
There are many avenues for an artist to pursue in order to get work exhibited. Much depends on your career to-date, the nature of the work you make, and the area in which you live.

Succeeding as an artist

As an artist there are different ways to understand (and experience) success. There is the first success that lies in fighting the demons of procrastination and creative anxiety and getting down to a new project or body of work. There is the success of producing something that satisfies your own creative standards and expectations.

These are the personal levels of success. Others are public and relate to exhibiting, critical reception, press coverage and the art market. While you have sole influence over the first two – personal – categories, there are various strategies you can adopt to facilitate the second set.

Initially, the most important (and often difficult) of these is getting your work out into the public realm.

Graduating art college

If you're coming to the end of your years at art college, one of the best ways to begin exhibiting is to self-organise.

Art college is a ready-made network of artists (and some budding curators), and you will be familiar with each other's work, as well as way of working.

Not having access to the resources of college doesn't mean you can't self-organise. Find a group of like-minded artists in your area.

It is the stuff of art world legend that Damien Hirst and some of his fellow students organised the group exhibition **Freeze** (1988) in London's Docklands and so met Charles Saatchi, setting him on the route to fame and glory.

Timing, with Freeze, was everything, although an intriguing location, clever marketing and networking helped. A catalogue was produced, and the students sourced funding from property developers in the area.

Important too were some of the Goldsmith's tutors, like Michael Craig-Martin, who got Tate Director Nicholas Serota to visit. The success of self-organised exhibitions is dependent on luck, timing, and – of course – the quality of work.

You don't have to be in art college (or have just left) to self-organise, but you're unlikely to find such a ready made group, plus mentors, all of whom have the same goal, again. It's worth remembering that the degree and diploma shows organised by art colleges are also patrolled by commercial galleries – if not to sign students up immediately, then to earmark ones to watch.

So present your work in as professional a way as possible. Galleries and annual exhibitions that specialise in showing the work of recent graduates are also becoming the norm – but don't fall into the post-college trap of exhibiting just because you were asked. Make sure the context (other artists, gallery, presentation) suits you and your work.

Artist-run spaces

Not having access to all the resources of college doesn't mean you can't self-organise. Perhaps there is a group of like-minded artists in your area?

For initiatives like this there's safety in numbers. Work out in your own mind the optimum size for your group or exhibition, so your work does not get swamped. Venue, access, security, documentation, publicity and financial arrangements all need to be considered.

Some artists take this further and establish permanent galleries, run by a collective of artists. These usually exhibit the work of members of the group, as well as putting on other shows throughout the year to keep the programme 'fresh'.

There is a greater financial and time commitment to this kind of venture, although if a premises can be found, they are often run on a shoestring. The advantages include a certain stability and identity, which means the gallery usually develops a higher profile with the press, collectors and members of the public.

Commercial galleries

Also known as private galleries, these are a mainstay of the art world, although they come in many shapes, sizes and guises.

Being taken on by a commercial gallery means the directors of that gallery will promote your work, usually give you an exhibition every two years, produce catalogues for you, introduce your work to collectors, institutions and the press and generally nurture your career. For this they take between 40-55 percent of sales.

Get out there, go to gallery openings, chat to people, submit to open exhibitions, talk about your work.

If this seems disadvantageous to you, bear in mind the financial risk they have taken on, and their ability to show your work in a context that increases its price. Most artists agree that it's a deal worth having.

That said, it's one of the most important relationships an artist will form, so make sure you can work with the particular gallery. Equally, your work will be seen in the context of the other artists the gallery represents, so make sure you think that suits the profile you want to develop.

So how do you get a commercial gallery to take you on? Artists do send in CDs, DVDs, CVs, slides and letters, and while it has been known to happen, it is rare for a commercial gallery to take on an artist from this approach. So it is worth doing, but don't bank on its success, or even take its failure as a rejection – these galleries will have files and boxes and piles of such submissions.

Getting taken on by a gallery usually happens through networking, word of mouth, introduction, or having seen the work of an artist in a group show or at an artist-run space. So get out there, go to gallery openings, chat to people, submit to open exhibitions (see below), be prepared to talk about your work.

Don't launch into a 'sales pitch' at the drop of a hat. Gallery directors are used to this and it can be very off-putting. If all that sounds daunting, don't forget: it's how most artists and their galleries got together. There's no reason why it shouldn't happen to you.

Public spaces

These are galleries funded by the Arts Council or by city or local councils. If your work is installation-based (or other non-saleable work), these are the places most likely to exhibit your work.

Keep an eye out for opportunities to become part of the art world.

Get to know them by attending their openings and programmes of events. You can often get on the invitation and mailing list just by asking, and all will be happy to add you to their email mailing list.

Most of these galleries will fill a couple of exhibition slots per year by open submission. This either means there will be group shows where you send in images of work for consideration, or else they will offer solo exhibitions to selected artists. Apply for these and keep applying.

Being turned down does not mean irrevocable rejection, in fact with each application or submission the curators get to know your work a little better, so it's always a good opportunity.

Having said that, by watching the kind of exhibitions they generally programme, you can make sure you apply to the spaces that best suit your own profile. If you make academic-style paintings, there's little point in submitting to shows designed to encourage experimental electronic art.

Other opportunities to exhibit

If it seems to you as if the art world (the world over) is one big connected entity – you're right. Keep an eye out for all the opportunities to become part of the art world:

- residencies
- international open submission shows
- talks by visiting gallery directors and curators
- workshops organised by artists collectives and studios.

A residency often has an exhibition at the end of it, or you can meet fellow artists and curators with whom you may work in the future – as well as having the time and space to make your own work.

Independent curators are also always on the look out for new artists, so talk to people and tactfully network. When you have established a relationship (or acquaintance) with a curator or a gallery director, invite them to visit your studio – when you feel your work is ready.

Apply for things, form groups, submit work and, most of all, good luck.