

Finding and Taking Up Opportunities

Video Transcript

Hi, my name is Josephine Reichert, I'm the artistic director of Ort Gallery. Today is video two of four of our industry support and professional development series. Today we'll be looking at finding and taking up opportunities. This series is funded by Arts Council so thank you very much for the support.

And just a quick audio description of myself I am a white woman in my 30s, I'm wearing an orangey jumpsuit with purple dots and I have medium long blondy-brown hair, half of it is up in a ponytail.

A quick disclaimer before we get started: This video is for entertainment purposes, I'm sharing some ideas and thoughts that have worked for us in the past. This is by no means an exhaustive list and it's also something that's probably more useful for people in the UK, although some of the ideas might work further afield.

So as you're probably aware it can feel like a minefield

to finding and taking up opportunities in the art world. On the one hand it seems like there's endless amounts of opportunities out there, on the other hand it feels like it's impossible to get any of them and there's so many people trying to take up these opportunities. So how do you avoid just getting plain rejected from everything you apply for and getting really down in the dumps about it?

The first thing I'd say is if you haven't yet watched my first video please go back to video number one, the link is below in the description box. In the video I talk about finding your unique selling point and sort of figuring out what your brand is and what's unique about you, because that will really help you find and take up opportunities as well. So when you're looking for an opportunity make sure that you look for opportunities that actually fit with who you are and what you believe in. You are much more likely to be chosen for a bursary or a residency or an exhibition if your work and your brand and your research aligns with whoever is putting out that opportunity.

So it comes back and goes down to research you need to research who's putting out the opportunity and why are they doing this. Very rarely people just do it out of the good of their heart so they also want

something in return and what they're looking for can you provide that? So if the opportunity is aimed at young people, for example, this isn't in order to exclude everybody who isn't "young" anymore, it's probably something based on the organisation's output, to do with the funding that they receive, it might be to do with that they've identified that they're not currently working with enough young people, it might be a partnership with another organisation, a youth centre, a university. Most of this you should be able to find out from their website so it's maybe not necessarily in the brief that you read for the opportunity, but you should be able to figure this out fairly simply just doing some basic research on this organisation's or trust's website.

Before I go any further I just want to say very quickly not all opportunities will be successful. Unfortunately it's a very competitive field, there are lots of people out there and you know art courses, for example at universities, are becoming bigger and bigger and it just makes for more competition. But try and think of competition as a good thing and not feel defeated by every single time you get turned down.

Think of applications as an investment in your future every time you write an application you're also

improving the way you write about yourself, your research skills are improving. So hopefully with every opportunity, even if it's not successful, you are adding something to your portfolio and to your expertise and you're also learning along the way.

Okay, so how can you actually find opportunities? I would recommend that once you are very clear on where you stand. So i'm going to take Ort's example: we work with socially engaged artists so when we put out an opportunity for an open call or an open submission exhibition or a... what else have we done? Obviously we've done vacancies, other organisations do things like residencies, anything like that, I would expect that the people who apply to one of our opportunities that we put out there, will be socially engaged, will have an interest in social art, a passion for the fact that art can improve things that are wrong with our society.

And if somebody applies who doesn't seem to have an interest in it or who doesn't talk about it in their statement, I'll be much more inclined to not take their application forward. So, as coming from the the other side, from the person putting out the opportunity, I really want to feel like people understand me. Because in the end I'm paying for the opportunity I'm

putting it out there. I want them to know a lot of work has gone in from our point of view: the fundraising, the drafting of the brief, the artwork, you know, everything that goes into that, all those hours. I also want to feel that the artists have put work in researching and checking that this is really for them.

