

Create an environment  
where you're free to express  
what you're afraid to express.

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## Seeds<sup>1</sup>



In the first phase of the creative process, we are to be completely open,<sup>2</sup> collecting anything we find of interest.

We can call this the Seed phase. We're searching for potential starting points that, with love and care, can grow into something beautiful. At this stage, we are not comparing them to find the best seed. We simply gather them.<sup>3</sup>

A seed for a song could be a phrase, a melody, a bass line, or a rhythmic feel.<sup>4</sup>

For a written piece, it may be a sentence, a character sketch, a setting, a thesis, or a plot point.<sup>5</sup>

For a structure, a shape, a material choice, a function, or the natural properties of a location.<sup>6</sup>

And for a business, it could be a common inconvenience, a societal need, a technical advancement, or a personal interest.<sup>7</sup>

Collecting seeds typically doesn't involve a tremendous amount of effort.<sup>8</sup> It's more a receiving of a transmission. A noticing.

As if catching fish, we walk to the water, bait the hook, cast the line, and patiently wait. We cannot control the fish, only the presence of our line.<sup>9</sup>

The artist casts a line to the universe. We don't get to choose when a noticing or inspiration comes. We can only be there to receive it. As with meditation, our engagement in the process is what allows the result.<sup>10</sup>

Collecting seeds is best approached with active awareness and boundless curiosity.<sup>11</sup> It cannot be muscled, though perhaps it can be willed.



As the seeds arrive, forming conclusions about their value or fate can get in the way of their natural potential. In this phase, the artist's work is to collect seeds, plant them, water them with attention, and see if they take root.

Having a specific vision of what a seed will become could serve as a helpful guide in later phases. In this initial stage, it may cut off more interesting possibilities.

An idea appearing to hold less vitality may grow into a beautiful work. Other times, the most exciting seed may not ultimately yield fruit. It's too soon to tell. Until we are further along in the process and the idea has been developed, it's impossible to assess these germs of an idea accurately. The appropriate seed will reveal itself over time.

Placing too much emphasis on a seed or dismissing it prematurely can interfere with its natural growth. The temptation to insert too much of yourself in this first phase can undermine the entire enterprise. Be wary of taking shortcuts or crossing items off your list too quickly.

The seed that doesn't get watered cannot reveal its ability to bear fruit. Collect many seeds and then, over time, look back and see which ones resonate. Sometimes we're too close to them to recognize their true potential, and other times the magical moment that inspired a seed into existence is bigger than the seed itself.

It's generally preferable to accumulate several weeks' or months' worth of ideas and then choose which of them to focus on, instead of following an urge or obligation to rush to the finish line with what is in front of us today.

The more seeds you've accumulated, the easier this is to judge. If you've collected a hundred seeds, you might find that seed number fifty-four speaks to you in a way that none of the others do. If number fifty-four is your only choice, without other seeds for context, it's more difficult to tell.

When we make assumptions about what seeds won't work or may not fit with what we believe to be our artistic identity, we may be prevented from growing as creators. Sometimes the purpose of a seed is to propel us in a

completely new direction. Along the way, it may morph into something<sup>1</sup>  
hardly resembling its original form and become our finest work yet.

At this point in time, it's helpful to think of the work as bigger than us. To<sup>2</sup>  
cultivate a sense of awe and wonder at what's possible, and recognize that  
this productivity is not generated by our hand alone.

| The work reveals itself as you go.<sup>1</sup>

## Experimentation<sup>1</sup>



We have collected a handful of seeds—of starting points and potentialities.<sup>2</sup>  
We now enter the second stage, the Experimentation phase.

Fueled by the initial hit of excitement at discovering a starting point, we play with different combinations and possibilities to see if any of them reveal how the seed wants to develop. Think of this as a search for life. We're looking to see if we can get the seeds to take root and sprout a stem.<sup>3</sup>

There's no right way to experiment. Generally speaking, we want to begin interacting with the seeds, developing our starting point in different directions. We are cultivating each seed, much as a gardener creates optimal conditions to foster growth.<sup>4</sup>

This is one of the fun parts of a project, because nothing is at stake. You get to play with forms and see what takes shape. There are no rules. Cultivation will look different for every artist and every seed.<sup>5</sup>

If the seed is a character in a novel, perhaps we widen the world they live in, develop a backstory, or become the character and start writing from their point of view.<sup>6</sup>

If the seed is a story for a film, we might want to explore various settings.<sup>7</sup> It could be different countries, communities, time periods, or realities. Shakespeare's plays, for example, have been adapted into movies centered around everything from New York street gangs to samurais, from Santa Monica to outer space.

