

“A must read for artists.”

–David Ross,
former director

Whitney Museum of American Art
and current chair,
MFA Art Practice program,
School of Visual Arts

*A POST-PANDEMIC
GUIDE FOR ARTISTS*

Making It in the Art World

Strategies for
Exhibitions and Funding

**BRAINARD
CAREY**

Director of Praxis Center
for Aesthetics

SECOND EDITION

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REVISED SECOND EDITION

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BRAINARD CAREY



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Presentation Tools and Techniques for Artists

As phone apps and the latest social network formats are changing the way we share images all the time, the way in which you present yourself and your artwork continues to change as well. To begin with, I will caution against a common practice of artists that usually gets them nothing but frustration, which is to send out a lot of cold letters (email or regular mail). If you want to present yourself to a gallery, do not buy a list of gallery addresses and send them all a generic package with a website link, images, and a résumé. It is remotely possible you could get a reaction from this, but the best tactic is to be targeted in your approach.

First, choose the nonprofit centers within your reach and choose the galleries that you like. Not the galleries that you think would be appropriate for your work, but the ones you admire for good shows.

To do this is fairly simple. First, look at a map or just write down the name of your city. You are about to make a list and a plan. If you wrote down the name of your city, begin searching on Google for the words “art gallery” and your city. Look for your state council on the arts and write down their number as well. I think it usually pays to take a trip to your local council on the arts.

EUROPE AND THE GLOBAL ART COMMUNITY

If you are living in another country, in Europe or somewhere else, there is usually something like an “office of contemporary arts,” which is funded by your ministry of culture or similar. Wherever you are, you

are putting together a list of everything in your area that is art-related, meaning galleries, museums, and nonprofit centers. The nonprofit centers are places of education, usually. That means they are supported by your government because their goal is not for profit; it is to help artists in some way. Nonprofits, or in Europe, NGOs, are everything from community centers to granting agencies to foundations that have been set up to give money to artists, and also museums and universities could be part of it.

After you have made the list of art-related institutions and galleries within your area, begin to sort them by which ones are closest. So pick all the places that are near to you and refine your list. Separate the types of organizations you are listing in different categories, such as galleries, universities, museums, nonprofits, art-related NGOs, and foundations for grants. Now you have a list of places and people to meet.

Take it one step at a time and begin by deciding how many you are going to call and visit in a week. I would pick a low number, like two or three in a week to start. Pick a time of day that you can spend thirty minutes on this task.

The next step is to look at your three contacts for the week and do a little research on each on the web so you can understand more about what they can do for you. Ideally, you have done enough research on each that you know who the staff is at the places you are calling. Then give them a call or write them a letter. You are not sending them links or images of your work; you are writing them a letter to ask about their services. If they provide grants, you want to be on their mailing list and know when the next application is due. If you are writing to a university gallery, you want to know who curates their gallery and who you can send a proposal to for having a show there. If you are writing to an organization that supports the arts in some way, like an arts council or NGO, then you want to be on their mailing list, and you want to know if there are any opportunities you should be aware of, like competitions or grants or juried shows. If you are writing to a museum, then you want to be on their mailing list as well, and you want to know if they look at the work of new artists. Let's look at each case and exactly how to proceed.

PRESENTING TO MUSEUMS

For museums, which are usually not for profit, what you are looking for is two things. One, you want to know who the curators are there. You want to know their names and what they have done in the past. It should be easy enough to find their names by looking at the museum's website. If that is difficult, call the museum and ask who the curators are for contemporary work. The other thing you would like to know from a museum is if they have a policy for looking at the work of new artists. You can write them a letter and simply ask that. Now let's go to the next step of this situation. You have a list of the museum's curators, and you have a sense of the shows they have, and perhaps they do look at the work of new artists. If they have a policy of looking at work, simply follow their rules. Usually they ask for a letter, images, and a biography of yourself. Keep in mind that most museums that have policies of looking at artists' work are usually not exhibiting those artists right away, then plan one to three years in advance.

What museum curators often do is look at your work so that they can understand more about what is going on in contemporary art. Also, even if they like your work very much, they will want to see more before committing themselves, in most instances. Normally you will get a letter back from the museum curator stating something like, "Thank you, please send us an update in six months." The reason they are saying that is so they can see how your work evolves, and also to see if you are professional enough to keep sending them work on a regular basis. The next step with museums, which you can do at any time in your career, is to target a specific curator. In my experience, it is easiest and best not to target the top curator.

