Adam J. Kurtz on being positive



November 16, 2016 - Adam J. Kurtz is an artist and author. His first book, *1 Page at a Time*, has been translated into 15 languages. He recently released his second book, *Pick Me Up: A Pep Talk for Now and Later*, on Penguin, and completed his Unsolicited Advice: 2017 Weekly Planner. In 2016, he was named one of *PRINT Magazine's* "15 Under 30" New Visual Artists. He has a popular Twitter and Instagram.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3001 words.

Tags: Art, Writing, Inspiration.

The work you make asks people to participate or to tap into their imagination and create something. Is creativity necessarily a positive thing?

Creativity is a huge, giant word. I don't think creativity is inherently good. I don't think it's inherently anything. Actually, I'm not even sure if creativity is the drive to make things, or if it's the mechanism that allows us to make things. It's so big, and the word means so many different things to different people.

It makes me think of my friend Will Bryant, who I think is genius. He made this poster that said, "Help me, I'm an artist," a couple years ago. I think about that all the time because the need and the compulsion to constantly create, and to turn every emotion and every learned experience into something to make it permanent, or at least more tangible, is a curse. It becomes an obsession, and it just depends how far you take it. I don't know. I think for some people, creativity is probably a curse, and for other people it is this intangible thing that they wish they had, where people tell themselves they don't have enough creativity.

Everyone is creative. Creativity is not a magical skill that you have or don't have.

People say that to me all the time. "I wish I was creative." Everyone is creative. Creativity is not a magical skill that you have or don't have. I think creativity is one of the big, vague things that we all have that manifests itself in very different ways.

For you, what's interesting about getting people to participate and to draw in your books, and to write things in your books, and to think? How did you start with that kind of activity book approach to art making?

It was a little bit of a fluke, to be honest. I didn't set out to be Mr. Advice Guy. I didn't set out to be mental health awareness or the "let's talk about it" guy. It was an organic journey from making things, small personal works, that were emoting my own feelings and learned experiences. Then it veered into this calendar project. Every year on Kickstarter, I make the *Unsolicited Advice* Weekly Planner that is essentially just a functional calendar that has little prompts that push you.

From there, the first book happened, and then the second. The original calendar project came from me realizing that I need a gentle push. It was always about helping myself, writing my future-self a little bit of motivation. As I've gone on, I've realized that a lot of people enjoy that and benefit from that and seek that out. We are all creative. Some people forget that. Some people need to be reminded to use their creative energy to write or draw or do something.

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I do try to remind people that creativity isn't just writing or drawing, and it's not just for artists, and it doesn't have to be a labeled anything. Really, everything I've ever done has come from this place of me helping myself, and then letting other people into it.

Do people approach you as a therapist, wanting to get tips from you like, "Hey, how can I do this? How can I do that? Hey, let me sit on this couch, and I can tell you my woes"?

People do talk to me about their stuff. That was happening before I was doing anything. It's just having conversations with friends. I've been giving advice, and I don't know if that's something that I'm good at, or if it's just something that we're all good at. It definitely happens more. It's a weird position to be in, to be thought of as someone who has therapist tendencies or gives great advice—because I don't.

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I don't consider myself a therapist. I don't consider myself an expert in anything. More than anything, I've just been very open about my own process and my own growth. If people benefit from that openness, I think that's great. I never want to be giving advice top-down, like, "This is what you should do," because I realize that the answers are just different for every single person. Expert advice doesn't work for everyone.

There are so many self-help books out there, and it's because there is no catch-all advice. I hesitate to call myself a therapist or an expert, and I hope that people don't see me as one. I'm really just trying to figure my shit out. If there's someone out there who processes the world in a way similar to how I do, and can benefit from some of what's helping me, that's great, but I'm not trying to fix everybody, and I don't think that's even possible.

Do you see yourself as an artist or a writer—or a combination of the two?

I finally adopted the title "artist" maybe two years ago. It was just a product of realizing that I'm a lot of things at once, and artist is the simplest word that's the most suggestible to other people. When I was like, "What can I put in my Instagram bio?," artist was the most succinct thing that any average person in the world could see that and be like, "Okay, I get it." To actual artists, I'm sure that is infuriating. In reality, I'm a graphic designer/writer.