There are countless directions to explore, and we never know which will guide us to a dead end and which will lead to new realms until we test it. In the case of a song, a vocalist might respond very quickly to a musical track<sup>8</sup>

and the melody will immediately reveal itself. Other times, although the singer finds the musical track compelling, they will listen to it a thousand times and nothing will come from it.

In this phase, we are not looking at which iteration progresses the quickest or furthest, but which holds the most promise. We focus on the flourishing and wait to prune. We generate possibilities instead of eliminating them. Editing prematurely can close off routes that might lead to beautiful vistas previously unseen.



In the Experimentation phase, conclusions are stumbled upon. They surprise or challenge us more often than they fulfill our expectations.

Ancient Chinese alchemists searching for immortality mixed saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal. They discovered something else: gunpowder. Countless other inventions—penicillin, plastic, pacemakers, Post-it notes—were discovered by accident. Consider how many innovations that might have changed the world have been lost because someone was so focused on their goal, they missed the revelation right in front of them.

The heart of experiment is mystery. We cannot predict where a seed will lead or if it will take root. Remain open to the new and unknown. Begin with a question mark and embark on a journey of discovery.

Take full advantage of the energy inherent in the seed itself, and do whatever's possible not to disturb it. You may be tempted to intervene and steer its development toward a specific goal or preconceived idea. This may not lead to the most productive of its possibilities at this stage of the process.

Allow the seed to follow its own path toward the sun. The time to discriminate will come later. For now, allow space for magic to enter.



Not every seed must grow. But it may be there is a right time for each one. If a seed does not seem to be developing or responding, consider storing it

rather than discarding it.<sup>1</sup>

In nature, some seeds lie dormant in anticipation of the season most conducive to their growth. This is true of art as well. There are ideas whose time has not yet come. Or perhaps their time has come, but you are not yet ready to engage with them. Other times, developing a different seed may shed light on a dormant one.<sup>2</sup>

Some seeds are ready to germinate instantaneously. You may start experimenting and find yourself completing the work and being pleased with the result. Or you may get halfway through the project, then feel unsure where it wants to go.<sup>3</sup>

As we lose enthusiasm, we often continue to labor on a seed, believing that the work has to turn out for the better because we've invested so much time in it. If the energy continues to drop, it does not necessarily mean that the seed is bad. We just may not have found the right experiment for it. Perhaps we need to step away for a time and shift perspective. We may choose to start over with it, or set it aside for a while and sift through the others.<sup>4</sup>

**The outcome is not up to us.** Give some attention to each seed, regardless of what you believe its potential may be, and look for a beautiful response.<sup>5</sup>

If you have just one seed—a very specific vision you want to carry out—that's fine. There is no right way. You might consider the possibility, however, that it could end up being a limitation, because you are no longer taking advantage of all that you have in you. Being open to possibility gets you to a place you want to go that you may not know you wanted to get to.<sup>6</sup>

If you know what you want to do and you do it, that's the work of a craftsman. If you begin with a question and use it to guide an adventure of discovery, that's the work of the artist. The surprises along the way can expand your work, and even the art form itself.<sup>7</sup>



When a plant is flourishing, we can see the life spring forth from every stalk, leaf, and flower. How do we know when an idea is flourishing?<sup>8</sup>



Often the most accurate signposts are emotional, not intellectual.<sup>1</sup> Excitement tends to be the best barometer for selecting which seeds to focus on. When something interesting starts to come together, it arouses delight. It's an energizing feeling of wanting more. A feeling of leaning forward. Follow that energy.

During the Experimentation phase, we are paying attention to this natural reaction of enthrallment in the body.<sup>2</sup> There is a time for the head work of analysis, but not yet. Here, we follow the heart. At some point, we may be able to look back and understand why the feeling arose. Other times we will not, and that's fine too. For now, this is of no concern.



