24/7
(Staying In It)

The artist's job is never truly finished.

In many occupations, when we go home, we leave our work behind at the office. The artist is always on call. Even after we get up from hours engaged in our craft, the clock is still running.

This is because the artist's job is of two kinds:

The work of doing.

The work of being.

Creativity is something you are, not only something you do. It's a way of moving through the world, every minute, every day. If you're not driven to an unrealistic standard of dedication, it may not be the path for you. So much of the artist's work is about balance, so it's ironic that this way of life leaves little room for it.

Once you acquiesce to the demands of the creative life, it becomes a part of you. Even in the midst of a project, you still look for new ideas each day. At any moment, you're prepared to stop what you're doing to make a note or a drawing, or capture a fleeting thought. It becomes second nature. And we're always in it, every hour of the day.

Staying in it means a commitment to remain open to what's around you. Paying attention and listening. Looking for connections and relationships in the outside world. Searching for beauty. Seeking stories. Noticing what you find interesting, what makes you lean forward. And knowing all of this is available to use next time you sit down to work, where the raw data gets put into form.

There is no telling where that next great story, painting, recipe, or business idea is going to come from. Just as a surfer can't control the waves, artists are at the mercy of the creative rhythms of nature. This is why it's of such great importance to remain aware and present at all times. Watching and waiting. 1

> Maybe the best idea
> is the one you're going to
> come up with this evening.[1]

Spontaneity
(Special Moments)

The song that springs to mind fully formed.
The impulsive windings of a Jackson Pollock.
The spontaneous dance move that fills the floor.

Artists may prize spontaneous works, thinking there is some higher purity or specialness held in works channeled instead of carefully planned.

But can you tell the difference between art that sprang to mind and art that was crafted with forethought? And what does this difference matter?

Art made accidentally has no more or less weight than art created through sweat and struggle.

Whether it took months or minutes does not matter. Quality isn't based on the amount of time invested. So long as what emerges is pleasing to us, the work has fulfilled its purpose.

The story of spontaneity can be misleading. We don't see all the practice and preparation that goes into priming an artist for the spontaneous event to come through. Every work contains a lifetime of experience.

Great artists often labor to make their work appear effortless. Sometimes they might spend years meticulously crafting and refining a composition to appear as if it was made in a day or in a moment.

There are others who romanticize planning and preparation. To them, a spontaneous work has less validity. It seems more like a product of an artist's good fortune than talent.

Consider neutrality. Just do the work and see what comes. If you like a result, accept it graciously, whether it arrives in a sudden flash or after long bouts of difficult, skilled labor. 1

For some artists, the work comes easily. Bob Dylan could write a song in minutes while Leonard Cohen sometimes took years. And we may love the songs equally. 2

There's no pattern or logic to this enigmatic process. Not all projects are the same, no two people are the same. The project is the guide we follow. And each comes with its own conditions and requirements. 3

If you are an artist whose process is intellectually based, it may be of benefit to play with spontaneity as a tool, a window to discovery and an access point to new parts of yourself. 4

Attachment to any specific creative process can seal the door through which spontaneity enters. Even if for a short time, it may be of benefit to leave this door cracked open. We can make an experiment of surrender to allow the surprise of discovery to come. 5

If you sit down to write with no preparation or forethought, you might bypass the conscious mind and draw from the unconscious. You may find that what emerges holds a charge that cannot be duplicated through rational means. 6

This approach is at the heart of some forms of jazz. When musicians are improvising a piece, preconceived ideas of what to play can prevent the performance from taking flight. The goal is to be in it and allow the music to essentially play itself, accepting the risks. The performances will be good on a good night and bad on a bad night. And perhaps the best jazz musicians are the ones who have the ability to create special moments on a fairly consistent basis. Even spontaneity gets better with practice. 7

You may worry that a great idea could get lost or overlooked in the spontaneity of a moment. To guard against that when I'm working with an artist, I make an endless amount of notes. When outside observers come into 8

the studio, they often can’t believe how clinical the process looks. They imagine a big music party. But we’re constantly generating detailed notes on focus points and experiments to test. For almost everything that’s said, someone is writing it down. Two weeks later, there will come a time when someone will ask a question like: What was that lyric we loved? What was the previous version of that element like? Which take was the best for the fill going into the second chorus? And we go back to the notes. [1]

