

# Making

Your Life as an Artist

# Workbook

The materials and approach of Artists U are open source, under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

(All of Artists U may be used by anyone as long as you are not using it to make money.)

Designed by Random Embassy in Philadelphia, PA

This workbook exists because of many brilliant people: Jennifer Childs, Janera Solomon, Nick Stuccio, Aaron Landsman, Colleen Keegan, Alyson Pou, Ruby Lerner, Makoto Hirano, Michele Byrd-McPhee, Anna Drozdowski, Kate Watson-Wallace, Ken May, David Mitchell, Rucyl Mills, Jeffrey Kent, Molly Ross, Ashley Minner, Maggie Villegas, Judilee Reed, Sam Miller, David Brick, Amy Smith, Debbie Shapiro, Esther Robinson, Jackie Battenfield, Karen Ann Myers, Rodney Lee Rogers, Tamara LaValla, Michaela Pilar Brown, Melissa Franklin, Nick Stuccio, Jeannie Howe, Leveraging Investments in Creativity, The William Penn Foundation, The Wyncote Foundation, The Surdna Foundation, The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Melissa Bridge, Beth Feldman Brandt, Pia Agrawal

# Thank

you

Thank you for making your work.

Thank you for choosing to be an artist.

It's incredibly important that you do it.

And that you make it sustainable.

## How to use this book

I am a choreographer. For the past ten years, I've been looking at artist lives: how we can thrive, what is punishing, and, most of all, the skills and tools we already have.

I started Artists U in 2005 as an artist-run incubator for changing the working conditions of artists, first in my hometown of Philadelphia, then in Baltimore and South Carolina, and now nationally.

I wrote the words of this book, but the ideas and tools come from many artists and thinkers: my collaborators in Headlong Dance Theater, my fellow Artists U facilitators, my colleagues at Creative Capital, and the thousands of artists I've worked with in the last decade.

This workbook contains exercises and assignments that have profound effects on artist lives. It is a companion to my book *Making Your Life as Artist*, which you can download for free ([artistsu.org](http://artistsu.org)). I recommend using them together; the workbook has the exercises, the book has the ideas and context.

The book and the workbook are free, open-source tools for artists to change our circumstances and to change the conversation. Use them, adapt them, remix them. And let us know what happens.

Andrew Simonet

A few thoughts:

*You know what's best for you.*

Use the workbook in a way that fits, that supports where you want to go. You're an artist which means you're a brilliant problem-solver and tool-user. This is toolkit. Use to build what you want.

*Don't do it alone.*

An workbook partner or two can help build accountability and get the conversation out of your head. We have a Working Group structure: a group of artists meets five times to do the Workbook. Download it and more tools at [artistsu.org](http://artistsu.org)

*Actually do it.*

These four things help artists thrive:

- 1) A plan. By far, the most important.
- 2) A sustainable budget, including rates for your time and strategies for bringing in revenue.
- 3) A realistic schedule that includes art-making and down time.
- 4) An artist statement that you love.

*If you want more information about any exercise or section, look at Making Your Life as an Artist, which goes more in-depth on all of these topics.*

Reach out if you have ideas, questions, insights.

[artistsu.org](http://artistsu.org)



**Planning**

**Mission**

**Money**

**Time**

# Planning

A concise, doable plan is the single most important tool for building a sustainable life.

Planning shifts artists from reactive to proactive.

Planning lets us spend a small amount of time on the big, long-term things that are most important to us. And that means those big things will actually happen.

Planning is a skill we artists already have. We use it all the time in our practice.

We imagine a thing that doesn't exist.

We make a plan to bring it into existence.

We implement that plan, responding to changes and discoveries.

We deliver the finished product.

Strategic planning means taking that skill out of the studio and using it on all aspects of our lives.

# Making Your Plan

## Step 1

Go somewhere by yourself, no phones, no computers. Write responses to the following:

**What do you want personally, professionally, and artistically in the next two years?**

**Personally** means everything in your life that does not have to do with working or making art.

**Professionally** means how your career unfolds, and how your work is delivered to the world.

**Artistically** means your art practice and the skills and collaborations that make it possible.

You have to write about all three.

Don't censor. Don't preshrink the goals to make them easier to accomplish.

Eliminate any "shoulds."

Whenever possible, quantify the goal, attaching a number to it. "More money" is a hope. "\$5,000" is a goal.

Be aware of which goals are internal (you can do it yourself) and external (someone else has to say yes). Make external goals as broad as possible:

"I want to perform at two festivals."

is broader than

"I want to perform at Festival X and Festival Y."

Dream bigger than you think you should.

*Personal Goals*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page below the title. It is intended for the user to write their personal goals.