If two ideas feel somewhat equal in weight, and one has clear potential to turn into something beautiful and the other shows less potential but seems more interesting, feel free to follow your interest.<sup>3</sup> Base decisions on the internal feeling of being moved and notice what holds your interest. This will always be in the greatest service of the work.

Failure  
is the information you need  
to get where you're going.

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## Try Everything<sup>1</sup>



Mixing blue and yellow makes green. Adding two plus two makes four.<sup>2</sup>

When combining basic elements in the ordinary course of life, much is predictable.<sup>3</sup>

In creating art, the sum total of the parts often defies expectation. Theory<sup>4</sup> and practice don't always line up. The formula that worked yesterday might not work tomorrow. The proven solutions are sometimes the least helpful.

There is a gap between imagination and reality. An idea might seem brilliant in our mind. But once employed, it might not work at all. Another might seem dreary at first. Then, upon execution, it might be exactly what's called for.<sup>5</sup>

To dismiss an idea because it doesn't work in your mind is to do a disservice to the art.<sup>6</sup> The only way to truly know if any idea works is to test it. And if you're looking for the best idea, test everything.

Ask yourself as many "what if" questions as you can. What if this were<sup>7</sup> the first painting anyone saw in their life? What if I removed every adverb? What if I made all the loud parts quiet? Look for different polarities and see how they affect the piece.

Perhaps take on the temporary rule that there are no bad ideas. Test them<sup>8</sup> all, even the ones that seem underwhelming or unlikely to work.

This method becomes especially useful in group efforts. Often when<sup>9</sup> working with others, different ideas are put forward and end up in competition. Based on experience, we may believe we can see what each person is imagining and what the result will be.

It's impossible, though, to know exactly what someone else is thinking.<sup>1</sup> And if we can't predict how our own ideas will work—and we can't!—how can we draw conclusions about what someone else imagines?

Instead of talking through different solutions to work out which is best,<sup>2</sup> take it out of the realm of the verbal. **To truly weigh choices, it's necessary to bring them into the physical world. Have them acted out, played out, or built into a model. Descriptions do not do ideas justice.**

We want to set up an environment where the decision making occurs free<sup>3</sup> of the misguiding force of persuasion. Persuasion leads to mediocrity. To be evaluated, ideas have to be seen, heard, tasted, or touched.

It's best if the person who has the idea either demonstrates it or supervises<sup>4</sup> the execution until it matches what they are suggesting. This will help avoid misunderstandings.

Once the idea is witnessed in its full expression, it may turn out far better<sup>5</sup> than you imagined. It may even be a perfect fit. Or it could be exactly what you expected. Something will be gained through the process, whatever the result. Give yourself permission to be wrong and experience the joy of being surprised.

When working through ways of solving a puzzle, there are no mistakes.<sup>6</sup> Each unsuccessful solution gets you closer to one that works. Avoid becoming attached to the particulars of the problem. Widen your field of view. If the idea takes the project somewhere with a stronger energetic charge, follow the new direction. Demanding to control a work of art would be just as foolish as demanding that an oak tree grow according to your will.

Allow the work to grow in the direction it seeks, evolve in accordance<sup>7</sup> with its natural state, and have its own life. Enjoy the journey of cycling through all permutations to reveal a work's true form.

Taking a wrong turn  
allows you to see landscapes  
you wouldn't otherwise have seen.

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## Crafting<sup>1</sup>



Once a seed's code has been cracked, and its true form deciphered, the process shifts. We are no longer in the unbounded mode of discovery. A clear sense of direction has arisen.<sup>2</sup>

Often unbeknownst to us, we find ourselves in the Craft phase. Now comes the labor of building.<sup>3</sup>

We work to add to a foundation that has revealed itself through our experimentation. The lines have been drawn. Now we're filling in the colors.<sup>4</sup>

Where the earlier phases were more free and open-ended, the inspirations and ideas that appear now are more directly related to issues at hand. We are looking for a shape that fits a specific hole, whereas before we were just looking for shapes.<sup>5</sup>

In some ways, the Craft phase is one of the least glamorous parts of the artist's job. There is creativity involved, but it often carries less of the magic of exploration and more of the labor of brick-laying.<sup>6</sup>

This is the point in the journey where some struggle to carry on. For now, we need to look away from the open field and turn toward a winding staircase a hundred stories tall. A long, precarious climb lies ahead.<sup>7</sup>