Everything I'm doing comes from a design approach and my design background. I'm not really an illustrator. Ultimately, I'm combining words and images, which is design. Ultimately, I'm just communicating, which I think is design. The books definitely lean into one territory, and writing guest essays leads into one territory, and then designing pens and other products is another.

Creative is actually a great word. Unfortunately, it also means everything and nothing. But I think being a working creative is a fair definition for what I do, because it's a little bit of everything.

I imagine some people approach these books for the advice and some people are pulled in my the illustrations and the drawings.

I don't think that the average person that could use my brand of help and advice, my brand of self-care and mental health awareness, is looking for self-help books. I think my type of person would roll their eyes at that stuff. It's a little bit of a trick. How to get people who probably could benefit from a little bit of creative meditation every day to actually want to do it? I think the answer is to just treat those people like people, and don't be too weird about it.

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treat those people like people, and don’t be too weird about it.

Just be cool. Don’t be a weirdo, and don’t come on too strong. Basically, I made *Pick Me Up* for people exactly like me. It’s the kind of book that I probably might cringe at at first, and then get really into. The kind of book where some pages I’m like, “Eh,” and then other pages draw me in and then bring me back to those first ones. I might not sit down and write about my feelings, but if I laugh a little bit and it speaks to me in a language that I speak readily, that could be enough.

I think I have always just made the things that I know how to make. Books, zines, and paper come really naturally to me. The internet comes naturally to me. Street art is another world. Creating images from text is what street art is a lot of the time, like graffiti tags and that classic graffiti text. I would definitely be into it, but it’s not something I’ve done. But I think it’s nice to get off the page sometimes.

I do like the idea of the small, very acceptable, and almost private journey of reading a book. No one needs to know what you’re doing in this book. That said, it is nice to also blow it up and tear it down sometimes.

You have a lot of Instagram followers. Your work is visual, and you’re also giving advice and giving wisdom that appeals to people. The way the internet’s functioning now is helping you flourish. Your average author, writing fiction or whatever, is not going to have the same kind of pull on the Internet.

I was an Internet person before I was an author. I started on Tumblr a long time ago, just sharing openly and making graphics. A very design school/art school thing to do is to spend three seconds in Photoshop making something that otherwise would be a text post or a tweet for a normal person. Then when Instagram came around, it lent itself really well to that.

You’re right. The average author is writing longer form text, and people on the Internet, sometimes people in general, don’t really have the patience for that anymore. There’s too much competing for our attention, so the most anyone can hope for is to present a sentence or two. Instagram thrives on this motivation thing. There are so many of these accounts, and so many of these images, sort of like post memes of a beautiful phrase, hand-lettered or laid against a picture of a fucking mountain or whatever.

Adam J. Kurtz recommends:

Water
Something From Nothing by Phoebe Gilman
Alanis Morissette “Thank You” music video
The Great Discontent interview with Will Bryant

I navigate in that space a little bit, because the messages are generally upbeat. Because I have an understanding of how my Instagram works, and people actually want more of that, and less of my face. Instagram is work for me, which sucks. I wish it was just me goofing off with my friends, but it’s a little bit of work. I have a pretty good idea of what will perform better, and what won’t, and I make an effort to create work almost for Instagram now that I know people will respond well to.

At first I felt really disingenuous. Then I realized that it was actually informing my tangible goods. Experiments that I was doing on Instagram, and content I was making in my mind for Instagram all throughout 2016, made their way into *Pick Me Up* and into some new projects launching next year. I realized that it felt a little bit disingenuous, but also people on the internet are telling you exactly what they want. If you listen to them, you can give them what they want. There’s no shame in giving people what they’d like.

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I think it’s a delicate balance of being real and relatable and open, but also knowing where to draw the line so that you don’t undermine yourself. I love people like Mira Gonzalez and Melissa Broder, who are so open in such a specific way, and I love them because I relate strongly to a lot of what they say. But I also know that communicating those parts of my personality regularly would undermine the positivity that people expect from me.