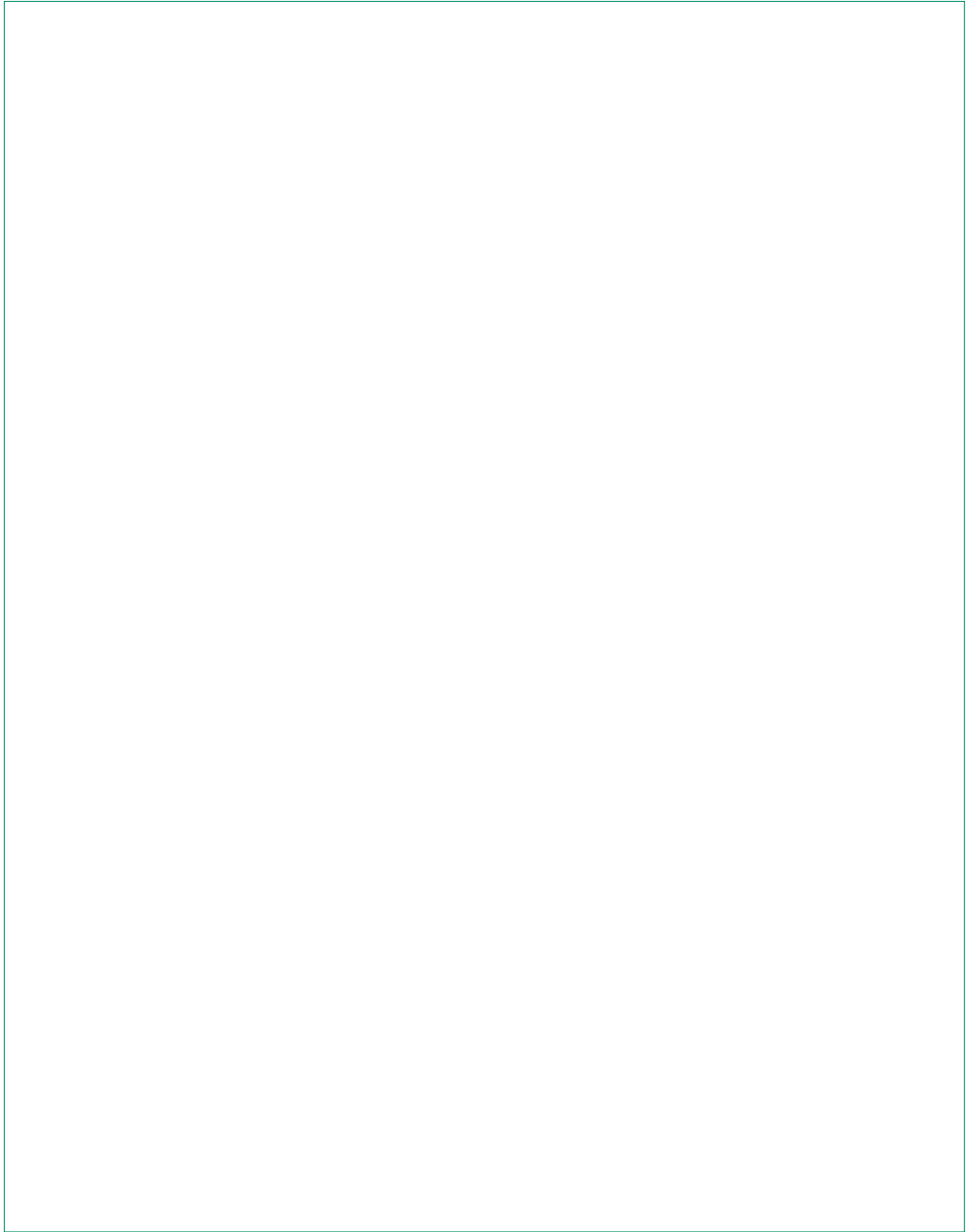
*Professional Goals*







## *Artistic Goals*



### Artistic Goals (Continued)

## Step 2

**Leave it alone for a week, then get out your list. You can add new goals and cross off any that don't feel important anymore.**

### **Choose your top three goals.**

Choose three that will have the most positive impact on your world.

That means three goals total. And you don't have to choose one from each category; they could all be from the same category.

Choosing three priorities turns your goals from a list (endless, diffuse) to a plan (concise, specific.)

95% of your plan is the things you are choosing not to focus on, the things you will not devote attention to.

# Goal One

# Goal Two

# Goal Three

## Step 3

**Break your three goals down into doable steps, the smaller the better.**

A step is a tiny action that you can put on your to-do list today and accomplish.

One way to tell if a step is small enough: you look at it and you have an urge to get it done. If a step makes you want to procrastinate, it's too big.

If you are doing something new, many of your first steps can be talking to people, gathering information that can help you figure out the next steps.

Keep the steps on a piece of paper or on your computer and move a couple of them onto your to-do list each week.