So what I would recommend is that you find... in video one I talked about finding organisations and researching organisations who you align with, with their core beliefs or their values or their ethos. So the first thing is sign up to those organisations' mailing lists and if you have followed my advice and you've joined a membership, again, most organisations who have a membership will also send out a newsletter. Make sure you're signed up to that and then read those obviously when they come through. Often it can just be a very quick sort of skim through: is there an opportunity in there? You don't always have to read everything word for word, but again a lot of work goes into making mail outs and, you know, it's nice to know that people take the time to read them. So you should consider that as part of your job as an artist to read and sign up to mailing lists.

And then when you do see an opportunity that at first looks like it is relevant to you then go and do the

research and check whether it really is relevant before you think about applying. I would also recommend that you sign up to, or regularly check sector support organisations. So we are Birmingham-based, so I know very much about the Midlands, obviously this works for all the counties in the UK so we have New Art West Midlands, for example, is one of the sector support organisations who have a whole heap of opportunities on their website at all times, so it's something that you might want to put a reminder in your in your weekly calendar to check every week is there something new that's come up?

You might also find these kind of sector support organisations that are more based on your medium or your interest. So they might be based on the, for example, if you're a photographer or if you're a painter, they might be more based around the medium or it might be more around the topic that you work in. So, I mentioned socially engaged and that's sort of a kind of theme and obviously there are lots of others out there.

I would also recommend that you sign up to the Arts Council mailing list they have separate ones for vacancies and opportunities. So not all opportunities are obviously paid the same way a vacancy is paid.

And then I'd also recommend that you find listings or mailing lists that are very specific to something that you're interested in. So this could be faith-based, this could be connected to well-being, disability you know whatever sort of fits your niche and if your niche is broader you might want to sign up to a few of these.

And these don't necessarily have to be art-based opportunities so for example in health and well-being there'll be lots of opportunities out there that aren't actually aimed at artists they are aimed at generally practitioners and you can then apply as an artist and say, you know, my work has a well-being aspect because "xyz".

So this goes back to research research research. I've already mentioned it in my last video, I mentioned it earlier in this video you really have to put the research in, because otherwise you're just wasting time: your own and the people reading your application. You know if the application doesn't fit the person putting it out it's just a waste of everybody's time. And, of course, the same goes for writing the application. Don't copy paste something and just put it in an email make sure that you have read the brief really carefully and that you're actually answering the questions. It might be

helpful to get someone like your mum, your dad, your grandma, your friend... to read it and check have you answered the question? Especially if they are not arty people they'll read it in a very different way. So just make sure that you're not waffling on, because you're just copy pasting, but you're actually sitting down and you're being concise.

I mentioned in my first video that it's really difficult to find your unique selling point and what's unique about you and it's just as difficult to write a good application this is something, a skill, that will come over time. So it takes time to become a good application writer and when I said earlier you're investing into the future... you really are, you're really, every time you're writing an application, a funding bid, a brief, a statement it's getting better and you're getting better at that skill.

And writing isn't for everybody, so if the writing part is something that scares you off, just a quick tip take your phone... here's my phone go on "Notes" and tap the little microphone button and just speak into your phone. Obviously, that only works on iPhone, but I'm sure Androids have similar applications. And the phone will actually write things down for you. It is much easier to just talk in a sort of informal way the

way I'm doing now, very naturally, and to then take the written down text and to edit that. You have less of that how do I even get started? What's my first introductory sentence? Because you'll have an actual text there that you can edit which is a lot easier than actually getting started on a blank page.

So, what kind of opportunities are there? There's open submission exhibitions, there's art markets, tenders which are usually a sort of open call funding bid where councils or trusts and foundations are looking for organisations or individuals to take up a certain project and they're asking for organisations and individuals to respond to.

As a little side note if this is only for organisations you don't necessarily have to be scared off. If you think you could be very good at responding to that tender it is much easier to find an organisation and to say: "I think we should apply for this tender can we do it in partnership" and the bid goes out from the organisation, but you write it. You're essentially doing the work for the organisation and it will be useful for the organisation as well to get this tender.