There’s a great volume of material constantly being generated, and we’re so in the moment that it’s impossible to remember everything, even something that happened seconds ago. By the time we get to the end of the song, I’m absorbed in listening, and those thoughts are gone. Faithful note-taking by a connected observer helps prevent special moments from getting lost in the churn of excitement. [2]

> Sometimes,
> it can be the most ordinary moment
> that creates an extraordinary piece of art.[1]

How to Choose [1]

Every piece of art consists of a series of choices, like a tree with many branches. [2]

Our work begins with a seed, which sprouts a trunk of the core idea. As it grows, each decision we make becomes a branch splitting off in a new direction, growing finer and finer in detail as we move further out. [3]

At each fork, we can go in any number of directions, and our choice will alter the final result. Often radically. [4]

How do we decide which direction to take? How can we know which choice will lead us to the best possible version of the work? [5]

The answer is rooted in a universal principle of relationships. We can only tell where something is in relation to something else. And we can only assess an object or principle if we have something to compare and contrast it to. Otherwise it’s an absolute beyond evaluation. [6]

We can hack into this principle to improve our creations through A/B testing. It is difficult to assess a work or a choice on its own without another point of reference. If you place two options side by side and make a direct comparison, our preferences become clear. [7]

We limit our options for each test to two choices wherever possible. Any more cloud the process. When cooking a dish, we might taste two different varieties of the same ingredient before deciding which to use. Two actors reading the same monologue, two shades of a color, or two different floor plans of an apartment. [8]

We place them next to each other, step back, and directly compare. More often than not, there will be a clear draw toward one. [9]

If there isn’t, we quiet ourselves to see which has a subtle pull. Following the natural feedback in the body, we move toward the option that hints at the ecstatic. 1

Whenever possible, make the A/B test blind. Conceal as many details as possible about each option to remove any biases undermining fair comparison. For example, some musicians have a preference for either analog or digital recording. It is worth recording using both methods, then devising a way to listen to each without any indication of which is which. Sometimes the artists are surprised by their preference. 2

If you’re at an impasse in an A/B test, consider the coin toss method. Decide which option will be heads and which will be tails, then flip the coin. When the coin is spinning in the air, you’ll likely notice a quiet preference or wish for one of the two to come up. Which are you rooting for? This is the option to go with. It’s the one the heart desires. The test is over before the coin ever lands. 3

When testing, don’t overintellectualize your choice of criteria. You’re looking for that first instinct, the knee-jerk reaction before any thought. The instinctual tug tends to be the purest, whereas the second, more reasoned thought tends to be processed and distorted through analysis. 4

The goal is to turn off the conscious mind and follow our impulses. Children are exceptionally good at this. They may move through several different spontaneous expressions of emotion in a single minute, without judgment or attachment. As we grow older, we’re taught to hide or bury these reactions. This mutes our inner sensitivity. 5

If we were to learn anything, it would be to free ourselves from any beliefs or baggage or dogma that gets in the way of us acting according to our true nature. The closer we get to a childlike state of free self-expression, the purer our test and the better our art. 6

Once a work is complete, no amount of testing can guarantee we’ve made the best possible version. These qualities are not measurable. We test to identify 7

which is the best version from the options at hand.

No matter what route you take, if you complete the journey, you will reach the same destination. This destination is a work we feel energized to share. One we look back on and wonder in amazement how it could have come from us.

Shades and Degrees [1]

In the creation of art, proportions can be deceptive. [2]

Two seeds of inspiration might seem indistinguishable, but one may yield volumes and the other little to nothing. What begins as a lightning bolt may not produce a work that reflects its initial magnitude, whereas a humble spark may grow into an epic masterpiece. [3]

In crafting, the amount of time we put in and the results we get are rarely in balance. A large movement may materialize all at once; other times a tiny detail may take days. And there's no predicting how much of a role either will play in the final outcome. [4]

Another surprising facet of the process is how the tiniest of details can clearly define a work. They can determine whether a piece is stimulating or languid, finished or unfinished. We make one dab of the brush, one tweak in the mix—and suddenly the work jumps from being halfway done to complete. When it happens, this seems miraculous. [5]

What ultimately makes a work great is the sum total of the tiniest details. From start to finish, everything has shades and degrees. There is no fixed scale. There can't be, because sometimes the smallest elements are the ones that weigh the most. [6]

When the work has five mistakes,[1]
it’s not yet completed.
When it has eight mistakes,
it might be.