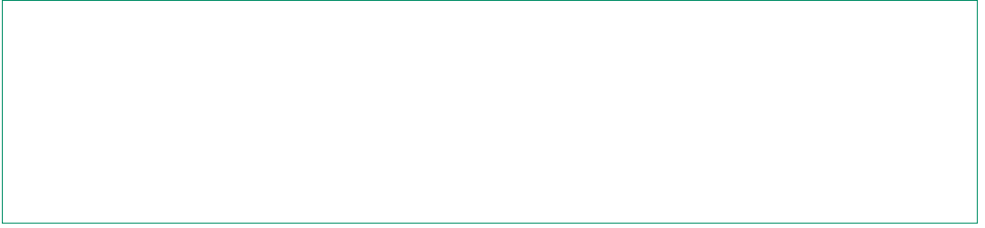
*Goal One:*



*Steps for goal one:*



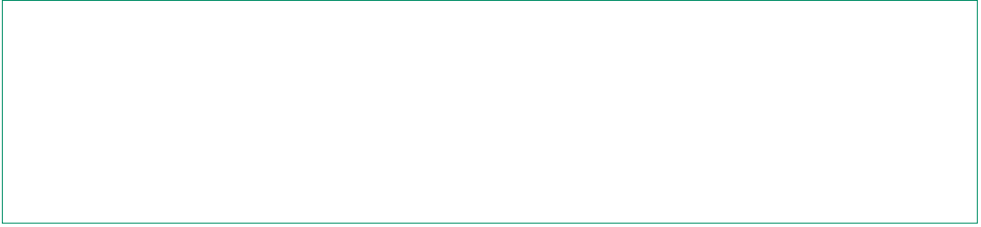
## *Goal Two:*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing the details of Goal Two.

## *Steps for goal two:*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing the steps for achieving Goal Two.

### *Goal Three*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing the details of Goal Three.

### *Steps for goal three:*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing the steps for achieving Goal Three.



# Mission

Every artist has a mission, a purpose bigger than yourself, a generosity. No one gets into this work for the money or status. Not for long, anyway. Artists begin with something to give to the world.

It may be a way of seeing or listening.

It may be pushing embodiment or questioning Big Cultural Narratives.

We have itches and visions and a drive to offer them up. It's what makes art-making different from keeping a journal or singing in the shower.

When we lead with our mission, more people connect with us.

We need to tell ourselves and others why we do what we do, what we have to give, and the big generous questions that provoke us into action.

And we need to say it in words, in what I call an artist mission statement.

We need artist statements of different shapes and tones for different purposes: programs, press releases, grant applications, websites. Underlying all of these, we need an internal artist statement, one that speaks honestly and passionately without worrying about who it's for.

## Write your artist mission statement: What? Why? And so what?

**What** is it? You'd be surprised how many artist statements don't clarify what the artist actually creates. Examples help.

**Why** is it important to you, the artist? What is your passionate connection to the work?

**So what?** That's a cranky way of saying: why does it matter in the world? Why does it matter beyond your interest? Why might other people connect to it?


### 1. The Interview

ou can do this alone, but it works best with another artist or artists. Set aside an hour for each artist, ask her these questions (and follow up questions when you are curious), and jot down notes, especially when something feels insightful or revealing.

When and how did you decide to be an artist?



Describe an early artistic experience that inspired you.



Are there any teachers or mentors who were formative for you? How?

Name three artists whose work you admire. What is it about their work and process that you love?

Describe your process for a specific work. Where did the idea or inspiration originate? How exactly did you work on it? What is your refining or editing process?

What is the most meaningful project you've ever created?

What is the most meaningful connection with an audience/public you've ever had?

If the whole world saw your work, if it was everywhere and kids studied it in school and towns brought it to the village green, how would the world be different? (This gets at the “so what” question. If answers to this start to feel hokey – people would slow down, there would be more empathy – you are on the right track.)