We may be tempted to turn back and chase the thrill of feeling the light bulb flicker on above our heads. But the first two phases have little purpose or meaning on their own. Art may only exist, and the artist may only evolve, by completing the work.<sup>8</sup>



How do we decide which experiment to craft? <sup>1</sup>

We continue to follow hints of excitement. Each one of us has to find our own path. If several directions seem captivating, consider crafting more than one experiment at a time. Working on several often brings about a healthy sense of detachment. <sup>2</sup>

When solely focused on one, it's easy to get tunnel vision. While it may appear a project's moving in the right direction, we are too closely entwined with it to truly know. <sup>3</sup>

Stepping away and returning with fresh eyes brings clearer insight into next steps. Switching to other projects will engage different muscles and patterns of thinking. These may shed light on paths otherwise unseen. And this may happen over the course of days, weeks, months, or years. <sup>4</sup>

Even in a single work session, moving between multiple projects can be helpful. <sup>5</sup>

There are also times when a single seed has so much power that you choose to focus on it exclusively, and that is your choice to make. <sup>6</sup>

In the Experimentation phase, we planted the seed, watered it, and gave the resulting plant time to grow in the sun. We let nature take its course. Now, in this third phase, we are bringing ourselves to the project to see what we can offer. <sup>7</sup>

This is one reason the boundary between the Experimentation and the Craft phases isn't a linear progression. We often move back and forth between the two, because sometimes what we add isn't as good as what nature is bringing. When we realize this, we stop and go back to where nature left off. <sup>8</sup>

Whereas the Experimentation phase is about what the seed has to offer, now we are applying our filter. Reviewing the totality of our experience in the world and searching for connections: What does this remind us of, what can we measure it against, what does it relate to that we've noticed over the course of our lives? <sup>9</sup>

In this phase, we begin with a project that has naturally developed. We recognize potential in it. And we see what we can add, take away, or combine to further develop it. <sup>10</sup>

The Craft phase is not just a building up. It is also a breaking down. The goal of developing the work can be accomplished through a pruning process of small cuts. We decide which details and directions might be removed, so that more energy and focus can be used to feed the core elements.



While the Craft phase can be difficult, that is not always the case. There are some artists whose focus is more on formalizing an idea than executing it. And in the case of some projects, outsourcing the Craft phase is what's called for.

Many of Andy Warhol's paintings were done by other artists and by machines, while he supplied the ideas and retained authorship. Some famous California rock bands of the '60s didn't play on their own albums. And some prolific authors just invent characters and story lines, and leave it to other writers to fill out the prose.

When it comes to performing these labor-intensive aspects of the process yourself, it is not a question of right or wrong. It's project dependent. Remain open to doing whatever it takes to make the art as good as it can be, whether this means inserting yourself more into the details of the process or stepping further back from them.

For some projects, an artist may feel it's necessary to be involved in all of the work. The physical act of crafting may give them a greater understanding of the art and more direct control over the details. Other projects may be better served if the artist acts as a maestro or designer in this phase, conducting the work of others.

Crafting can be daunting. It's helpful to think of it as another opportunity for play. For some artists, crafting is their favorite part of the process. There is a natural joy and sense of accomplishment in following a set of instructions to create something physical and beautiful. The love and care they put into this phase can be clearly recognized in the final work.



## Momentum<sup>1</sup>



When treated like the earlier phases, with no boundaries or time constraints,<sup>2</sup> the Craft phase may extend longer than necessary.

Once enough data is collected, and the vision is clear, it can be helpful to set deadlines for completion. The options are no longer unlimited; the process is less open-ended. There may not be a clear finish line in sight, but the core elements are there.<sup>3</sup>

Imagine you have a script that has been translated to storyboard. Going from storyboard to finished film is somewhat of a mechanical process. There is art and inspiration involved, and there are a million choices to be made, but the path ahead is clear. Our creative task now has narrower parameters.<sup>4</sup>

If we're pleased with the blueprint, it could be constructed many different ways. As long as we continue referring back to make sure the developed project is as good as the original plan, there could be several different versions that all ring true. The power is held in the underlying structure.<sup>5</sup>