Look for a new curator at a museum, someone who is probably young and handles something that might not even apply to you, like booking performances or music. Write to that curator directly and ask him or her if you could meet with them to talk about a project that you would like their feedback on. I always ask if I can meet the curator for a ten-minute Zoom meeting. Usually that is hard to say no to. It is also helpful if you Google the curator and find out something about their past so you can make a reference to it in a letter, showing that you know who they are! The letter might look something like this:

Dear [Curator's name here],

(Begin with a compliment.) I just read your text on the paintings of [artist's name here; find this by researching on the web], and I thought you did a great job at articulating the importance and subtlety of her work. (Say why in the next sentence and make this section at least two paragraphs long.)

(This is the ask section.) I am writing to you because I would like to have a brief meeting with you (ten minutes) by Zoom (or FaceTime) to tell you about a project I am involved with that has similar tendencies to the work you just wrote about. It would take ten minutes or less and will be easy. I value your words and the way you approach your writing and hope you can have this brief meeting with me to hear about an idea concerning my art that I would like to share with you.

Is it possible to meet on [date] at [time] by Zoom or FaceTime for 10 minutes?

Sincerely,
[YOU!]

PREPARING FOR A MEETING WITH A CURATOR

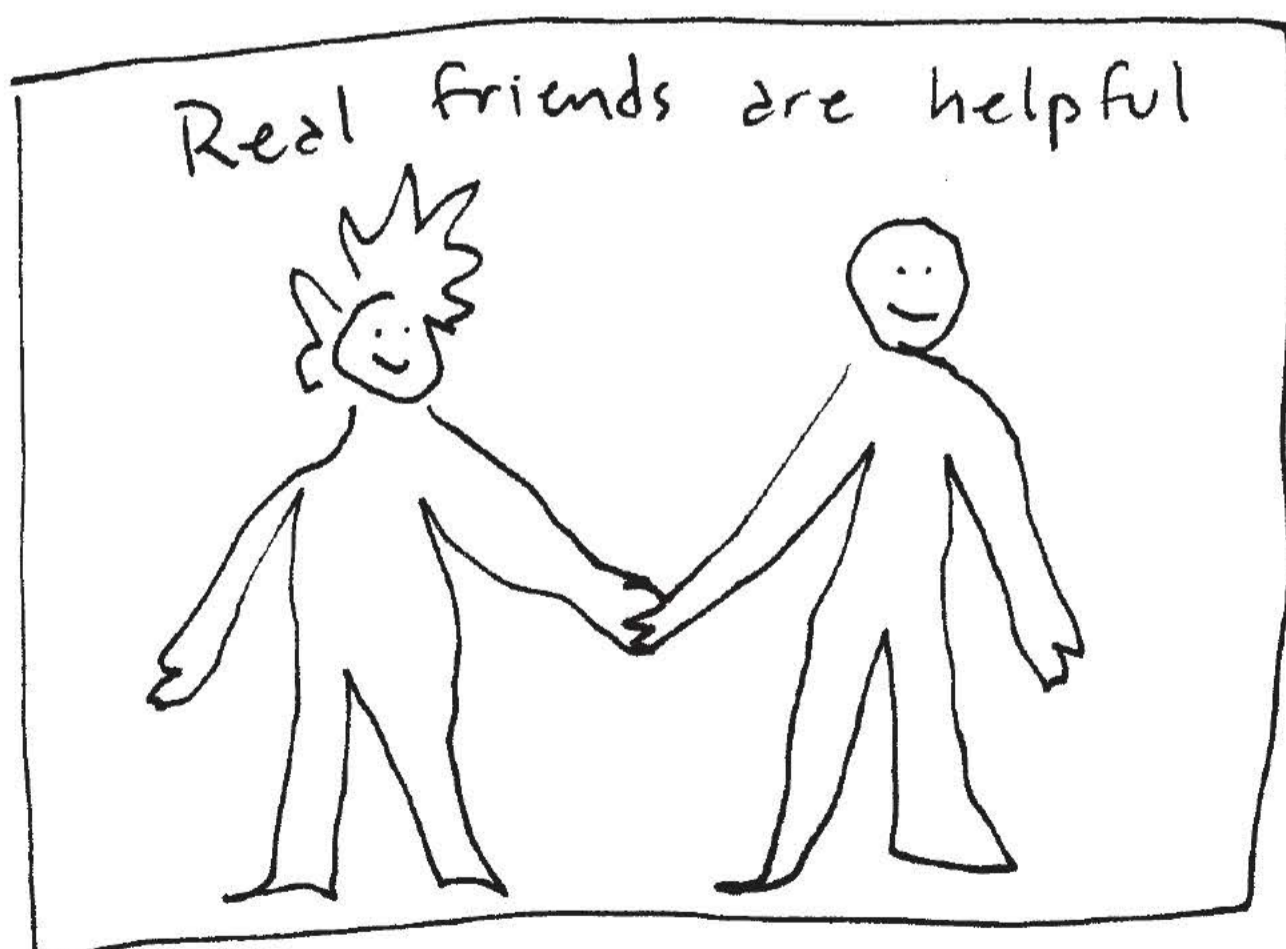
The idea is to get a meeting with a curator, any curator at the museum, and this is what you will do once you get the meeting.

