

On balancing art and work



Artist and technologist Tim Schwartz discusses translating between the digital and the physical worlds, finding a home for your conversations, and having a realistic view of success.

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As told to Kate Silzer, 2560 words.

Tags: [Technology](#), [Art](#), [Activism](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Beginnings](#), [Money](#), [Business](#).

You have such a wide and unique array of projects. Where do you come up with your ideas, and how do you decide which projects to pursue and which ideas are worth following through on?

I think an overarching theme for all the things I do tends to be taking ideas in technology or the digital space and translating them into physical form, whether that's book or print or sculpture. How artists get ideas, that's a long process. I went to grad school in 2007, and when I started that, I did not have a process for how I came up with ideas. I'm not sure I have a process now, but I feel more comfortable in not having a process and definitely have a better gut sense of when things are interesting to me and when they're not.

I think I am someone that works through obsession as an underlying theme. I think that resonates with a lot of people. I grew up in the ADD nation and on Ritalin, and back then, I had to be medicated to be able to focus in on an idea. As I grew up, I figured out what I would call "hyper-focus through obsession," and that's how I operate now. So as long as I get excited about something, I can just nerd out on it for a long, long, long time.

I think a lot of people don't feel comfortable talking about that type of disability. For me, it was a real transition. I came off drugs when I was in high school and then in college figured out my own techniques for how to be obsessed with ideas and get a lot of shit done. So in my art practice, when I get super excited about something, I will just deep dive and spend weeks on it, or however long it takes.

Do you always have something that you're excited about?

It comes and goes, and I think part of being an artist or a creator is being comfortable with letting it go when you don't have it and coming back to it when you do. I think I've been in it long enough to know that it'll come back. So I'm not that worried about it.

What constitutes success for your work?

I'm old enough now to understand what I consider success in my work. For me, it's about finding a home for the conversations around it. I think that is what really charges most artists. If you tie it to fame or money, it will in 99% of the time be fleeting. So for me, it's really about, where's the home for the conversation? Who do I want to be in dialogue with? First it was the digital media ghetto of the late-mid aughts, and now I'm feeling more affinity with fine press bookmakers. The conversations are great, and the communities are really giving. It's fun.

I do overlap into the traditional fine art worlds and those gallery spaces. It's fun to go have a big party and

have people walk around and drink beers at an opening and have people geek out on work. But I find the long-term recurring conversations tend to be, for me, in digital media arts worlds and in fine press book nerd worlds. So I've been super lucky to find those conversations.

How did you get involved in book arts, and what about it is most fitting for the ideas that you're exploring?

What's nice about the fine press book world or book arts world is that the stakes are low. It would be hard to imagine that the rockstars [in this world] are making more than 100 grand a year, selling out baller books, working all year. The spaces [book arts] occupies are really niche. So because the competition is so low, everybody tends to be very giving, and that is super nice.

I came into it because I was in grad school in a very conceptual program, and I wanted to make this book. I ended up working with this guy, John DeMerritt in San Francisco. I don't want to offend any other book binders, but I think on the West Coast, he's the person. And Amy Borezo is the person on the East Coast. Anyway, I got this chance to work with John, and we just hit it off. Aside from enjoying making books, I just want to work with John DeMerritt more, so I tend to make books so I can collaborate with him.

The translation from the digital to the physical and vice versa is a theme in a lot of your work. What is lost and what is gained in doing that kind of translation?

A lot of my work for years was about what's lost as archives become digital. Having a physical thing to hold in front of you, particularly a book form or an object that can be engaged with, is just inherently different from digital forms. I am a digital native all the way, but there's something about the physical book that lends itself to a processing, a thinking, that's just different. Maybe it's just that I'm of a certain age and grew up around books and newspapers. It could be my own perception, but I think it resonates with a lot of people.

Your work engages this idea of using a physical means to alter a digital presence. Resistant Systems specifically comes to mind, which was an exhibition you did around a digital-focused wellness brand you conceptualized, offering analog products to "purify your digital life." What is your personal relationship to being online like today?

The idea that we can renegotiate our engagement with privacy, security, how we use technology in more of a wellness aesthetic, I think is really important and interesting, because right now everything we learn about technology is in this [geeky, boring] aesthetic, especially around the guts of data backup or passwords.

When I'm not being an artist, I build websites. Right now, I'm a chief technology officer for a media startup, and that's how I make money, not by making books.

I think that is an important thing to acknowledge as an artist, because I feel like most artists are not making a full living based off of their work. How do you balance those two parts of your life?

For 10 years now, I've been fully remote, and I've tried to negotiate 30-hour a week full-time work. That leaves me time to be an artist. I'm very lucky that I have enough skills and background that I can get a job where I only have to work 30 hours a week. Obviously, it bleeds over at different times, and it's a job. But that's been a sustaining pillar that I hold myself to over the years.

So much of technology and digital security and privacy, that whole space honestly, is really overwhelming to me. I think it's interesting that you're trying to make that a little bit more palatable. How do you think about getting people over that complacency or fear?

So all of those things are true across the board for basically everybody. How you get over the overwhelm is to just chip away at it. My dad's on 1Password now and uses his thumb on his phone to get his passwords. That took a lot of work. My partner, who is not technology-oriented, just needed some basic ground rules set up. A lot of this is just setting up basic systems, and then once you adopt them and adhere to them, it's easy. But it's

figuring out, what is the system? How do I implement it? Am I doing it right? All those things are just hard.

