



# Sustaining a Life-Long Creative Career

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The following post is part of a series of interviews with influencers in the contemporary art world.

It's not easy making it in the art world. And, every artist faces unique challenges.

To explore the topic of sustaining a career in the arts, I sat down for coffee with [Jackie Battenfeld](#) at a café in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. We spoke about the realities she has faced making it in the art world and how she broke through.

Jackie is a true force of nature. She's a full time successful artist. Previous to making art full time, she scaled [The Rotunda Gallery](#) (now BRICartsmedia) into a world-class arts organization in the 1980's and curated thirty-six exhibitions there. Jackie also published [The Artist's Guide](#), a comprehensive handbook for building a successful art career, and continues to mentor artists through teaching a professional practice class at [Columbia University](#), and the Professional Development Program at the [Creative Capital Foundation](#).

**Could you describe your personal mission?**

My goal is to leave “the art world” a better place for artists than I found it. I want artists to be more in control of their career and not to be overly subject to the whims and pressures of an art market.

**In your book, you highlight how if you ask artists to measure their success, most will say it's having the time, space and money to make art. How do you measure your own success? It is also preserving time and resources to create art?**

Absolutely. Success for me is dependent on the income I make from sales of my work which allows me to “buy” time in my studio, It feels like a grant I’ve given myself. Spending three or four days or more each week working in my studio is the best life imaginable. My favorite quote in *The Artist’s Guide* is from my interview with artist Janine Antoni. “All my decisions come from wanting to make art for the rest of my life.” That requires time, space and money.

**You've talked about how most artists learn the skills required to make it in the art world through painful trial and error. What do you think are the most important skills for artists to learn?**

First of all, to realize no one is coming to save you! You’ve got to take care of yourself and be in control of your professional life. Most artists graduate from school knowing how to make art, but they are tragically unfamiliar with the skills necessary to build a life-long career. There is no system of paid mentorship or internship to learn how to function independently. It’s sink or swim.

So on top of making the best art they can, each artist has to manage his or her professional life. That means devoting time and attention to the necessary tasks of organization, record keeping, planning, fundraising, and promotion. In short, an artist is running a small business and they need to be the CEO, CFO, and human resources, not just the creative department.

**Could you take us through the experience of making the leap from running [a nonprofit] gallery to a full time artist?**

In the early 80’s, I started and nurtured [The Rotunda Gallery](#) for eight years. I had no previous experience so I learned on the job: exhibition programming, fundraising, budgeting, and promotion. It was exciting and exhausting. The best part was the opportunity to work with so many artists as an art administrator and curator. Through it

all I somehow managed to continue painting, but I became a “secret artist.” It was uncomfortable for me to promote the gallery and my own art at the same time. Meanwhile the each year the Gallery grew, acquired more staff, expanded programs and the budget too. By now I was married, had a four-year-old son and another one on the way. It was harder to find time to do my own studio work. I felt I had done as much as I could for the Gallery and it needed a new director to take it to the next phase. I wanted out. While struggling with how to leave and what to do next, I had an epiphany. Managing the gallery had taught me so much about the business side of the art world. I realized that if I applied that knowledge to my own practice, I could figure how to make my life work as a full-time artist. That’s when I left to strike out on my own.

**What advice would you have for artists managing dual careers to keep themselves afloat and navigate the ups and downs of the art market?**

Artists have many skills besides making art. Generating more than one income stream, whether it be teaching, freelancing, developing another small business, working part-time, taking advantage of grants and residencies, or a life partner with a dependable income is the only way to manage the ups and downs of the art market. Only a tiny handful of artists have a steady income from sales of their work year in and year out. Mostly it’s a wild ride of feast or famine. Another income stream helps even it out a bit. Also, a studio practice can be pretty lonely, so for many artists the upside to earning money outside of their studio practice is fellowship in other communities.

**After you made the leap to become a full time artist, you talked about building your studio practice from the ground up. What was your plan to sustain your creative career?**

I developed a five-year strategic plan with ambitious artistic and yearly financial goals. Honestly, the plan frightened me and I wasn’t sure I could do it, but it helped me override my misgivings and made me take actions I wouldn’t have done otherwise. The financial part of the plan helped me realize that I needed more than one gallery to represent my work. I needed relationships with a network of art dealers around the United States. Who were they? I sat down with the *Art in America Annual Guide to Galleries.Museums.Artists* and scoured it cover to cover looking for possibilities. Don’t forget I did this in 1989 before we could access the Internet. It was dogged work. Where were artists with ideas/work similar to mine exhibiting? Did I know anyone who lived in that city? Who could I contact for more information or to arrange an introduction? My research determined where my work might be a good fit and why. Over a three-year

period, I contacted hundreds of potential art partners. Some I telephoned to ask if they were open to reviewing new artist's work, others I sent a package cold. Every submission had a carefully crafted cover letter to introduce my work and demonstrate I'd done my research along with a few images, statement and resume. Amongst the many rejection letters were some positive responses I could follow up on. In time, some of these became strong art partnerships I have maintained to this day. Now with the ease of research and connectivity of the Internet, when I look back at this process, it seems it was barely a step above the old Pony Express days.

I knew I was on the right track when my first year's financial goal was accomplished in only six months. The best part was my studio work had busted wide open. Having more time to paint allowed me to experiment, and be more playful and inventive. I hadn't imagined that "the plan" would also expand my art.

Those years weren't easy and there were setbacks, but I persisted. The alternative, going back to art administrative work, was not an option. Amazingly, I completed my five-year strategic plan in three years and started a new one. By that time I didn't need to work so hard to find outlets for my art, they were finding me. I've never looked back.