If the project were a building, we're picking which materials to clad it in and what type of windows to install. You may have a preference, but the building will maintain its integrity. The details matter, but they aren't likely to sink the enterprise.<sup>6</sup>

In the Craft phase, deadlines are suggested completion dates rather than set in stone. There is still an element of surprise and exploration throughout our execution, and it's possible to find ourselves at any moment back in the Experimentation phase.<sup>7</sup>

While crafting, an artist might succumb to outside pressure to set a fixed release date for their project. Preparations are made. Outsiders are notified.<sup>8</sup>

Then sometimes, as we work diligently toward the final stage, an entirely new and preferable direction might appear. But the artist is left without the time to pursue it. And this leads to a compromised result. <sup>1</sup>

The artist's goal is not merely to produce, but to make the finest work they are capable of. The business thinks in terms of quarterly earnings and production schedules. The artist thinks in terms of timeless excellence. While crafting, make deadlines for your own motivation, not necessarily to be shared with others unless it helps with accountability. <sup>2</sup>

Once the Craft phase is nearing an end, then we might start thinking in terms of fixed deadlines. <sup>3</sup>



Crafting contains a paradox. To create our best work, we are patient and avoid rushing the process, while at the same time we work quickly without delay. <sup>4</sup>

By remaining too long in this phase, many pitfalls may arise. One is disconnection. If an artist is creating a beautiful work, and keeps endlessly crafting it beyond the need, sometimes they suddenly want to start all over. This can be because they have changed or the times have changed. <sup>5</sup>

Art is a reflection of the artist's inner and outer world during the period of creation. Extending the period complicates the artist's ability to capture a state of being. The result can be a loss of connection and enthusiasm for the work over time. <sup>6</sup>

Another challenge we might call *demo-itis*. Demo-itis happens when the artist has clung too tightly, for too long, to their first draft. <sup>7</sup>

The danger of living with the unfinished project for too long is that the more often an artist is exposed to a particular draft of a work, the more final that form can become in their mind. A musician might record a demo of a song very quickly. They could listen to it thousands of times and imagine developing it to all it can be. Yet when it comes time to actually make the best version of the song, the demo may be so ingrained in their head that any <sup>8</sup>

changes to it seem blasphemous. When we become overly attached to a premature version of the work, we do a disservice to the project's potential. <sup>1</sup>

To avoid demo-itis, there is a simple technique. Unless actively working to make something better, avoid listening to it, reading it, playing it, looking at it, or showing it to friends. Work as far forward as you can while crafting and then step away, without repetitively consuming the unfinished work. By not accepting the work-in-progress as the standard version, we leave room for growth, change, and development to continue. <sup>2</sup>

Keep in mind that it's also possible for something great to be made very quickly. An artist might spend five minutes sketching an idea for a project, and think very little of it. They might sense the seed of something great, and then spend hours or years trying to develop it into something more. But it is possible that the initial sketch or demo, born in all of five minutes, was actually the best version, the seed's purest expression. We may not realize this until after embellishing it or stepping away from it for a while. <sup>3</sup>

Another impediment some come across is that their vision for the work exceeds their ability to manifest it. They can hear the drumline, but the rhythm is more complex than their ability to play. They can picture the dance, but their body can't perform the moves gracefully enough. It might seem as though the next step is an impossible leap. <sup>4</sup>

In these moments, it's easy to feel discouraged. We mistake the fantasy version of the work in our minds for what the actual work has the possibility to become. There may indeed be times when our mental conception of a piece translates almost directly into the physical realm. At other times, it's an unrealistic idealized version. And sometimes, our vision for the work is a goal to work toward, and in the process we come to learn we'll reach a new and unexpected destination. <sup>5</sup>

Falling short of grander visions might actually put the work exactly where it wants to be. Do not let the scale of your imagination get in the way of executing a more practical version of your project. We may come to realize that this version is better than the initial, seemingly impossible vision. <sup>6</sup>



When you're on a roll in the Craft phase, work toward a full first draft.<sup>1</sup> Maintain the momentum. If you reach a section of the work that gives you trouble, instead of letting this blockage stop you, work around it. Although your instinct may be to create sequentially, **bypass the section where you're stuck, complete the other parts, then come back to it.**

Sometimes solutions to these difficult pieces will reveal themselves once the overall context has emerged. A bridge is easier to build when it's clear what's on either side of it.<sup>2</sup>

