

EAST information sheets

05: Getting out there:

Approaching a gallery and dealing with commissions

Introduction

In order to show your work to the wider public it will be necessary at some point to work with professional organisations. Whether it is a gallery, theatre, performance space, other curatorial or even a non-arts organisations it helps to know how to deal professionally in order that the experience is a positive one. This information sheet is intended to help ensure that your professional dealings with organisations are enjoyable and beneficial rather than a nightmare.

The information is split into two areas where artists and professional organisations interact.

1. Approaching galleries
2. Dealing with commissions

1. Approaching galleries

It is essential to approach galleries in a considered and professional manner. The idea is to let the gallery get to know you. A recent graduate is not going to be able to walk into a gallery, propose an idea, show a few images and be immediately accepted. There are certain routes to take: directly approaching a curator, proposals, volunteering, competitions and websites.

Further information

For tips on approaching commercial galleries ECCA provide a thorough guide to customers on their website.

www.ecca-london.org/resources/customers/handling/

Directly approaching a gallery

Ying from The Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester gave the following advice when asked the question: What do you feel is the best way to approach a gallery? And the worst way?

"Best way to approach a gallery:

Do some research about the gallery, as all galleries have their position and area of interest. Take CAC as an example. By observing our exhibition programme, you can easily realise we only work with mid-career and established artist so far, but not just anyone of Chinese decent.

Worst way to approach a gallery:

- 1. Don't keep on chasing up for a reply.*
- 2. Avoid asking for some actual project/exhibition when you first introduce yourself.*
- 3. Keep the gallery informed about your updates but not too often. Only send information around when there is something new.*

There are two important things which will give a good impression to curators. It is quite a long-term strategy:

- 1. Make them remember you or your works, by emailing your works*

and updates, sending in a portfolio before you ask for anything.

2. Before sending in a proposal, You can try to arrange an appointment with the curator/ exhibition officer/ CEO. Tell them your intention of submitting a proposal and the idea of your works and ask for actual comment and check their intention."

Proposals

Most exhibition spaces in the public sector organise events by asking for proposals from artists. This is either open to anyone or by invite only. Listings of proposals can be found in artist's network newsletter such as Art's Council England's newsletter (available at www.arts.org.uk) or on networking websites such as EAST online (www.eastonline.org.uk). Or you may hear of proposals through friends and associates.

For more detailed information on proposals please read **EAST information sheet 07: Proposals.**

Volunteering

Another way to find out what's going on is to volunteer in an organisation you are interested.

David from the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester has the following advice.

"Doing volunteer work for an organisation is an easy route into an organisation. You are networked into the arts sector. You will get to know the staff and may get opportunities to talk about your work on an informal basis. Though you may not ever get a show in a large organisation e.g. Tate, Whitechapel etc. One of the curators may learn about your work and inform someone else about your suitability for a particular show. You may also get the opportunity to invite people to small exhibitions as friends, who would willingly offer you moral support and discuss your work to other arts practitioners in other organisations. A great number of artists have received success through this route. You could also receive advice or have opportunity to show your work to

someone for constructive criticism."

Entering competitions

Although you may not win entering competitions will gain you an audience with arts professionals you may just remember your name or think you would suit something they have in mind.

"Larger competitions like the John Moores, Oriel Mostyn, EAST International, New Contemporaries (for students) and BP Portrait Prize (for Portrait Painters) and BOC Emerging Artist Award (for those under 30) should be entered without fail. These competitions could establish your career as an artist and lead to further opportunities. It is almost like a Lottery when entering a competition so don't be disheartened if you don't get in one year. There will be different judges the next."

David, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester.

Art websites

"There a few good websites that allows artists to build an online portfolio. These are used by smaller galleries to look for artists working in a particular theme.

Saatchi Gallery is free and you should do this immediately. Axis is free for the first year and £10 thereafter. Re-title is probably the best as the standard is higher. This maybe due to the £30 yearly subscription fee."

David, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester.

