

What Can Visual Artists Do to Be More Creative?

- **Train you senses to take in more of the world.**
- **Keep looking at art. And look for a long time.**
- **Collect things.**
- **Build a community of artists as passionate about their work as you are.**
- **Remember: It's only humiliation.**
- **Have a plan to resist creative blocks.**
- **Get more sleep! Really.**

1. Train you senses to take in more of the world.

According to artist Robert Irwin, art is “a continuous examination of our perceptual awareness and a continuous expansion of our awareness of the world around us.” Artists are supposed to be experts in sensation. So artists need ever more sensory stimulation. One way to succeed at this expansion of consciousness is to selectively break the cognitive filter that keeps you from being overwhelmed by sensory data. The pleasant cognitive haze in which we typically walk around is great for keeping you focused on everything you already know and do, but it's death to creativity.

What generally snaps us out of the cognitive haze is surprise. Something different. A strange noise. A puddle across a path that is usually dry and clear. Godzilla looming up from behind a hillside.

But you don't have to wait for a fight-or-flight-worthy encounter. Train yourself to be selectively attentive to what usually passes unnoticed. Right now: look down at your hand as if you've never seen such a thing before. What do you see when you look intently at that hand? What does your hand feel like if you rub it with your other hand? Slap it on the desk—what does it sound like?

Assuming you followed my suggestions: it's remarkable, isn't it, what you didn't know about your own hand. Think how much you don't know about everything else that usually slides right by you. By paying deep attention to what usually escapes your notice, you build new concepts and experiences that can be linked to others you already have in your brain stores.

In *The Blank Canvas*, Anna Held Audette observes, “An idea is our visual reaction to something seen - in real life, in our memory, in our imagination, in our dreams.” Ideas are not general notions when they start out. Ideas are the result of some small, specific insight about how heretofore unconnected concepts and sensuous experiences are, in fact, linked in some interesting way. That small insight becomes the irritant in the system (like a grain of sand in an oyster) around which other insights can accrete.

We love travel because it puts us in places where lots of sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes are unfamiliar and therefore closely attended to. Take a trip wherever you are by noticing how much you don't notice about the world around you every day.

2. Keep looking at art. And Look for a long time.

This one is pretty obvious. If you want to keep ideas about art-making flowing, you need to keep looking at art of all kinds, everywhere you can. Fill your head with the domain.

No need to fear that you will be overly influenced by what you see if you see a lot of stuff of all sorts. Don't just look at the work of people who do what you do. Look at everything. Look hungrily. And look for a long time. The painting you see after sitting in front of it for an hour is a very different painting you see as you pass it by for a minute.

The truth is, you can't be novel and appropriate unless you know what's out there. You can't break the rules unless you know them.

3. Collect things.

No, I don't mean stamps or figurines. I mean resources: images from magazines, poses on a train that you sketch or surreptitiously photograph, samples of fabric, items you find that might be reclaimed for art-making. Have a place to store them—a sketchbook, a Flickr site, a closet in your house, a drawer in your desk.

And don't just collect them—take them out and look at them or handle them once in a while. Make them part of your sense memory—how you go about learning to take in more of the sensuous world. Even if you never use them, they teach you something every time you stop, notice, and acquire.

Oh yeah, and purge once in a while. Have a resources swap meet with your artist friends. If nothing else, you'll all have a good laugh about the things we artists pick up and keep.

4. Build a community of artists as passionate about their work as you are.

In any biography of an artist you read, or any biopic of an artist you see, you always find a circle of artist friends who are as obsessed about art as the central character is. Just as certified public accountants hang out with other certified public accounts to talk about accounting, artists like to talk art with other artists.

Even chatter and blather about art with other artists is a good thing. You're speaking a

common language about a common way of seeing the world, and that may lead to unexpected new ideas and insights. But even better is to have some way of engaging regularly with each other's work. Bring the party to each other's studios for an impromptu critique along with the pizza and beverages.