Implications [1]
(Purpose)

You may sometimes wonder: Why am I doing this? What's it all for? [2]

Questions such as these come early and often for some. Others seem to go their whole lives without ever troubling themselves with these thoughts. Maybe they know that the maker and the explainer are always two different people, even when they're the same person. [3]

In the end, these questions are of little importance. There doesn't need to be a purpose guiding what we choose to make. When examined more closely, we might find this grandiose idea useless. It implies we know more than we can know. [4]

If we like what we are creating, we don't have to know why. Sometimes the reasons are obvious, sometimes not. And they can change over time. It could be good for any of a thousand different reasons. When we're making things we love, our mission is accomplished. There's nothing at all to figure out. [5]

> Think to yourself:
> I’m just here to create.[1]

Freedom [1]

Does the artist have a social responsibility? [2]

Some might agree with this notion and want to encourage artists to create accordingly. [3]

Those who hold this belief may not have a clear understanding of the function of art in society and its integral social value. [4]

The work of art serves its purpose independent of the creator's interest in social responsibility. Wanting to change people's minds about an issue or have an effect on society may interfere with the quality and purity of the work. [5]

This doesn't mean that our work can't have those qualities, but we generally don't get there by planning them. In the creative process, it's often more difficult to accomplish a goal by aiming at it. [6]

Deciding what to say in advance doesn't allow whatever's best to come. Meaning is assigned once an inspired idea is followed through. [7]

It's best to wait until a work is complete to discover what it is saying. Holding your work hostage to meaning is a limitation. [8]

Works that attempt to overtly preach a message often don't connect as hoped, while a piece not intended to address a societal ill may become an anthem for a revolutionary cause. [9]

Art is far more powerful than our plans for it. [10]

Art can't be irresponsible. It speaks to all aspects of the human experience. [11]

There are sides of ourselves that aren't welcome in polite society, thoughts and feelings too dark to share. When we recognize them expressed in art, we feel less alone.

More real, more human.

This is the therapeutic power of making and consuming art.

Art is above and beyond judgment. It either speaks to you or it doesn't.

The artist's only responsibility is to the work itself. There are no other requirements. You're free to create what you will.

You don't have to stand for your work, nor does your work have to stand for anything but itself. You are not a symbol of it. Nor is it necessarily symbolic of you. It will be interpreted and reinterpreted in the eyes and ears of those who know almost nothing about you.

If there were anything you might stand for, it would be to defend this creative autonomy. Not just from outside censors, but from the voices in your head that have internalized what's considered acceptable. The world is only as free as it allows its artists to be.

What we say,
what we sing,
what we paint—
we get to choose.

We have no responsibility
to anything other than the art itself.
The art is the final word.

1

The Possessed [1]

Artists are often portrayed in films and books as tortured geniuses. Starving, self-destructive, dancing on the brink of madness. [2]

This has instilled the belief that to make art, one has to be broken. Or that the force of art is so powerful that it breaks its maker. [3]

Neither generalization is true. These misconceptions have a disheartening effect on the would-be artist. Some creators may live with a profound darkness. Others stride forward with ease and exuberance. Between lies a wide range of artistic temperament. [4]

For those called to art who do struggle with an overwhelming sensitivity, the creative process can have a therapeutic power. It offers a sense of deep connection. A safe place to voice the unspeakable and bare their soul. In these cases, art does not unravel the maker, but makes them whole. [5]

Although the character of the tortured artist tends to live more in mythology than in reality, this does not mean that art comes easily. It requires the obsessive desire to create great things. This pursuit doesn't have to be agonizing. It can be enlivening. It's up to you. [6]

Whether you have a powerful passion or a tortured compulsion, neither makes the art any better or worse. If you are able to choose between these paths, consider selecting the more sustainable one. An artist earns the title simply through self-expression, as they work in their own way at their own pace. [7]

What Works for You [1]
(Believing)

There's a songwriter who wrote all of her music in the same messy room in an old office building. It hasn't been touched in thirty years and she refuses to let it be cleaned. The secret is in that room, she says. [2]

