

Parsons DT Commencement speech transcript  
Delivered May 13, 2020 via Zoom  
By Evan Roth

Hi everyone. Let me just start by saying congratulations. I'm very honored and excited to be joining you in this moment here today. I'm a proud DT graduate and current teacher at the Paris campus. And from working with those students I think I have at least a partial idea of some of the stresses you might be feeling graduating into times of uncertainty. And so rather than try to just be uplifting and motivational, I thought I'd use my 15 minutes here to arm you with as much practical advice as I can cram in. So in preparing for this, I sat down and tried to write up all of the things I wish I'd known graduating into the arts. I tried to keep this list much less "take time to smell the flowers" and much more "learn to ask for more money", if that makes sense.

A few quick disclaimers before I start: 1) at 42 years of age there are still times when I find myself arguing over \$100 artist fees, so I might be in no position to be offering advice and 2) this list is reflective of my experience as a practicing artist and is based on my circumstances and privileges. Everyone's situation is different. I know many of you are not going directly into the arts but my hope is that at least some of this will translate and be of use to everyone.

Ok, so.... 31 things I wish I'd known entering into the arts:

1. ***It's a long hustle***: This might sound like a bad thing, but it was actually an empowering realization for me to come around to because it sets more realistic expectations in terms of how and when career advancements are made. I think it's easy to look around and wonder how other artists got that big solo exhibition out of nowhere... but chances are they've been putting in work for 10 years or longer (and if not they are the exception to the rule). So keep in mind, "it's a long hustle."
2. ***No matter how good something goes, tomorrow is probably going to be the same as today***: There's been moments in my career when something good happens, I get that show, or I get that grant, and I think "Ok this is it, things are really going to be easier from this point forward!" And I'm continually surprised about how little changes immediately afterwards. In my experience things might change over the course of a year or two, but it's hard to tie anything to a single event. So the bad news is that, no matter how good something goes, tomorrow probably isn't going to change that much. But, the opposite is also true....
3. ***No matter how badly something goes, tomorrow is probably going to be the same as today***: One time I did a performance in Russia that was so poorly received that a literal angry mob formed and the fire department had to be called in for fear of a riot. The review of the show in the paper the next morning was possibly the worst review I've ever read... not just of my work, but of all time. On top of all that, I also got frostbite. It was a low moment for me professionally, but I was amazed at how quickly things went back to normal after that. Life didn't end. Now enough time has passed that I can't even find that article on the internet anymore if I wanted to. So remember, no matter how badly something goes professionally, tomorrow probably isn't going to be that different than today.
4. ***At least 12 no's for every "yes"***: Dealing with rejection is part of our job as artists. So my advice is not to even consider self pity as an option until it's been at least 12 consecutive

rejections. And I can attest that receiving rejection letters during quarantine feels especially insulting. But receiving repeated rejection is completely normal in this field. After your 12th consecutive rejection you can allow yourself to consider rethinking what you're applying to or what you're applying with, but until then it's business as usual. And this brings us to our next point:

5. ***It's almost never personal:*** When your application gets rejected, when someone doesn't answer your email, when it seems like everyone but you got invited to that group show, it can feel like, "oh, they must just not like me". When in reality, there are simply a lot of artists doing interesting things, and most likely they just haven't been properly introduced to your work yet. It's almost never personal.
6. ***Learn to say 'no':*** It's hard when you are starting out and not getting that many invitations to realize that some of them you need to say 'no' to. You don't want to let the invitations you get drive your practice. And this leads to ....
7. ***Flip bad invitations into good ones:*** Before saying outright 'no' to participating in an event, consider replying enthusiastically with what you would be excited to do (even if this deviates really far from the initial invitation).
8. ***Think on longer timelines:*** Allow yourself time to think beyond your next deadline. Actively thinking about where you want to be in 5 years or 10 years will help you make more informed decisions about how to spend your time and what you want to say 'no' or 'yes' to.
9. ***Ask for money:*** Ask at the beginning: "Thank you for the invitation. It sounds like an interesting project, what do you offer in terms of artist fees?". Send. Ask at the end, "I'm just following up on the invoice I sent a couple of weeks ago, do you know when I can expect payment on this?" Send.
10. ***Never be embarrassed or hesitate to remind people to pay you.*** They should be embarrassed! Email them everyday if you have to and hold your head high.
11. ***Get them excited about the project before getting into the specifics of the budget.***  
Once you're sure there is some kind of budget involved then show sketches or renderings of your work looking incredible in their space.... once they are in love with the project idea, then start negotiating the specifics of the budget.
12. ***When proposing projects to venues present options at different price points and don't be afraid to upsell.*** "Here is option A that falls within your scope, and here is what we could do with slightly more budget".
13. ***Start thinking bigger earlier:*** When working within a tight economy of means, it's often difficult to think about how your work might exist at a larger scale. Force yourself to think beyond what you can afford to produce at the moment.
14. ***Brainstorm all associated costs.*** Any cost you forget to ask for at the beginning is now coming out of your artist fee. Framing, crating, shipping, return shipping, taxes, food per diem, transportation to and from the airport, luggage fees .... Anything you forget to negotiate for at the beginning will likely be paid for by you.
15. ***When working remotely, always require the venue to send you installation photos of your work for approval 24 hours before the opening:*** When I can't be there to install my work in person, it drives me crazy seeing my work looking sloppy on someone else's instagram shot from the opening. And once that happens there is no way to go back.
16. ***You have to meet people and you have to tell them about your work.*** There are ways to do this without being pushy and self-promotional, but in order for people to support your work

they have to know about it. As an introvert, this isn't always easy for me but it is part of the job that cannot be fully neglected.