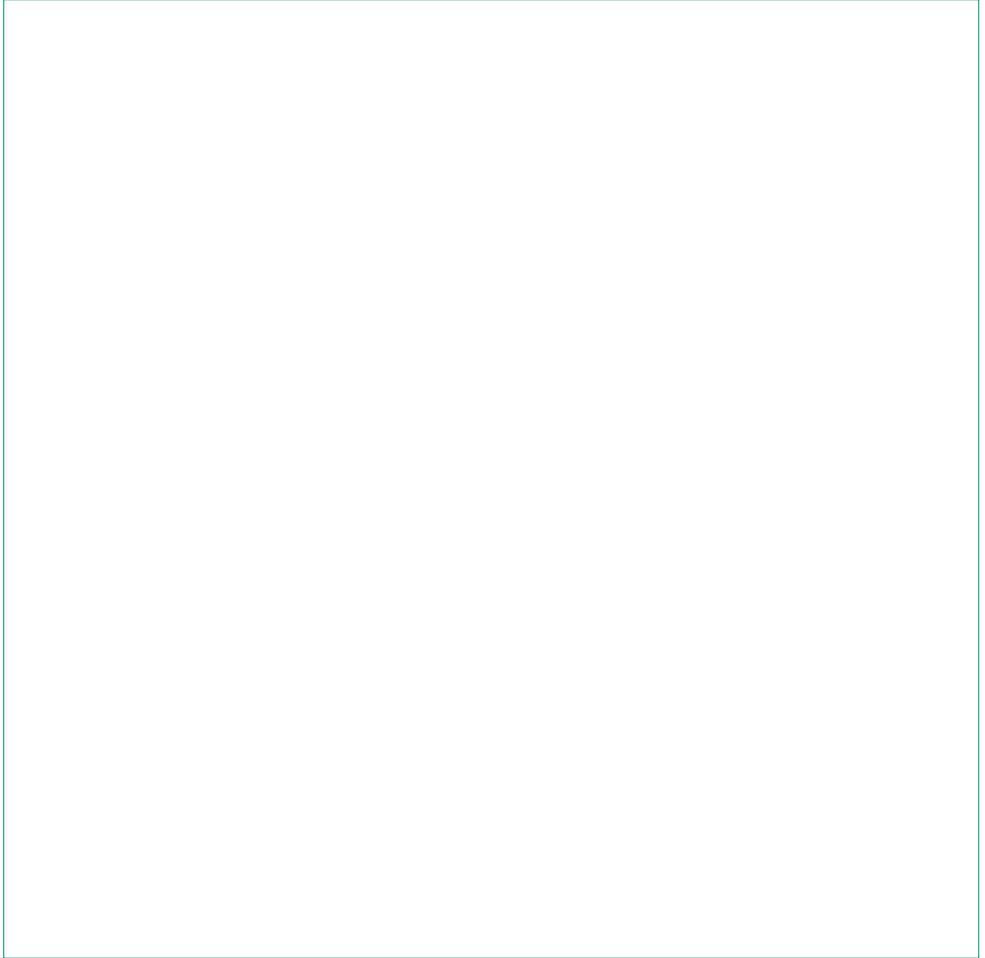
## 2. Language

Write a list of ten words to describe your work. This is the tiny haiku/telegram version of your artist statement.

Nouns and verbs are especially good. One or two adjectives are okay, as long as it isn't all adjectives.

Read these aloud to each other. (If you're doing this alone, read them out loud.)

Steal words from others that you like.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for students to write their list of ten words.

### 3. The Statement

Write a one-paragraph artist statement in the first person (“I”).

Start with a clean slate. If you have an existing artist statement, put it out of your mind for now.

Use phrases or sentences from the interview that you like. Use some of the ten words from your list (but you don’t have to fit all of them in).

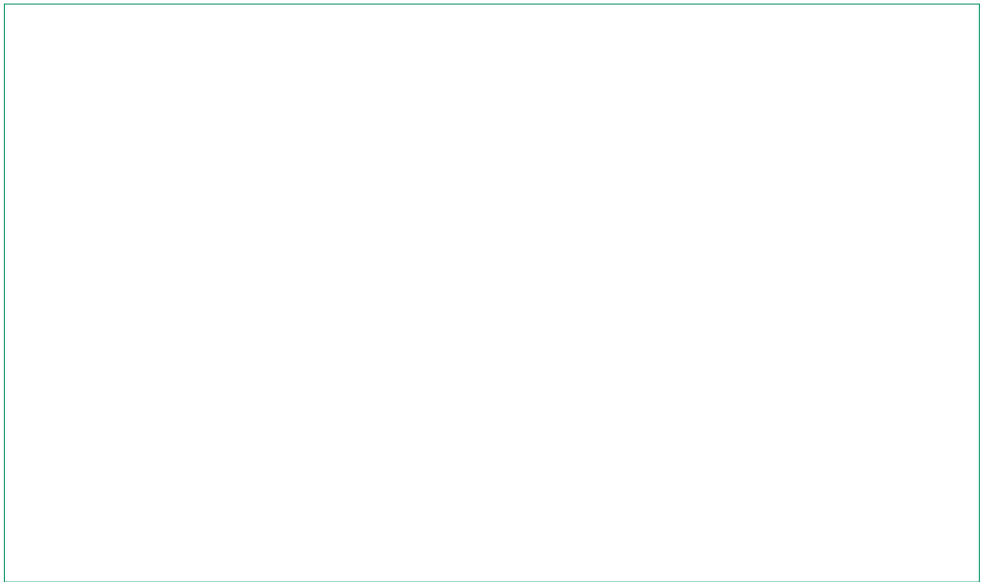
Answer the what-why-so what questions with juicy language and total honesty.

Your artist statement can speak in the same voice as your work. If your work includes collisions, humor, contradiction, or playfulness, your statement can, too.

Lead with what is most distinctive about your work, not with things that other artists do.

Give an example, especially if your work is between genres or hard to picture.

Strategically simplify. A lot of artists tell me, “Yeah, I do paintings but I also make installation work and digital projects and public art and I might record an album so DON’T PIN ME DOWN, MAN!” No writing will ever capture the full complexity of who you are as an artist. So simplify. And bring the reader close to your work.



