

Mark Dorf on sincerity, balance, and the internet



September 7, 2017 - Mark Dorf is a New York-based artist working between the lines of photography, digital media, and sculpture. His work aims to explore humans' interactions with the digital domain, urban environments, and the natural landscape in order "to understand our curious habitation of the 21st century world." Here, he talks about his progression as an artist, using the internet as a resource, and using sincerity as a filter for what you should (or shouldn't) make.

As told to Willa Köerner, 2110 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Beginnings, First attempts, Success.

So, you're an artist. How did you end up here?

When I talk about finding my creative practice, I tend to harken back to my family history. My grandfather was a photographer. My grandmother was a painter and ran a photo restoration business on the Lower East Side. My dad works in medicine, and my aunt and uncle are both marine biologists. This interest in art, science, and technology has always been all around me—and now I make work about science and technology through the lens of photography. It seemed natural once I realized what I was doing.

Did you know at a young age that you were destined to become an artist?

I think I was looking at the works of Anthony Goicolea when I was in high school, and I had an art teacher say, "You know, you can do this as a profession." And I thought to myself, "Ah, here we go." Back then I was doing some weird, wacky things, like buying all these cabinet televisions—those televisions that are like pieces of furniture—and stacking them on top of one another and photoshopping in sections of my body, like a person standing inside these stacked TVs. So I was already feeling around, but in the end, it was validation from a high school teacher that made me think I could actually do this.



Emergent / *Emergence* #7, 2014, Mark Dorf

Today you're represented by Postmasters Gallery in NYC. How did you make that happen?

I actually have a truly millennial story as to how my relationship with Postmasters began. I used to live up in the Hudson Valley, and I would come into the city for openings, and Postmasters was always a spot that I was interested in going to. I used to post these weird little 3D animation sketches on Instagram, as I was just kind of teaching myself at that time how to use virtual space and 3D rendering. I started having a conversation with Postmasters' account through Instagram, which led to an email, which planted a seed for something larger. Of course from here relationships were built in a physical manner as we got to know one another and began to connect the dots of those that we had in common. I was certainly not alone in this endeavor as well—many people both directly and indirectly helped me to get to that point. Building my relationship with Postmasters required not only making the work but also understanding an identity and helping those who helped me along the way. Truly to work with a group effort and to support the peers that are your community is the best way to exist in the world at large, which is something that I am still learning every day. In the experiences that I have had, the support of a community, and the return of that support back to your community is what will take anyone the farthest in whatever endeavor you are embarking on.

That's definitely a social media success story. Do you have other social media strategies you use?

I pretty much put everything out there, even weird works-in-progress that don't turn into anything. I think that's my strategy, if you want to call it that. I make these things because I'm drawn to making them, and in the same way, I also want to share them. For me it's really important that creative work sparks intellectual conversation.

As far as my strategy goes, if you want to call it that, I just try to be sincere. So by putting these things out there, I'm throwing variables out into the world just to see what happens. I don't think about it as branding or marketing, as much as it's an avenue to create a portrait of myself in a public virtual space. It's not about Mark Dorf the brand or Mark Dorf the artist. It's about, "Hey, I made this thing. Let's see what happens."

How do you sell your work besides having a gallery? Has that been hard given that so much of your work is digital?

A lot of my work is digital, and a lot of it exists on the web, but I don't really sell that stuff. A lot of the things I post online are labeled "sketch" or something like that. I'm always fiddling around and exploring materials and mediums in the digital realm. So I post a lot of these things online, but they're not really meant to be part of a larger body of work. Sometimes they do make their way in there, but it's more an expression or exploration of material. It's a very privileged thing to say, but I don't think about sales so much because I feel like that would derail the intentions of the work. It's always nice when it happens, though.



Transposition / *Landscape 12*, UV Print on Dibond, Birch plywood, tempered glass, house plant, fake grass, bark, resin, fluorescent light, bottled water, 30" x 60" x 9", Edition: Unique, 2017, Mark Dorf

Are you able to make a living being an artist or do you find that you need to support yourself in other ways?

I've been very, very lucky the last few years. I've been able to support myself as an artist through different commissions, the gallery, and other things like that. But that could very well change in the future. When I first came to New York I was working in the commercial photo industry as a studio manager for a fashion photographer, doing retouching and all those kinds of things. But as of about two years ago and for the moment, I've been able to phase out of that.

That's awesome, and leads into my next question. What does success look like to you?