You will prepare yourself for the virtual or in-person meeting in the following ways:

1. If in person, bring printed images, not a laptop with pictures on it, but printed images, preferably fewer than ten, on eight-by-ten sheets of glossy paper (or a similar size). They can be printouts from your computer, but keep everything very neat and organized. Do not bring original work or anything that is awkward. The idea of this meeting isn't to evaluate you or your art, but to make a proposal.

If you are doing it through Zoom or FaceTime, make a PowerPoint presentation of your art that is no more than 5 minutes long (so you can discuss it) or you could use your phone to show them your actual studio.

2. Decide what you are going to ask the curator. Yes, you are going to ask them a question, because if you don't ask them something, you will have a pleasant meeting that will end with the curator saying, "Thank you and let's keep in touch," and you do not want that! You want something more valuable from the curator, which is a reference. But what will you ask? What will you propose?
3. This is the fun and creative part. It depends on your medium, of course, but think about how you would like a show of your work to look. How many pieces would you put in that show? Will the show have a message? Is that message political, personal, spiritual, or something else? When talking to a curator, it is easiest to discuss ideas, because quite honestly, talking about art is difficult. It is usually



difficult for the artist as well as for the person viewing the art, so talk about ideas, or things you are interested in, from books to movies or philosophy.

IT'S ABOUT IDEAS

Make your idea succinct and understandable. Perhaps you are telling them you want to have a show of paintings or sculpture or something else. Say exactly how the show would be put together and why it will be exciting. Tell them why you think the show is important. You should be able to say all that in less than one minute. Then wait for the curator to respond with something like, “Oh, that is interesting.” Then tell them that you want to present this show, do they know of any venues that might be appropriate for it?

Wait for an answer; do not jump in with nervous talking. This method gets the curator off the hook from having to talk about their museum, and most likely there is little they can do for you there. However, they know other people that may be able to help you, and they might say something like, “Oh, you should talk to X, that gallery might like it, and also Y, because that is a space that encourages dialogue,” or they might even say, “So-and-so at this museum might be interested.” Whatever their answer is, explore it a little, ask more questions if you don't understand something they say, and take notes with a pencil and paper! Then thank them and leave.

When you get home, or end the virtual call, write them a brief thank-you note. That is the way I got a solo show at the Whitney Museum, which I will go into detail on in chapter 8. I made an appointment with a curator I did not know. I described three ideas to the curator, and she told me two places for the first two, and for the third, she suggested another curator at the museum! It is really that simple if you just make the meeting and think of something to say. We are all interested in ideas, and especially when the person talking about the idea is enthusiastic and positive. When I talk about ideas to a curator, I am very excited about it, like I was as a child when I expressed my enthusiasm easier. People are very attracted to

others who are sincerely excited and happy about a creative project; it is the life force we all desire and live for.

We have covered how to present your work to a museum, either for review (if they have a policy for that), or by talking to a curator about your ideas. Presenting your work in these cases is fairly straightforward, with the exception of talking to a curator, which is more creative and personal. Your ideas for the work you have could be a small show of four paintings, or videos, or photos, then a larger show of perhaps two mediums (paintings and video or music and drawings, etc.), and then the third option, a large solo show of something more comprehensive that has a particular message.

GALLERY PRESENTATIONS

Galleries are very different from museums in two ways.

One, their motive is profit. If they don't sell, they are out of business. Also, like museums, they are surviving in post-pandemic culture by giving virtual tours to collectors.

Two, they are privately owned, so there are no strict rules or standards at all. You are approaching a business owner who has certain goals. One may be to show great art, but the most important thing to them is making money.

