

Breaking into the Arts Industry

Video Transcript

Hi my name is Josie. This video series is going to be split into four videos, each with a specific topic looking at the arts industry to support emerging talent to join the arts industry or to increase their profile within it.

A quick disclaimer these videos are for entertainment purposes, they're supposed to be supportive and helpful. The things that I'm going to be mentioning are by no means exhaustive there's always going to be other ways in which people have success in the arts industry.

Unfortunately there is no clear pathway in the arts industry so therefore these are just some suggestions that seem to be working for people who we work with. So please bear that in mind.

So today's video is video one of four and we'll be looking at the initial ways that you can use to break into the arts industry.

Videos 2 to 4 will be looking at taking up with opportunities and working with organisations and curators and they'll either already be live in the description box below or there'll be a date of when they go live. So please make sure you check those out as well.

At Ort Gallery we work with emerging artists in a few ways: one of them is our membership scheme called "Schwarmerei" and members join Ort Gallery for a period of 12 months. There is a subscription fee but it is very low at the moment it's only 40 pounds [We are committed to widening access and opportunity regardless of income. If you cannot afford a membership please [contact us](#) for a free space.] And the members can access things like exhibition opportunities, one-to-one support with the directors, monthly development sessions and also peer to peer learning.

Obviously, right now we are filming this whilst the country is in lockdown so we are hoping that these videos will sort of fill the gap of us not being able to run development sessions.

So this video is for you if you've just graduated from

art school or you're about to or if you're deciding that you'd like to take your hobby to sort of the next level to make it a business to become a professional artist.

The first question that I would put to you is you need to think about what success means to you. There's lots of different ways in which artists will [describe] that they have "made it" or that they've been successful in the arts industry so I'll be going through the different types that I can think of on the top of my head right now.

One is obviously commercial success, so making it for lots of people means making a living of their art, not having to have another job and ideal case scenario selling through a commercial gallery. Ort Gallery is not a commercial gallery. We're an artist-led space, we support artists and so therefore we're not in the best position to give you advice on how to work with commercial galleries. However, hopefully the advice we're giving in today's video will help you along the way to then access more commercial opportunities.

Artist-led spaces tend to concentrate on different aspects so usually they are funded by public monies like you know the Arts Council, City Council many other trusts and foundations and so there's less of a

commercial emphasis on the work and it's more about the artwork itself and other elements that feed into that. So, for example, at Ort Gallery we are really interested in socially engaged work; work that picks up topics that are current in society issues and problems that communities face and we create ambitious exhibitions with artists to challenge audiences, to bring new audiences in and to have conversations with each other, especially amongst people who wouldn't usually meet if it wasn't for this exhibition for example.

So because this is publicly-funded each funder will have a set of outcomes that they'd like to see out of the work. So for example so many people accessing the work or so many people participating in a workshop or an event. So that's really what the emphasis will be on from the organisation's point of view. So the artists we work with tend to be very interested in that and they want to meet people, they want to work with communities and they have a very sort of social agenda within their work.

Other artists-led spaces might have different agendas so you might want to just take some time to think about what kind of art you're interested in and also what kind of organisation you might want to work with.

So going back to the question around "What does success mean to you?" there is commercial success versus the survival mode. You might want to ask yourself "are you happy to have another job and to sort of be a part-time artist and a part-time accountant?" Or is your goal really to move away from that from your day job or your night job and to be a full-time artist, to spend all your time creating because that's what makes you happy? Is your goal to make enough money to survive or is it to become a millionaire? Is it about the amount of people who might hear about your work and know about your work or is it more about the recognition that you could get? So, for example, working with really high-profile organisations or other artists? Or is it simply about having exhibition opportunities and a critical discourse with other people about your work to improve your work and create the best art that you can?

The answer might, of course, be one of all of them or a little bit of all of them. I think what's really important is to have an idea of what success means to you and to make a bit of a plan of where you'd like to go.

So it might be that you say: "Over the next year I'm happy to do volunteering work, I'm happy to have a

side job. In five years time I'd like to be only working one day a week in a side job and the rest of the time I want to commit to my art practice and in ten years' time I want to have had a show at "X" gallery."