**4. Share your statement with your artist partner(s) or with people who know your work.**

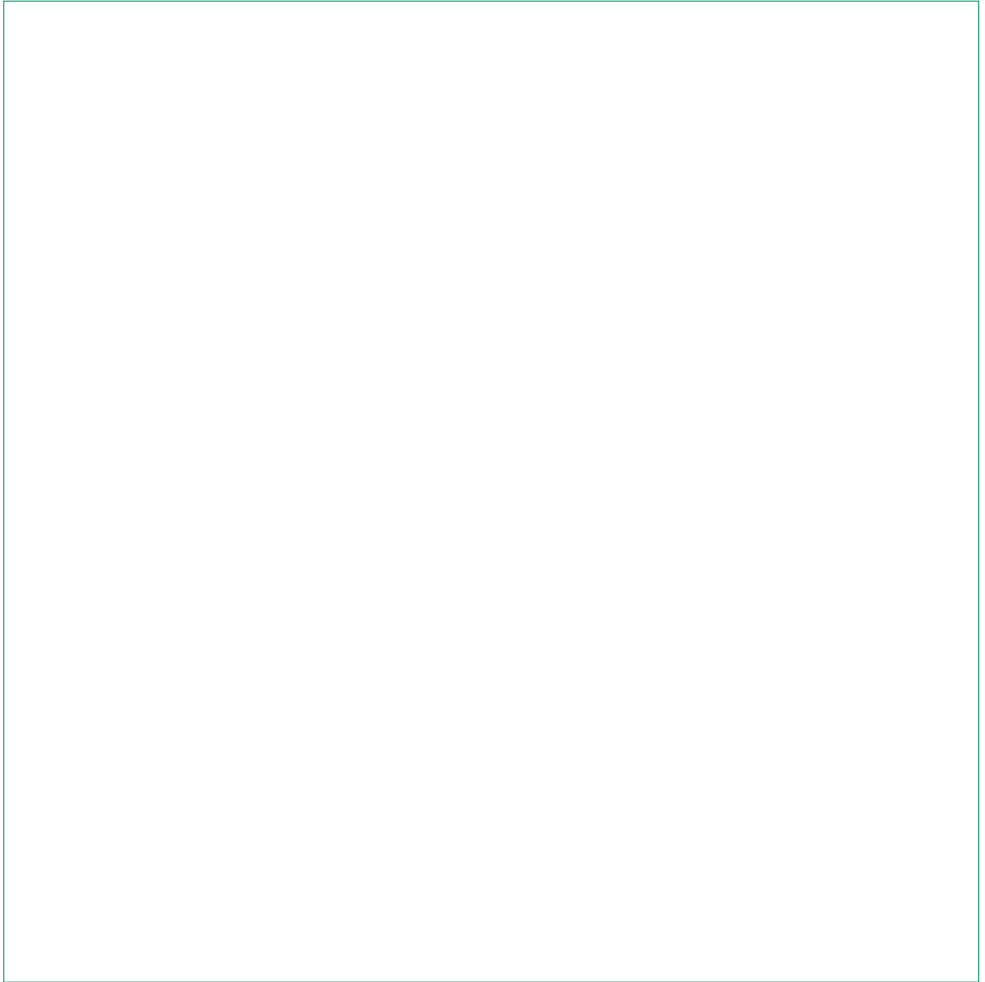
Ask them:

What is the strongest language, the words or phrases that linger?

Does it answer the what-why-so what questions?

And does it make you want to see the work?

After discussing it, go back and edit.



Your final (for now) artist mission statement

# MONEY

Most artists who leave the field don't leave by choice. They leave because they can't work out the time and money equations. There are other challenges in an artist's life, but the two things that actually stop us are: time and money.

The positive way of saying that is: if you can manage your time and money, you can make your work. Forever.

If you have a sustainable budget that pays for your life and your art, and a balanced schedule that includes art time, you can make your work.

A small amount of regular attention to your financial situation can bring huge changes. I don't want to put money at the center of our work. I want to take it out of the center by managing it so it is no longer a constant, low-level stress.

Here are small steps *you can do this week* to transform your finances.

## Get your credit report.

Go to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). It's free.  
(Don't google it; people try to make you pay.)

A credit report is a living document: mistakes can be corrected, problems can be cleared up, and positive steps can be taken to improve your credit score.

Knowing your credit score is economic citizenship. When we ignore our credit, we give up access to capital and to the incentives that reward investment and home ownership.

### **Have a meeting with a realtor if you don't already own your home.**

Just a meeting. Realtors make money when someone buys or sells a house, so they want to meet with you. Ask artist homeowners for a recommendation.

Owning real estate is not for everyone and not for every moment in your life. But we miss out on huge financial advantages when we say, "I'm an artist so I can't own a home."

Write down everything you spend for one week.

Do this with unconditional friendliness toward yourself. Most artists don't have expense problems, we have income problems. But knowing where your money goes helps you make decisions.

