

# VULTURE

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## 27 Artists on the Worst (and Best) Advice Anyone Ever Gave Them on Being an Artist

*As told to Brian Keith Jackson, Whitney Mallett, Cara Ober, Antwaun Sargent, Michael Slenske, Carl Swanson, and Drew Zeiba*



Marina Abramovic. Photo: Laura Lezza/Getty Images

How to be an artist? In the issue that hit stands November 26, *New York Magazine* art critic Jerry Saltz shares his [33 rules](#). But here's what actual artists said when we asked them.

### **Who gave you the best advice on being an artist, and what was it?**

From my old professor: "If you make drawings with your right hand and become a virtuoso, you should immediately switch to your left hand." Also: "Don't repeat yourself." — *Marina Abramovic*

Paul Rego: "Work, work, work. Work, work. And take many lovers." — *Natalie Frank*

Kerry James Marshall: “You have to do this for the love of the work first. Beyond that, anything else is gravy.” — *Sanford Biggers*

Mel Bochner, when I was in graduate school: “Make the work; find a way in your life, even though there may be obstacles, to prioritize art.” — *Mickalene Thomas*



Mickalene Thomas. Photo: Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images for ICP

Alighiero Boetti: “Never write bullshit!” — *Maurizio Cattelan*

My aunt Claudine Brown: “I’ve known you for a long time and you are incapable of having a job you don’t like.” (I don’t think it was entirely meant as a compliment.) — *Hank Willis Thomas*

My mother, who was also an artist: “Never stop.” — *Joyce J. Scott*

Carrie Mae Weems during my last year of graduate school at Syracuse: “Follow your own voice, be responsible for your failures and, if you haven’t found your voice, work until you do.” — *Deborah Roberts*

My mother, who, when I told her I was bored as a child, always said: “Good. It’s good to be bored.” Learning to sit with my boredom, I developed my imagination, my patience, my ability to sit with myself alone in my studio for long hours. — *Narcissister*

Elizabeth Catlett: “Make art every day.” — *Derrick Adams*



Derrick Adams. Photo: Chance Yeh/Getty Images

Charles Ray: “The medium of sculpture is space.” Before hearing that, I had always thought of sculpture in terms of materials. — *Frank Benson*

“Nothing happens without the work.” — *Jordan Casteel*

My mother: “Remain grounded and clear. Being an artist doesn’t mean leaving all of the personal self-care and self-reflection behind.” — *Xaviera Simmons*

Mase: “Stay humble, stay low, blow like Hootie.” — *Jayson Musson*

“Don’t try to be original.” — *Jon Rafman*

## **What’s the worst advice you ever got?**

When I was in grad school, one of my teachers told me “When in doubt use yellow ochre.” — *Marilyn Minter*

One of my art dealers told me, “Do different variations of your pieces.” — *Maurizio Cattelan*

“Be like so-and-so, go to dinner parties and shmooze.” — *Kenny Scharf*

A grad school professor: “Politics and identity in art are a waste of time.” — *Sanford Biggers*

A curator in response to my identity-politics-themed works: “You really can’t make work like this, I mean once Kara Walker had done it, nobody else can touch these themes.”  
— *Narcissister*



Narcissister. Photo: Pier Marco Tacca/Getty Images

My mother: “If you have to be an artist, at least marry a doctor lawyer or architect so you can live off of their income.” — *Marina Abramovic*

This idea “you can’t trust anyone” is always bad advice. People want to help one another.  
— *Raúl de Nieves*

A “friend” told me: “You need to capitalize on this attention right now because your work doesn’t really have any substance.” — *Kayode Ojo*

People have told me to stop being a perfectionist and make more work, more quickly. This is not bad advice in theory, but it does not work for me. — *Frank Benson*

A gallerist said I should stop using paint straight from the tube. — *Claire Milbrath*

**Did anyone ever give you “permission” to be an artist?**

Absolutely no one. — *Marilyn Minter*



Marilyn Minter. Photo: Vivien Killilea/Getty Images for Visionary Women

Everyone who never let permission dictate their own vision of success. — *Jordan Casteel*