Obviously this will change over time but what I'm getting at is that you need to start thinking about yourself as a business.

So every business will write a business plan or a good business will and I really encourage you to do so as well as an artist. It might feel dry and boring but the truth is that going through these questions (you can get templates for business plans everywhere on the internet), going through the questions, going through the concepts of what are your strengths and your weaknesses, what do you need to improve on what are your ambitions? You know when we say financial success you know what does that look like to you is that eleven thousand pounds a year is that sixty thousand pounds a year is that 200 thousand pounds a year? It will mean different things to different people and that will change over time and it will also influence on how you think about your career.

Not everything in this process will be just down to you writing it in a business plan, of course, there'll be elements of luck and whether you take up the right opportunities and make the right choices and meet

the right people. However, having an idea in your head of where you want to get to is really good.

And it can be really ambitious, you know, nobody's saying "oh in ten years time I want to have an exhibition in my own studio" that's something you can do maybe in a year's time or maybe today or tomorrow. So be ambitious, you know, absolutely think, you know: "I'd like to get to this quite advanced stage." Because once you know where you want to get to you can think about how to get there what's that path that's going to lead you there?

Right, so you might say: "How do I brand myself?", you know, "How do I think of myself as a brand or a business, how do I do that?"

Well thinking of yourself as a brand is obviously a very sort of uncomfortable topic for lots of artists. We like to think of ourselves as these people who pick up a paintbrush and we're super creative, but the truth is that we have to brand ourselves to some extent. In 2020 every artist is expected to have social media channels, a website, an understanding of, you know, what their voice online is.

So you might already have all of this set up or you might be in the early stages of doing this, so in order to be coherent and for your voice on social media and on your website to fit with your artwork, you need to think of yourself as a brand, as a business. So how do you do this?

Firstly I would recommend you look at other people who you look up to or you're inspired by and look at how they do it, you know, who of them does it really well, who does it really badly, what can you learn from that?

Artists are inspired by everything some people are inspired by looking at the formation of clouds and some people are inspired by music. And obviously the line between inspiration and copying can be very fine, so you have to be careful that you're not just plain copying what someone else does. But it doesn't mean that you can't learn from their profile, from their branding, from what other people do well.

Something else you can do is look at their CVs. Lots of artists have CVs online, or you can look at LinkedIn, you can see whether there's something you can find out about another person and this can be an artist who's quite ahead in their career. Maybe they are

well established or a mid-career artist, you can still learn from them. How did they get there? You know is it obvious from their CV that they were born into a family where, you know, their father is a big shot curator and they just introduced them to all the right people and their first show was already in a big shot gallery? Or have they worked their way up, you know, did they have small exhibitions and sort of worked with collectives and creatives and small organisations to work their way to where they are now, I don't know, Turner Prize winner... I don't know who you're looking up to!

But you can also learn from other people, you can you know, I don't know what your inspirations are, so like I said, it might be musicians, it might be fashion designers, it might be something nothing to do with art. It might be scientists. But you can learn from anybody and their pathway. If they're really big you can read their biography.

Some of this might sound like really blatant information but I think people forget that this idea of how do you make it isn't just a big unknown. Everybody has to carve their own path in the arts industry and so in order to do that you need to understand yourself and where you want to get to.

The next thing I would recommend is to not be alone on this journey. It can be really frightening and it can be really alienating to be on your own, so try and contact and connect to other people. So this might be people who you studied with, or people who share studio space with you. But ideally you want to connect to people who have a similar interest.

So let's say, like I said, you're inspired by music there's other people out there who you might connect to through Instagram or Twitter, who are following the same hashtags, who are creating similar artwork and especially if they're not, you know, like really really far ahead in their career, they might be very interested in meeting you as well.

So you can start off by liking their posts, retweeting them or sharing their post on Instagram etc. And you can write to them, you can just, you know, without an agenda, just make contact. Just connect to people - flatter people!

