On becoming an organized adult

An interview with artist and filmmaker Jillian Mayer

June 18, 2018 -

As told to Charlie Sextro, 2567 words.

Tags: Art, Focus, Collaboration, Process, Multi-tasking, Creative anxiety.

I've always been impressed by the number of projects you're working on at any given moment. Do you know how many different projects you worked on in 2017 alone?

I guess 17, maybe? The thing is, I had several shows that were getting lined up, and I also have a show that I've known about for three years, happening in 2019. Plus, I work at a non-profit film collaborative based in Miami called Borscht Corp, which throws the Borscht Film Festival every two years or so. In February 2017 we had the festival, so a lot of energy went into getting that together. A very, very small team throws that event so we're really burnt out after a while. By the time it's over you can't find any of your things. You can only find your right shoes—you don't know where any of your left shoes are. You don't know where your house key is. I ask my friends that aren't involved in the festival to just take my dog to ensure it survives. You just become a mess, but it's really a beautiful experience.

Honestly, the way I stay organized is I keep a lot of Google Docs. Every time I have a studio visit I try to look at it like a cheat sheet right before I go in because sometimes I forget major projects I'm working on. 2017 kind of felt like a year where I was getting a lot of things going.

Could you talk a bit more about your Google Docs system?

Having a *lot* of Google Docs is important. I recently brought on a wonderful human named Olivia Lloyd to be my studio manager, and that's helped dramatically in the last three months. But I'm redoing my Google Docs in order to have each commission or project have its own folder. Every time I have notes they go in the folder. It's sort of annoying, but it's also amazing. It's broken up by 3D works, video works, paintings, and invoices. It's just management.

What caused you to implement your system?

I'm becoming an adult. It just used to be that my to-dos would build up because I didn't know where things were. I just want to be really on top of it. That's my dream—to really know where my things are. I'm one of those people that has a messy art studio but I know where everything is more or less, and no one understands how that is. I wonder if I'm wasting a lot of mental space on that. When I walk into a beautiful studio I'm like, "wow," but then I don't know where anything is because it's all hidden in drawers and put away. The thing is, whenever I get a new space, it won't have shelves built out or pretty drawers or anything. My dream is to one day have a real shop with labeled drawers. And to go on some reality show—like a home improvement one—where they build it for you, or else I'll just start making piles everywhere.

I wrote to that TV show where they build you beautiful mini homes. I tried to pitch them so hard. I was like, "I got a mini dog. I make giant artwork outside so it'll be cool. I don't need much. I could do this in Miami or LA. And my sister lives on the side of a hill. I could do it here." I came so hard with this pitch and no one wrote me back.

Juggling so many different projects, do you find it to be a struggle to stay focused?

100% yes. Next question.

What typically causes you to lose focus? What are you fighting against most often?

ADHD. I realized in the last couple years that it can be challenging for people who are not permissive of tangents and creative flow to listen to me, so I try and go out of my way to go full circle on topics. That's a very valuable creative exercise for me because it's usually through weird conversations and tangents that I get really excited. Everyone knows that feeling, hopefully—that high. I look at them as little gifts, those little light bulb moments. There's nothing better than when you have a peer or friend or a mentor that you're sitting with, and you guys are just talking and going for it, and no one has to apologize for the flow of creative diarrhea. You're just kind of stacking on ideas. That's the best.

My collaborator for narrative works and films Lucas Leyva and I have made a couple of shorts together. The one that I feel is the most reflective of my own thought process—and maybe of me myself—is the short *#PostModem*, which we made in 2013. Within 13 minutes we do 10 shorts, so it's 10 little video art pieces that can all be distributed separately, but also can come together as one short film. There are also online extensions of it with different websites connected, as well as a physical gallery exhibition called *Precipice/PostModem* at Locust Projects in Miami, Florida, which is an experimental non-profit arts space. For me, that project felt the most like home because it was made up of so many different things. It could be fractured, *or* it could all be wrapped up together.

I move quickly through thoughts. I don't know if that's a blessing or not. It would be nice to have a long time to think about something but that's not the way my brain is.

What helps you focus on individual projects?

The way I try and stay focused is through deadlines. As I mature into an adult I try to not have that feeling anymore—you know, that moment where you don't know what's going on, what's due, or what you're supposed to be doing. My director friend Sean Metelerkamp and I spoke at great lengths about the term "decision fatigue." When a lot of projects are happening at once it's important to ease into them and keep myself organized, or else I melt.

My new thing that I've been working on the last two years is getting things done *before* a deadline. It feels so good. The thing is, since I have some reading problems, if I wait to the last minute the shit is gonna make no goddamn sense. So I need to get a smart friend to edit it, and then I have to make them lunch. If I get an idea, I write the idea down, and then one day I'll just be sitting doing something *else* I'm supposed to be doing that's on a deadline and decide, "I don't want to work on that. Let me write out the basic proposal for this new idea instead."

For instance, the other day I had the idea to make this really big sculptural wind chime as a public art piece. It could be placed somewhere like a congested intersection where you normally hear honking and horrible noises, but then suddenly you just hear nice soothing chimes. So I made a prototype, not out of the correct materials I'd use for the public art piece, but just a way to see it at half-scale. I made a nine-foot sculpture in my backyard, which took a couple days. I probably shouldn't have been doing that at that time because I had other things to do, but whatever. Then I took a photo of it. Another day I Photoshopped in real chimes, cut that out, put it in a Photoshop file with a grass lawn. And then I wrote down what it was, what materials I'd need, and a cost estimate.

