

LETTERS

TO YOU G

ARTIST

LETTERS
TO A
YOUNG ARTIST

from

Gregory Amenoff, Jo Baer,
John Baldessari, Xu Bing,
Jimmie Durham, Joseph Grigely,
Guerrilla Girls, Cai Guo-Qiang,
Joan Jonas, Alex Katz,
John McCracken, Kerry James Marshall,
Elizabeth Murray,
Thomas Nozkowski, Yoko Ono,
Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper,
William Pope.L, Yvonne Rainer,
Stephen Shore, Jessica Stockholder,
Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Lawrence Weiner

An Art on Paper Book
Darte Publishing, New York

In the summer of 2005, *Art on Paper* magazine published a special issue titled "Letters to a Young Artist." Inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet," it included a collection of twelve letters by established artists written in response to a letter from a fictional "young artist."

This book, which includes twenty-three letters, expands on this idea and provides an even greater range of opinions and words of wisdom, often surprising, by many of today's most revered artists. We have read these letters many times and they continue to touch our hearts, incite our curiosity, and enrich our understanding of both the greater art world and the inner workings of a creative mind. And like Rilke's, the advice they contain transcends the discipline of art: these are life lessons.

We are publishing this book in a small, pocket-size format to encourage you to carry it around with you - referring to it for inspiration when necessary - and to pass it on to friends. Cai Guo-Qiang, who grew up in China, jokingly referred to it as the "little green book," likening it, in format at least, to Mao's little red book.

One last note: the original letter from the young artist is not published here. As you read on, however, you will see recurring patterns of thought that will help you to reconstruct it in your own way.

Peter Nesbett, Shelly Bancroft, Sarah Andress

A NOTE TO THE READER FROM THE YOUNG ARTIST

Eighteen months ago, I graduated from art school and moved to New York City from the West Coast. I was excited about the prospect of living and making art in what many say is still the heart of the contemporary art world. The museums. The galleries and nonprofit spaces. The music clubs. A community of peers. I remember the exhilaration I felt when I first arrived, sleeping on a friend's couch while I looked for my first apartment.

That seems like a long time ago. Since then I've been overwhelmed by the challenges of trying to make ends meet. When I'm not at my job - where I spend most of my time - I'm either out looking at exhibitions or I'm holed up in my room trying to make my art. In short, I've been spending a lot of time alone in a city teeming with people. The few friends I have made are artists, many of whom are already showing and selling their work. Not me, although I've had the chance. Call me a purist, but I think it is important for artists to develop a true sense of themselves before showing their work, so as not to be tempted or tainted by commercial ambition. I struggle with many aspects of the art business, which at the moment appears to be ruled by fashion and greed.

Feeling the need to connect with someone who has already lived the life I am living, I decided to write a letter to an established artist whose work I deeply admire. Just the process of writing the letter was therapeutic, and I wasn't expect-

ing I'd actually receive a response. But several weeks later, I did. I was shocked. Reading it, I felt buoyed, energized, and heartened by the engagement.

I began writing to other artists, one by one, selecting those who seem to have approached their careers with passion and integrity. Each response emboldened me to write again and over time I accumulated almost two dozen letters from artists in the United States and abroad. The letters have prompted me to take a good look in the mirror, to question my fears, ambitions, prejudices, and assumptions.

I share the letters with you here exactly as I received them, with the hope that they may be of as much value for you as they have been for me.

Dear Young Artist,

I did not answer your letter sooner, first because I am very busy and second because the honest and specific questions in your letter cannot be answered simply, in a few words. The situation of each person who engages in art is unique and bears its own conditions. In addition, even those artists who have already succeeded when asked why others have not, have trouble answering the question despite their natural talents.

One can see from your letter that you are a person who has courage when it comes to your future and your artistic responsibilities. This is not something that everyone possesses; but it is the first condition of being a successful, outstanding artist. You should recognize this. I have always thought that to be an artist, the first thing you must do is clarify what art is and what its principles are. Specifically speaking, you must identify what an artist does in this world and what relationship exists between yourself, society, and culture. And even more specifically, you must determine your particular commutative relationship with society. If you want to be a person who can survive on your art, you must clarify what can be exchanged with society before society will repay you. I sometimes think: I have a house in which to live, a studio in which to work and food to eat - what has been exchanged? Museums and collectors are willing to buy my work for a high price, what

have they purchased? The artwork itself is a mere lump of materials; is it worth that much? Does value derive from meticulously cultivated skill? Many artists work more meticulously than I do. Rather, that part of the work with value presents society with a valuable way of thinking and is associated with a new form of artistic expression. As this "new mode" is something that people need, it can become marketable; only then can it constitute a conversion key. The discovery of this new mode springs from talent, a sensitivity to one's time, and an above-average recognition of the current culture and environment. In this way, it restructures the methodologies of old art. Consequently, a good artist is a thinking person, and is adept at translating thoughts into the language of art.

From your letter it is clear that your goals are lofty. At the same time, you are not an artist looking to quickly achieve market results. This is the right way of thinking. Of course, any "value" will be transformed into a commodity and it will ultimately be sold. A street artist might sell one piece every ten minutes; an artist in a gift shop might sell one piece every day; and an artist in a commercial gallery might sell one piece a month. Some people sell a piece as soon as it is finished, others sell only one idea for their entire lives. It all depends on what kind of artist you prefer to be.

Some of the principles I have discussed above are a little broad and do not address the prob-

lems you are facing. Below I will bring up some specific examples from my experience, which you might find helpful.