Another benefit is that if you are stuck at a section in the middle, it may feel overwhelming to know you're only halfway through the work. If you finish the rest of the draft and return to the portion you skipped, it feels more easily achievable when there's only 5 or 10 percent of a project left to complete. With the end in sight, it's easier to feel motivated to finish.<sup>3</sup>

If you're holding a center puzzle piece in your hand and staring at an empty tabletop, it's difficult to determine where to place it. If all of the puzzle is complete except for that one piece, then you know exactly where it goes.<sup>4</sup> The same is generally true of art. The more of the work you can see, the easier it becomes to gracefully place the final details clearly where they belong.

Art is choosing to do something skillfully,<sup>1</sup>  
caring about the details,  
bringing all of yourself  
to make the finest work you can.  
It is beyond ego, vanity, self-glorification,  
and need for approval.

## Point of View<sup>1</sup>



The goal of art isn't to attain perfection. The goal is to share who we are. And how we see the world.<sup>2</sup>

Artists allow us to see what we are unable to see, but somehow already know.<sup>3</sup> It may be a view of the world singularly different from our own. Or one so close, it seems miraculous, as if the artist is looking through our own eyes. In either case, the artist's perception reminds us of who we are and who we can be.

One reason art resonates is because human beings are so similar.<sup>4</sup> We're attracted to the shared experience held within the work. Including the imperfection in it. We recognize some part of ourselves and feel understood. And connected.

Carl Rogers said, "The personal is the universal." The personal is what makes art matter. Our point of view, not our drawing skills or musical virtuosity or ability to tell a story.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the difference between art and most other trades. In the arts, our filter is the defining factor of the work. In science or technology, the aims are different. The reason we create art isn't with the intention of making something useful for someone else. We create to express who we are. Who we are and where we are on our journey.<sup>6</sup>

Our point of view doesn't have to be coherent. And it's rarely simple. We may have different, and sometimes contradictory, points of view across a variety of topics. Aiming to narrow it all down to one elegant expression is unrealistic and limiting.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever our perspective, so long as we share it, unaltered and undoctored, we succeed in art's fundamental purpose. <sup>1</sup>

When making art, we create a mirror in which someone may see their own hidden reflection. <sup>2</sup>



A point of view is different from having a point. <sup>3</sup>

A point is an idea intentionally expressed. A point of view is the perspective—conscious and unconscious—through which the work emerges. <sup>4</sup>

What causes us to notice a piece of art is rarely the point being made. We are drawn to the way an artist's filter refracts ideas, not to the ideas themselves. <sup>5</sup>

It's of no use to know your point of view. It's already there, working in the background, ever evolving. Efforts to portray point of view on purpose often lead to a false representation. We hold on to stories about our perspective that are inaccurate and limiting. <sup>6</sup>

Wayne Dyer said that when you squeeze an orange, what comes out is orange juice. When you get squeezed, whatever comes out is what's inside you. And part of that extract is the point of view you don't even know you have. It's baked into the art you make and the opinions you share. <sup>7</sup>

Long after a work is completed, we may look back and understand our true point of view in it. <sup>8</sup>

We don't need to make a point of making a point. It will appear when it appears. The true point is already made in the innocent act of perception and creation. Knowing this is liberating. It lifts some of the pressure. We can worry less about understanding why it works, or if others will understand where we are coming from. We are free to be present and allow the material to come through us, and free to stay out of its way when it does come through. <sup>9</sup>

Much of art's greatness is felt on a gut level. Your self-expression allows the audience to have their own self-expression. If your work speaks to them, it is of no consequence if you are heard and understood. <sup>10</sup>

Set aside such concerns about whether your work will be comprehended.<sup>1</sup> These thoughts can only cause interference, for both the art and audience. Most people aren't interested in being told what to think or feel.

