grant now.” Inevitably, that overwhelming thought led to procrastination and online time-wasting.

Now, I say, “I’m going to work on the artist statement of this grant for 20 minutes.” And after 20 minutes, I stop and take a break.

### **Say no.**

Don’t do it all. The fastest and most effective way to make yourself more productive is to choose not to do things.

Another way to say this: every artist has a lot of work that she won’t get to. That’s a fact. If you choose in advance what you won’t do, you save yourself a lot of stress and you can be strategic about what doesn’t get done.

Most artists don’t make time for the things that are essential for building a sustainable life: planning work, strategy, long-term thinking, and building partnerships. Instead, we are caught up in the endlessly squawking mess of deadlines and people asking for stuff. You can say no to entire gigs (the teaching residency that’s interesting but exhausting) or to aspects of gigs (I don’t have time to make a video preview of my show right now). In *Headlong*, there were many things that *Dance Companies Must Do* that we chose not to. Big fundraising events. Cultivating a fancy board of directors. Performing at booking conferences. And you know what? We were fine.

### **There is no ‘just.’**

My friend Matty told me this. Artists will say, “Okay, we’ll just get some costumes and figure out the music and we’ll just find a good space and tech the show and then just sell some tickets.” But there is no ‘just.’ Each one of those actions takes time and resources. Take the word ‘just’ out of your thinking and get honest about the demands on your time.

### **Schedule time for long-term thinking.**

Schedule planning time, strategic time, dreaming time and post-mortems (check-ins after you complete a project, which is planning after the fact.) Planning won't happen if you don't schedule it, and it is the single most effective tool for building sustainable lives.

### **Get help.**

Having other people do work for you is the only way to actually make more time.

Get as much help as you can with the things that don't have to be done specifically by you, so you can focus on the thing that only you can do: making your work.

Work less and work smarter.

There are different ways to get help.

#### *Interns and volunteers*

They work for free. Nice. But they usually require a lot of training and oversight. They are money-cheap and time-expensive. And

they might not stick around for long. If you have a lot of easy-to-teach work, or a labor-intensive event coming up, volunteer labor can be great.

#### *Outsourcing*

You can outsource parts of your work to professionals who do it well: agents, bookkeepers, publicists, production managers, web designers, photographers, and videographers. When I finally hired someone to do my taxes, it eliminated a huge amount of stress and procrastination. (And she got me a much bigger refund.)

We artists often have a scarcity mindset, thinking we have to do everything ourselves. Artists who invest smartly and carefully in their work by hiring professionals often see it pay off in better results and more time to focus on the art.

#### *Hourly employees*

Many artists eventually need a general admin person, someone to help with communications, production, fundraising, and so on.

### **Don't hire yourself.**

You already have one of you. You need someone different, someone with skills and interests that are not yours. Delegating is hard for artists. We are control freaks. I had three company managers teach (i.e. force) me to delegate before I got good at it. These ideas helped me delegate:

#### *Delegate the things you most dislike.*

Make a list of your least favorite things and delegate those. Getting rid of something you dread has an exponential impact on your productivity and well-being.

#### *Train people to succeed.*

This takes time and feedback and patience. Don't just say, "That's wrong!" and stomp off to do it yourself. Explain how it could be better. Smart people learn when given a chance.

#### *Be comfortable with Good Enough.*

If something has to be Perfect, don't bother delegating it because you'll end up doing it anyway.

#### *Make a letter of agreement.*

Specify expectations, pay, hours, and assessment times. After two months (and every few months thereafter) have a meeting to assess both ways how things are going.



*Create an advisory board.*

Making art can be isolating. An advisory board can help an artist make decisions, plan for the future, and find resources.

An advisory board is a small group of people who get your work, and whose opinions and thoughts you want to hear. Meet every few months for a couple of hours to talk about what you are doing, what is coming up, and what resources and connections would help move you forward.

These meetings are a chance to have conversations about your work out loud, instead of just in your head (or with your romantic partner). An advisory board can be small, three or four people is fine to start.

You might look for:

- Someone from your art world: a presenter, gallerist, curator, etc.
- Someone from outside the art world
- Someone with specific skills: a lawyer, accountant, fundraiser, or just someone who's great at Thinking Big

Having a team in your corner, people you can check in with and bounce ideas off of, can ground your thinking about the future.