Every person who has studied art wants to become a major artist, but every person's conditions are different. This includes knowledge, artistic sensibility, financial and family background, etc. Everyone has strengths and limitations. Those who know how to work also understand that whatever limitations they meet can be transformed into things that are useful to them. Using a limitation well transforms it into a strength. In China I received a very conservative art education, and I didn't come to America to participate in Western contemporary art until I was thirty-five years old. You and the majority of young artists in America have received an open contemporary art education early in your life. In terms of your linguistic and cultural adaptations, it's easier for you to meld into New York's contemporary art scene. Compared to you, I was not naturally predisposed, but from this "inadequacy" I could extract something to utilize that others have not. Due to my socialist art-education background, I probably view contemporary art from a distinct perspective, which also stems from living in a new cultural environment and confronting language barriers. I am particularly sensitive to language, words, and misreading. My art expresses characteristics that others' art does not.

My viewpoint is that wherever you live, you will face that place's problems. If you have

problems then you have art. Your plight and your problems are actually the source of your artistic creation. The majority of young artists who come to New York to develop their careers are eager to enter the mainstream. But, like you, they have to spend time working other jobs to support their costs of living here. It may seem like you are wasting time that could be used for creating art, but you needn't actually worry about this too much. As long as you are a true artist every field that you are engaged in outside of art circles - living and working - will produce treasure, which sooner or later will be used in the creation of your art. It is not important to plunge headlong into this mainstream system. Instead, find a suitable position and relationship to it. But you should know that you must bring something new to this system - something that is not already there - for the system to have a reason to accept you. And it should be something that cannot be found in the system itself. Only if this thing is from some other realm or from the boundary between two regions will it be possible for you to succeed. Today's art has become, on the surface, rich and varied, but in terms of methodology it has also become more and more narrow. Too many artists know how to make "standard" contemporary art. The system really doesn't need any more of this kind of artist.

Just work, and don't worry whether your talent will be discovered. With the speed and ease of communication today, tragedies like those of van

Gogh's time basically do not exist. Museums and curators are the same as artists: They are anxious that no interesting work will come out. So long as you can bring forth something good, museum curators will come to snatch it away for exhibition.

I wish you success,

Xu Bing
New York

Dear Young Artist,

Thanks for the lucid note. I am envious of your age and also your handwriting . . . nothing I can do about the former or the latter, hence the typed response. Rather than frame my reply to you in poetic terms, I have constructed a list of things you might want to remember as you continue on your chosen path in visual art. As you read them, imagine me yelling them at you with urgency!

First and foremost you must remember that ARTISTS DRIVE THE BUS. It is an easy thing to forget. We sometimes feel we are at the bottom of the heap (artist as victim). But for an artist in his/her studio, working in relative isolation and producing objects from the imagination, there is nothing of what we call the art world — no critics, no curators, no art historians or art history departments, no museums, no art books or art libraries, no magazines, no auction houses, and, finally, no galleries. The entire enterprise is built on one central event: the creative act in the studio. I mean no arrogance here, but it is simply true. I don't know whether we are the plankton or the whale, but we are indispensable.

That said, LET YOUR STUDIO BE YOUR SANCTUARY. Have no illusions . . . the art business, despite the pretension that surrounds "cultural products," has more in common with other businesses than it does with art. When your work leaves your studio and moves into the world, its

character changes. One doesn't need to consult a Marxist to understand that art is a luxury commodity. You learn to live with this fact (and find ways of justifying it), but in the studio things are different. Within that space you create and take chances, destroy, and create again. If the marketplace finds its way (spiritually) into that studio you have abdicated your essential power. Keep your studio clear from concerns of the marketplace. You might have to dance with the wolves but you can still keep them near the door.

Speaking of work in the studio - DON'T BE AFRAID TO DO DUMB THINGS IN THE STUDIO. Artists can't get anywhere beyond the familiar and the prevalidated without risking being ridiculous. We would not have Guston's late work had he not willingly risked "dumbness."

A quick one - KEEP AWAY FROM ART FAIRS. Instead, visit a museum and spend time in a wing housing art from centuries past. You will be rejuvenated, not demoralized.

SUPPORT YOUR FELLOW ARTISTS AS THEY SUPPORT YOU. Your best community is your peer group of fellow artists. Openings are wonderful events, when artists come together to celebrate one another. Sure, they are great places to extend your network, but they are primarily events to extend community beyond the studio. We live in a country where culture is marginalized . . . all the more reason we should support our own efforts. Artists like Joan Mitchell, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol

all set up foundations to help artists in perpetuity. What a testament to their generosity!

READ BIOGRAPHIES OF ARTISTS. The lives of other artists can illuminate various ways to approach your own life as an artist, and those narratives can also help you see beyond the conditions of our particular time.

It's great to have lots of shows and sell lots of work but that alone will not fulfill you. To paraphrase the late, wise painter Harvey Quaytman - A LIFE IN ART IS A LONG RACE NOT A SHORT SPRINT. Can you imagine a rich shape for your creative life beyond the standard measures of fame and financial success? If you begin to answer that question when you are young, you will have a leg up when you find yourself in your mid and late career.