That is a very complicated question. What is success? I guess for me, success is every time I find a specific trajectory to explore, or the moment that I feel like I've begun to understand the vocabulary of the ideas I'm trying to navigate. Right now I'm doing a lot of research regarding anthropocentric world views. I'm very much in the research and writing phase, trying to hash out this baseline vocabulary. Success will be the moment I feel fluent enough in the subject that I can just make stuff—when I'm so entrenched in that intellectual space that it will just reflect the research I've done.

What's the biggest risk you've ever taken as an artist?

This question feels similar to when people ask, "What have you sacrificed in your life?" Of course I've taken risks in exploring new mediums, or even taken a risk in trying to create a lifestyle that's conducive to having a creative practice in the first place. But I also feel like I haven't really taken risks—everything feels like a natural progression.

Do you think you're averse to taking risks?

I do think I'm neurotic, which maybe disallows for major jump-off-a-cliff risk situations. But I do think taking risks is important. There are a lot of times where you'll find new things worked out through experimentation, through jumping off that cliff. It's just that word, "risk," might mean different things for everybody—not just artists, but all humans.

Maybe as an artist, every decision is a micro risk. On the more extreme spectrum, have you experienced failure?

Absolutely. When I first graduated from undergrad, I moved up to the Hudson Valley because I didn't have enough money to jump into Brooklyn or New York City. So I moved up there and worked in a fabrication shop. I was living with a friend of mine, and we were gonna do this big collaborative project. Just to say the least, that both imploded and exploded. It was crazy—it actually put a pretty big stint in my creative practice for a while, coming out of undergrad, trying this collaboration and then having it fall apart.

I feel like that was a pretty major failure, but at the same time, failure has such an absolutely negative connotation. Not to be cheesy, but you learn from everything. So in that regard, nothing is ever 100% a failure. I fail all the time. You're trying something new, and then it just doesn't work out, so you keep banging your head against the wall.



//_PATH / *Untitled 20*, 2012, Mark Dorf

So how do you bounce back from a failure?

You just keep at it. A lot of times I'll find myself going into a more comfortable space where it's like, "Okay, that wasn't fucking working. Let's just do this other thing." For me to bounce back from a failure—whether it's a project that just never resolved itself or a medium that I can't control very well—I just kind of go back to reading and research and talking to people. Because of that, a lot of my time is not actually spent making stuff.

When you're in those modes where you're not creating a lot of output, do you get bummed out?

Yeah, I definitely get bummed out. I think it goes back to what I was talking about earlier, how a lot of my digital work only exists on the web. That's how I keep myself from getting severely bummed out, by still making that kind of stuff. And honestly I do get really anxious when I don't have a big thing on my plate. It kind of drives me crazy, and then of course you get to the space where you're overproducing a lot of bad things, and then you have to throttle that back and reset again. It's just this constant try, reset, try, reset, try, reset.

Do you feel like you have a tendency to take on too many projects?

Right now I've got a lot of things going, but because I don't work a "nine to five day job," I'm able to balance things a lot easier. Actually, all the projects I'm doing kind of keep me sane, because when I first left my job I freaked out for a long time. I was like, "What have I done? This is a poor choice." Then I kicked my ass into gear.

I think it was only in the last year or so that I'm beginning to understand what that ebb and flow of real balance is like. It does have to do with taking on different kinds of projects, whether they're solely me or if they're a collaboration, or if you're helping someone

else out or if someone's helping you out. It's about creating that balance and that structure for yourself.



//_PATH / *Untitled 13*, 2012, Mark Dorf

What resource has been the most valuable for you and your work?

When I lived up in the Hudson Valley, I couldn't afford a studio space. I said, "Okay, how do I make it work in this context." I started making digital works because I had an old laptop, and I could play in there. It didn't require space, and I could take it places. That naturally led me to a lot of internet communities. I was also looking for this more conceptual or theoretical kind of conversation, which was harder to come by in the Hudson Valley. Not to say it didn't exist. But this internet culture allowed for a special kind of conversation and exchange. Upon moving to New York, I realized that a lot of those people from the internet were here, and since then we've become friends. So yeah, the internet has been a hugely important tool and resource.

How do you hold yourself accountable to finishing projects?

It goes back to that idea of sincerity that I was talking about earlier. If you're not driven to make it, then what kind of personal investment do you have in it? What I'm about to say may sound totally irresponsible, but as an artist, you shouldn't really need to hold yourself accountable. If you really feel like you should make something, then that's when you're going to make.

Mark Dorf recommends:

To read [*Hyperobjects*](#) by Timothy Morton
To listen to [*The Lemon Of Pink*](#) by [The Books](#)
To paw through the [Rhizome Net Art Anthology](#)
To eat at [Spicy Village](#)

To spend time with the work of Wu Tsang

Name

Mark Dorf

Vocation

Visual artist

Fact

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