A week or two later someone was like, "Hey, I want you to submit something for a public art piece." I was like, "Oh, I already have an idea!" So instead of sitting there asking myself what I could submit, I already had this inventory of decent sketches.

Since you're juggling so many individual projects, is it important to take a step back to look at the bigger

picture of your creative output?

It’s hard because I’m always trying to focus on what is directly in front of me, but also trying to think about the larger practice of my work. When you’re starting out as an artist, you feel kind of lost because you’re building your vocabulary and your world. You’re just making things because you have this impulse or egomania and decide that the world should have some of your stuff. After a couple years you can look back and see what you’ve been making and see the intersectionality with the world that you’ve been building. Sometimes you feel as if those pieces are unimportant or they didn’t fully finish or you just got bored, but with a couple years distance it’s really interesting and easy to see the larger narrative that you were working on.

It’s about trying to be a little bit more open and kind to yourself and kind to your process and just having more faith. It’s about not having any concerns if something is relevant and fits into your narrative of work, because who cares? The pressure to know if you’re making something that’s significant to your overall retrospective and body of work is too much. I think it’s important to release yourself from that, because whether it’s an important work or just part of a bigger process, it’ll find its own way as long as you are devoted and you care.

Now that you’ve been looking back at your body of work, what trends do you keep seeing?

My general work is about things that sound very broad, such as identity, environment, experience, researching, and valuing the tension between digital and physical worlds. My work is kind of emotional, because it’s constantly trying to navigate and negotiate between these two worlds. For some people there’s large separation between the digital and physical worlds, but some of my younger friends don’t understand that concept at all.

I don’t want to say I have existential woes, but sometimes I wonder, “This can’t be it, can it?” I really think humans are incredible. I’m interested in solutions, or theoretical solutions, and the way in which the tools we make shape us and our practice and our existence. Some people make very fascinating work, and some people just consume and never think about anything and just watch. Humans are here on this earth for a certain amount of time. I’m curious to see what we do. Yeah, we’re messing things up but we’re all going to die and the earth will figure it out.

Nothing I do will really matter in the whole spectrum of existence. During the human time, some people might be influenced by my work. Some people have remade it. I get nice letters from people. I get opportunities to be involved in different cultural events and interesting workshops. I really love having a great time with humans, but I don’t think this is it. You know what I mean? I’m just aware of how we have these canons, these archives, and these dead sea scrolls, but ultimately they won’t exist forever and there will be no one to archive them. Right now, who has the power? It’s the archivists and the editors, for now, but soon it will be the robots.

How involved are you with all the projects going through Borscht Corp?

Well, I like to be involved. At times when I’ve thought that my input or opinion didn’t matter, my teammates would remind me that it did. It is a very supportive group. And you never know, just by being in the office, when you’ll have valuable input for someone. Whether that’s when someone can’t think of a name for their movie and you’re like, “You should name it *this*.” And then everyone’s like, “Yay.” You never know in which way you can effect another creative person. And yes, it is important to know when they’re asking for advice or just asking for an ear. And that goes not just for creative teams, but also for friends, family, and all humans. That’s something I used to do too much—giving advice. But just because I think my ideas are cool doesn’t mean everyone else does, and that can be distracting for others.

When you’re deep in a project, in order to focus, do you silo yourself off from society?

Unfortunately not, but I’d like to. I work on a lot of projects with other teammates. I don’t want them to be upset with me for not being available when my opinion should be given, so I do keep a phone on me and check it a lot. It’s just uncomfortable when I’m working with gooey materials. Sometimes I think that I went to such gooey gross materials like fiberglass and resin because I wanted a reason *not* to be on my phone. You know what I mean? I feel like the person who builds sculptures out of legos is quite clean, where another practice might deter you

from being on your phone.

Any advice on what to do when you hit a creative roadblock?

Something I say to my younger mentees is that if you're at a place and you're hitting a wall, there're a couple of options you have, and neither one is to be sad or pissed. It's time to go see art or get involved with other people's projects, and to just go and step into their world. Volunteer for them or perform for them if they need performers. *Really* step out of your zone, your studio, and just give yourself the opportunity to find something new. You don't have to even really look for it. It just sounds so corny, like one of those posters, but just put yourself in a new situation. I also stress making yourself uncomfortable because for me, that's how I've learned so much. You never know exactly what you're learning, but some new pathway is probably opening up in your brain. Something is building.

I went to the True/False Film Festival a couple years ago. It's a documentary film festival in Missouri that's super cool. They asked me to be a provocateur with a couple really neat buddies. We each had to give seven minute talks, and the theme of True/False that year was on being lost. After a seven minute talk my presentation ended with the conclusion that if you're someone who knows exactly what you're looking for in life, this is a really great time for you to be alive, because there're all these tools to get you where you need to go. But if you're someone who needs to wander and get lost to come up with ideas, this is a challenging time for you to be around. So, you have to go create that space for yourself by drifting, and perhaps by disconnecting.

Jillian Mayer Recommends

1. Smiley Emoticons
2. The Editorial Magazine
3. Deli Near Info. An open social media network in which the distinctions between navigation and content are suspended.
4. Topical Cream
5. Are.na

Name
Jillian Mayer

Vocation
Artist, Filmmaker