17. **Know where your money goes each month:** Understand your finances, especially your repeating monthly expenses. This will help you realistically evaluate invitations and jobs and figure out how much you need to earn each month.
18. **Support other artists:** Recommendations from artists actually go a long way, so when someone asks you, "who is doing good work right now?" have in mind artists you love and pitch them with passion.
19. **Inquire about representation:** When you're invited to an event and the makeup of that event is not reflective of the world you want to live in, then email the organizer or curator and ask them about it. This can be done respectfully and privately. They will thank you for it.
20. **As you learn more and more about how fucked up the contemporary art market is you will be tempted to make art about it..... resist this urge.** It's not worth it.
21. **Be professional.** Meet deadlines. Plan for contingencies. Show respect to the people you are working with and they will be more likely to recommend you to others, and will want to work with you again in the future.
22. **Make a backup plan:** For me, having a plan in mind for what to do if all of my invitations dry up was actually helpful. This allowed me to be less fearful about my immediate finances and take more risks with my practice.
23. **Force yourself to appreciate things when they go well:** I've been surprised in the past at how even after a strong opening or selling a big piece how easy it was to slip back into everyday stresses. So even weeks later I try to remind myself to appreciate and feel good about those successes when they do happen. So set an alarm for two weeks from now to remind yourself to feel good that you graduated!
24. **Solidify your mentors:** This is advice I received at a Creative Capital professional development session. In general people at all levels are potentially willing and excited to be approached as mentors. Aim high, reach out to them and ask in very straight forward language, "will you be my mentor?" Spell out what that means.... "maybe we could speak online for 30 mins once every couple of months?"
25. **Live with your art at home:** You'll probably know if it's good or bad after waking up to it everyday for one month. If you're still not sure then live with it for another month.
26. **When your ego can handle it, ask people close to you for critiques of your work.** Once you leave school, you will almost never again be surrounded by people that want to think deeply about and discuss your work at length. If you don't ask for it, you could go years without receiving honest, constructive feedback. There are times when this might not be what you need. For me I know there are many times when what I need is just encouragement. But, when you're feeling ready for it, reach out to people and ask them for unguarded feedback on your work.
27. **Take note of your surroundings when the good ideas come.** Those conditions are often repeatable. Were you jogging, having morning coffee, taking a shower? Then, when you run out of ideas just go for more jogs, or take longer showers.
28. **Treat the documentation of your work with the same attention as you made the work with.** 99% of people will experience and learn about your work through its documentation, so think about how it will be photographed as a forethought rather than an afterthought. In my experience the photos of a piece installed in an exhibition do more in terms of bringing in

future invitations than people seeing the work in person. And this leads me to the next point, because you are going to need those photos when you....

29. **Apply to many things.** This should go without saying, but it's easy to forget, especially when life starts to fill up with other things. Probably the single biggest break I received in my career was a fellowship at Eyebeam. This allowed me to make work full time for two years after graduate school. It's scary for me to think about what might have happened had I missed that deadline. There are a lot of resources for how to identify and apply for arts funding, but at a minimum you can do the following: spend some time doing online searches for "art funding", "art grants", "art residencies". You will find lists of these opportunities compiled by different people and different organizations. Start a spreadsheet and add all of the ones that you qualify for based on the kind of art you make, the country you live in, your age, etc. Make this a living document to which you return to and add more things when you find them. Sort this list by due date and add the deadlines to your calendar. And then consider sharing this document with others, as others might share theirs with you. And also, don't forget that the people reviewing applications have other jobs, so even if your project doesn't get funded it could lead to an invitation for something else they are working on in the future. This brings us to...
30. **When you get rejected, apply again the next year.** The Creative Capital grant I mentioned earlier, I got rejected from that twice before receiving the award. For larger grants I've heard of artists being rejected many more times than that before finally getting them. Again, it's a long hustle. Ask for feedback on rejected applications. Applying over the course of several years gives organizations a chance to really know your work and watch it grow. Ok, and the last thing I will leave you with...
31. **When in doubt, make work.** This is something easier said than done, but it's something I return to repeatedly. When I'm feeling lost or distracted by what others are doing or what I worry I should or should not be doing, I try to block out all the distractions of the art world, of the Internet and social media, and just make things.

It is a tough field you're entering into at a tough time, there is no way around that. But I think the reason we have chosen this path along with all of its rejections and difficulties is because there is an undeniable joy and satisfaction in making these things. So in times of doubt, make work.

So with that I'd just like to extend a final heartfelt congratulations on your accomplishment here today, and thanks so much for inviting me to be a part of it. It means a lot. This concludes what I wanted to say, but I did have a very small parting gift for you (don't get your hopes up). I'll paste a link into the chat here: <http://www.evan-roth.com/transfer/graduation/>

I'll include the transcript of this talk here later, but for now you will find a set of Zoom backgrounds that I made specifically for the graduation class of 2020.

So feel free to download them and use them when necessary. Congratulations again, and at this point I'll send it back over to you in New York. Thank you.