

The Highlights - Master of None

Last year I gave a workshop at the Dumbo Arts Center on the topic of the artist's website under the rubric of "Tools for the 21st Century." In preparation for the talk, I culled examples of disparate artists' sites and downloaded open source website authoring tools to demonstrate to the Adobe-less. Before these technical demos - which came at the end, and were brief - I instructed the participants (who had paid for a workshop in how to make a website) to question if they even really wanted a website.



The room was full of artists of all stripes expecting me to tell them how to make their websites. It seemed to me to be a real "just the facts ma'am" type of crowd; most appeared to be there because they had already presupposed that they needed a generic artists' website. In front of them, microphone in hand, I felt a kinship to the late comedian Bill Hicks, who often attempted to disarm his expectant and fidgety crowd in this manner:

There's dick jokes comin' up, please relax. Folks, here's the deal. I editorialize for forty-five minutes, the last fifteen minutes we all pull our chutes and float down to dick joke island together.

The short opinion that follows is not a manifesto or a proclamation. It's not a research assignment, not a judgment or a complaint. This is not about the value of art workers: that is an entirely different and more significant inquiry. This is a questioning, a presentation of a type of alternative - and at the end, I'll tell you how to make a dick-joke website.

The apex of vocational success for a visual artist is supposed to be an unencumbered studio existence comprised of "making work" all day long (and, having used up my Bill Hicks

ration for this piece, I'll refrain from suggesting what it is we're supposed to be doing after 5 pm). There's a low hum among artists that tells us we should aspire to having studio-only work lives full of assistants, espresso makers, and plenty of storage.

While this is obviously not a realistic goal for most, neither is it a desirable or productive model for every artist. Aside from the fact that many of us are concerned with collaboration, community, and dialogue with other artists in addition to making our own work for exhibition, there are conceptual advantages to not being in the studio forty hours per week. For one, being a human in the world - for me, at least - is one of the main requirements of being an artist. The hermetics of a studio/art-world-only existence sometimes prevent an engagement with the world of working people - and let's be clear: studio work is labor that should be valued, but in many cases it is most championed when it is solitary, self-generated, and full-of-itself. There is no clock-punching going on in this equation.

Another requirement of art-making is problem-solving. Working to solve other people's problems - the problems of my employers, administrators, departments, students, peers, and colleagues - has made me more dexterous in solving my own when I am in my studio. I'm not certain that, as artists, we should spend all day, every day solving only our own problems alone.

Perhaps I take this position because I am pessimistic or lack confidence, or maybe because the current economic prospects make it look nearly impossible for non-international-brand-name artists to sustain a studio-only model for some time. But I don't think I'm selling artists short in saying this: our work should be valued, but the job description of an artist is so much more than to produce salable objects for consumption. Artists with complementary specialties - writing, administration, teaching, organizing, curating, cooking - can bring a non-corporate, unconventional, can-do (or can-figure-out-how-to-do) approach into a workplace. Ours is an aesthetic and critical outlook that can serve more than just our own needs within the culture at large. In return, the workplace can provide monetary sustenance, healthcare, and a sense of community and outside responsibility for us.

It's not for everyone, but in the current economy, artists who previously survived off of their work are going to have to (re)-enter the civilian workforce. Assuming they can find jobs, this turn should not be envisioned as a punishment or a reckoning for these artists, but as an opportunity/challenge to reposition themselves in relation to a limited and limiting vision of the artist as sole studio proprietor.

Artwork can be made in between shifts at a job. In the best cases, the work itself - and not just one's time management skills - is challenged by the fact that this outside employment exists. On the flipside, it is also ideal when the position is open to being filled by an artist

and the workplace welcomes a productive, if alternative and sometimes selfish, member of the staff onto its rolls. Historically, artists have excelled at carving out workable situations, the goal usually being least amount of man-hours for most amount of cash. But a new model can also exist, one where an artist retains agency while also getting paid to do complementary work which is informed by the subtlety, strangeness, and sure-footed temperament of the artist's persona.

And, about that website:

1. Open Dreamweaver. File > Document > New.
2. Insert dick.