All the best,

Gregory Amenoff
New York

Dear Young Artist:

I became a painter because I went to a school that was in a great museum. Walking to class, I started to see the paintings, quietly waiting to be seen. They penetrated and I realized I wanted to make paintings as intense and moving as those on the wall. I had wanted to be a commercial artist. Instead, I started trying to paint. Here are some suggestions as you begin your career:

Stay in touch with your original motivation to become an artist — and be aware that it is always a process of becoming. You have to stay light on your feet. It is about change and transformation. You are the boss of that but you don't have total control. Good to give into that. Making art requires a lot of isolation, but I realized over time that I also wanted a whole life, that I could still do my work and have a partner and a family. So have a life. Art making fits in well.

Showing your work — eventually selling work — is not evil, and it is a natural process. You are not selling your soul, you are earning a living, and you don't have to do anything you feel is wrong. If you make some money and get attention for what you have done, your friends may be envious. Forgive them — you'll have those feelings, too. Only human.

The art world seems to conjure up a lot of nonsense right now and seems to be only about trends, money, and fame. Try to stay focused and centered in what you want in your work, keeping

in mind that your art is about describing your spirit and your life force makes the work better.

Good luck. You are already succeeding just by attempting.

Elizabeth Murray
New York

Young artist to be,

You *should* have grandiose ideas about your future success. No one with small ambitions and vague goals ever amounted to much in this game.

Since childhood, I dreamt of being counted among the great artists whose work inspires young doodlers to say: "That's what I want to do . . . I want to make something like that!" I wanted my work to be in museum collections, I didn't want to just go there to see the work of others. I only wish my art school education had been rigorous enough to prepare the way. When I left school, I felt, as you seem to, at the mercy of mysterious authorities I did not know, and forces beyond my control. I had done some exercises, and made a few things, but never felt I really learned anything. A hope and a prayer was all I really had to go on. There was nothing to look forward to, nothing to work toward. I was told, "There's nothing you can do. Shut up and do your work . . . they'll let you know if you make the grade." That arrangement is unreliable, and totally unacceptable. Never surrender your dream to chance, alone.

Needless to say, I was angry and bitter after school. I felt there were important and concrete lessons to learn, but few teachers seemed willing or able to pass the information on. At this point, I understand a thing or two. What I've learned since school gives me many reasons to be very particular about with whom I share this knowledge. Your letter provides no specific information about

Dear Young Artist,

New York is a tough city. It is complex and beautiful. Cities are amazing and brutal. We love cities. They survive, we survive. Each individual finds a way alone or with the help of others.

One must know when deciding to become an artist - it is an irresistible attraction - that there are no guarantees of success, rewards, recognition, etc. One chooses or is drawn to a life of producing works that have no practical use in a largely indifferent world. The way is not easy or comfortable. To be an artist you must love art - and you must respect and find a haven for yourself in your work. It is important in life to find a basic pleasure - intellectual, sensual, kinetic, touch, smell, sight . . . "the shape, the sense, the feel of things" (Hilda Doolittle). Life in general is a miraculous phenomenon full of contradiction for all.

To be in a city like New York or Los Angeles or Mexico City is to be in a dialogue with a community of people that inspire and inform one another.

One should understand fear - fear of failure, fear of not getting this or that. Fear is a device to control us, to stop us in our tracks, to keep us from questioning the erosion of basic human rights. It is the tool of the oppressor. Fear can be a warning. Sometimes I go toward fear, and it is a veil. What are you afraid of?

When I began to produce work for a public in

1968, I was 32. It was the right time and place. In working with concepts of performance and video, I imagined that I was exploring new territory. It was a time of change - of crossing boundaries, breaking forms, merging, turning upside down and backward, of dialogue with artists, musicians, dancers, filmmakers . . . it was fantastic. The work was important.

Now is fantastic. Art is communication, and one must share, show, learn about others, exchange, but not necessarily in a commercial gallery. Decades ago, a center shifted from Paris to New York, but now there is no center. You don't have to be in New York, nor is it necessary to rush from the precarious state of becoming into the marketplace. People seem to rush from here to there for no reason without thinking. You have to find time for yourself. To take chances. Art is not safe. It is a gamble - it can be dangerous. Safe imagination can be boring.

I can see interesting work, beautiful work, but often it seems to be too much looking back at itself, playing it safe, repeating old gestures. True for old artists as well. (young inside always)

Thank you for your letter, Young Artist. Maybe someday we will meet.

The answer is the Work. To Work. To care about the Work.

Sincerely,

Joan Jonas
New York

PS: Be careful not to be overwhelmed by unimportant details. Schedule time every day for your work. There are many examples of poets, for instance, who were doctors, worked in insurance companies, or banks. Find a way to support yourself that is not a compromise. Years ago I saw a photograph in a Canadian magazine of an old woman sitting on the ground surrounded by wooden objects she had made. She was outside the system you refer to. She was smiling and it seemed that she loved her work. For me, this was inspiring.

Dear Young Artist,

I started my career as a young artist in 1957. Then, there was not the money in art that there is today. Therefore, one made art because one needed to do so. I taught public school five days a week and painted when I could. I got married and participated in having two children, which made it more difficult to make art. I lived in National City, California, not an art center.

My advice? Don't go into art for fame or fortune. Do it because you cannot not do it. Being an artist is a combination of talent and obsession. Live in New York, LA, Köln, or London. As for money: If you're talented and obsessed, you'll find a solution.

Yrs in art,

John Baldessari
Venice, California

Dear Young Artist:

You misjudge me if you think I am someone who has "maintained integrity and freedom of thought and participated in the art world" successfully. Although the art world has acknowledged and supported me indirectly over the years, I do not consider myself a gallery artist in so far as, with one exception, I have not made graphic or media work that is designed for gallery spaces. The one solo exhibition that appears on my résumé was composed primarily of dance photos and memorabilia, and was conceived by a curator, not by me.