She believes it, and it works for her. [3]

Charles Dickens carried a compass to make sure he always slept facing north. He believed that alignment with the electrical currents of the Earth supported his creativity. Dr. Seuss had a bookcase with a false door hiding hundreds of unusual hats. He and his editor would each pick a hat and stare at each other until inspiration came. [4]

These stories may or may not be completely true. It doesn't matter. If a ritual or superstition has a positive effect on an artist's work, then it's worth pursuing. [5]

Artists have created in every way possible—at the extremes of chaos and order, and at the meeting point of different methods at once. There is no right time, right strategy, or right equipment. [6]

It may be helpful to receive advice from more experienced artists, but as information, not as prescription. It can open you to another point of view and broaden your idea of what's possible. [7]

Established artists generally draw from their personal experience and recommend the solutions that worked for them. These tend to be specific to their journey, not yours. It's worth remembering that their way is not *the* way. [8]

Your path is unique, for only you to follow. There is no single route to great art. 1

This doesn't mean ignore the wisdom of others. Receive wisdom skillfully. Try it on for size and see how it fits. Incorporate what's useful. Let go of the rest. And no matter how credible the source, test and tune in to yourself to discover what works for you. 2

The only practice that matters is the one you consistently do, not the practice of any other artist. Find your most generative method, apply it, and then let it go when it is no longer of use. There is no wrong way to make art. 3

Adaptation [1]

Something peculiar happens when we practice. [2]

With a piece of music we're learning, for example, we might play it over and over. It gets a little easier, a little harder, a little easier. Then we stop and come back a day or two later, and suddenly it flows from us far more naturally. Our fingers seem to have more agility. A difficult knot has untied itself. [3]

This phenomenon is different from most forms of learning. It's not reading information and remembering it. It's more mysterious than that. You wake up one morning, transported to this new reality where you suddenly have more skill than you did before you went to sleep. The body has changed, adapting to the task it was presented and rising to perform it. [4]

Practice gets us part of the way there. Then it takes time for practice to be absorbed into the body. We might call this the recovery phase. In weightlifting, the practice breaks down muscle and recovery builds it back stronger than before. The passive element of practice is as important as the active one. [5]

It's commonly thought that achieving artistic mastery means working tirelessly. This is true. But it's only half of it. There may be benefit in taking breaks, in stepping away and returning at a later point. Whether when practicing your instrument or over the course of your life's work, recovery at the opportune time will cause greater leaps in improvement. [6]

This cycle of practice and adaptation creates multifaceted growth. You are building concentration and focus, and training your brain to learn more effectively. More easily. [7]

As a result, other skills are lifted as well. Teaching yourself to play piano will likely improve your hearing. And you may well get better at math. [1]

This adaptation process plays a still bigger role. One beyond learning. It’s an aspect of the universe manifesting through us. A will to life. [2]

An idea gathers energy, building charge, yearning to be embraced. We can hear it, see it, imagine it, but it may be an inch further away than we can currently reach. As we trace back over it, again and again, more and more detail comes into focus and we become wholly consumed. [3]

Our capacity grows and stretches to touch the idea that Source is offering up. We accept this responsibility with gratitude, cherish it, and protect it. Acknowledging with humility that it comes from beyond us. More important than us. And not just for us. We are in its service. [4]

This is why we are here. It is the impulse through which humanity evolves. We adapt and grow in order to receive. These inherent abilities made it possible for humans, and for all life, over eons, to survive and thrive in an ever-changing world. And to play our predestined role in advancing the cycle of creation. Supporting the birth of other new and more complex forms. If we choose to participate. [5]

Translation [1]

Art is an act of decoding. We receive intelligence from Source, and interpret it through the language of our chosen craft. [2]

In all fields, there are different degrees of fluency. Our level of skill influences our ability to best articulate this translation, in the same way vocabulary affects communication. [3]

This is not a direct correlation. It's a fluid relationship. When learning a new language, you may be able to ask a question, speak a beautifully memorized phrase, or accidentally say something humorous. At the same time, you may feel unable to share bigger ideas, more nuanced feelings, and express the full extent of who you are. [4]