My seventh-grade English teacher Mrs. Gonzales. She could see early on that my artwork was my security, my identity, so she provided me with safe a space to create in her classroom before and after school. — *Deborah Roberts*

No one gave me permission, I'm just good at being poor, idealistic, and solipsistic.  
— *Jayson Musson*

My mom gave me permission by never asking me why or to defend the thing that I loved. I can't imagine not having had that support. — *Paul Sepuya*

I fought against being an artist for a long time because I thought that it was impractical and that it would lead to a life of poverty. But when my daughter was young I noticed that I kept on getting up earlier and earlier to work in my makeshift studio in my house. I realized it was a habit that wasn't going away, and I needed to take it more seriously. I guess I gave myself permission. — *Simone Leigh*

There wasn't some romantic gates of heaven moment. It just took unlocking the mind and really saying it out loud, "I like making things." — *Tyler Mitchell*

I think all artists are secretly waiting for permission to be an artist, even after they're dead. I'm still waiting for it, myself. — *John Waters*



John Waters. Photo: Emma McIntyre/Getty Images for Hammer Museum

No one gave me permission to be an artist; it was a calling and I just listened to it.  
— *Derrick Adams*

God himself. — *Marina Abramovic*

### **Was there a moment when you felt like you'd made it?**

The moment when I had my solo Brooklyn Museum show, I was like, “Okay, I’ve done something, because I’m here. There is a larger audience that wants to see my work.”  
— *Mickalene Thomas*

When I discovered the only person you need to please is yourself. — *Maurizio Cattelan*



Maurizio Cattelan. Photo: David Livingston/Getty Images

My first solo exhibition opening, which was on the Grand Canal in Venice, I came over the bridge, and there was a crowd of people drinking Prosecco. They all turned and applauded, saying “*Bellissima.*” — *Shinique Smith*

In 2012 I was able to quit a job at the Apple Store; not because I was selling work, but because my friend Haley helped me get a teaching job at NYU. — *Artie Vierkant*

The Whitney acquired my large painting *When the Worlds Collide* in '85 and showed it in the Biennial. — *Kenny Scharf*

When I was asked to do a solo exhibition in the grand foyer of my high school when I was in 12th grade. — *Sanford Biggers*

When I lived in Amsterdam, next door to me there was a shop which sold very good organic fruits and vegetables. The owners were never friendly to me and the products were so expensive. One day I was passing by and they finally invited me in the shop with a huge smile on their faces and they offered me a basket of delicious strawberries for free because they had seen me on *Sex and the City*. I knew then that things had changed. — *Marina Abramovic*

When my episode on *America's Got Talent* aired. To have that endorsement of my work from such an unexpected source was exciting and validating. — *Narcissister*

I felt really good when I was able to put my electricity bill on auto-pay. — *Jayson Musson*

It's incredible to walk into my studio every day. My surroundings constantly remind me of the fortunate position I'm in. — *Kennedy Yanko*



Kennedy Yanko. Photo: Gary Gershoff/WireImage

I still don't feel like I've “made it.” — *Marilyn Minter*

There's no having made it, only the work of continuing to make it. — *Paul Sepuya*

## **What was your plan B?**

If I weren't an artist, I'd be a criminal defense lawyer or a psychiatrist, because that way I could deal with unfathomable human behavior, basically the same as I do now. — *John Waters*

I'm doing my plan B. Plan A was to be a lawyer. — *Mickalene Thomas*

When I first moved to the United States, my class asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said an opera singer. — *Raúl de Nieves*



Raúl de Nieves. Photo: Gonzalo Marroquin/Patrick McMullan

Chemical engineer. — *Kayode Ojo*

I always thought that if I weren't an artist I would have been either a surgeon or midwife. Midwifery is on the same spectrum of creating and seeing the creative process unfold. — *Xaviera Simmons*

A gardner. — *Kenny Scharf*

There was never any plan B. — *Tyler Mitchell*

Bartender. I've got a great rack. — *Natalie Frank*

I'd like to be a philosopher. I especially like the idea of being a comic-book philosopher — you know, if philosophy was written in comic-book format. — *Joyce J. Scott*

It's not a job. It's my life. Being an artist and being a person are the same thing to me. — *Hank Willis Thomas*