My career was launched not in the art world as such, but in a community of dancers, composers, and artists who could afford not to be concerned about their careers at a time when this was possible. The economics of living in New York, for one thing, allowed us to immerse ourselves in ideas rather than real estate, and to have low or no expectations of making a living at what we did. Success was measured not by the number of shows we were invited to be in but by the respect of our peers. Again, perhaps, the result of economics. A friend of mine paid \$19 a month for an apartment (I paid \$45), and no one questioned one another's monetary resources. Furthermore, the pressure that comes from making a salable object that can be inserted into the market economy was entirely lacking in the production of dances. This was one more factor that allowed us to work unfettered by — and happily

oblivious to - the potential for monetary rewards.

I must admit that the "good old days" I parade before you lasted only a few years, from around 1960 to 1964, after which a general diaspora took place - both geographically and professionally - as artists found galleries and teaching jobs and choreographers began to institutionalize themselves with companies and boards of directors. Which seems to be the usual route of avant-garde movements. Far from judging such developments, I only wish to emphasize, with the utmost fervor, how important it is for a young artist to delay "professionalism" as long as possible. Find some way to give yourself a chance - and time - to experiment, take risks, play, fool around, even fail, before trying to launch a career. Show your work only to a few devoted friends. Art schools should be a congenial site for this kind of engagement, and sometimes they are. But, as I have frequently found, art schools also tend to serve as launching pads for careers by fostering the same emphasis on polish and completion that one finds in the art world. Challenge yourself with what "doesn't work." Know your sources and what influences show up in your work. Don't worry about originality, but be self-critical, and find ways to accept and deliver supportive criticism among your peers. Don't get hung up on creature comforts. They can come later. Try to see everything.

From what I can observe of younger artists

today, those who are most positive about the state of the art world have banded together to form their own cooperatives, for exhibitions as well as living and working arrangements. You need one another as never before.

Best of luck,

Yvonne Rainer
New York

Dear Young Artist:

We're guessing you're a woman, since the majority of art students have been female for decades. Get ready to work harder and for fewer rewards than the guys next to you. If you're an artist of color, multiply those difficulties.

We're not going to advise you about your work, that's for you to figure out. Instead, we want to talk about why you should be an activist as well as an artist, and how you can find your own unique, outrageous way to fight injustice, like we did.

We put up our first GG posters in the streets in 1985. We were looking for a place to put our frustration, but we also wanted to have some fun criticizing an art system that was so unfair. We never thought we'd still be at it in 2006! The overwhelming public response to our GG work has empowered us in our lives as activists and in our real lives as artists, too. Some of us want - and have - a piece of the pie, while others would like to blow the whole pie up and start over.

Sure, the art world's better now than ever before, especially at the entry level where everyone wants to see what women and artists of color have to say. But galleries still overwhelmingly show white males, and up the ladder, at the level of museums, auctions, and art history books, there's a crushing glass ceiling, way worse than in a lot of other fields.

Let's face it, it's hard for anyone to succeed

at making art, especially in a system that manufactures scarcity, then sells it for big bucks to rich collectors. Museums suck up to these art investors, ask them to sit on their boards and let them decide what to save for the future. We think that's a lousy way to preserve our culture!

So you need to make sure your work endures. Whether you do that as an art world insider or outsider, you'll have to spend some time away from your work, out of your studio, communicating and engaging with whatever art world you decide to live in. Be aware of the system. Don't be afraid to stand up and criticize it. Be inventive. Do some creative complaining! Calculate, embarrass, humiliate, when necessary. Make 'em laugh at themselves and maybe, just maybe, you can get the powers-that-be to move, if only a few centimeters. And don't forget to have fun doing it! That's the very best part!

Some ideas:

Measure the diversity of artists in shows. Then sticker the information in important places, like inside the toilet stalls of major museums and galleries! We did a recent count at the Met in New York. The figures were pathetic: Only 7 percent of the work on exhibit was by women. We put that stat on an artwork we did for the Venice Biennale!

Be a Secret Santa: Each holiday season, deluge curators, critics, textbook authors, and collectors with e-mails asking if they've been naughty

or nice to women and artists of color.

Organize postcard campaigns to egregious offenders. Organize counter events to publicize the issue. We deluged the Guggenheim with mail about an all-white, all-male show opening in SoHo. Then, a woman was quietly added to the show! We had our own opening party outside with hundreds of supporters and our own band!

Dress up and organize your own docent tours of galleries and museums. Explain the art world Olympics: how choosing a few artists to win everything makes the visual arts an expensive, precious commodity that only millionaires can afford! Imagine if art was cheap and available to everyone.

Put postcards of your and your friends' work in the postcard racks of museum bookshops. List this intervention on your résumé as your first museum exhibition.

Think of yourself as the Permanent Resistance. Imagine a better system for making, showing and collecting art. Then work to make it a reality! We've been doing it for years. Help us finish the job.

Things don't change without activism. (Ars longa, but so is activism.)

Go Ape with us,

Frida Kahlo and Kathe Kollwitz, Guerrilla Girls
New York and Los Angeles

Dear Young Artist,

Your questions are confusing to me. Looking back, I don't remember asking any of them of myself. Armed with a ridiculous amount of confidence and an inflated sense of the importance of my work, I simply set about it. I went to art school and then moved to New York. I was fearful and panicked setting out on my own, but I did it anyway.