The more we develop, expand, and sharpen our skills, the more fluent we become. We can experience greater freedom and less sameness in the act of making. And vastly improve our ability to manifest the best version of our ideas in the physical world. [5]

For the sake of both the work and our own enjoyment, it's of great value to continue honing our craft. Every artist, at every juncture in the process, can get better through practice, study, and research. The gifts of art are more learned and developed than innate. We can always improve. [6]

As Arn Anderson once noted: "I'm both a professor and student, because if you're no longer a student, you don't have the right to call yourself a professor." [7]

If you feel unable to hit a note or faithfully paint an image, it's helpful to remember that the challenge is not that you can't do it, but that you haven't done it *yet*. Avoid thinking in impossibilities. If there's a skill or piece of [8]

knowledge you need for a particular project, you can do the homework and work toward it over time. You can train for anything. 1

While this framework will broaden your ability, it won't guarantee you become a great artist. A guitarist could play the most complex solo and while technically impressive, it might not connect emotionally, while an amateur could perform a simplistic three-chord song and move you to tears. 2

At the same time, there's no need to fear learning too much theory. It won't undermine the pure expression of your voice. If you don't let it. Having the knowledge won't hurt the work. How you *use* the knowledge may. You have new tools. You don't have to use them. 3

Learning provides more ways to reliably convey your ideas. From our enlarged menu, we can still choose the simplest, most elegant option. Painters like Barnett Newman, Piet Mondrian, and Joseph Albers were classically trained, and they chose to spend their careers exploring simple, monochromatic, geometric shapes. 4

Consider your craft as an energy alive in you. It's just as much a part of the cycle of evolution as other living things are. It wants to grow. It wants to flower. 5

To hone your craft is to honor creation. It doesn't matter if you become the best in your field. By practicing to improve, you are fulfilling your ultimate purpose on this planet. 6

Clean Slate [1]

After spending thousands of hours working on a piece, it's difficult to judge it from a neutral place. When someone experiences the work for the first time, after only two minutes they may see it more clearly than you do. [2]

In time, almost every artist finds themselves too close to the things they make. After endlessly working on the same piece, perspective is lost. We develop a kind of blindness. Doubt and disorientation may creep in. Judgment is impaired. [3]

If we train ourselves to step away from the work, to truly detach from it, to distract ourselves completely, to dive fully into something else . . . [4]

After being away for a long enough period of time, when we come back, we just may be able to see it as if for the first time. [5]

This is the practice of cleaning the slate. The ability to create as an artist and experience the work as a first-time viewer, dropping baggage from the past of what you thought you wanted the work to be. The mission is to be in the present moment with the work. [6]

Here is one concrete example of keeping a clean slate. The final stage of the recording process is the mix. This is where a sound engineer balances the levels of different instruments to best present the material. [7]

When listening to a mix in progress, I make a list of notes. Maybe the vocal in the bridge isn't loud enough. The drum fill in the transition to the last chorus wants to have more importance. Or we may need to duck a certain instrument in the intro to make space for another event. [8]

A common practice is to make those changes, tick each item off the checklist, and then play back the song with the list in mind. *Okay, are the* [9]

vocals in the bridge louder as I requested? Yes, check. Does the drum fill in the transition seem more important? Yes, check.

You're anticipating each part. Selectively paying attention to see if your changes were made, rather than listening to the song as a whole and seeing if it's actually better than it was before.

The ego comes in, saying: *I wanted this to happen, I got what I wanted, so it's a problem solved.*

But this isn't necessarily true. Yes, the changes were made, but did they improve the work? Or have they set off a domino effect that created other problems?

At this stage in the process, every element of a work is interdependent. So even a small change can have unexpected ramifications. When the mix is updated to reflect your list, you may falsely assume you've made progress.

The key is to give the notes to someone else to implement when you can, then discard the list and never refer to it again. When the revised mix is played, listen as if for the first time and begin a new list of notes from scratch. This usually helps to hear things as they truly are and guide your progress to arrive at the best version.

A way to practice keeping a clean slate is to avoid looking at the work too often. If you finish a section or come to a sticking point, consider putting the project away and not engaging with it for a period of time. Let it sit for a minute, a week, or longer, while you go get lost.

Meditation is a valuable tool for hitting the reset button. You may also try vigorous exercise, a scenic adventure, or immersing yourself in an unrelated creative endeavor.