Everybody wants to hear that there are people out there who think their work is great. When I receive an email and people say: "Oh, you know, I really look up to you, your work is amazing." I'm flattered! I'm more likely to listen to what they want.

And I do think people want to help in the arts industry, I know it can sometimes feel like you send off emails and nothing comes back but there's lots of people out there. If you connect to the right person who will want to help you, especially if they look at your, let's say, your Instagram profile and they go: "This person's making really cool art, they're in early stages in their career, but I can really see talent there, I'd like to connect to them."

For example, myself as one of the directors of Ort Gallery I meet lots of artists. It doesn't mean that they're necessarily going to have an exhibition at Ort Gallery next week, but I will follow their careers over time and it might be that at one point their work fits into our programming or the connections they've made with other organisations or other artists will suddenly fit into what we are planning at Ort Gallery.

So write to people, say: "Can we have a cup of coffee?" Make it informal and without an agenda and just say: "I'd love to meet you, I look up to you, I'm interested in you."

Obviously there's other ways in which you can connect to people as well, in real life. You can go to exhibition

openings, you can find opportunities where you might be able to connect to other artists and organisations and I will be talking about this in the next video where I talk about finding opportunities and taking them up.

And the video after that I'll be talking about working with organisations, so please come back to watch them because it'll basically be the next steps along the way of breaking into the industry. The way I've structured this is in this video I'm talking more about getting yourself ready, getting your thoughts in line, getting your persona online and in real life prepared to make those connections in the art world, so that you're ready when you meet someone you can say: "I'm this person, I'm interested in this, I want to meet this person, I want to one day have an exhibition there."

You have those answers and you don't sound ignorant or, you know, overly ambitious, but you seem serious and committed to your own career.

And so in order to do this you need to find your USP, you know, as business speak would say it, so your unique selling point. What makes you different from other artists? Why should somebody exhibit your work and not the next person?

There's hundreds thousands and millions of artists out there and with our world becoming more global and the arts industry also becoming very international you're competing not just with people in your city or even your country, you're competing with people around the world and that can be very intimidating.

I don't mean for this to sound like you should just give up now, on the contrary, you should do your work you know, if you really believe in your artwork that's amazing and you should do it and there is a place for you. You just need to figure out where that place is.

And for me personally that took about seven, six, seven years to actually find what my unique selling point was, what made me different from other curators and other what made our organisation different from other organisations.

I think some people are very good at that, they know literally from the moment they decide that they want to do art: "This is why I want to do it: because nobody else has this skill, or nobody else is from the same background as me, or has these experiences." And then there's other people, like me, who take a long time to figure this out and that's fine, you know, that's why I'm saying thinking of yourself as a business and carving out your path, that's absolutely fine to not

know right now, what's so unique about you. But it's something you want to keep thinking about and keep looking at and coming back to and in the very least you can right now write down a few sentences about what is different about you.

It might be something in your biography, something you've experienced, it might be something about who you are, or what you're interested in, it might be something about how you see the world or experience the world or it might well be something that you make an artwork about, or the technique that you're using.

So try and think really broadly about what this unique selling point might be and also go back to doing your research. Look at other artists, what makes them unique, why do you look to them, what do you think is amazing about them? Maybe it's simply the way they draw, they just have a really beautiful style and that's fine.

I definitely also want to say at this stage, even though I'll be talking about opportunities in the next video, don't be defeated when things don't go according to plan. And don't be defeated when you sent these emails to people you try and make connections and it doesn't work immediately. Part of the reason why

it took me nearly seven years to get to the stage where I was like, oh this is what's unique about me, was because I kept taking up the wrong opportunities I kept missing... people would introduce me to really high-profile individuals and organisations and I would be incapable of making that connection of asking them the right question or suggesting the right partnership.

I just couldn't, at the time, figure out what was the best way to work with them, but now I can and I've gone back to them and I said: "Right, I'm ready now!" And it might have taken me a long time and because we are still around and we're still going and we finally got there you know I've now got a much bigger track record, I've got much bigger portfolio and expertise, so actually maybe it's not bad at all. Maybe it is the right time to make those connections with higher profile organisations and I have the confidence to stand up and to say: "this is what I'm good at."