EXPENSE


AMOUNT




EXPENSE


AMOUNT


EXPENSE


AMOUNT


**Write down how much you need to earn in a year to live without financial panic.**

Knowing what your life costs will change the way you think and the way you hear information.

Here’s how to figure out that number. Go to last year’s taxes and take the “gross income” number, the number before taxes are taken out.

Add to that number any money you earned that was not included in your taxes.

Think about last year. Were you strapped for cash? Did you have trouble paying your bills? If so, add money to make it panic-free.

Add money for things every artist needs if you don’t have them: health insurance, paying down debt, putting money into savings, and taking time off.

If you live in a household or shared economy, there will be a big number for the household and a portion that is your contribution.

What I need to earn in a year to live without financial panic (my annual income):

## Figure out your hour, day, and week rates.

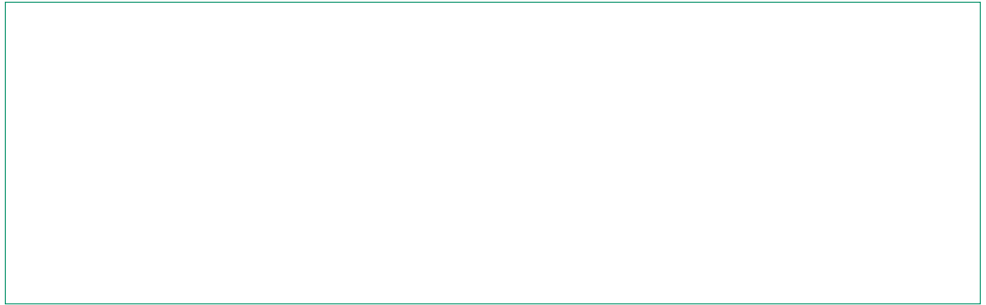
Artists don't know what our time costs. People ask us to do residencies, workshops, artist talks, etc., and to make our lives sustainable, we need to know our rates.

Divide your annual income need by 1500 to get your hourly rate.

Why 1500? If you work a "normal" job for a year, you'll work 2,000 hours (40 hours per week for 50 weeks.) Artists don't have 2,000 hours to earn our living. A lot of our work is piecemeal, a teaching gig here and a day job there, with lots of prep, travel, and transition time. And we need more down time than most people to feed our imagination and vision. Artists who earn their living in 1,500 hours find sustainability.

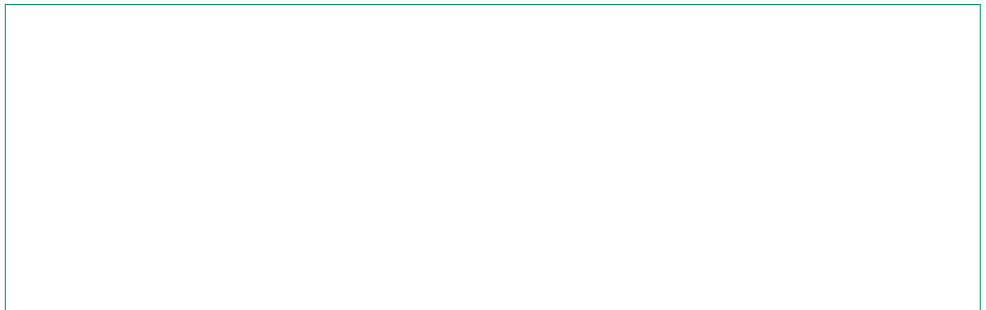
Multiply your hourly rate by 8 to get your day rate. (8 hours in a working day.)

Hourly rate x 8 = day rate



Multiply your day rate by 5 to get your week rate. (5 days in a working week.)

Day rate x 5 = week rate



Annual income

Hourly Rate

Day rate

Week rate

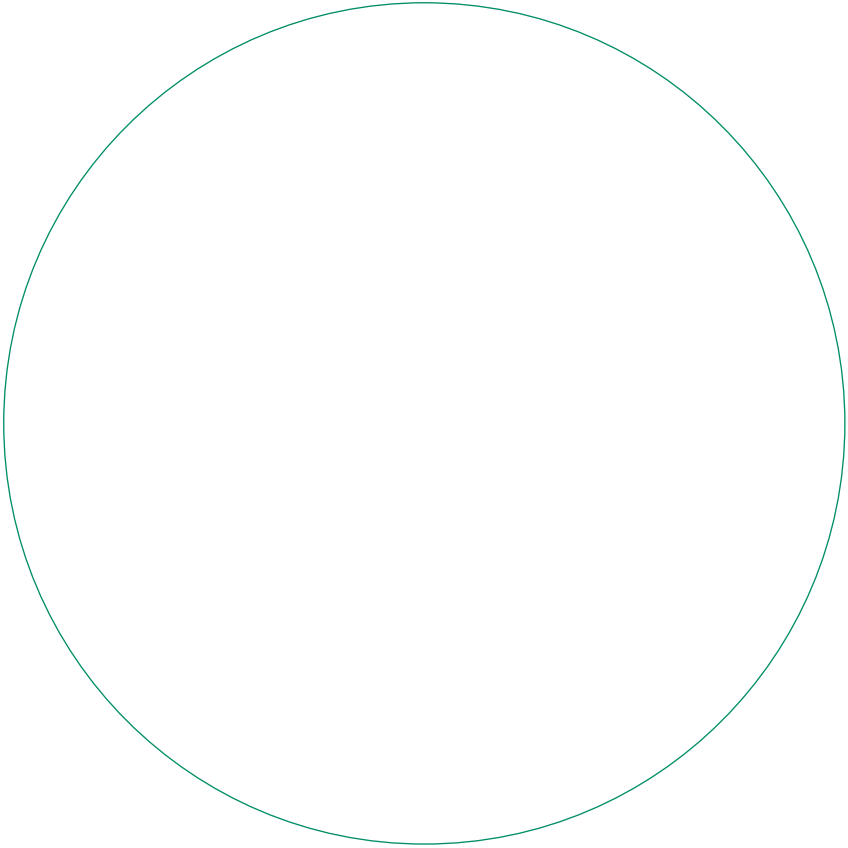
Make your revenue pie chart.