One of the first things I learned after moving to New York is that no one can make decisions for you or tell you what you should do. There are no right answers. I have made sure to work with people that I trust and enjoy. I like showing my work; it is a privilege that feeds the work. And I am very careful to preserve time in my studio, to not overextend myself.

In art and in life all of our actions are at once inextricably bound to circumstance and filled with choices we make from a vast and unlimited array of what's possible. The dance between the two poles of circumstance and unlimited possibility is what generates meaning and passion. I would advise you not to believe for a moment the vein of art criticism and theory that natters on incessantly about the emptiness and failure of the avant-garde. You are a person, armed with free will and the tools to discover that will. You can make things that embody your sense of what matters. You can have conviction, passion, and belief. That there are many forces out there intersecting your work is exciting,

challenging, and invigorating. Commerce has always been part of human relations and public life. It is one system of communication among many.

Love,

Jessica Stockholder
New Haven, Connecticut

Dear Young Artist,

I received your letter and felt sad that it is so very hard now for the young artist in New York. It is also difficult for the older artists who, although they started at an easier time, are struggling with the usual enormous expense of living in New York, and additionally face all the problems of aging and having elderly family to support as well. I think New York is always a problem unless you are a billionaire. I feel you are correct in seeing as much art as you can, as well as meeting other artists and sharing your experiences.

One thing I would warn you about: Be careful of whom you let into your studio. I remember two artists who lived near each other and often visited each other's studio. One had an earlier and better chance to show than the other and took her friend's idea and showed it first. So you need to be very self-protective and shrewd.

Also, as best as you can, be aware of the art world's foibles and how it is constructed. Try to get a sense of the galleries, museums, and auction houses as they are very intertwined to the point where one wonders about insider trading among the most elite members of the art world hierarchy. One of the things I did was to use statistics to try to analyze the situation, especially for artists of color (Latino, African American, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American, etc.). There are of course the usual tokens and collaborators. I wanted the knowledge

to understand what I was and was not seeing. I did not want to be a "good German," so to speak. I also did a lot of reading and self-searching to try to understand my strong points and my weaknesses. I tried to be aware of other people's behavior and motivation so I would not take it all so personally. My findings were that there was a definite bias throughout the art world against people of color and often women. To this day I am still dealing with this issue and hope that you prefer to become fully aware of some of the underpinnings of the art world. Some prefer to show in this environment, taking advantage of the restricted opportunities to push themselves forward with what is called white privilege.

One of the things that I find very helpful is this: If you open your studio or have a show and you get verbal or published criticism that is not positive, write it down or talk it into a tape. I find that that gets it off my mind, as I do not need to bother remembering it because it is captured along with my reactions to it. Once you have distance from it, you can decide what is useful.

You should also try to be aware of archival practices so that your work will physically survive. Also be sure to keep track of where your work is and who owns it. Records that I kept or did not keep years ago have profound consequences for me now - positive or negative. Try to select your representatives carefully. Do they pay the artist, and how quickly, when the

work is sold? Will they tell you who bought it and for how much? Are they truly honest? One big caution is showing abroad, as there can be economic losses. One can have problems with import and export tariffs and taxes on art that vary from country to country, as well as large shipping bills. The best way is to have a reliable dealer take on that headache for you if you can trust her.

We all isolate ourselves. Try to get together with people you trust. Also keep your mind fresh. I try to read every day from about 11:00 P.M. until 1:00 or 2:00 A.M., or I try to read first thing in the morning. The hard part is finding enough work (a job) to pay the bills - and pay off student loans - so that you can afford to make art. I worked for a museum for twelve years (five days a week or more) before I could find a teaching job. Some artists work in construction, some work on Wall Street, some wait tables or work for other artists. Some teach and some are librarians. Whatever works for you. Try not to get overly discouraged. Isolation can also cause this. One thing that helps is reading about the lives of other artists.

I wish you all the best. Be true to your work and try not to take the pits and valleys of the art world personally.

Howardena Pindell
New York

You just got out of art school; you're ambitious - hey, you moved to New York; that's aggressive; continue it; think up work and show in galleries and try to gol-dang say what you think and feel in the world! in such a way that the world stands to have more fun and get better, and you too.

OK, I've said it. A value. The only art worth doing is the art that makes things better. More actually advanced. More enjoyable. A key: genuine happiness. All around.

So, make art that comes out of your own sense of what's actually best, and advanced, and supercool. Do you live on a planet, or on a multi-blither of unknown galaxies?

Best regards,

John McCracken
Los Angeles

**Dear 'Young' Artist,

My grAndmother told me I wAS going to be An Artist befoRe I knew what An Artist was. She took me to see JACob LAWwww-Rence ^and Mel EdwARds and Bette SaaR^ At the WhitnEy MuSEUM of (AMericaN) ART and heR own WORK At the Studio Museum of HaRLeM. To be cleAR: my grAndmother WAS not A pROfessional ARTist, shE cleaned houSES « » to MAKE A living. In fact that'S how shE got this ideA thAt I could be AN ARTist. see Some of heR clients weRe ARTists. To MAKE A long stoRy shoRt, shE cooked up this ideA I could meet these ARTists if I helped heR cleAn theiR houses. « » My grAndmotherER felt meeting these ARTists, real ARTists who ACTually MADE A living making ART, would help me in some wAY. « » Both of the ARTists (she introduced me to) weRe white, jewish AND in theiR 60's oR 70's. (Both weRe ModeRnist but not too ModeRnist, just enough.) Both hAd been in thE camps duRing World WAR II. I sAw theiR « » nuMbeR tAttoos. Both weRe VERY humble And self-effAcIng About being ARTists. Both WORKed VERY hard AND WERE not...SuPER Rich...ZZZZZZZZ***....

