

# 10

DIVINE TRUTHS  
OF WORKING ARTISTS



*Crista Cloutier*

# 1 THOU SHALT FAIL!

Failure is an important part of an artist's job and can even become your best friend.

But too often our egos get in the way and we forget that being an artist is a practice, a journey. It's not a destination. And like any journey, particularly a difficult one such as art, the road is a minefield. It's full of risks.

But don't look at failure as "failure," look at it as a wise teacher. No one is born with the talent and knowledge and understanding that it takes to succeed as a working artist. Be patient with yourself. You've got to work through the bad to get to the good. Whether it's technique or marketing, there's no such thing as genius. There's only work.

Artist Vik Muniz once said to me that he'd failed so much in his career that failure has become his workplace and he now stands on failure itself. "When I succeed, it's because that time I failed to fail." Wise words from a photographer who's just been listed as one of the most important artists of our time.

Take these words to heart and go out there and fail! Fail again! Fail bigger! Never stop striving to do better.



## 2

# THOU SHALT HAVE A WEBSITE.

It's true.

Having a website is a sign of professionalism in the art business. And no, your Facebook page doesn't count. Your Saatchi page doesn't count either. Not that there's anything wrong with sharing your work on outside platforms, but they don't replace the need for your very own professional website.

You can use those platforms to attract new audiences for your work but what if you meet a collector or curator or gallerist? Why would you want to send them to a site where they can easily become distracted by someone else's work?

If I meet an artist and they ask me to look at their work but they don't have their own site, then I won't go any further with them. Without their own website, they aren't ready, they're not taking the business of being an artist seriously.



Websites are not expensive, and they don't have to be complex. They also don't have to be a "Museum to You," showing everything you've ever created since 3rd grade. They can be simple, in fact, the simpler the better.

By having a website, you're telling the world that you take your work seriously, and that you're current.

Don't expect your site to sell for you, that's not its purpose. But think of it as your portfolio. Use your website to invite people into your creative world and share your story.

3

**T**HOU SHALT BE  
SELF-CONFIDENT.



Thou shalt be self-confident. Or, at least fake it until you are.

A lot of artists tell me that they struggle with self-confidence. Do you? Do you think that it's something everyone else has and for some reason, you don't?

Self-confidence is really no great mystery. It's simply confidence in yourself.

Confidence that you'll do what you say you'll do - when you say you'll do it. It's confidence that you have your own back. Confidence that what you say is true, even in your work, especially in your work.

And you build self-confidence by practicing these skills. Meet every deadline. Tell the truth. Be where you say you're going to be when you've said you'll be there. Follow instructions. Present yourself professionally. Work consistently to hone your skills. Deliver everything at the highest quality that you possibly can. And always, always over-deliver.

This is how you acquire self-confidence. It's not something you're born with. It's not something that anyone else can give you. It's a skill that you develop over time.

And in the art business, self-confidence will serve you well.

# 4

## **T**HOU SHALT CONNECT WITH OTHER ARTISTS.

Any artist worth her salt is part of a larger arts community. Other artists are not your competition, other artists are your colleagues and, I think you'll find, your best friends.

I once lived in a town with lots of artists but no community. Everyone worked in their own frustrated little bubble. I tried to begin a monthly get-together; somewhere we could each share what we were doing.

But there was a big push-back. "I don't want to meet with other artists because someone might steal my ideas," one artist complained.

"You paint kittens," I reminded her. "I doubt your ideas are going to change the course of art history."

Other artists are the only ones who will know how you can overcome a technical challenge, where you can find the materials you need, and what you are going on about when you talk about your work incessantly.





Other artists will fill your shows because they're the only ones who understand what you've put into it. Other artists are your best resource for information as well as inspiration.

So join an arts community. Contribute your knowledge, and be as generous as you possibly can, always resisting that urge to hold back.

Your arts community is the best place to practice karma. The art gods smile favorably on those who give to other artists.

5

**T** HOU SHALT TAKE  
TIME TO CONNECT  
WITH YOUR IDEAS.



Art is more than just pretty pictures. The best art explores ideas, and ideas need time to develop and to grow. In fact, they demand it.

Respect the process and give yourself permission to take this time for your work. Schedule it, or better yet make it a part of your daily routine.

