

VULTURE

27 Artists on the Worst (and Best) Advice Anyone Ever Gave Them on Being an Artist

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Kennedy Yanko,
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How to be an artist? In the issue that hit stands November 26, *New York Magazine* art critic Jerry Saltz shares his 33 rules. But here's what actual artists said when we asked them.

Who gave you the best advice on being an artist, and what was it?

From my old professor: "If you make drawings with your right hand and become a virtuoso, you should immediately switch to your left hand." Also: "Don't repeat yourself." — Marina Abramovic

Paul Rego: "Work, work, work. Work, work. And take many lovers." — Natalie Frank

Kerry James Marshall: "You have to do this for the love of the work first. Beyond that, anything else is gravy." — Sanford Biggers

Mel Bochner, when I was in graduate school: "Make the work; find a way in your life, even though there may be obstacles, to prioritize art." — Mickalene Thomas

Alighiero Boetti: "Never write bullshit!" — Maurizio Cattelan

My aunt Claudine Brown: "I've known you for a long time and you are incapable of having a job you don't like." (I don't think it was entirely meant as a compliment.) — Hank Willis Thomas

My mother, who was also an artist: "Never stop." — Joyce J. Scott

Carrie Mae Weems during my last year of graduate school at Syracuse: "Follow your own voice, be responsible for your failures and, if you haven't found your voice, work until you do." — Deborah Roberts

My mother, who, when I told her I was bored as a child, always said: "Good. It's good to be bored." Learning to sit with my boredom, I developed my imagination, my patience, my ability to sit with myself alone in my studio for long hours. — Narcissister

Elizabeth Catlett: "Make art every day." — Derrick Adams

Charles Ray: "The medium of sculpture is space." Before hearing that, I had always thought of sculpture in terms of materials. — Frank Benson

"Nothing happens without the work." — Jordan Casteel

My mother: "Remain grounded and clear. Being an artist doesn't mean leaving all of the personal self-care and self-reflection behind." — Xaviera Simmons

Mase: "Stay humble, stay low, blow like Hootie." — Jayson Musson

"Don't try to be original." — Jon Rafman

What's the worst advice you ever got?

When I was in grad school, one of my teachers told me "When in doubt use yellow ochre." — Marilyn Minter

One of my art dealers told me, "Do different variations of your pieces." — Maurizio Cattelan

"Be like so-and-so, go to dinner parties and shmooze." — Kenny Scharf

A grad school professor: "Politics and identity in art are a waste of time." — Sanford Biggers

A curator in response to my identity-politics-themed works: "You really can't make work like this, I mean once Kara Walker had done it, nobody else can touch these themes." — Narcissister

My mother: "If you have to be an artist, at least marry a doctor lawyer or architect so you can live off of their income." — Marina Abramovic

This idea "you can't trust anyone" is always bad advice. People want to help one another. — Raúl de Nieves

A "friend" told me: "You need to capitalize on this attention right now because your work doesn't really have any substance." — Kayode Ojo

People have told me to stop being a perfectionist and make more work, more quickly. This is not bad advice in theory, but it does not work for me. — Frank Benson

A gallerist said I should stop using paint straight from the tube. — Claire Milbrath

Did anyone ever give you "permission" to be an artist?

Absolutely no one. — Marilyn Minter

Everyone who never let permission dictate their own vision of success. — Jordan Casteel

My seventh-grade English teacher Mrs. Gonzales. She could see early on that my artwork was my security, my identity, so she provided me with safe a space to create in her classroom before and after school. — Deborah Roberts

No one gave me permission, I'm just good at being poor, idealistic, and solipsistic. — Jayson Musson

My mom gave me permission by never asking me why or to defend the thing that I loved. I can't imagine not having had that support. — Paul Sepuya

I fought against being an artist for a long time because I thought that it was impractical and that it would lead to a life of poverty. But when my daughter was young I noticed that I kept on getting up earlier and earlier to work in my makeshift studio in my house. I realized it was a habit that wasn't going away, and I needed to take it more seriously. I guess I gave myself permission. — Simone Leigh

There wasn't some romantic gates of heaven moment. It just took unlocking the mind and really saying it out loud, "I like making things." — Tyler Mitchell

I think all artists are secretly waiting for permission to be an artist, even after they're dead. I'm still waiting for it, myself. — John Waters

No one gave me permission to be an artist; it was a calling and I just listened to it. — Derrick Adams

God himself. — Marina Abramovic

Was there a moment when you felt like you'd made it?

The moment when I had my solo Brooklyn Museum show, I was like, "Okay, I've done something, because I'm here. There is a larger audience that wants to see my work." — Mickalene Thomas

When I discovered the only person you need to please is yourself. — Maurizio Cattelan

My first solo exhibition opening, which was on the Grand Canal in Venice, I came over the bridge, and there was a crowd of people drinking Prosecco. They all turned and applauded, saying "Bellissima." — Shinique Smith

In 2012 I was able to quit a job at the Apple Store; not because I was selling work, but because my friend Haley helped me get a teaching job at NYU. — Artie Vierkant

The Whitney acquired my large painting When the Worlds Collide in '85 and showed it in the Biennial. — Kenny Scharf

When I was asked to do a solo exhibition in the grand foyer of my high school when I was in 12th grade. — Sanford Biggers

When I lived in Amsterdam, next door to me there was a shop which sold very good organic fruits and vegetables. The owners were never friendly to me and the products were so expensive. One day I was passing by and they finally invited me in the shop with a huge smile on their faces and they offered me a basket of delicious strawberries for free because they had seen me on Sex and the City. I knew then that things had changed. — Marina Abramovic

When my episode on America's Got Talent aired. To have that endorsement of my work from such an unexpected source was exciting and validating. — Narcissister

I felt really good when I was able to put my electricity bill on auto-pay. — Jayson Musson

It's incredible to walk into my studio every day. My surroundings constantly remind me of the fortunate position I'm in. — Kennedy Yanko

I still don't feel like I've "made it." — Marilyn Minter

There's no having made it, only the work of continuing to make it. — Paul Sepuya

What was your plan B?

If I weren't an artist, I'd be a criminal defense lawyer or a psychiatrist, because that way I could deal with unfathomable human behavior, basically the same as I do now. — John Waters

I'm doing my plan B. Plan A was to be a lawyer. — Mickalene Thomas

When I first moved to the United States, my class asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said an opera singer. — Raúl de Nieves

Chemical engineer. — Kayode Ojo

I always thought that if I weren't an artist I would have been either a surgeon or midwife. Midwifery is on the same spectrum of creating and seeing the creative process unfold. — Xaviera Simmons

A gardner. — Kenny Scharf

There was never any plan B. — Tyler Mitchell

Bartender. I've got a great rack. — Natalie Frank

I'd like to be a philosopher. I especially like the idea of being a comic-book philosopher — you know, if philosophy was written in comic-book format. — Joyce J. Scott

It's not a job. It's my life. Being an artist and being a person are the same thing to me. — Hank Willis Thomas