Other opportunities are funding: There's funding for individuals and organisations in the art world, there's

vacancies for you know actual jobs, as self-employed or employees of an organisation, there's commissions for projects, exhibitions, events, parties... commissions take a lot of different shapes, there's workshops there's also teaching, bursaries, residencies... there's a lot out there.

So make sure that you really understand the glossary that I just went through so you actually know what it means to get a bursary or a residency. And obviously on the brief it will also really explain what they're after from you and what is expected of you so make sure that you're actually available for example you know if you have a full-time job you probably can't take up a residency unless it's a weekend residency or the person providing this residency is happy for you to work around other commitments.

So next I would go back to this concept of business plan. So think about sort of the next year, the next five years, what kind of opportunities do you want to take up and when? When is a good time to do something? So, for example residencies: they might be more relevant at early stages in your career when you really need that time to develop projects or a travel bursaries again might be more relevant when you're younger, you're less tied down by other commitments.

So you can sort of plan what fits with your life - obviously I don't know how old you are or where you're at in your life, what your circumstances are - so you have to sort of figure that out for yourself and having a bit of an idea what you want to do.

The same goes for paid and unpaid opportunities. Unpaid opportunities are... how shall I put this? There's a very fine line between an opportunity and exploitation and very recently the rules around free internships changed and this is now no longer legal for someone to offer a free internship so make sure you know your rights as well and you need to stand up for those rights, of course, you need to make sure that you are paid if you are doing the work of what an organisation would pay for usually.

There's nothing wrong with volunteering and, you know, it can be a really good way of getting in, trying things out for yourself, doing a placement getting an idea of what it's like to work in an organisation. But you also need to be very realistic around: Can you afford it? Have you got the time? And also: When do you stop volunteering? You know, for some people never, some people can afford to volunteer for forever some people want to volunteer forever. But I think for most of us the reality is we can't do that for very long

you know a few months, maybe a year, but then you need to start earning an income, because otherwise you will be taken advantage of. So be very clear in your plan when you want to get to that stage where you no longer take volunteering opportunities.

So once you've got this plan you can specifically look for opportunities that fit with your plan so if you've decided this is a good time to go on, to travel or to take up residencies or you've decided that you're not quite there yet to submitting to open exhibitions, so you currently want to just, you know spend time on working... whatever it is you can look specifically for opportunities that fit what you're currently, where you're currently at in your process, in your career.

Remember there's lots of opportunities that might very be very specific to who you are. So there's lots of opportunities for graduates out there for example and sometimes you have to take up those opportunities within a year or two of graduating so make sure you don't miss out on those.

There's also always opportunities that are specifically aimed at people of a certain age or a certain faith or you know other characteristics about you so you know the more "niche", I guess, those opportunities

are the more likely you are to get those. So it's really worth looking into.

Another really good thing is to think of an opportunity that you take up now and how that might fit into the bigger picture. So volunteering at an organisation who you think are amazing and you look up to and one day you want to be the CEO of is maybe a good step. You might struggle to afford that step, but maybe you can get a short placement where, you know, for a couple of months you come in once a week and you get to know everybody in the organisation and it often... not necessarily, you know, you need to be careful around sort of what agenda you have here, but often people volunteering at organisations get a better idea of how to find vacancies or what kind of jobs are out there.

And also there are a lot of jobs within the arts industry you know marketing, bookkeeping, finance, curation, technical, front of house... I mean you know there's there's a lot of jobs and it's sometimes quite hard to sort of understand the roles of all these people, so whilst you're in placement you can get to know these better. And obviously another way which I'll be talking more about in the next video is actually working in organisations. So that can be sort

of from the bottom up, as, you know, they say, so you could take up a job that you know you maybe don't want to do your whole life, like, they're now called gallery assistants, so essentially people invigilating the space but taking up that job for a year or two will help you get to know the organisation better, meet people within the organisation, so it can be a stepping stone in your career.