That said, there are people who trade exclusively on empty aphorisms, of constant daily sunshine, and I think that’s bullshit, too. Finding the happy middle ground that’s honest and open, that’s positive, but also kind of jaded, has been a delicate balance. I think what made it easier is that the intention was never to monetize. I was never like, “Well, I’m going to build his Instagram account, and then I’m going to sell T-shirts.” A lot of it just happened organically.

An editor at Penguin emailed me out of nowhere after seeing my work on Pinterest, but I didn’t put my work on Pinterest. I didn’t go into it trying to build a career, which is what has enabled it to become something. It’s never gone too far or been too aggressive. But it’s tricky. I think all of that success is also determined by the person in the background. In the case of Melissa Broder and So Sad Today, she was already a poet with a solid grasp of the publishing industry.

While, at first, So Sad Today wasn’t created to be monetized, over time when it seemed possible that something could come out of that, she was exactly the right person to make that happen. Because it wasn’t such a novel idea, because it wasn’t going to be like, “Hey, we’re offering you a book deal. Drop everything, do this. This is the once-in-a-lifetime shot.” I find her inspiring. She was in a position to be like, “Okay, I’ll use that name, but I’m not going to just print tweets in a gift book,” which she could have done, and I’m sure anyone would have loved to publish.

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And, in my experience, people on the internet are very understanding when it comes to the commercial projects. I don’t regularly get hate for selling out. I think people are always just excited to see something they love grow and flourish, and to lead to new projects for the people they love. We all get how it works now. We’ve seen enough YouTubers become millionaires. We’ve seen enough famous teens on the Ellen DeGeneres Show to get it.

I find that I’m always supportive when people I like on the Internet do these bigger projects, and I think there’s an understanding that, “Well, you can’t cross over directly from a Twitter account to a book. There’s going to have to be some growth and a little bit of packaging.” Because everyone is a brand now, because every single person understands what it means to have to become a little digestible, because we all make these choices in one way or another.

There seems to be a little more—I don’t want to say forgiveness—but for lack of a better word, there’s almost this forgiveness and this understanding of that’s how it works, and you’re still being true to yourself, but you’re also trying to create something that has a broader appeal.

When you remove the work from the internet and do readings, how do you present the material? Do you feel like you’re a teacher? Is it something where you try to have participation from the audience?

I don’t really tour the book. I learned that after the first book, where there was a release event, and then I did a few follow-up events. Mostly, that was me living out this outdated and romantic notion of what being an author is. The reality is is that, first of all, no one really gives a shit about your book tour. The book tour is for you, and just for existing fans. You’re not going on a book tour to sell books. For the most part, I think people who go on book tours are just trying to live that dream. Unless you’re a celebrity with a book deal, which more often than not you probably are.

For me, at least with *Pick Me Up*, I knew that I wanted to have a launch event in New York and something in LA. It was just an excuse to pull together people that I really admire, who’s work I feel suits what I was trying to accomplish, and maybe we all do it in our own way.

In New York, we had this comedian Aparna Nancherla, who was hilarious. Her comedy centers around her dealing with depression. Then the poet Sarah Jean Alexander read some of her work,

which also tackles life from a place of darkness through humor. I think that's what *Pick Me Up* is, and what my work is is being open about the ups and the downs, but tackling it in a way that is mostly funny. It's this dark humor. I'm Jewish. I probably should have opened with that. *[laughs]*

I know so many people who are building creative lives by being their true selves, and it's inspiring.

In the case of the LA event, too, it was Hallie Bateman and Mira Gonzalez. It really is just surrounding the book with its influences and with its soul sisters or something. That's not the right word. You know what I mean. Nearest neighbor. Let me never say soul sister ever again. *[laughs]*

There's an energy. There's this large network of people doing what they're doing— I don't want to say "under the radar," because that's a trope, but I don't think anyone's crossed over into the mainstream in a massive, massive, massive way. Like, none of us are Ariana Grande. But we're finding a way to make this dark humor a little more digestible, and also being true to ourselves. I know so many people who are building creative lives by being their true selves, and it's inspiring. I mean, if any of us could sing, and if these ideas were buried in pop songs, then we'd all crossover.

Name
Adam J. Kurtz

Vocation
Artist, Author, Graphic Designer

Fact

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