Further information

Saatchi Gallery: www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/yourgallery &
www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/stuart/

Re-title: www.re-title.com

Axis: www.axisweb.org

2. Commissions

Commissions between you (the artist) and a gallery/organisation (the commissioner) can be beneficial because:

- **They can stretch you professionally** allowing you and your practice to develop: sometimes into unexpected areas.
- **They can allow you to realise an idea** that otherwise would not be possible without a strategic partner.
- **They allow you to create new work** which you will be paid to develop.
- **Working in partnership you will forge new relationships and associations** which can help in your career.

You will though be faced with responsibilities to the commissioner which will test your professionalism.

What makes a commission work?

Well defined roles and responsibilities worked out between the artist and commissioner.

A good brief. Ideally you will have some hand in this so make it work for you.

Good planning. Don't leave this to the commissioner. Your planning should be at least equally meticulous.

Communication. Maintaining lines of communication ensures a smoothly-run project (with no nasty surprises!).

Controls and monitoring. Someone needs to make sure that the objectives of the project are met.

Roles and responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities need to be defined early on in the project. Generally they are split between you (the artist) and the commissioner as follows:

The Commissioner's responsibilities:

- Presentation (E.g. Exhibition space, publications).
- Marketing (Press, advertising).
- Funding.
- Administration (E.g. Insurance, Health and Safety procedures).

The Artist (YOU):

- Realisation of the project.
- Written material.
- Ensuring deadlines are met.

Joint responsibilities:

- Concept (though the artist should try and lead this)
- Materials
- Planning
- Budget
- Documentation
- Evaluation

If either the commissioner or artist is a group, try out the outset of the project to decide on lead contacts. These two people will be responsible for lines of communication.

Initial meeting and contracts

The first meeting for your commission will be important in that it will set the mark for meetings to follow. Try to present yourself as organised and professional.

Ensure that everything is understood and agreed upon by everyone. Ask questions. If you are asked to sign a contract make sure you have read it and understood it. If not, don't sign it. For more information on contracts read **EAST information sheet 03: Project management and contracts.**

Make notes during the meeting (and subsequent meetings) and when you get home type them up. This will serve as a handy reminder of the meeting and as proof of decisions/changes made. Notes on a meeting should contain:

- Attendees (including yourself)
- Date, time and duration of the meeting
- Points discussed
- Any decisions made during the meeting.

If important decisions have been made consider sending your notes to the commissioner to ensure they agree.

Relationships and communication

At all point in the project it is essential to maintain good communication. Never assume that the commissioner understands the technical aspects of your work. Explaining your processes may help them understand why things are sometimes late and that changes cannot be made at the last minute. Maybe invite the commissioner to your studio/workplace. This friendly gesture can promote openness and understanding.

Use your professional contacts if you need to. Introducing your associates to opportunities increases the chance that they will return the favour in a similar circumstance.

Confidentiality is the keystone to professional relationships. The commissioner will not want details of contracts or finance to be broadcast.

Important changes in the planning and budget of your project may be made outside of meetings. Keep a note of all emails and phonecalls where decisions are made. If you are unsure of anything - ask the question!

Planning

For detailed information on planning projects read **EAST information sheet 03: Project management and contracts.**

Budgets

For detailed information on budgets read **EAST information sheet 05: Money matters: Pricing, selling and budgets.**

Documentation

Try to get funding in the budget for detailed documentation of the project. Photographic, audio and digital documentation can be beneficial for your archive, future press and websites. If possible, try to get funding in place for printed documentation E.g a brochure or leaflet.

Further information:

Read ECCA's guide to Presentation for good tips on commissioning and taking photos of projects.

www.ecca-london.org/resources/customers/presenting

Finishing off

Maintain your professionalism with the commissioner by presenting them with a sign-off letter at the end of the project. This can be as simple as a letter detailing the project and asking for confirmation that you have met all obligations. This can be sent before you submit your invoice and ensures that any outstanding obligations can be cleared up quickly before you receive your payment.

It is also a good idea to ask the commissioner for feedback. If any relationships have been strained over the course of the project this is a chance for you to hear straight from them why and can help clear the air.