I Am not suRe what I leARned ^Right thEn And thERE^ About being A (successful) artist. FOR A long...time I thought you hAd to be old « » experienced « » AND « » somehow eARned it...?...I wAS 12 wHEN this happened. 7 yeARS later ^I leARNEd^ that veRY young ARTists* could be good successfu&\$ ARTists. But I still thought this WAS AN Anomaly. It seemed to me

thAt most folks would have to do some other
 lAbor to suppoRt themselves if thEy chosE to be
 ARTists. This MAde sense to me. It still does.
 So Enjoy yoUR hateful dAY job. It is probably
 giving you ^much^ moRe thAn youR dReAmed of
 gAllery will eveR pRoVide. And if you « » eveR
 « » get A gAllery, don't come Running to me wheN
 thEy cheat you oR make you feel like cRAP. We
 ^ARTists^ desErve the ArtWORLD we create. As
 foR ^being^ A blAck ARTist, which I claiM to be,
 I think it's ^About^ gtwo things PROFOUUND
 simultaneous: A...love...of duchaMpian pPropoRtions
 And A struggle only Hannibal, nAy only his ele-
 phants could enDUure But foR me it is Achoice «
 » ^thAt^ is kno eAsy to make, ^AND^ it is not a
 cetRain choice it is A beautiful
 trubling choice that seems choice-less on the
 won hand and on the other An infinity of possi-
 bilities swirLing—I met a young blAck womaN who
 thought I wAs being irresponsible in the
 Articulation of blackness in my work (hmmmmmmmm)—
 if I WAS—tttwo be responsible////who's respon-
 sibility would I model my nEW won responsibility
 on? Hers? AAAss-tAchment to family, tribe,
 chuRch, The STATE even one's %rt gallery can be
 goo????—but attachment is A hindrAnce if it
 requires.....thAt you leave youR cRiticality***
 behiNd——

Love WPL
 Lewiston, Maine

*eg. jAsper johns, 25 yRs. Old And a communist,

no-solo show aAt MOMA

**dear = beloved

***= I just fell asleep

****=substitute criticality for ass alternately
 back and forth like a yo-yo or dr. Jekyll and
 his mother or the blinking lights of a motel
 sign

Dear Young Artist,

I, as you, have put off writing to you, because I am not seeing you in person to gauge your responses to what I say. Would you blink, blinking back some fear or embarrassment you might not want to expose, if I say this or that? If I were facing you, I could change my direction, make space more real or possible for you in what I say. In a letter, you are a "Young Artist" in the abstract. I am worrying about your uniqueness, about not honoring your uniqueness. Are your sensibilities rawly close to the surface or protected by a fresh urban armor? Will you have any clue what I am talking about? Can this be a good and helpful thing for you or a stumbling block? But we're stuck on paper; so here goes.

I believe that art is the articulation of human freedom. Remember, above all, you are the boss, The Boss, of your freedom. No one else. Your art, if it is original and worth something, expands all human freedom.

Art, after it comes through you, will be different. Art comes from you, you all by yourself, unique among anyone who has ever lived in the history of the world; AND, art comes from you in *your* world with the choices you make as a free being, and the glue, even, with the relationships that you create and stick to; AND art comes from you as a citizen *in* the world; AND you *within* history and in nature.

It is your job to re-invent art itself, through what you create.

This is not the job of critics, theorists, and curators. They follow. We lead, shape, and bend the path of history.

I'm not saying throw out history. But the main history we work from is from artist to artist: handed down. Actually, to save your neck, you can learn to talk to artists, even those from hundreds and thousands of years ago: Bring them your problems, your terrors, your dreams, practical things you have to solve.

You don't have to shape up to someone else's definition of "the artist." Make it up, make up the whole thing, while you're doing what you have to do to survive. You are even free to open yourself up to survival and maintenance of your choices as fountains of your art; you can let these tough customers flow through you.

You worry about showing too early. I disagree. Because you will change, become a new person, many many times over through the years. You will re-invent yourself out of your circumstances and your will. If you show later, you're someone else. Showing can keep a kind of integrity to who you are at the moment.

I used to worry about that when I was young. I actually thought I would keep silent for ten years before I opened my mouth about anything. Now I think that's ridiculous. I was a certain kind of spirit then, and a different one ten years later. Shmushing your young spirit into a more "mature" spirit is being violent to oneself as one is through time.

You ask about the art world and worry about it

corrupting you. First of all, you only mention galleries in relation to the art world. You don't mention the streets, the water, the air, the land, below the land. You don't mention cities, urbanism. You don't mention outer space, inner space, multiple scales, microscopic scales. WHAT? You don't mention the public domain, democracy, the meaning of *public*.

You don't mention the people who receive or who could enter into direct relationship, even interactive relationship, with your art.

You don't mention changing the world itself, bursting all categories, starting over, re-inventing everything. WHAT?

You can see here that I come from the 1960s and 70s. It's so obvious.

So I think the "Art World" is a much more huge entity than you mention. It's way bigger than galleries.

BUT, I cherish the art world. The whole art world. It can be cruel, cold, indifferent; but it is also a world that you can shape. That's where there are people who can listen to you at the deepest level, more than anyone. People who can come across you — even people that you may never meet — and who will make it possible for you to keep believing in your own struggle, even if you become desperate. They are at the essence of the enterprise of making and continuing to make until you have no more breath to breathe! It is the art world that has kept art going from eons ago, responsible to art as if it were one's own child.

