

Letter to a Young Woman Artist

Dear Young Woman Artist,

If this letter has found its way into your hands or onto your screen, then I am lucky. This is what an artist dreams about, finding the perfect audience for her own voice. And you, reading this missive, are she.

Writing this to you, today, at 50 years old, I have spent over half my life as a professional artist. While I may not be a Young Woman Artist relative to you, I am still one today in relationship to the women who came before me and to myself. Once a Young Woman Artist, always one. Louise Bourgeois, Joan Brown, Miriam Shapiro, or any of the women involved in the Cal Arts Feminist Art Project will always be Young Women Artists in their interiors and spirits in relationship to the artists who taught and inspired them.

Being a Young Woman Artist is really your second birth into the world, where you define yourself on your own terms. Becoming an artist is a willful and intentional decision.

Writers Charles Baudelaire and Hélène Cixous introduced me to the idea of a second childhood, the kind that only artists and poets have as adults. Baudelaire declared that “genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will.” And Cixous wrote:

But there is a path. It makes us go around the world to regain the second innocence. It's a long path. Only at the end of the path can we regain the force of simplicity or of nudity. Only at the end of life, I believe, will we be able to understand life's secret. One must have travelled a great deal to discover the obvious. One must have thoroughly rubbed and exhausted one's eyes in order to get rid of the thousands of scales we start with from making up our eyes.

I call “poet” any writer, philosopher, author plays, dreamer producer of dreams, who uses life as a time of “approaching.”

A second innocence, the rebirth we give ourselves, requires sustained work. It is unlike naivete, which is disillusioned and revealed and broken by the workings of the world. Innocence is not naïve: it is a form of adulthood that looks at life through the eyes of a child with the capacities adulthood brings. An artist's life is a journey of both beauty and tragedy, brimming with sensitivity to nature and energy, and efforts to reconcile our actions with our ideas.

If there is anything that I can share with you, it is what have I done to nurture my interior Young Woman Artist, my second innocence. Here are fifteen thoughts that have sustained me, and I hope, that one, if not more, are helpful to you. Keep only what resonates with you.

- 1) Your work should be the same thing whether no one is looking or if everyone is looking.
- 2) There are messages that are meant for you and only for you. Learn to listen to them and receive them even if no one else can hear or perceive them. If you listen to and are guided by your messages, others will be able to see the result of your actions.
- 3) Know that being a Woman Artist takes a long time... a lifetime. Small gestures, made every day, add up to works of art. And works of art have the power to change your life. Being an artist is a life of accretion.
- 4) There are some days you will spend 100% of your time being an artist and some days only 10%. Aim to average 50% of your time being an artist.
- 5) Be kind to yourself at the end of each day. Tomorrow brings a fresh start for the work you left unfinished today. You are your own best collaborator.
- 6) If you feel like a Maserati stuck in traffic, build your own road. Don't stay on roads that don't allow you to run your motor.
- 7) As you are making your work, ask yourself: Are you responding to something that already exists, in protest or reaction, or are you making something imaginary, fantastical and new? There is nothing wrong about being reactionary, but even artists who are making art in protest don't make their best work from a reactionary place. They create from a place of what is not yet, not destructive of what is.
- 8) Take care of your needs. Being a woman and an artist immediately puts you in an economically marginalized category (and this is without asking if you are a woman of color and/or queer). Focus on building a strong foundation for your entire life, the other 50% of your time. Get health insurance, marry whoever you want, adopt five cats and have children, but never stop making art or identifying as an artist. Real life both takes away the time from your art practice and gives the stability you need. Having love in your life — self-love and close relationships — is what will give you sustenance to take the risks you need to in your imagination.
- 9) Participate generously in your art community as much as you are able, but do not sacrifice your own career to take care of others.
- 10) Being an artist also means being an administrator. Some days you will be the personal assistant to your Young Woman Artist and “work on working.” This is everything from organizing your communication, paying your bills, focusing on another job, to researching ideas and meeting people.

- 11) Comparing yourself to other artists of your generation can be a useful metric of your career but should not be a permanent state. Use your feelings of envy to indicate areas where you might want to grow. If you haven't won a prize or gotten a show, embrace the motivation you feel when seeing others who succeeded in those aims. Be envious of the goal itself and not the person.
- 12) Get in the practice of taking uncomfortable steps. Send letters of inquiry. A museum curator friend of mine told me that in 25 years not one woman artist had written her for an opportunity to show their work, but she regularly received inquiries from men. Understand that sometimes the personal discomfort that comes when asking for opportunities might be conditioned rather than real.
- 13) You can't avoid tragedy, misfortune or failure, but you can be aware of how you handle them. Perhaps not in the moment, but later, in the studio, or workshop. The gift of being an artist is to be able to rework and reorder the raw material of life into something meaningful. It's good to remember that many people don't have work that helps them process and reorder their reality.
- 14) Take care of your body. Being an artist, like being an athlete, requires long hours of disciplined action to achieve goals. It's the practice of this discipline that make the finished work so satisfying. Your body, the instrument for your work, will flourish with good food, exercise and taking care of your health.
- 15) Most importantly, do work that makes you lose yourself to joy. Do whatever you can, in your way, that makes you riotously, awkwardly, and explosively joyful. Only you can define and celebrate what that is.

Have fun out there and if we run into each other, please say hello!

Lots of love,
Alexandra