Great art is created through freedom of self-expression and received with freedom of individual interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

Great art opens a conversation rather than closing it. And often this conversation is started by accident.<sup>3</sup>



Most human beings like to fit in.<sup>4</sup>

We adapt not only to the evolving flow of material coming through us, but the boundaries and templates of the culture around us.<sup>5</sup>

Can great art come from conformity? And what is the purpose of being an artist if we deny our unique personal point of view?<sup>6</sup>

Those of us choosing to live as artists embrace our filter as a gift. To reject it would be tragic. The refracted light it projects is our own singular landscape of artistic possibility. How can a piece of art ever truly be a guilty pleasure?<sup>7</sup>



The Beatles were inspired by American rock and roll, artists like Chuck Berry and the Shirelles. But when they played, it was different. It wasn't different because they wanted it to be so. It was different because they were different. And the world responded.<sup>8</sup>

There are countless examples of imitation turning into legitimate innovation. Having a romanticized vision of an artist, genre, or tradition may allow you to create something new, because you see it from a different perspective than those closer to it. Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns are abstract psychedelic mythology compared with the American Westerns of the 1940s and '50s that he hoped to mirror.<sup>9</sup>



It's impossible to imitate another artist's point of view. We can only swim<sup>1</sup> in the same waters. So feel free to copy the works that inspire you on the road to finding your own voice. It's a time-tested tradition.



In the culture, there's always a dialogue between the past, the present, and the future, even when it's not clear what the influence is. As creators and enthusiasts, we share and receive points of view in order to participate in and further this exchange.<sup>2</sup>

When we hear something new, it provides insight into where **we've been**<sup>3</sup> **and where else we could go**. We may have thought we could only move forward. But when someone turns left, it shows we can also go right. And then our right turn may perhaps inspire someone else to explore an entirely new direction.

It's a symbiotic loop. The culture informs who you are. And who you are<sup>4</sup> informs your work. Your work then feeds back into the culture.

This constant march into the unknown would not exist without the<sup>5</sup> simultaneous sharing of millions of divergent points of view.

Expressing oneself in the world and creativity are the same. It may not be<sup>6</sup> possible to know who you are without somehow expressing it.

## Breaking the Sameness<sup>1</sup>



There are times during the Craft phase when you hit a wall and the work isn't getting any better. Before stepping away from the piece, it's worth finding a way to break the sameness and refresh your excitement in the work, as if engaging with it for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

In the recording studio, I occasionally suggest exercises to artists with this goal in mind. We attempt them without expectations regarding outcome. The intention is simply to rekindle excitement and access new ways of performance.<sup>3</sup>

Several of these exercises follow. Whether or not you find yourself at an impasse, perhaps they can inspire similar experiments in your chosen field.<sup>4</sup>

## Small Steps<sup>5</sup>

To create movement for a musician who was blocked, we offered him a small task: write just one line every day. It didn't matter how good or bad he felt about the line, as long as he committed to writing it. If more came through, that was fine but not necessary. By breaking down what seemed insurmountable into single lines, he was able to reopen the creative channel and eventually began composing entire songs again. This happened much more quickly than expected.<sup>6</sup>

## Change the Environment<sup>7</sup>

If we're looking for a performance of a different nature, it can help to change an element of the environment. Turning off the lights and playing in the dark can create a shift in consciousness and break the chain of sameness from performance to performance. Other shifts we've experimented with include having a singer hold the microphone instead of standing in front of it, and recording early in the morning instead of at night. To access a greater degree of variation, one vocalist chose to hang upside down while singing.

## **Change the Stakes**

Besides changing the external environment, you can also change the inner. If a band imagines that this is the last time they'll ever play a particular song, they're likely to perform it differently than if it's just another take. Other times lower stakes, such as doing a rehearsal prior to recording, may bring out the best performance.

## **Invite an Audience**

When an artist thrives on being in front of a crowd, we may bring in several people to watch a session. Being observed changes how an artist acts. Even if the audience consists only of one person who isn't part of the project, that can be enough. While some artists may overdo a performance for an audience and others may hold back, most tend to be more focused with someone else present. Even if your art is non-performative, such as writing or cooking, it will still likely change with an observer present. The goal is to find the specific parameters in each case that bring out your best.

## **Change the Context**

There are times when a singer doesn't connect with a song, like an actor whose line reading falls flat. It can be helpful to create a new meaning or an

additional backstory to a song's lyrics. A love song might sound different if sung to a long-lost soulmate, a partner of thirty years that you don't get along with, a person you saw on the street but never spoke to, or your mother.

With one artist, I suggested singing a love song written to a woman as a devotional to God instead. We can try many different permutations while singing the same song, without changing any of the lyrics, to see which version brings out the best performance.