Don't wait for time to open up to make community building possible. Time never will. Build on the network you already have. And if you can't find a way to structure community building for yourself, jump on something ready made. Take a class!

5. Remember: It's only humiliation.

Critique does one great service to artists: it helps them learn to put their egos on the line at every stage of the creative process. Painful as it sometimes can feel, it's a huge advantage in the creative life.

Once you have a skill base, be confident and take more risks. Try something that seems silly, or hard, or just beyond the border of what you know how to do. Work hard at it, then put it out there to your circle of artist friends. So what if it isn't any good! Their comments may help you go down a better path, or may help you see how to make your original idea work. Just keep the flow of work going, and keep the critiques coming. You might have the members of your critique group read *The Critique Handbook*, by Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford, just to lay down some ground rules for what a critique should and shouldn't do.

One of the deepest fears most of us harbor is the fear of making a fool of ourselves. So turn it around—don't run away from the fear; run toward it! The pain of showing work that doesn't work lasts a few minutes. As the actress Judy Holliday once said, "It's only humiliation." The benefits of learning from mistakes, however, last forever.

6. Have a Plan to Resist Creative Blocks

Creative blocks are inevitable in an artist's life. Often the obstacles are mundane: the wearing-down of motivation by the need to juggle the day job, the family, the holidays, the yard work, and so on. But the danger of these blocks is that they threaten to absorb you completely, until your will to add one more imperative—your own desire to make art—to the list is eroded.

The research says that resisting creative blocks to keep momentary setbacks from becoming chronic, calls for four skills:

- **Break it down:** If you have a creative project, divide it into the smallest possible units.

The projects that don't get done are those that never get started. By breaking a big task

into ever-smaller units, you have a better chance of getting started—which infinitely increases the possibility that you will finish. If making schedules doesn't scare you, schedule some regular time to do a little bit on a regular basis. If you're not that kind of a planner, keep your project out where you can pick it up and do a little bit, here and there.

- **Rehearse:** Elite athletes spend almost as much time visualizing their moves as making them. Do the same thing: work on your next bit of your project in your head. Your brain won't realize that you're only visualizing, and will keep spinning out new ideas and mini-insights to prime your process when you do have time to work.
- **Put your own voice in your head:** Neuroscience suggests that we say somewhere between 300 and 1000 words per minute to ourselves. That constant stream of self-talk is mostly repetitive, and a lot of it is accumulated self-scorn—much of which we incorporated from the negative words of others. So try to inject your own voice into the stream, with words that are supportive rather than scornful. Remember—the brain doesn't differentiate between what you say and what is—it treats these scornful words as if they are data to store. If you catch yourself calling yourself lazy, or stupid, an idiot, a failure, talentless, worthless—correct the pattern as if you were correcting a trash-talking 5-year-old. Say the kind of nice things to yourself that you would suggest that 5-year-old say. The more you hear supportive words in your own voice, the more you will believe them—and the less space the trash-talk will have in your head.
- **Breathe:** When you feel yourself getting tense and negative while you are working on a project—or even just thinking about it—you have to avoid letting those negative feelings take over and color the experience. The best way to do that is to initiate what psychologists call the relaxation response—a cascade of neurochemicals that induces calm and a sense of well-being. The fastest route to the relaxation response is to take a few long, slow deep breaths—with particular attention to long, slow exhalations. It's almost magic how quickly this simple practice will work. Sometimes the relaxation will be so profound that you may fall asleep—but that's not so bad!

7. Get more sleep! Really.

Artists are notorious late-nighters. And that's fine. But make sure you schedule in some late mornings and some nice afternoon naps. According to Harvard researchers, sleep enhances performance, learning, and memory, and it also helps the brain connect unrelated ideas and

memories in a way that leads to and links mini-insights.

Remember the words of painter Paula Modersohn-Becker: "To struggle for strength. It sounds so dramatic. One does as best one can, and then one goes to bed. And that's how suddenly one day, it becomes evident that one has achieved something."

So go to bed.