List every income stream you had last year and put the amount you earned.

Add it all up to get your total income, then divide each revenue stream by your total income to get the percentage. (If I earned \$5,000 in art sales last year out of \$45,000 total income, then art sales were 11% of my income: 5,000 divided by 45,000.)

Source of revenue	Amount	% of total

**Draw your pie chart.**



(You can print this and draw your pie chart on it. Not hard for an artist.)

## Set revenue goals.

Look at your revenue pie chart.

*Who is paying you well? And how can you get more of that work?* Are there gigs that come to you organically that you could put effort into pursuing?

*Can you increase your rate or price?* As you get experience and success, your value increases.

*Who gets a paid a lot to do this?* People earn radically different amounts for the same work.

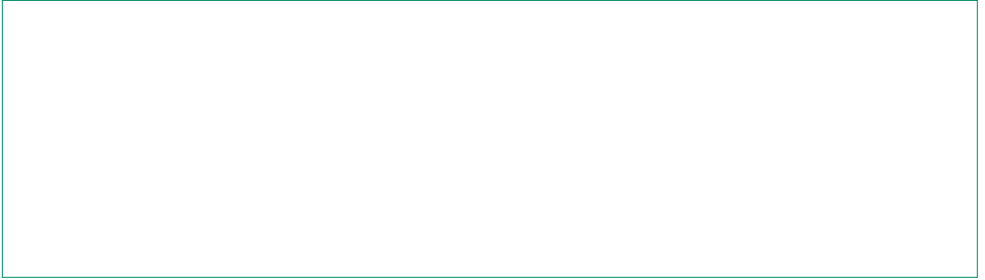
Make one or two specific revenue goals, and make steps for each goal. That could be: “I want to increase my art income by \$X next year.” Or: “I want to teach one less class per week and make the same money.”

Change how you talk to people. A lot of revenue streams begin with conversations. Tell people what you can do for them. Initiate conversations with potential employers. Ask past employers and your network: can you think of any people or organizations who might be a good fit for me?

Artists who are creative and strategic about revenue thrive financially.



### *Revenue Goal One:*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing details about Revenue Goal One.

### *Steps for Revenue Goal One:*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing the steps for achieving Revenue Goal One.

### *Revenue Goal Two:*

### *Steps for Revenue Goal Two:*

# Make your skills resume.

While a traditional resume lists previous employment, a skills resume lists your skills and competencies. Many artists have skills that do not come across in an employment history, and many of us are capable of high-level work that even we don't realize. New revenue streams often begin with naming our skills.

## Catalog your skills.

**Think of one or two large projects you have done (could be a body of work, a show, a community event). Write down everything you did to bring that project to life.**

Think of day jobs you have had, your money earning work. Write down every skill and responsibility of those jobs:

Think of your professional life as an artist. Write down all the things you do to manage it:

What other skills do you have? Languages, computer skills, manual skills:

## STEP 2

### Group your skills

**Categorize your skills by type.** It might look like:

*Fundraising: Conceiving and implementing individual donor campaigns, Large donor cultivation, Grant research, Grant writing, Grant reporting, Kickstarter campaign management.*

*Web communications: Cultivating and maintaining social media followings, Maintaining online email lists, Writing and designing online newsletters, Building and updating websites, Editing digital photos and videos.*