### **Alter the Perspective**

A technique we sometimes use in the studio is to turn up the volume on the headphones extremely loud. When every sound explodes in your ears, there's a natural tendency to play much quieter to restore the balance. It's a forced perspective change, and can bring out a very delicate performance. Even vocals will be whispered, because anything more than that would be overwhelming. Conversely, to coax someone to sing louder, with more energy, I might ask them to turn the vocal volume down in their headphones so their voice is drowned out by the music. Whatever the situation, if a task is challenging to accomplish, there's often a way to design the surroundings to naturally encourage the performance you're striving for.

In a concert, setting up the lighting so that the performer either sees the crowd and the faces in it or can't see anyone at all will alter the performance. If a performer uses in-ear monitors and all they hear is the music they're playing and not the audience response, it will be very different than if the screaming of the crowd is mixed in. It's worth experimenting with different scenarios to observe what they bring out and to find the performance you want.

### **Write for Someone Else**

In the case of a musician who typically writes their own material, I'll suggest, "Imagine that a favorite artist asked you to write a song for their next album.

What would that song sound like?”<sup>1</sup>

By creating something you’d be excited to hear your favorite artist perform, it depersonalizes the process and can allow the writer to break free of themselves. A quintessential song of female empowerment, “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman” was written by Carole King and Gerry Goffin. King—and then, of course, Aretha Franklin—sang it. I was surprised to learn that Goffin wrote the lyrics and King the music.<sup>2</sup>

At times, I will ask the musician to select an artist whose lyrics and point of view are very different from their own, as a way to avoid the sameness that can occur in a career over time. If an artist is normally full of braggadocio, we may choose a more vulnerable, soft-spoken lyricist. If you tend to write in style x, it can be interesting to choose an artist who is the polar opposite of x. This doesn’t mean the song will be good. It’s just interesting to see where it leads. And sometimes it leads you right where you’re going.<sup>3</sup>

Like the other exercises, this can be applied to any craft. If you’re a painter, creating an original new work by your favorite artist can open a channel and lead to interesting results. Many artists have a perceived idea of what’s in their wheelhouse, and that’s ultimately a limitation. So it’s helpful to step out of yourself and into someone else’s wheelhouse.<sup>4</sup>

## Add Imagery<sup>5</sup>

I was working on an album and the band was struggling with the keyboard solo. The mood wasn’t right. We wanted something more grand. So instead of a musical reference, we created a scene. We came up with a description of the aftermath of a battle: “Imagine there’s a beautiful green hill covered in trees and flora, just breathtaking, and a battle has just ended. Smoke drifts off the hill and reveals wounded soldiers scattered along it, waiting for help to arrive.” We painted the scene very vividly, then said, “Play the solo like that,” and hit *record*. The keyboardist began playing beautifully.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, it’s been a technique we’ve continued to use. Often, we don’t even know what the connections are between the image and what we want to<sup>7</sup>

hear. Thinking of a specific image or story, or imagining that you're scoring a film and then starting to play, will often bring a stronger direction to a meandering tune.

## **Limit the Information**

When a songwriter sends a demo of a track for a band to record in the studio, I don't want the musicians to in any way be informed by the musical choices made for the demo. So I'll typically have one musician, usually a guitar player, listen to it and learn the chords, notate them on the lyric sheet, and give that to the band.

The guitar player and the singer may then perform it, with no suggestion of rhythm other than the speed implied by the way they play it.

When you're working with great musicians, this leaves them free to bring in more of themselves. Rather than recording a good version of the demo, they will use the full range of their creativity and decision-making abilities to take the song somewhere new and often unexpected. If the results aren't great after trying different approaches, they can always listen to the demo at that point, though that rarely happens.

The general principle is to be protective and limit people you're working with from experiencing things that could interfere with their creative process. Limit the information to the barest of sketches. If you want creators to bring all of themselves to something, give them the most freedom to create. If you give a screenwriter a book, an outline, or a sentence to turn into a script, each will lead to a very different screenplay.

These exercises are not set in stone. The intention is to establish different perspectives or conditions, and see where you or your collaborators end up. Consider creating your own versions of these experiments. Or if using these specific ones, feel free to change the parameters as you're working or remove them altogether when the time is right. The actual exercises are of little