For a short time, I helped a friend who was a musician get booked at clubs in New York city. This is what I learned; if you have a band and want to be booked at a club or bar or venue of some kind, you have to convince the owners of the venue that you can bring in a crowd; that is all, and you are booked. Sounds simple, doesn't it? It is all about the money. When people come to see bands, they drink at the bar, and that is how money is made there. So if I can just guarantee one hundred people will come, I can have almost any night at any club. Amazing, isn't it? It is all about the money and not necessarily the music at all! If you have a band, the key is obviously how to bring a crowd in. That comes from great self-promotion with stickers, Facebook, YouTube, giving away and selling CDs or merch on the street and online, free downloads and more. I know one band that

packed the house by telling every one of their friends they would supply free beer to everyone after the show!

I mention this because it is not dissimilar in the gallery world. You have gallery owners who want to turn a profit and are not afraid to talk about money. You may wonder, “Is the quality of your work important to them?” Yes and no. Like the story I told about booking bands, if they feel you can bring in a buying crowd, they are interested. A friend of mine, who is a private banker and works with some of the wealthiest individuals in the world, told me, “You have to think, ‘what does the person want’ that you are trying to reach.” So in the case of a gallery owner, what they want is to make a profit and bring in more collectors. They have a list of the collectors who have bought from them in the past, and they are always trying to increase that list. If they do not increase that list, they are asking the same people over and over again to buy art, and that is a limited situation financially.

So in your approach, which I will outline here, it is much more than just sending or showing them images; you can do this even if they are a largely private gallery that sells work remotely. You can certainly send in images, but you must understand how the mind and the eyes of the gallery director work. He or she is not only trying to decide if they like your work, but more important to them, they are deciding if they can easily sell this work and bring in more collectors. Of course, if you are well known and trying to switch galleries, they are interested because you have made money for gallerists in the past. If you are not well known, then you are like hundreds of others who write to them, and if you try to look at it from their perspective, why should they show your work?

AN OFFER THEY CAN'T REFUSE

This leads us to the current trend in artist-driven marketing, which is making the dealer an offer they cannot refuse. That means making a proposal to a dealer that makes financial and aesthetic sense. This approach was created as much by the rising costs of running a gallery as the competition among artists to get into a gallery. This means that the traditional

approach of sending them your images online is not the best way to make a deal with a gallerist. To begin with, go back to your list of galleries in your area, research them online, and visit them in person when possible. Try to attend at least one opening, go to the all the Zoom tours they have from each of the galleries you wrote down. Take a look around at the opening or Zoom tour; do you like what you see? Ask questions about the work at the opening or in the Zoom tour, and someone from the gallery will tell you more about it. Do you like the way they talk about art and sell it? If so, this is a reason to want to work with this gallery. If not, then move on or try another opening there to give the gallery another chance.

In the smallest galleries, your approach could be simple. Walk into the gallery and ask the person behind the desk if they look at the work of new artists. They will give you their answer, which, if yes, usually means either sending them images by email or a studio visit from the gallerist. If the gallery is more established, then the example of making a deal they can't refuse will have a chance of working. But how do you make such a deal? In this area, you can be as creative as you like, but it is a business proposal. Some form of "I have a great opportunity for you that could be a win-win situation for both of us," and then of course explain your idea, which involves sales, the press, and new collectors.

Here is an unusual example that worked well. An artist named Andrea Fraser does what she calls "institutional critique," which means that much of her artwork, which is sculpture, prints, and performances, are critiquing the institutions of the art world, such as galleries and museums. Her proposal to a major gallery went something like this: She proposed a show in the summer (typically a downtime for galleries) for a month. The show was simple to put up; it was just a monitor in one corner, playing a video over and over. The video was of the artist having sex with a collector. It was shot from a security-type camera attached to the ceiling of a hotel bedroom. It took place in real time without any close-ups. The video will be in an edition of ten. However, the first collector who bought the video also acts in it. Thus, she is having sex with a collector. So for the show to work, one video has to be sold at \$10,000 before the show opens. For the gallery, they have already broken even before the show opens! From the

artist's point of view, she is creating a situation that, to her, exposes elements of the art world, that is, artist as prostitute, gallerist as pimp, and collector as john. But for the rest of the world, the public gallery audience, and the press, it had a different effect. They were shocked, aghast, and fascinated. That is one model of making the dealer an offer he can't refuse. That particular show did very well and got her tons of local, national, and international press.

Now you might be thinking you do not want to do that! However, your approach can be more subtle. Imagine telling a dealer you will have a show of your paintings, and there will be a band there, a comedian, and a magician. The performances will be on one night, and there will be different parties on other nights for select groups of people from museums, such as the young collectors' club or other associations that are interested in the arts. That is just a sketch of an idea, but you get the basic concept. Come up with a deal that is exciting and impossible to refuse and generates a new audience. Even if your idea doesn't work the first time, you will get a gallery owner's attention with this kind of approach and they may negotiate and brainstorm with you.

