

DEAR ARTISTS

advice series by jazz swali

East Midlands
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Developing a successful artistic practice today involves more than just creating artwork; it requires thoughtful engagement with curators, strategic participation in exhibitions, and long-term career planning. From maintaining an online presence to building meaningful relationships with people in the arts, artists must navigate various aspects of their practice to gain visibility and create opportunities. This short advice guide explores the broader elements of sustaining and developing an artistic career, focusing on effective networking, collaborations, and the presentation of work.

Throughout this document, you will find six areas of advice from Curator Jazz Swali, alongside helpful resources to support your artistic practice.

1) Advice about portfolios

2) Advice about curators

3) Advice about working with curators

4) Advice about artwork preparation and care

5) Advice about exhibitions

6) Advice about funding

This has been formed in partnership with CVAN East Midlands.

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where are your portfolios?

- 1 Artists, it's crucial that you have your portfolios ready and accessible. Curators need easy access to your portfolios. This means having a website - it should be linked in your social bios.

Social media and newsletters are great tools for networking, updating and sometimes selling, but a website is crucial for curators to research and understand your practice better, to consider you for future opportunities like commissions.
- 2 Curators need strong documentation of your work with clear labelling (dimensions and materials etc.) to e.g., consider how they might present work in a gallery.

Please deactivate the non-save feature on your images. Likewise, embedding images into PDFs makes it more difficult to save them. We need access to images so we can work on developing exhibition and commission proposals ahead of approaching you. We also import images into exhibition designs using tools like SketchUp, where we 3D model.
- 3 Curators require access to your artist statement and bio. It's important to note these are two distinct things. Your artist statement should share your practice, thinking and intentions, while your bio should provide a record of your career, including exhibitions, awards, education etc. We often need artist statements for our proposals and interpretation and bios for publications and media.

RESOURCES

Artist Statements and Bios:

Artquest – Writing an Artist Statement – A free resource offering a step-by-step guide on writing artist statements: artquest.org.uk

Jackson Art – Writing an Artist Statement and Bio – A free resource offering a step-by-step guide on writing artist statements and biographies: jacksonart.com/blog

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what do curators do?

- 1 Curators spend time developing exhibitions, commissions and programming. However, what this looks like for me most of the time is researching funding options, writing funding applications and often being rejected, then re-applying. The process of conceived an exhibition/commission through to realising it is often long, typically taking 1-2+ years. So having a portfolio is essential (see post 1)!
- 2 I like to develop work together with artists. This process means bringing in the curator's vision. Curators spend their time looking at and thinking about art, and they understand where your practice and work might sit within the broader cultural landscape. This process might include studio visits, crits and the development of new commissions/events/performances. Sometimes though, the collaborative process can take place during the installation of an exhibition. Typically, the curator knows the space well and can guide how the work might best be presented, responding to other works/architectural features/the history of the building.

For me, a curatorial practice is a creative one! I have a vision of how exhibitions, commissions and programming can reflect a critical understanding of the cultural landscape of contemporary art.
- 3 As an artist, you should be talking with curators who have an interest in the subject matter you're exploring in your practice. You should be having these conversations at all stages of the process, particularly early on when creating new works. This ongoing relationship is essential. I like to work with artists on a long-term basis, developing a professional relationship where you can work together to create work/exhibition that strengthen both of your practices! As well as presenting your work to the public, I want to help situate it within a framing that adds layers.

RESOURCES

Building an Online Presence and Portfolio:

Squarespace – Offers website building specifically tailored for artists to showcase portfolios: squarespace.com

Behance – A creative portfolio platform for artists across all disciplines: behance.net

Cargo – A portfolio website builder for showcasing visual work: cargo.site

Mailchimp – Mailchimp offers tools for artists to build professional newsletters, which can help secure funding and increase visibility: mailchimp.com

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working with curators

- 1** Connecting with a curator is difficult and will only happen after a period of working on it. Reaching out cold via email or social media is an okay way to connect.

To make it good, you need to have a reason as to why you want to work with them and what you want from them. Do you want to connect on e.g., developing a project together, critique, or even help with research?

To make it great, you need to research the curator. Not every curator is for you and you are not for every curator. Consider how they connect to your practice - consider their practice, programming and previous work. Does their research align with what you're doing or want to achieve? Posts 1 and 2 should help to put you in a position where you are now able to start reaching out!
- 2** Curators will find you! Curators are continually researching and developing exhibitions, commissions and programming. We're always looking for artists to help develop. We'll be considering whether you fit the projects we're working on. This is why you must be visible online through a website. Especially one that's keyworded, allowing curators to find you in the depths of Google.

Also, curators talk and will give other curators contacts of artists they think are relevant to the projects they are working on. So, you never know how working with different curators will connect you to new opportunities.
- 3** Building long-term relationships is important. As you develop as an artist, curators also develop. When you work together on a long-term basis you can have a mutual learning exchange. The curator can advise you from the position of knowing your practice and goals, as well as from a place of familiarity and trust. Extra Tip: Whenever you visit a new city, research what curators, galleries, and museums are there. Reach out and let them know you will be around and would like to grab a coffee and talk about your practice and to introduce yourself.

RESOURCES

Networking and Connecting with Curators:

CuratorSpace – A platform for artists and curators to collaborate and share opportunities: curatorspace.com

ArtConnect – A community for creative professionals, offering opportunities and networking: artconnect.com

LinkedIn – Essential for professional networking and connecting with curators: linkedin.com

ArtRabbit – Connects artists with art events, curators, and opportunities worldwide: artrabbit.com

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artwork preparation

1 How you envision your artwork for display is a crucial aspect of your practice. Some works' downfall often lies in how they have been considered for display. This is not always about the curation but sometimes about the artist's approach to creating the work, with fixings, installation and display being an afterthought.