Each day I take an hour or so to have a conversation with my work. I travel all over the world so when I'm in Arizona I ride my bike, when I'm in the countryside I ramble through forests, in London I walk to museums.

It doesn't matter where I go, the destination is always the same – inside myself. This, this space, this precious time by myself, allows me to connect with my thoughts on a deeper level. This is where I think through my ideas: making connections, solving problems, understanding bigger pictures. This is my real work, and this is my workspace.

Just because reading books and blogs, visiting museums and taking long solitary walks looks like more fun than other people's jobs doesn't mean that it's not part of your work.

You've sacrificed a lot to be an artist. Don't deny yourself this.

And it's a revolution. A call to arms. As the world moves away from quiet contemplation, someone must lead the way back. This is what art does. By taking this time to think, you can change the world.

# 6

## **T**HOU SHALT **NOT QUIT.**

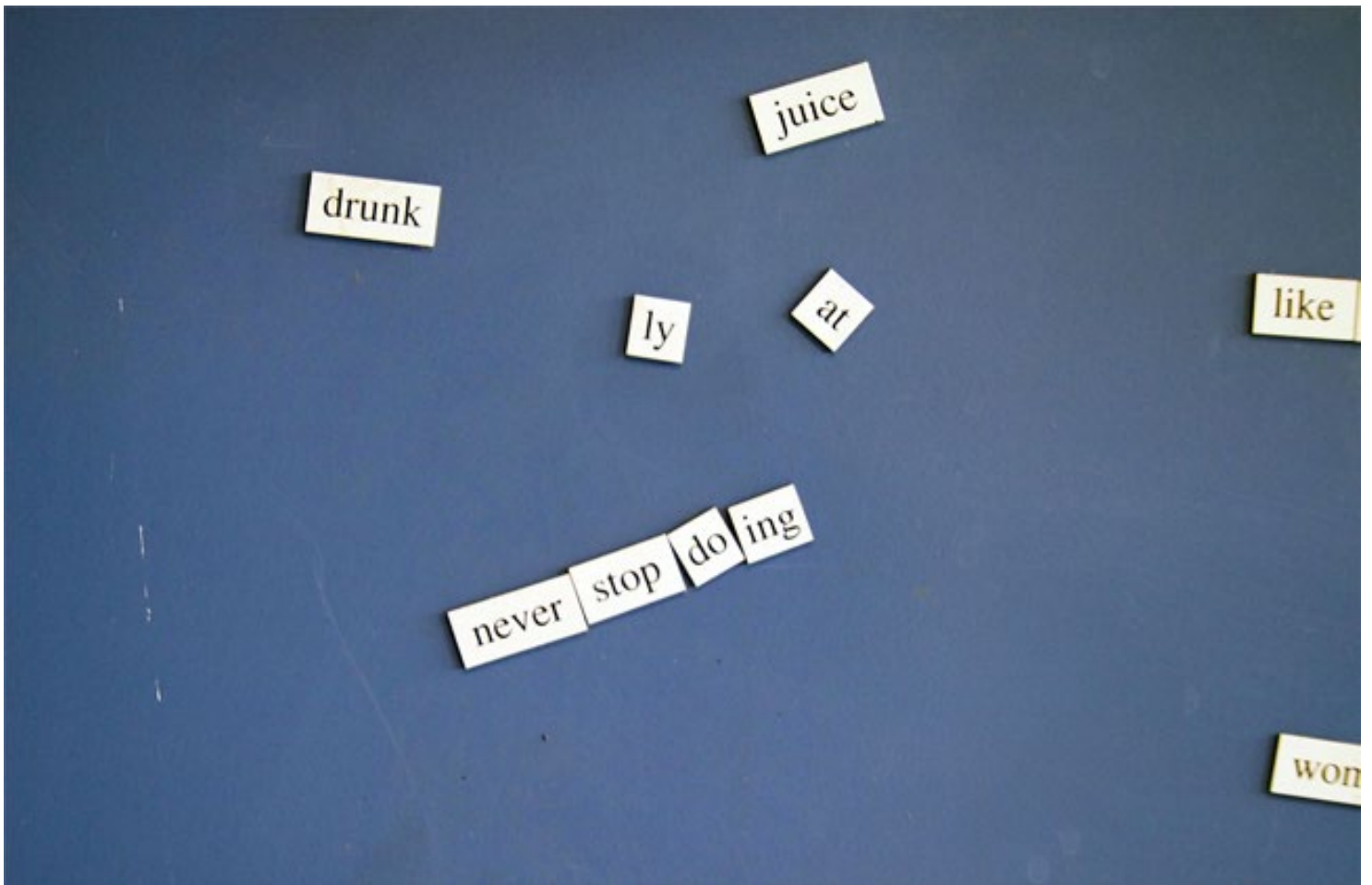
Artists have got to arm themselves with resilience. You're going to hear the word "no" more than you will "yes," and it takes resilience to keep going.

