

When is a day job a work of art?



Answer: When you use it to sharpen your artistic skills

Sometimes the business of art includes everything but art.

All of us at one time or another find ourselves in situations that run counter to plan. We end up in jobs that would seem to have nothing to do with our creative work. Or we live estranged from our work for long periods of time for reasons beyond our immediate control.

We do these things because we must, and they are part of our business of art only because we are artists and we are doing them.

Yet the fact that we are indeed artists means that, even in the most art-estranged times of our lives, we come equipped with an arsenal of tools and skills that we can use to turn mind-numbing activities into creative acts.

The hard-earned skills of the artist

Think about some of the skills that making art has taught you, or which you've naturally brought to the making of art. You might list things like discipline, spontaneity, openness, patience, attention to detail, an understanding of the integrity of a work, an appreciation for the world around you, and an almost automatic ability to work with the creative process.

In addition, just as the artist learns to let his work develop and mature, the work has a similar maturing effect on the artist. The musician's daily practice of an instrument, the painter's gradual increase in richness of vision, the writer's dawning understanding of the structure of both a written piece and life—these skills come as hard-earned gifts to those who persevere.

We may not think of our artistic skills as transferable (who would list them on a resume?), but they most certainly are, and we can draw on them in our times of most desperate need.

When life meets art...meets life...meets art...

There are few times more desperate in the life of an artist than the hours spent on a day (or night) job. And because they DO feel so desperate, day jobs are wonderful opportunities for us to remember our true expertise and put it to work.

What would happen, for example, if you applied your understanding of themes in art to your job as a waiter? What are you working on? Writing love songs or a screen play? Painting landscapes or self-portraits? What are your underlying themes? The irreconcilable differences between men and women? Sustainable development? Pure visual perception? Mathematical progressions in sound? What mad experiment could you devise to explore your theme at work, create an art project out of your day with no one being the wiser? How would that change your experience of your day job?

Artists have been exploring the supposed conflict between art and life for centuries. In the 1980's, a genre called "lifelike art" began to emerge: art as indistinguishable from life. The art-critical issues around lifelike art still abound, but it's a very handy concept to play with when you're a painter who can't paint because you're stuck behind a cash register.

Sharpen your creative skills

How about using your unfortunate circumstances to hone the skills that make you good at your craft, such as the discipline of showing up every day to write or dance? That's a hard one when you're driving a truck or teaching a class. But this is precisely the time to call on your determination and excel.

Keep that creative thread running! For starters:

- Make sure you work on your art every single day, even if it's only ten minutes at a time.
- Get up earlier than usual and write or practice scales before you go to work.
- Develop the habit of keeping portable materials with you, then learn to switch into creative mode for every ten-minute break you can squeeze into your day.
- Design a ritual that re-inforces your creative work and do it religiously.

Transform that day job into a work of art

Instead of letting your job get you down, you could consider it your most amazing challenge thus far. Apply your creative powers and find ways to transform the job from an albatross into a soaring eagle.

In 1975, conceptual artist Raivo Puusemp moved to Rosendale, NY, specifically to help the town solve a major problem it was experiencing. He got himself elected mayor, applied the concepts he'd been working with in his own art, and allowed the group dynamics of the town to resolve the issue. He then stepped down as mayor and went on with his life and art. No one had a clue that the entire town had just been the subject of a gigantic art event.

As Puusemp proved, any circumstance can be cast in the way of an art project. Prepare your materials and tools for work by clarifying your vision and goals, then getting started the night before by defining your creative task for the next day. Work deeply by delving into the relevance your daily work routine holds for you, your art, and the society you'd like to contribute to creating. Use your imagination and visualization powers by shifting your perception to see your day-job world in a whole new way.

All these skills are yours, and your application of them at the gas station, nursing home, or insurance office can only make them -- and your art -- better.

Jori Lynn (Durga) Keyser is a creativity and prosperity coach living and working in Corsica. She's a weaver, a writer, and somewhat of a visual artist. You can visit her art in abundance website to learn about coaching, subscribe to her free newsletter, and find writings, tips, and links of all kinds at <http://www.artinabundance.com>.

Jori Lynn's book OUT OF THE GARRET FOR GOOD: A Guide to Prosperity for Artists, Writers, and Craftspeople is planned to be out next year.

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