Consult a curator and technician about your work. Technicians, especially, will have an innovative and considered approach to displaying and fixing your work. Curators will give you contextual guidance on what the work is saying with a particular way of showing it. Is it on the floor, hanging, on a plinth, projected, on a screen etc.?

2 Take care of your work! Storing work correctly is important, this goes for digital work too. You can do condition checks wherever your work is stored. I get it; they should be fine wrapped up in your garage, but the last thing you want is to ship it off only to discover it's mouldy or damaged. I've had horror moments of unpacking works to find the canvas frame completely wonky. You can find artwork care articles online. Think about light, temperature, and humidity. Overall, care for your work is important for its quality and longevity.

3 Having a plan on how you want your work to be presented in an exhibition is a good start. However, it's equally important to build flexibility into your thinking. Your role in the installation process is crucial. Being prepared for unexpected issues and being able to adapt is imperative to the success of an exhibition installation. What helps curators and techs install your work more efficiently is when you include details, instructions and fixings within a well-packaged artwork. Listen to curators and techs, discuss options and learn from their skills and expertise.

Finally, make sure you put your name on things!

RESOURCES

Art Storage and Maintenance:

Artsy – Provides tips and articles on storing and maintaining artwork: [artsy.net](https://www.artsy.net)

Artwork Archive – How to store artworks: artworkarchive.com

Caring for Digital Art – A guide for maintaining digital artworks: [tate.org.uk](https://www.tate.org.uk)

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solos vs groups

- 1** Group shows are important for career building. They help you understand your work in a broader cultural context, learn from other artists and consider where your practice is heading. Plus, co-exhibiting artists' audiences and peers may take an interest in your work.

Consider what the show is doing for your work. Strategically place yourself within exhibitions that align with your goals. Who do you want to see your work? What's the exhibition doing for your work? Where and when will your work be most relevant to show? A running theme throughout my advice is networking and developing long-term relationships with curators and fellow artists. Answer these questions by finding artists you align with. Look at what they're doing. Ask a curator for feedback.
- 2** Solo shows are also important for career building. However, they generally require experience of you taking part in group shows first.

It's usually relevant to have a developed series of work/developing project for a solo show; otherwise, what would we be looking at/listening to/experiencing? Commissions to create a new body of work for a solo show are few and far between. I'd suggest considering your portfolio of work as a wider series from which you and curators can draw from.

A solo exhibition is not only about showing your work and your practice but is a moment to reflect the zeitgeist.
- 3** Exhibitions are important, but at what cost? I've seen artists pay large sums to be part of poorly organised shows with few visitors. In my opinion, you shouldn't pay to be part of an exhibition—it's not worth it! I feel similarly about submission fees being exclusionary and elitist.

RESOURCES

Exhibitions and Artistic Opportunities:

Artsy – A global platform offering exhibition listings and curator connections: artsy.net

TransArtists – A resource for residency programs and exhibition opportunities globally: transartists.org

A-N – Provides UK-based artists with exhibition opportunities, residencies, and a wide range of professional development resources: a-n.co.uk

ArtJobsUK – A platform for UK artists offering exhibition listings, open calls, and various creative opportunities across disciplines: artsjobs.uk

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how to get funding

1 Securing funding is a complex journey. The first question is, are you ready for funding? That might seem silly to ask. However, funders are increasingly looking for creatives who will be 'value for money', see longevity in your development and practice, and feel convinced that you're at the right point in your career to benefit from cash support. It's so competitive that the difference between being funded or not comes down to whether the narrative you tell is one that can be supported over another. I find the best way through this is to reflect on where your practice is and where you want it to go. Consider if now is the right time to ask for funding or if you need to develop more first.

E.g., after I applied for a DYCP with Arts Council and was unsuccessful, I waited two years until I applied again, knowing that I needed time to develop before I was then successful.

2 What funding is relevant to you? Whilst I recommend applying to lots of opportunities when emerging, ensuring they're relevant to you in that moment is critical. (This skill will be helpful as you grow and exercise saying no.) Spend more time on relevant and fewer applications that you care about, rather than applying on mass. Funders will know if you copy and paste your responses, as you won't be specific in expressing why you're applying for that opportunity.

3 Develop what you've already written! Rather than starting from scratch every time, build on what you've done previously. Your development will be gradual, allowing you to build a more consistent narrative of your practice within your funding writing. Time is limited, so use what you have to your advantage.

Save every application you write and always ask for feedback before submitting. Don't be afraid to re-write it.

RESOURCES

Funding and Grants for Artists:

British Council Arts Opportunities – Supports global projects and offers funding opportunities for UK artists: britishcouncil.org

Arts Council England – Offers grants and funding for artists in the UK: artscouncil.org.uk

Grand Plan Fund – Offers £1,000 grants to support creative community projects by people of colour: grandplanfund.co.uk

The White Pube Funding Library – A free resource library offering a comprehensive list of grants and funding opportunities for artists: thewhitepube.co.uk/funding-library/

Jerwood Arts Signposting – A guide to grants, funding opportunities, and career resources for early-career artists and creatives in the UK: jerwood.org/signposting/

The Elephant Trust – Provides grants to artists in the UK to help fund new work, exhibitions, and creative projects: elephanttrust.org.uk

A-N The Artists Information Company – Provides a range of grants, including funding for artists' professional development and projects: a-n.co.uk

Jazz Swali is a Curator whose work centres on oppositional thinking and doing through queer art and exhibition-making. They engage queering as a critical mode of investigation, exploring issues such as social justice inequalities in representation and marginalisation in the arts.

CVAN EM is the free-to-access Contemporary Visual Arts Network for the East Midlands, encompassing Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, and Rutland.

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