Something else you can do is, you can create your own opportunities. I am essentially the master of that. I, at the beginning, wasn't successful in taking up other people's opportunities at all, so I created my own. It's much easier to do that as a group which means you can apply for opportunities as a group, you can spread the workload, you can carry very different opportunities, because there's more than one of you and you also have different types of expertise and experience within that group.

Something else people will probably have on their minds watching this video is: "Should I send my CV or a portfolio to an organisation?" And the general rule of thumb in the art world is: don't do that. There's a few reasons why. It's to do with who you send it to, in the first place, so you need to make sure that you

don't come across as a cold caller, because when you are a cold caller you're, kind of, not really taken seriously or people might just not have capacity to look at your portfolio. So, unless you've already had a conversation with someone within that organisation or a previous relationship, for example, through volunteering or having had a job there, I would not recommend doing that.

There's other steps that are probably going to be more successful. However, having said that I know of people who've done that and they have been successful so that's why I had my disclaimer at the beginning... there is no rule of thumb, but I do think that for 90% of people this is not going to be successful and you're probably wasting everybody's time.

However, if you do think that your work really fits with this organisation's ethos and the work that they do, it is worth making contact. It might be that you're better off doing this personally, so for example calling them or going to an exhibition opening and trying to speak to a curator, or a programmer, or producer there rather than an email. Because, I think, you know, likely it is very easy to ignore an email and like I said, we are desperately underfunded in the art world, so it might

well be that they, you know, they want to but they just haven't got capacity to get back to you.

There are also organisations who do accept proposals and you'll see that on their website. They'll even give you a specific email to apply to and that's great, so you can you can send your CV, your portfolio, whatever you're allowed to send in you can send that in, but again, go back to what I said earlier research them first, look at exactly what work they do and make sure that you you aren't just sending in the same application you would have sent to another organisation. Make it very specific and even say that in your application: why you want to work with that organisation.

Other opportunities that you can create for yourself is you can open up your studio and invite people or take part during open studio events or festivals. You can also open up your home and have a show in your in your front room. Obviously you have to make sure that you're doing this in a safe way so you might want to do this invitation only. You can also have exhibitions in cafes and you know more unusual spaces... libraries... where you can invite people too. There are arts markets, which you can either organise yourself or you can take part in, where you can show your work, you

can try and sell it or maybe you can just look at it in a sort of getting people's email addresses, interest that kind of thing.

You can upload things online, obviously, I'm not telling you anything new here: Youtube, Instagram, Etsy, lots of organisations online have online galleries and similar ways for you to list your work on there. I would definitely say make sure that it's relevant to what you do. So, for example with Etsy, Etsy is very much about people making handmade products that are being sold so jewellery or toys or furniture. And as a painter or photographer your work might not fit with that. It might, you know, it might well, but really make sure that you're not wasting your time putting your work up on there.

There are also other more unusual things that you can do like you can contact landlords who have shop fronts that aren't being used whether you can take them over for a week or two and put an exhibition up in there. You can get all your friends together and you you know paint it and make it look cool and just open the door put an a-frame outside free exhibition come in...

And then there's obviously funding bids you can apply for. I feel like a lot of artists at early stages in their career don't think of that as an opportunity, but actually there are lots of funders who are willing to support artists at early stages in their career specifically.

So I mentioned at the beginning this video is funded by Arts Council. Arts Council in the UK at least, in England, fund individual artists at early stages in their career and there are other funders who do this as well so you'll have to do some research into this. I won't be mentioning them all now, because you really need to research the funder - it goes back to research i'm afraid. Put yourself in the funder's shoes: Why would they give money to you? What is their agenda? Who do they report back to? Are they reporting back to the government? Are they reporting back to their trustees? And what are they trying to prove with the funding that they invest? What do they, you know, what outcomes are they looking for? So again don't waste your own and their time, make sure that you really understand why they should invest in you and then you can answer that question: you should invest in me because I can give you this, you know, I'm I'm actually able to provide this for you.