Remember, set-backs are not the same thing as failure. So don't despair!

Consider everything a lesson learned. But cultivate an understanding of how to deal with setbacks. You're going to get rejected, someone is going to close the door in your face, they will delete your email without even reading it. How will you choose to deal with that? What can you learn? How can you do better next time?

There will be people who don't like your work. Or will think they can do better. How do you handle criticism? What about the guilt, the fear, and the shame that comes with putting yourself out there?

What's an artist to do?



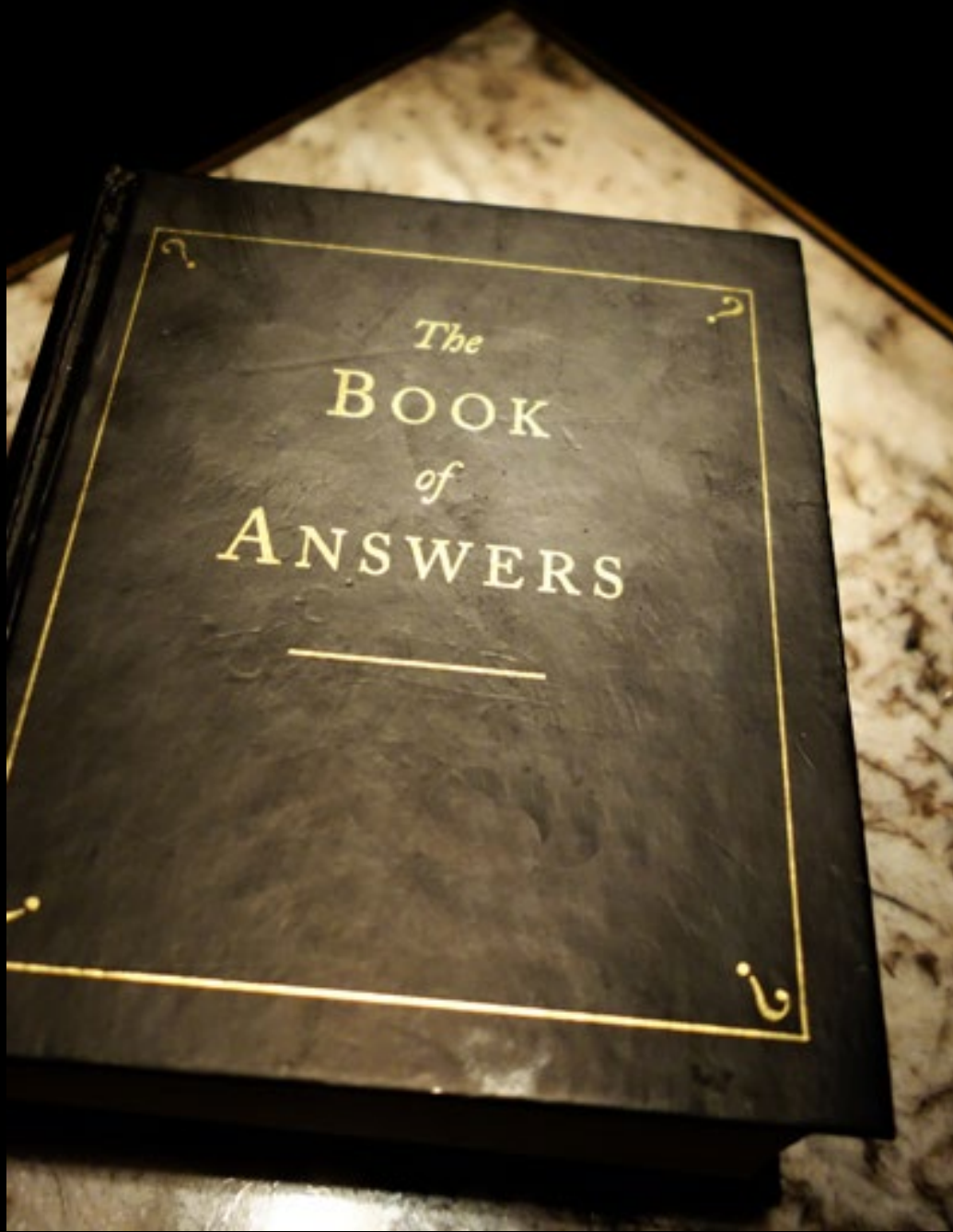
Breathe, because they always tell you to breathe in these situations. But more importantly, find the gold, by that I mean find the lesson or the gift this experience brought. What have you learned? What have you gained?