You are  
not alone.

I can tell you this: as hard as things might be for you, as hopeless or confused as you might feel, there are literally thousands of artists feeling the same way.

## So let's change things.

Let's change the conversations we have with each other.

Let's honor and reward each other's successes and our own.

Let's advocate for (and only accept) sustainable compensation.

Let's congratulate each other for taking time off and saying no, instead of competing to be the busiest and most stressed.

Let's focus on our skills and what we have to offer, instead of obsessing over our needs and what we lack.

Let's be realistic about the challenges of living as artists and acknowledge that our skills are more than up to the task.

Let's tell younger artists that balance and sustainability are essential.

Let's dignify the crucial role we play in our culture by talking about it and by embodying it.

# Principles for Building a Sustainable Life

*Success will either happen to me or it won't.*

I am building an artistic life, not an artistic career, step by step, thinking long-term and staying responsive to changing circumstances.

*No one cares about my work.*

By offering a strong artistic voice as widely as possible, I give citizens a chance to come close to my work.

*I am competing with other artists for scarce resources.*

The success of other artists is good for me. And mutual artistic support is worth more than money.

*I need I need I need I need I need.*

My skills are needed in the world.

*The future is scary and I don't have time to think about it.*

With limited, regular planning, I work toward the art, the values, and the life that I believe in.

*What I do is frivolous and I am lucky if I get paid for it.*

We are highly trained professionals, and the work we do, collectively, is essential in our culture. I expect to be compensated fully and fairly. I have the freedom to do unpaid or low-paying work that is rewarding in other ways.

*I never have enough time or money to make my work perfect.*

With the time and resources I have for each project, I will do the best I can.

*I have to do everything I possibly can for every project, even if it kills me.*

No opportunity or work of art is worth the well-being of the people involved. I can say no.

*I have to work all the time, with no time off.*

I schedule down time in my day, my week, and my year, essential to my well-being and artistic growth.

*No one cares about art.*

The world is hungry for noncommercial experiences, for moments of focus, connection, and insight instead of the profit-driven distraction provided by the entertainment industry.

*I wish I had the career that \_\_\_\_\_ has.*

I define success for myself, and trust that impact does not correlate with fame.

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**Andrew Simonet** is a choreographer, writer, and founder of Artists U. He co-directed Headlong Dance Theater from 1993 to 2013. In Headlong Andrew focused on immersive, intimate works: *Pusher*, in which they sold dances on the street like drugs, *CELL*, a performance journey for one audience member at a time guided by your cell phone, and *This Town Is a Mystery*, performances by and about Philadelphia households performed in their homes and followed by a potluck dinner. Andrew continues to be fascinated by what happens when complicated, messy bodies meet systems and each other.

With Headlong, Andrew was the lead fundraiser, securing support from The Creative Capital Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Rockefeller Foundation, The Japan Foundation, and The Pew Fellowships in the Arts. Headlong's work has been presented by Dance Theater Workshop, PS 122, MassMOCA, Central Park Summerstage, The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, and the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art. Andrew founded Artists U in 2005, offering free planning and professional development work for artists in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and South Carolina. He

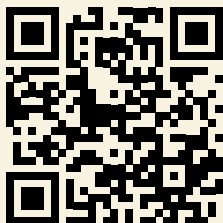
gives talks and workshops nationally, and is an artist leader with the Creative Capital Professional Development Program. Andrew lives in West Philly with his artist wife, Elizabeth, and their sons, Jesse Tiger and Nico Wolf. He can be found online at [artistsu.org](http://artistsu.org).



This book exists because of many brilliant people:

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Spread the word.  
This book is available as a free download at  
[artistsu.org](http://artistsu.org).



**Artists are the most talented,  
hard-working people I know.  
So why are they perennially exhausted,  
broke, and overwhelmed?**

Based on 20 years as a working artist and a decade of work with artists locally and nationally, *Making Your Life as an Artist* looks at why artists' lives are so punishing, and how we can build balanced, sustainable lives.

This book is available as a free download  
(no strings attached) at [artistsu.org](http://artistsu.org)

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