So I wish you a long life and great courage.
Believe in yourself and work your ass off.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles
New York

IN RESPONSE TO A FELLOW ARTIST:

ART IS MADE FROM THE NECESSITIES OF A HUMAN BEING
NOT CONTENT WITH THE CONFIGURATION AS IT IS PRE-
SENTED TO THEM. IF ART REMAINS A QUESTION THERE
IS NO DIFFICULTY IN MAINTAINING ONE'S INTEGRITY &
FREEDOM OF THOUGHT WITHIN A PUBLIC CONVERSATION.

(ALL PARTICIPATIONS IN EXHIBITIONS & PRESENTATIONS
OF WORK IN ANY MANNER OR FORM ARE IN FACT CONVER-
SATIONS WITH YOUR OWN TIMES.)

THE QUESTIONS OF MAKING A LIVING ARE THE SAME
EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS ALL MEMBERS OF A SOCIETY
HAVE. THE ADVANTAGE OF THE ARTIST IS THAT THE USE
OF THEIR PRODUCT IS NOT DEPENDENT UPON BEING IN
ACCORD WITH THE POWERS THAT BE!

AS TO RIGHTNESS OR WRONGNESS: THESE ARE THINGS THAT
CAN ONLY BE DETERMINED WITHIN A PUBLIC SPHERE.

IF YOU FEEL YOU HAVE WHAT TO SAY, YOU ARE BEHOLD-
EN TO FIND WHERE TO SAY IT.

ART IS NOT ABOUT MAKING SENSE BUT OF DETERMINING
MEANING.

BON CHANCE & GIVING THE DEVIL ITS DUE. I LOOK
FORWARD TO SEEING YOUR WORK IN CONTEXT.

YOURS IN ART,
LAWRENCE WEINER
NEW YORK

To a Young Artist,

You could be 18, 30 or 50, you are young to have decided to be an artist at this time in your life. First let me congratulate you on your choice. From here on, you enter the endless magic life of being an artist.

The world is your oyster: It will provide you with unlimited material for your art. Look at it again from that point of view. Suddenly the world is a different place, so interesting, so beautiful, and so mysterious. Have fun with it. And share your fun with us.

You, as an artist, will unfold the infinite mystery of life and share it with the world. It may just be two people your work will communicate to. Don't be upset. Be upset if you are not happy with your work. Never be upset about how many people have seen it, or how many reviews it has received. Your work will exist and keep influencing the world. Moreover, your work will keep changing the very configuration of our world no matter what kind of attention it gets or doesn't get. So even when you are an unknown artist, be caring of what you make and what you give out. Your work, no matter what, affects the world, and in return, it brings back 10 times what you've given out. If you give out junk, you get back junk. If you give out confusion, you will give yourself confusion. If you give out something beautiful, you will get back 10 times more beauty in your life. That's how it works. You are now like a tree in the park. Your exis-

tence is making the city breathe well. So relax and be yourself. Don't try to be anything but yourself. Rely on your instinct and inspiration. Go with it!

By the way, my thanks to you for being an artist. I am aware that I will be one of the many, many people who gets the benefit of your decision. I wish you great success.

I love you!

Yoko Ono
New York

Dear Young Artist,

Thanks for your letter. Yes, it definitely is possible to maintain your integrity and freedom of thought and still participate in the art world. The way to do that is *always* to choose maintaining your integrity and freedom of thought over the art world *whenever* the two conflict. They don't always conflict, so you can have both to some extent. But you won't be able to participate in the art world as fully as possible, unless you're willing to sacrifice your integrity and freedom of thought in order to do so. And you won't be able to maintain your integrity and freedom of thought unless you're willing to sacrifice whatever degree of art world success is necessary in order to do that.

Each time you choose art-world participation over personal integrity when the two conflict, you break more and more of your own spirit — that part of yourself that justifies hope, faith, and trust in others by demonstrating that you are worthy of them yourself. Kill that, and you kill your own self-esteem — that innocent belief in your own goodness that breeds the belief that you deserve the rewards you strive to obtain. Kill that, and you kill everything that gives value and meaning to art world participation, and to the enormous successes and satisfactions it promises. You create for yourself a personal hell of cynicism, suspicion, dishonesty, and self-dislike in all of your relationships that no amount of money, power, or

recognition can eradicate (quite the opposite), as well as the noxious, partly buried awareness that you yourself are no better than those you condemn.

On the other hand, choose personal integrity and freedom of thought instead, and you ensure your personal equanimity and contentment no matter how much art world recognition, success, money, or power you must relinquish in order to protect them. Here's why:

Integrity means that you are not tempted to lie to yourself about what you're doing, or why. Your deeply held convictions inform your principles, your principles motivate and guide your actions, and your actions express your convictions. There is an internal coherence — in the best case, harmony — among your beliefs, your emotions, and your actions. This doesn't mean you never experience internal conflict, for example, between the beliefs and the impulse to self-aggrandizement. It means that when you're internally conflicted, you know you are, and know what the issues are, and see the trade-offs clearly. Your self-respect does not depend on rationalizing or making excuses for actions you recognize to be inexcusable; so you're not tempted to debase or misrepresent your core convictions to yourself in the service of getting ahead, and thereby distort your perception of yourself, your options, or their consequences. In order to see clearly when you're tempted to violate your principles, you need a strong sense of self-respect, and — simultaneously — a strong

sense of humility. *Self-respect* means you can acknowledge mistakes or flaws without plunging into self-hatred or depression; you can maintain your dignity without deluding yourself that you're perfect. *Humility* means that you can make amends for those mistakes without feeling ashamed; that you can learn from them without losing value in your own eyes. Integrity, inner clarity, self-respect, and humility mutually reinforce one another through the sheer pleasure of heightened self-knowledge, and strengthen the self to withstand threats to its internal unity.