Then focus on the best possible outcome for the situation and let go of everything else. In other words, keep working.

Remember, set-backs are not the same thing as failure. You only fail when you quit.

So here's a simple formula for success - never quit.

**T**HOU SHALT  
NEVER STOP  
LEARNING.



What's the one single trait that all great artists share?

Curiosity.

Great artists take the time to learn their art history. They know that contemporary art does not live in a bubble and they honor the legacy of those who went before.

Never, ever stop learning. Know your art history. Learn about the issues facing your medium today. Understand your subject matter inside and out. Books, podcasts, museums, blogs; ideas are all around you. Follow them and see where they take you.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but nothing will kill an artist faster than ignorance.

# 8

## **T**HOU SHALT BUILD **AN AUDIENCE.**

Where can I find an agent?  
How can I get a gallery?  
Who will sell my work for me?

These are the questions that I hear almost daily.

And they're the wrong questions.

Those aren't the things you need. What every artist needs is an audience.

And no, it's not someone else's job to find one for you. It's your job.

Because playing small just doesn't work. Does it?



And let me tell you, galleries and agents don't want to hold your hand and do all the hard stuff for you. They are looking to work with professionals who are wise to the ethics of business, savvy about marketing, and who can bring a dedicated audience to the table.

In this day and age, you simply must build and control your own audience. That's the only job security there is.

So the question you need to be asking is "How can I develop my audience?" And then see where those answers take you.



# 9

# THOU SHALT LEARN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES.

Art is a business – remember?



So as a working artist, you are a self-employed, small-business owner. And, as any entrepreneur, you've a responsibility to understand the ethics, the rules, the financial implications, and the processes of your business.

You're responsible for keeping track of inventory, setting fair prices, understanding contracts, maintaining client relations, establishing a marketing plan, as well as creating new work.

Don't run away from what you don't know. If someone opened a coffee shop and panicked whenever these issues came up, they wouldn't be in business for very long. Too many artists choose to hide from the hard stuff, and they pay a price for it.

There are tools and resources available to help you. Make the time to learn what you need to know. And never, ever stop educating yourself. Constantly strive to improve.

# 10

## **T**HOU SHALT DO THE WORK.

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You might wear a beret, but you don't get to be an artist if you don't make the work.

I understand that you might be feeling overwhelmed right now, but all of these tasks can be taken in baby steps. The key is consistency.

Keep moving forward, keep striving, keep making art and learning and growing.

There is no destination in art, there's just the journey. Enjoy the ride!

A close-up photograph of a person's face and torso. The person is shirtless and has a slight smile. They are holding a white circular object, possibly a lid or a small sign, in front of their chest. The object has the word "ARTIST" printed in a bold, black, serif font. Below the word, the website address "www.theworkingartist.info" is printed in a smaller, black, sans-serif font, following the curve of the circle. The background is out of focus, showing a light-colored wall and some indistinct shapes.

**ARTIST**

[www.theworkingartist.info](http://www.theworkingartist.info)



*Crista Cloutier is the founder of The Working Artist, the premier online business school for visual artists.*



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