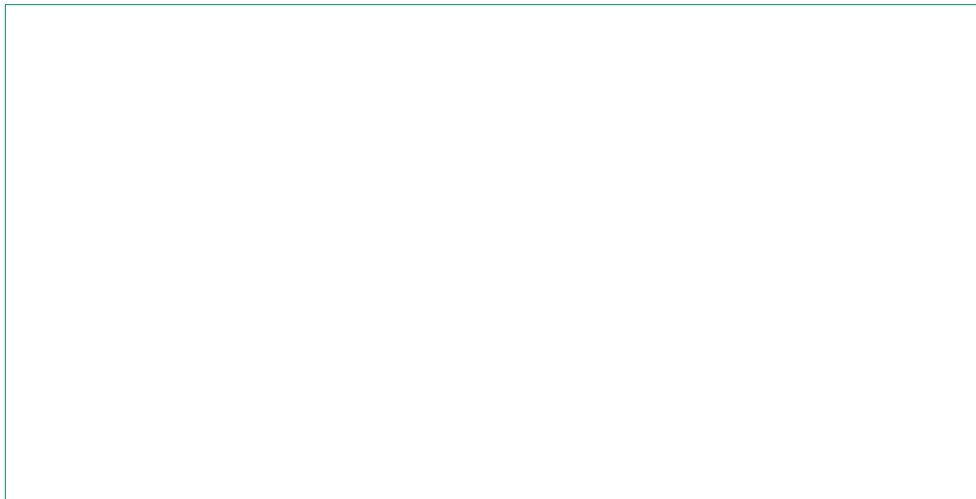
Look at your skills resume and imagine what you could be hired to do, especially high level, complex work. What is hardest problem you can solve for someone?

Make it easy for people to pay you. Another way of saying that: no one knows how to hire you. So you need to tell them specifically:

What can you do for someone?

What is is valuable and distinctive about it?

How much does it cost?



# Time

Time is the secret killer for artists.

I have never met an artist who needs to work harder, but all artists think they do. Artists need to work less and work smarter.

No artists give themselves enough down time. And we need more of it than most people.

Exhausted? Overwhelmed? Feel like you're constantly behind and there must be something wrong with you? There is nothing wrong with you. You are doing a heroic job under unmanageable conditions. Pushing harder won't fix it. You have to change the conditions.

"I'll just make more time." No, you won't. Time, unlike money, is finite. When we say we will make more time, we mean we will take it away from our art practice, our sleep, our families, our wellbeing.



### Write down how you spend your time for one week.

Artists know surprisingly little about how we actually spend our time. Tracking your time can help you see what's working and what's in your way.

Be specific. "Did work from 10:00-1:30" is vague. Break it down: "Answered emails 10:00-10:40, worked on project budget 10:40-11:00, phone call with Tia 11:00-11:30."

No week is "normal." Don't worry about it, just do it.

At the end of the week, look at how you spent your time.

What helps you be productive and what gets in the way? Always build on how you actually work, not how you think you should work.

When are you most productive? Use your best working times to do the most important work. Do emails and finances at your low-blood-sugar times.

Time Tracking Day 1

ACTIVITY

TIME

Time Tracking Day 2

ACTIVITY

TIME

Time Tracking Day 3

ACTIVITY

TIME

Time Tracking Day 4

ACTIVITY

TIME

Time Tracking Day 5

ACTIVITY

TIME

Time Tracking Day 6

ACTIVITY

TIME

Time Tracking Day 7

ACTIVITY

TIME



## List everything you are doing.

Write down all the projects, jobs, art practices, and ventures you are working on this year.

You don't need to include personal daily activities (buy groceries, clean my apartment). But if you have a personal project (buy a house, renovate my bedroom), write it down.

If you are like most artists, you are doing too much. Artists need to work less and work smarter. A lot less.


I can say it categorically: artists who do a smaller number of things excellently go further. We think doing 37 things at once is going to move us forward, but it does the opposite.

Look at what you are doing and ask: what can I take off my list?

*Everything I am doing*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying the majority of the page below the title. It is intended for the user to write their response to the prompt 'Everything I am doing'.

## *Everything I am doing*



**Getting help**

The one way to “make more time” is to have other people do things for you.

Get as much help as you can with the things that don’t have to be done specifically by you, so you can focus on the thing that only you can do: making your work.

**List your team.**

Who is already doing things for you and with? Collaborators, advisors, advocates, employees.

### List your dislikes

Make a list of your least favorite things to do. Start with the one you most dislike and ask: how can I get someone else to do this? Getting rid of something you dread has an exponential impact on your productivity and well-being.

## Make an Advisory Board

An advisory board is a small group of people who get your work, and whose opinions and thoughts you want to hear. Meet every month or two to talk about what you are doing, what is coming up, and what resources and connections would help move you forward.

These meetings are a chance to have conversations about your work out loud, instead of just in your head (or with your romantic partner). An advisory board can be small, three or four people is fine to start.

You might look for:

Someone from your art world: a presenter, gallerist, curator, etc.

Someone from outside the art world

Someone with specific skills: a lawyer, accountant, fundraiser, or just someone who's great at Thinking Big

**List people you would love to have on your advisory board.**



# Thank you (again)

Thank you for making your art.

And thank you for doing all of the things in your life that make art-making possible.

You are not alone.

There are thousands of us creating our work and creating our lives.

We are stronger when we do it together.

**[www.artistsu.org](http://www.artistsu.org)**