And this brings me to my next point: you do want to keep creating through all of this. Maybe take one day a week where you say: "this is the day that I do this research, this is the day that I commit to business planning". But the rest of the time you want to keep making. Sometimes it's hard to make work when

you've got all these other questions buzzing around in your head so you might work differently and you might want to sort of figure that out for yourself first and then spend time making.

However, I really encourage you to go and see exhibitions, stay on top of what's going on, listen to podcasts, be informed, do research and keep creating work. Because for lots of artists it takes a really really long time to also technically figure out and critically figure out what they want their artwork to be and for some people that takes years and years. So don't stop making and never be defeated. If you create something that's rubbish and that you're gonna burn, move on do the next thing, try a different project.

What really helps with the next stage is to find critical friends, so like I said before it's really difficult to be on your own and critical friends is anyone who can look at your work and who can say in a constructive way: "You need to start again or maybe use less purple." So someone who can really help you with your work in a critical way. This could be a curator or another artist or sometimes also people who don't actually work in the arts industry.

If you don't know where to start with making critical connections there's lots of organisations out there who, like Ort Gallery, have memberships that you can join at a low cost, sometimes free to make these connections.

There's also industry support organisations like New Art West Midlands who will have opportunities on their website like having curators come to your studio and to visit your space and to give you some feedback. And you can also always just ask. Right? You can send an email to a curator or an organisation, you can say: "Would you meet me? Would you have a look at my portfolio? It's not about having an exhibition, I don't have an ulterior motive, I'm just looking for some feedback."

You can get back in touch with old tutors if you studied art. I'm not saying all of this will definitely be successful, but something will be successful. Somewhere along the line you will be able to get some critical feedback for your work.

And this is where networking comes back in as well. If you go and see lots of exhibitions go to openings... I know networking feels really uncomfortable to lots of people, just to go up to someone and be like: "Oh hi let's have a talk..." It's uncomfortable, it's awkward.

So, you don't have to go in there with so much of an agenda. Try and just go so that you feel like you're on top of what's happening right now: you're simply going to an exhibition because you want to see the exhibition, because then you can look back on it and say: "Oh I went to see that exhibition and I thought it was good or I thought it was rubbish or whatever it was to you."

And if you want to talk to someone, again, use flattery. Ask a question, be polite. Let's say it's the curator: "Well done, I think it's an amazing show, you did really well!"

[They respond:] "Thank you, I'm flattered and what do you do?"

And you have a little conversation. It doesn't necessarily have to be immediately: "Oh can we have a studio visit, can you help me?"

You can look at it in terms of your introducing yourself to the scene, you're around and you're making connections. You're meeting other artists and curators and maybe think of it as an investment for the future so you will eventually go back to that person and maybe ask them for their help or you will maybe connect to them down the line. So just think of it as a friendly conversation, that's all it is at this stage. And you're investing into future opportunities.

So to go back to the idea of business plan: a lot of what I talked about in this video today is essentially a very basic version of a business plan. You go through all the different aspects: your strengths and your weaknesses, your plans for the future. You think about your competitors, you think about your inspirations and your goals. And all of that forms a basic business plan. It doesn't have to be extremely in-depth, but I do recommend you actually taking a template and writing it down. Having something in writing that you, three years down the line, you can look back on and you can say: "Oh I already knew what my USP was I just hadn't realised it". You know there's a lot you can learn from yourself.

In the next video we'll be talking about taking up opportunities. How do you actually make this work? How do you do the next step? You figured out now who you are, what your work is all about, what your brand is, but how do you now get an exhibition? Or start work in an organisation etc?

So that's what we'll be looking at in the next video. Like I said, the link is either already in the description box or there'll be a date of when the link will go live so please check that out.

I'm going to sign off for today's video we would be really appreciative if you could leave any comments or questions below. I will also leave my email address in the description box so you can ask any specific questions and I really hope you enjoyed it and I'll see you in our next video. Bye.

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