Many more approaches for a virtual opening on Zoom, for example, could be having a panel of speakers that collectors want to hear from, like art historians or other collectors. Now museums in post-pandemic culture are saying they have a greater attendance to their public lectures than before the pandemic because it is so much easier to go to an artist talk or a panel discussion. So consider putting something like that together, a Zoom talk or panel discussion or studio tour.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

A website is not the only way to show your work online, of course; we have Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other sites, which are free and make it easy to put up images. And with Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, you can put up images as they are made and get comments right away. I think that a website, a fairly simple one, is necessary, but social networking will help drive traffic to your website. There is much more to Facebook in that

you can actually meet people who can help you and who are real! The same goes with Instagram, the dominant platform now for artists. For example, most of the people I “friend” on Facebook are involved in the arts. I look at other pages, in particular art critics’ Facebook pages, and comb through people who are interested in the arts: collectors, museum directors, artists, and more.

It is amazing how you can connect directly with people. If you search on Facebook for “art collectors,” you will see amazing resources for meeting collectors. There are groups of collectors and all kinds of pages for them. This is a valuable resource. I have written directly to collectors introducing myself and asking them to lunch or a Zoom meeting. I have met with museum directors this way as well, and I think it is one of the best networking tools for artists out there. Instagram and Facebook are great ways to not just exchange messages and become friends, but to actually meet people in the real world at an exhibition or your studio or even in a Zoom meeting, which is more personal than just writing.

MAKING FRIENDS ON FACEBOOK

There are many ways to promote and share your work on Facebook, but I will go over a few basic steps.

1. Begin adding about five to ten friends a day at the most (or Facebook will stop you). Make these friends art-related, such as collectors, curators, gallery, and museum staff. When you add someone as a friend, send a personal note, even if it is the same one to everyone. Something simple like, “I would like to be your friend because I like the work you are doing with [the name of a museum or something related to them], and I would like to keep in touch. Sincerely, [you].”
2. As you build up friends, start commenting on their posts as much as possible (a few times a week would work). Spend part of each day, maybe thirty minutes or so, sending notes

or making comments on other people's postings. Write thoughtful comments on images that people who you want to be friends with are posting. If you have a Facebook page already, you know the value of this. If someone comments on a photo or comment of yours, you take an interest and often write back. The more sincere and interesting the comment is, the more response you will get.

3. In your status updates, post images of new work you are doing. Try to avoid talking about your pets, children, domestic minutiae, and other nonessentials. You want this to be productive time, so use it that way.
4. Warning! Do not use the same password on your Facebook account as other accounts, like Gmail, because that makes you an easy target for hacking. That means someone breaks into your Facebook account and sends commercial messages to all your friends. Beware. I know that is basic, but a hacked site can ruin your day!
5. The last Facebook tip that I would suggest is to limit your time on it, for while it may be a helpful tool, in excess, it is a major time waster. As of this writing, in 2021, Facebook is the biggest platform with Instagram, but there are many, many others, some of which are yet to emerge. I personally try to keep it to a minimum, so I don't spend too much time in front of the computer, but keep your eye out for new forms of social networking that are sure to arise!

PRESENTATION AND LECTURE TOOLS (NOT POWERPOINT!)

When you begin to present yourself and your work for different audiences, you need a basic plan to begin with. Traditionally, PowerPoint has been the digital tool of choice for presentations.

But first let's talk about the audience. Are you presenting your work for a grant or fellowship? Or presenting your work for a university audience?

You might want to present your work and yourself to a potential funder. All of the above require a similar approach with slight differences in tone or delivery, but how do you create a basic presentation? At this point in time, I would suggest Prezi, which is a very sophisticated update of PowerPoint presentation.

You can still deliver a certain amount of information in a narrative order if you like, but there is something more interesting and dynamic about Prezi. To begin with, you first assemble in a folder on your computer some things related to your presentation. Then, instead of the typical slide show of PowerPoint, you are using a nonlinear approach. Prezi has a way of letting you put all your information down on a desktop, your pictures and blocks of text, and then you simply draw lines between them in the order you want it to be presented. It is very visual and easy to use, so I suggest going to their website to see it for yourself. The advantage to this is that you can present it directly from your computer, or it can remain on the Prezi website so you can present with any computer that is online. If you feel uncomfortable with it, PowerPoint is the next best option, but I strongly urge you to explore Prezi, as it is much more exciting to look at.