Freedom of thought means that the principles and convictions I've just been talking about spring into your awareness, from a part of yourself that lies beyond the limitations of the individual ego, and that is uncensored by that part of your mind that packages your subjective self-expression for public consumption. It means that your curiosity to know and understand — yourself, your environment, your relationships — is not stifled or constricted by guilt, shame, or fear. Freedom of thought doesn't have much to do with self-assertion, and, even less to do with personal identity or self-indulgence. On the contrary: It is the ability to rise above the narrow constraints of the subjective self, to see and investigate and understand it from a reflective distance, and to be able to use your own personal pet human (i.e., your body) as an instrument for being or doing whatever your principles and convictions tell you is then required — by the circumstances, by your own

imperatives, or by intuition. Freedom of thought is inherently connected to the pleasure of self-transcendence, and so to the pleasure of freely acknowledging your own imperfections – with humor, compassion, severity, and accountability.

So integrity *plus* freedom of thought is a powerful and heady combination: It means acting in unity and inner transparency from drives and motives that lie above and beyond the blinkered perspective of the ego, according to uncorrupted principles that you deeply believe in and that inspire your action and clarify your perception, and that are unsullied by fear of public disapproval or ridicule or punishment or retaliation or failure. Integrity *plus* freedom of thought protects you from this kind of fear because whenever it threatens, you see the trade-off clearly: capitulate and you damage (and eventually lose) the only thing worth aspiring to, the only thing worth having, and the only thing worth experiencing on a moment-to-moment basis as you navigate through your life.

Now about *maintaining* your integrity and freedom of thought. Most of the myriad available spiritual, religious, or psychological disciplines, practiced daily, patiently, stubbornly, over an extended period of time, that put a premium on self-knowledge, self-control, self-discovery, and self-expression as a package can help a lot (if you think I'm talking about navel-gazing, go back and reread the preceding paragraphs). Whatever your discipline is, it has to be a fixed and permanent commitment, a cor-

nerstone of your life that you seek opportunities to practice, without which your day is not complete. Of course this doesn't mean that you practice every day mechanically; exactly the opposite. It means that if you don't practice, you viscerally feel the gradual process of shutting down, becoming numb, mechanical, unreflective, insensitive, sad; of atrophying that part of yourself that gives you reason to live. Once you stop feeling that process, you're lost, and that part of yourself will sink out of reach. So when you fail to practice, thirst for it, grieve its loss, resolve yet again to give it pride of place in your schedule. It doesn't matter whether you always succeed in this resolve. What's important is making that resolve, each day, with the same determination. The more often you make it, the easier it will get – eventually – to act on it, and the more opportunities to practice you will find. Eventually you will find that every situation you confront, and particularly those in which you are forced to choose between personal integrity and art world success, there is an opportunity to practice. And eventually you will greet such choices joyfully, as a chance to celebrate and honor the deep convictions and principles that by now structure, govern, and permeate your self, your awareness, and your experience at all levels. This is the point at which the choice between personal integrity and art world success is so easy as to be no real choice at all.

Young artist, it is highly unlikely that you

will be rewarded professionally for reaching this point. Nor will it make you popular. On the contrary: You will develop a reputation for being "difficult," "uncooperative," "inflexible," or even "self-destructive;" and treated (or mistreated, ostracized, or blacklisted) accordingly. If these reactions concern you, remember you always have alternatives: to maintain your integrity and accept the rewards, or fall into line and capitulate — and accept the "rewards."

Good luck!

Best regards,

Adrian Piper
Cape Cod, Massachusetts

PS: As for showing early, I don't think you can formulate a hard and fast rule about that. There are important lessons to be learned either way. I started showing internationally before I graduated from art school, and learned a lot from that. I think that just as it's better to live with someone for a while before marrying them, it's better to find out sooner rather than later what the art world is like, so you can decide whether or not it's your lifetime cup of tea.

Dear Young Artist:

Art world participation could spoil your "integrity" and "freedom of thought"? You talk tosh. Only you — on your own — can do that.

Furthermore, anyone employing the word "tainted" in regard to the art world should either grow up or else content themselves with amateur productions. If you intend to make work that you want others to enjoy or appreciate, the [commercial] art world will be part and parcel of your universe: The best art must always be grounded in its contemporary reality, both in its production and in its distribution. Ivory towers are only for the very young, the menopausal of both sexes, or the dissatisfied or disgruntled. The best art seldom resides there.

Lots of gallery opportunities exist for young artists because their work is cheap and thus easy to invest in. If a good gallery is interested in you early on, the only real reason to shy away from showing is the risk that early successes might box you into continuing a praxis that works (i.e., sells), which could then be parlayed into teaching positions, etc., restricting further developments of your work (if you let it). But there's nothing wrong with any of this: It's a pattern common to the greater part of the artists' world.

On the other hand, time to explore yourself won't get you much farther than what you like and dislike. The best art is not based on self, but rather on what's important to imagine — and