

FINDING YOUR WAY AS AN ARTIST

A presentation by Mary Virginia Swanson
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A BRIEF LIST OF SELF-ASSIGNMENTS FOR ARTISTS

Get To Know:

1) YOURSELF. Define your interests, your abilities, your budget, your limits. Find your focus, in all aspects of your life, and stay on track.

2) YOUR SOURCES OF INSPIRATION, in the works or words of other creative individuals or the forces of nature. It may be knowledge of that place near your home or in your mind that brings clarity to your ideas. Experiment - find ways to access inspiration when and where you wish. There are no barriers to imagination unless you put them there.

3) YOUR VOICE as an artist. A hundred artists will depict a tree in a hundred different ways. Find the one that speaks your voice. Until you do, experiment with your materials, and by all means take risks. Only you can decide what you have to say through your artwork and only you can determine how to best interpret that voice through your final art object.

4) YOUR INDUSTRY and its history. It is essential to understand the evolution of your medium and its masters, as well as what drives key decision makers. Take time to study the history of collecting art, publishing photography - past and present, commercial commissions and licensing. Know the role of the curator to their institution and constituency, and the role of the gallery to collectors and art makers. Learn as much as you can about all aspects of our field.

5) YOUR GOALS. Don't try to be all things to all people. Time and money are necessarily limited, so work hard to make solid decisions towards what is important essential to your creative life. These decisions may determine where you live, the environment you work in, and the company you keep.

6) YOUR MARKET. Define through research what audience is most likely to respond to your work. If your work has a definable subject, that is the gateway to a much larger audience. If more abstract in nature, a smaller yet perhaps more sophisticated audience awaits you. Once you know to whom your work speaks, you can better clarify your path to that audience.

7) YOUR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY. With the work completed, and audience and aspirations defined, present yourself as an artist with the utmost professionalism and clarity or purpose. All promotional materials should have a unified style and coherent message, whether in print, CD-ROM or website format. There is only one chance to make a first impression.

8) YOUR TOOLKIT. You are an amalgam of what you know. Take command of your materials; strive to be no less than an expert with your resources. Embrace the WWW. Listen and learn from other practitioners. Challenge yourself technically and intellectually. Join professional organizations, subscribe to related publications, and keep an open mind, always. Never stop learning.

9) YOUR COMMUNITY. Scale will not matter, from a small group of neighbors, to a large number of like-minded people throughout the world. Access can be face to face or via technology. You can participate in a dialogue anywhere, anytime. Do not allow yourself to work in a vacuum, however habit forming; there is much to gain from interaction. Partake of many communities

10) YOUR GIFTS. Give back to your community and your industry. Become a mentor or an intern sponsor. Teach. Volunteer your services to non-profit organizations. Donate prints to support causes that matter to you. Never forget to credit those who helped you become the artist and person you are today. Give back and you too will receive.

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This handout is featured in Ms. Swanson's book, *The Business of Photography: Principles and Practices*; the second edition is due in Fall 2011.

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