

Momus

How To Be an Unprofessional Artist

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No one likes being called an amateur, a dilettante, a dabbler.

“Unprofessional” is an easy insult.

The professional always makes the right moves, knows the right thing to say, the right name to check. Controlled and measured, the professional never fucks the wrong person or drinks too much at the party. They never weep at the opening, never lay in bed for days too depressed, sick, broken to move. They say about the professional, “so easy to work with” or “so exacting but brilliant.” The professional takes advantage from every encounter, employs every new acquaintance as a contact, always hits the deadline. When asked about their work, they know what to say, a few lines of explanation sprinkled with enough filigreed intrigue to allude to abysses of research, the mysteries of making. They answer emails in minutes. Their PowerPoints are super crisp. Look at their website, so clean, so modern, so very *pro*.

You don’t feel like any of these things.

You are hungry, tired, overworked. You drank too much at the party and then slept with the wrong person, and then the really wrong person. You missed the deadline, it just thrusted past with a whoosh. Hustlers around you disappear into wealth and fame. Your dealer tells you to make more with red, those red ones are really selling. Maybe, she says, you make only the red ones for a while? Your student skips class to go to an art fair. The most pressing collectors are the ones holding your student loans. They keep calling, you wish you could trade them a drawing. It can take days to answer the simplest email. Your website, if it exists, is in shambles.

You wander. You doubt. You change styles, media, cities. You experiment, you fail. Again. And again.

Unprofessional most literally means “below or contrary to the standards of a paid occupation.” Who makes the standards? Is everyone paid? Fairly? Is being an artist a job or something else? Who sets these standards? Do you wish to be standardized?

Art and success.

So easy to cocktail those two words together into “professionalism.” Pull up a famous artist’s CV and work from the beginning. Does success look like a sculpture plunked outside the Palace at Versaille? Is it a biennial, a prize, a blue-chip dealer? Is it the cover of a magazine, a thick, chunky retrospective catalogue? Even more evasive things just glanced, the luxury sedan like a bullet, shiny and hard, that the aging photographer bought after he dumped his smallish gallery and long-term partner, for a bigger dealer and a younger girlfriend, shiny and hard as his car; or perhaps, the off-hand mention of a domestic servant, a personal chef, the third nanny, the smallest chink in the opacity of wealth, so very far from the roaches scurrying in your kitchen sink and the fact that you’ve eaten nothing but mushed pumpkin and cigarettes for a month.

This did not feel professional, but it’s true. These things you experienced to be an artist.

Your body of work is a mark of your passages, the richest of your thoughts and the deepest of your emotions. Simply manifesting this into art is hard enough, but today you feel like you need to be professional. The pressure and penury makes you nervous and cautious. What can you make that will take the iron of poverty from your flesh, that will make this feel less like a terrible mistake?

*Can't you tell by my clothes I never made it
Can't you hear that my songs just won't sing
Can't you see in my eyes that I hate it
Wasting twenty long years on a dream.*

Lee Hazlewood, “The Performer” (1973)

Somehow making money makes us feel for real. Money we can trade for food and shelter, for time and space and materials to continue. These things are hard and pressing, but it’s not the money that makes us real. We are real already.

Everyone can be an artist, not because they have a degree or they sell, but because they live life artfully, with skill and imagination, freedom and awareness.

But artists trade promissory notes and subsume authority into institutions for some outside validation. Proof to your beloveds they weren’t crazy in supporting you financially, emotionally, spiritually. Later, broke, you exchange dreams for money, or even, later yet, make other people’s dreams and trade those instead.

Collectors, they are *really* responding to the red ones.

The path is clear for the professional. BFA, MFA, Commercial Gallery, Museum. 5 Things Every Artist Has to Know About Getting a Gallery. 10 Easy Tips for Killing Your Studio Visit. 3 Totally Simple Steps to Art Stardom. Mix in a teaching appointment perhaps, a grant here, a residency there.

For the unprofessional, it isn’t so narrowly defined. As Charles Bukowski wrote, the shortest distance between two points is often intolerable.

It’s not that artists shouldn’t be paid for their labor, but we ought to refuse the assignation of value and worth purely based on salability or the validation of institutions. Systems will always seek to swallow us. We must resist the efficiency of their gears with the softness of our humanity. Unprofessionalism is asserting our right to be human against this machine.

Fragile, weak, doubtful, bumbling, to be “unprofessional” is to simply be human. This does not mean acting without ethics, honesty, or basic kindness. These finer qualities can easily exist independent from how we trade our time for money.

Professionalism makes a person into a brand. The cynical think this has already happened: our slightest movement tracked for personalized advertisements, our declarations and photographs that we share with others all branded and branding, self-awareness as commerce. And though others can attempt to professionalize you, reduce your spirit to a slogan, a product, a logo, you do not have to do this to yourself.

For the time being we live under capitalism, but we don’t have to be broken down into its systematic alienations, divisions, inequalities, reductions of all value to market-value.

In some ways, I was piqued to write this by Daniel S. Palmer’s [recent essay](#) on hyper-professionalization just published in *Artnews*, which ends on an inspiring note: “In a moment of monotony and conformity, artists must reclaim their freedom.”

He opens his essay with a young artist pitching a practised spiel, surrounded and over-handled by art pros. This fails miserably to impress Daniel Palmer. Obviously, being a professional in this sense doesn’t always work. It might have currency with those who are also hyper-professionalized like this particular emerging artist, churning through a system crafted for exactly such purposes. But it didn’t work with Daniel Palmer, and it wouldn’t work for me.

Such clear professionalism is crass, careerist, empty. Repulsive even. “Ambitious young artist” always sounded like an insult to me.

I see making art as the necessary expression of the human spirit. We all need to live, but when the acquisition of wealth becomes the primary endeavor, you are no longer an artist but a financier.

More than a gallerist or a manager, a dealer or an advisor, a critic or a curator, more than an army of assistants and a clutter of collectors, an artist needs the courage to act alone and a community that makes such acts more bearable. One that allows us to be vulnerable, inappropriate, to go rogue, go wild, act weird, and fail.

To be amateurs, dabblers, dilettantes.

An amateur is filled with love beyond compensation, the dabblers fearlessly go places they don't belong, the dilettantes happily lack the hidebound pretensions of experts. When we step out of the imposed confines of professionalism, we can be as open as students, able to flirt with other modes, to seek knowledge, experience, and value in our lives without limits.

Stripped away of institutional validation and the pressures of the market, we are free to be human, to be artists, to be unprofessional.