And then I would say just sit down and write the bid. Take two hours and just do it just put your head down and write your bid. It's again just like writing an application to somewhere it's really difficult to write bids and it's again something that you will get better at over time and funding bids are notoriously tight on word count so it's really tricky to say all the right things in a very small box.

And then once you've written that you've got your first draft give it to somebody else to read ideally someone who's got a little bit of experience in the art world and writing and getting successful bids.

Because from my own experience when members of Ort Gallery write funding bids and they send it to me I can read it from an outsider's perspective and I can tell them that on average 90% of them will undersell themselves, won't really shout about what's good about them. They'll forget to mention really basic things like "I'm a painter or I'm a photographer or I make videos" because they forget that obviously this funder is coming at you completely cold you have to explain everything.

They'll also make really ridiculous claims regularly like saying "oh yeah five million people are going to see my exhibition". No funder is going to fund that. It's fine to be realistic. You can say I'm trying to get

more but realistically 50 people are going to come and see this show. You know it's much better to be honest and realistic than to just pick stuff out the air. They're not going to fund you if you say five million people are going to come around to my exhibition in my own living room.

If you send off your bid and it comes back negative some funders will supply feedback. You should always ask for feedback. You can ask for feedback from anybody not everybody will supply it but usually organisations that are funded by public monies are supposed to be giving feedback so ask for it because feedback is really useful, you know, it can really help you make a better bid next time, a better application. And either way look at it as a learning process the next bid you're going to write you're going to get better at it, so again it's an investment in your future, in your career down the line.

And just one last little tip of the trade: make sure that you're aware of all the implications before you apply to a funder. So funders will have all these buzz words like match funding, support in kind... you need to make sure you understand what they mean and whether you're able to support that because you'll be signing a, you know, a T&C [Terms & Conditions] once

the funder says "yes you can have the money" and if you're not careful you might be signing that you have got two grand already in the bank before they give you the extra eight, because that's what you essentially said you had.

My last point when it comes to making up your own opportunities is around thinking outside the box. Are there people you are already in contact with... is your uncle a dentist or have you got a previous career as a lawyer? Or you know... any kind of contacts you have who might help you to create opportunities for yourself: take those up! You might have not thought of that because they are essentially not artists but artists are very good at creating opportunities for themselves in any circumstance so, you know, lots of offices have receptions, have meeting rooms where they present to the outside world, so they like it to look nice, they like to have contemporary art in there. That's something you can, you know, maybe support and there's also money possibly within that, so definitely something to try and follow up on.

Obviously not everybody has these kind of links and I understand that, but I just wanted to mention it. However there is another way of thinking about this. So it might just be that the niche that you found for

yourself offers opportunities that you hadn't thought of. So, going back to the art and health and well-being link: there are lots of ways in which you can work with health and well-being organisations, the NHS, GP surgeries something like that and you can find out whether there are opportunities there for you to take up. Maybe these aren't opportunities aimed at artists but maybe you can convince them that actually an artist can deliver some of this work that they're looking for. So, for example, people who experience let's say cancer. A way you can work with clinicians to, I don't know, take people's portrait and make them feel really good about themselves because you take this beautiful portrait of them. Or maybe it's more about putting on an art workshop that brings people together and helps them share their experiences.

So art can be a really good tool to bring people together overcome issues within society. So you know try and think what links you might be able to make or you already have and that you can draw on.

So that's the end of today's video thank you so much for watching! Thank you again to Arts Council for funding this. There's going to be two more videos: in the next video I'll be talking about working with organisations in lots of different ways so please come

back to that the link will either already be in the description box or there's a date of when that will go live.

And if you have any questions if i've left anything out please email me my email address will be in the description box or you can leave a comment underneath the video. And I hope to see you in our next video. Bye bye.

Josephine Reichert, Artistic Director, Ort Gallery
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