I wish that personal finance and personal computer hygiene was taught in schools. I really link it directly to personal finance, because no one teaches you how to fill out your taxes in school. That's the first goddamn thing you have to do as an adult. In the same way, to be online, you need to have passwords and store them safely and back up your shit so you don't lose it. Literally everybody loses their stuff once in their life. Then they've learned, and they've had to deal with it. But what if we didn't have to have that loss in the first place?

I'm always wishing that somebody had taught me more finance stuff, because there's no baseline education on how to do it. It's really interesting to see this topic approached via an art book, which is such a precious object and such a labor of care in so many ways, especially contrasted with the infiniteness and carelessness of content on the internet.

I've done [crypto therapy sessions] a number of times with LA Crypto Party, this group that I've co-run for a while, where people come in and basically just lie on a couch and tell us all their digital problems. Then we write up little digital prescriptions for them of how they're going to fix this. I've also done five-minute cleansings with people where we talk about their passwords, their habits, like, "Do you have any bad passwords? Let's write it down, burn it, get rid of it, and then generate a new one." Taking these processes and rituals is a way to have a new engagement with all that messy stuff you don't feel like dealing with.

While we're on the topic of technological fears, I have to ask if you're thinking at all about AI and how that is impacting artists and workers and digital security as well.

The ChatGPT stuff, I think we'll come up with a model of how it's integrated as a tool. I liken it to when the web started and search became a thing. We all changed how we engaged with that. We are all really good searchers now with keywords and how we type things in. I think it'll be the same way with ChatGPT, where we've found ways to include it.

I just wrote an article the other day, and I was having trouble with the last paragraph. I was actually writing about ChatGPT. I was like, "Let's just put it in and see." I got a couple phrases that I thought were novel that I hadn't thought of. Not that novel, but it was good enough to get me through my spot where I couldn't get it farther.

If we go beyond ChatGPT into just large machine learning systems, for sure human labor will continue to be replaced, as it always has, by technology changes. I have a long-term project that's basically about unionization in the printing industry, the history of it, and then how that can be a lens for unionization contemporarily and the reaction to Amazon. I'm going to be reprinting primary source documents and doing it all by hand as a way to look at this evolution. But interestingly, in the newspaper industry in New York City in the seventies, there were a series of huge strikes as basically all of the Linotype machines went out for making the papers. It basically changed to people on typewriters doing all the copy, and then it would be photo-transferred into lead.

All those people went on strike because they were all in these big unions. The scabs that got hired or moved up were all of the female secretaries that knew how to type. It moved a whole lot of women into the workforce in this technology change, even though all these people that were in the labor and were controlling the newspapers were losing jobs and losing wages. So it's messy. All these changes are messy, and you never quite know the outcomes and the ramifications in all the different pockets. I think that's something to just hold onto for us, is all of the Luddite reactions and how evil the change in technology is, there could be these other changes that come out of it that we just aren't aware of that might be not horrible.

I've used a letterpress a number of times. It's painstaking, and it's slow. It forces your brain to work in a totally different way in terms of intention and attention. What interests you about that as a medium?

Let me pull out an example that's right here. This is my first letterpress project, and it's called Data Transmissions. This is where I laid [out] my manifesto of how I think about letterpress. It's just redoing cell phone screenshots by hand in metal type. For me, this is a manual process of data processing. So if you think

about it, the value of data when it's digital on a phone is zero, and then if you add your manual labor, as used to happen for producing data or information, the value of it is drastically different. The reprocessing of data by hand I think is an important thing to think about.

There's a level of satire and humor that's apparent in some of your work. The Paris meter stands out as an example, in which you track and compare the prevalence of searches and news results for Paris, France versus Paris Hilton. What do you think is the role of that sort of playfulness in your art?

That humor isn't in all of my work, but certainly a number of my pieces. I think it's like, "Would you rather look at a boring chart or a fun chart?" It's the same as when I'm making aesthetic choices in a conceptual piece. I'm going to make aesthetic choices that I like, that I think are nice to look at.

If I'm going to do a Paris Hilton meter, if I just make some boring juxtaposition of terms, it's not that interesting. But also, with Paris Hilton versus Paris, France, you're looking at two different versions of culture—of pop and a long-term culture—over time. It's been running for 12 years. The gauge is slowly going towards Paris, France. It popped back up to Paris Hilton for a little while. She had a little action last year, two years ago.

Is there anything you'd want to say about your work or your process or your creative spirit before we wrap up?

I've been very lucky that I've figured out a way to make money concurrently with making art. Anybody that's going back to school or early on in your career, even if you want to make it as a superstar—which is totally cool, valid, great, and it will happen to, I don't know, 10% of the people that go to grad school or try to do it all—just have something in your back pocket. I've been very lucky to have that. It can be related to your art, and don't be shy about saying so, because I think we do cover it up so much in the art world and it's only in my later age that I feel comfortable with sharing my whole self.

Tim Schwartz Recommends:

Suso Saiz

Jacob Mann

Custom ergonomic split keyboards

Openback headphones

Being in the ocean

Name

Tim Schwartz

Vocation

artist, activist, and technologist

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Mariona Vilarós