When you return with a clear perspective, you will more likely have the discernment to see what the project wants and needs.

What allows this to happen is the passing of time. Time is where learning occurs. Unlearning as well.

Context

Imagine a flower in an open meadow.

Now take the same flower and slip it into the barrel of a rifle. Or place it on a gravestone. Notice in each case how you feel. The significance changes. In new surroundings, the same object can take on considerably different meanings.

The context changes the content.

In your work, consider the implications of this principle. If you're painting a portrait, the background is part of the context. Changing the background sheds new light on the foreground. A dark setting sends a different message than a light one. A dense environment feels different than a sparse one. The frame, the room the painting is hung in, the artwork next to it. All these elements affect the perception of the work.

Some artists choose to control all these factors thoroughly. Others leave them to chance. And some create art that is completely context dependent. Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, for example. In a grocery store, they're disposable packaging for useful kitchen items. In a museum, they're rare objects of fascination and intrigue.

When sequencing a collection of songs, placing a quiet one next to a loud one affects the way a listener hears them both. After the quiet song, the loud one seems more bombastic.

One musician, I'm told, would add his newest track to a playlist along with the most beloved songs of all time to see if his work stood up in this context. If not, he would set it aside and keep working toward greatness.

The social norms of any time and place are another contextual box that art lives in. The same story of a relationship between two people could play out in Detroit or in Bali, in ancient Rome or in a different dimension. In each case, the story may take on new meaning. [1]

Publish the work one particular year as opposed to another, and the meaning can change again. Current events, cultural trends, other works released concurrently all affect a project's reception. Time is another form of context. [2]

When a piece isn't living up to your expectations, consider changing the context. Look past the principle element, examine the variables around it. Play with different combinations. Place it next to other works. Surprise yourself. [3]

A few common options are: [4]

soft-loud [5]
fast-slow
high-low
close-far
bright-dark
large-small
curved-straight
rough-smooth
before-after
inside-outside
same-different

A new context may create a work more powerful than the one you anticipated. One you never could have imagined before changing one seemingly inconsequential element. [6]

The Energy [1]
(In the Work)

What motivates us to work so diligently? What drives us to finish certain pieces and not others? [2]

We would like to think that it's our enthusiasm. A feeling that wells up when in the throes of self-expression. [3]

This energy is not generated by us. We are caught by it. We picked it up from the work. *It* contains the charge. A contagious vitality that pulls us forward. [4]

Works hinting at greatness contain a charge we can feel, like static before a lightning storm. They consume their maker, occupying waking thoughts and dreams. Sometimes they become the artist's reason for living. [5]

The energy feels similar to another force of creation in the world: [6]

Love. [7]

A kinetic draw beyond our rational comprehension. [8]

Early in a project, excitement is the inner voltmeter to watch to help choose which seed to develop. When you're handling a seed and the needle jumps, it indicates that the work is worthy of your attention, your devotion. It holds the potential to sustain your interest and make the effort worthwhile. [9]

As you experiment and craft, more energetic charges are set off as further decisions are made. You catch yourself losing track of time, forgetting to eat, withdrawing from the outside world. [10]

Other times the process is a grind. Minutes pass slowly and you count down the days until the work is complete. A prisoner etching marks on a cell wall. [11]

Remember that the energy in the work isn't always accessible to you. At times, you take a wrong turn and the charge is lost. Or you're so deep in the details that you can't see the bigger picture. Even with the greatest work, it's natural for excitement to wax and wane. 1

If the work is thrilling one day and isn't for a long while after, you may have experienced a false indicator. When the moments of joy seem like a distant memory and the work feels like an obligation to a past idea, this could mean you've either gone too far or that particular seed wasn't actually ready to germinate yet. 2

If the energy is depleted, either back up a few steps to tap back into the charge or find a new seed generating excitement. One of the skills an artist develops is the ability to recognize when either they or the work have nothing left to give each other. 3

All living things are interconnected, depending on one another to survive. A work of art is no different. It generates excitement in you. This commands your attention. And your attention is exactly what's required for it to grow. It's a harmonic, mutually dependent relationship. The creator and the creation rely on each other to thrive. 4

The call of the artist is to follow the excitement. Where there's excitement, there's energy. And where there is energy, there is light. 5