

# Want to succeed as an artist? Enter the vast, thorny wilderness of online artist mentoring.

With a rising number of artists vying for a limited number of galleries and grants, arts professionals pivot to careers as coaches.

By TRAVIS DIEHL

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From 2005 to 2017, Paddy Johnson ran a respected art-world blog, Art F City. "Fiery Independent," began its tagline. But art criticism is a precarious business. She tried teaching as an adjunct, but that wasn't much better.

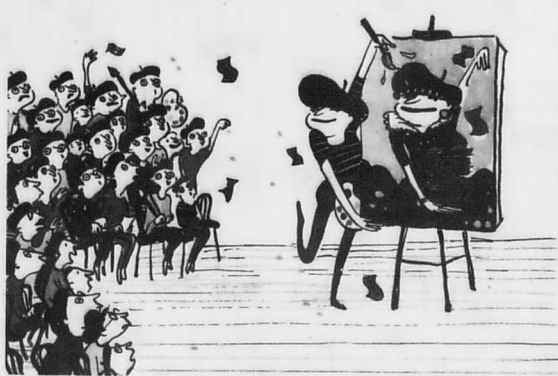
Gradually, Johnson shifted to providing career counseling to artists and helping them workshop their statements of purpose and grant applications. She realized it could be a business. In February 2021, she invited her mailing list to a webinar on the value—or not—of a fine arts degree. A follow-up email included a link to "Book a free consult with our coaches."

In May of that year, Johnson founded Netvork, an app-based resource for artists, with message boards, how-to guides and frequent Zoom seminars. It now has more than 900 members, most of whom pay between \$40 and \$87 a month.

Welcome to the vast, thorny wilderness of online artist mentoring.

With ever more artists vying for limited galleries and grants, there has been a recent flush of subscription-based, web-powered coaching and marketing programs offering advice, encouragement and feedback to creative types. This is partly a symptom of COVID, which encouraged people to embrace video calls and group chats at the same time it intensified isolation. It also reflects the growing number of midcareer artists looking for peers beyond art schools and yearning to profit from their talents.

Many of these groups' founders were frustrated in their own careers. "I felt like a failure as a teacher and a failure as a critic," Johnson said. Now, rather than hustle for teaching gigs, coaches like Johnson rely on apps like Teachable and Mighty Networks to reach followers and collect dues. The self-help genre has a reputation for selling unrealistic promises,



HANNAH ROBINSON / The New York Times

as they say, if you want to get rich quick, write a get-rich-quick book. But as a critic with an MFA, I'm a convert to one classic: Julia Cameron's "The Artist's Way," a workbook for unlocking creativity that has sold 5 million copies since 1992. Which left me wondering: Do the members of mentoring groups benefit as much as their gurus?

So I signed up to mailing lists. I started a fresh Instagram account and followed every artist coach I could find, which attracted targeted ads from still more. I sat through sales pitches—like a free workshop on avoiding online art scams from a program called Milan Art that ended with an overview of their membership costs. I even signed up for two: Johnson's Netvork and the Praxis Center for Aesthetic Studies, for a peek behind the payroll. And I asked more than a dozen of these groups' members about their experiences.

These career support services range widely, from sales-focused to philosophical to pedagogical. Those who want a holistic approach to art can join artist-led groups dedicated to mutual support and demystifying the art world. On Netvork's message boards, members experienced with galleries and graduate degrees share

advice and cheer one another on.

And if you're looking for something more personal, reminiscent of attending art school remotely, the consulting startup NewCris promotes "a community of artists for the present" via hourlong virtual studio visits. West Street Coaching, a smaller outfit, also offers one-on-one meetings. The NYC Crit Club and its sister Canopy Program provide a mix of virtual classes, online critiques and in-person sessions at their Chelsea loft.

These groups aim to pick up where traditional art education leaves off: Artists want to know not just how to make paintings, but how to sustain a long and satisfying career. The coaches and advisers wrestle with the problem of success as an artist: What does it look like? How do you know when you have it? And how much of coaching, self-promotion or community get you there?

Brainard Carey, an artist and director of the online Praxis Center for Aesthetic Studies, argues that "artists aren't entrepreneurs."

"If they were entrepreneurs, then as soon as something didn't work, they'd move to something else," Carey said. Instead, they make art for "the weirdest reason in the world": because they want to see it.

Carey founded the Praxis Center in 2016. Today, the online group claims 1,800 members and charges between \$33 and \$59 a month.

The Praxis Center grew from a collective comprising Carey and his wife, Delia Bajo, also an artist. His sales pitch hinges on the duo's participation in the Whitney Biennial of 2002 (a performance that involved washing visitors' feet and giving them handbags and hugs). People started asking them how they got in. "I'll like what we encountered," Carey said, "which is, you know, people holding their cards close to their chest in terms of how they made their way in the art world, we began telling them everything."

Their basic method: Ask. Ask for meetings, then shows. Heck, ask for money. Go to the donor wall of a museum. Carey advises in one member-only video, and takes names. In his 2011 book "Making It in the Art World," Carey describes how he mailed cryptic packages of work samples to four Whitney Biennial organizers, which scored Praxis an interview.

Even the fanciest MFA program can finance the fact that surviving the mental, spiritual and financial

doldrums of a long career requires devoted friends. Netvork emphasizes—well, networking.

"The art industry is messed up," reads the Netvork homepage, using an expletive. "Let's beat the system together."

Jonathan Herbert, an artist who said he went tagging with Jean-Michel Basquiat and now resides in Sarasota, Florida, is active in Netvork and Praxis Center and speaks fondly of both. "I remember the day of finding a great grant and not wanting to tell anybody, because God knows one more person applying would really screw my chances up," Herbert said. But Netvork users freely share open calls in the Opportunities section.

Yet even with Netvork, the promotional emails come thick and fast, suggesting that you'll "get the shows, residencies, and grants of your dreams." Does that bring the awkward tang of false promises?

"What we are trying to do is to make things easier for artists and also to set expectations appropriately," Johnson said. Sure, members start out wanting to know how to get more shows and find galleries, she continued, but these questions get answered naturally "as you focus on meeting people and making art."

Johnson has several part-time employees, including William Powhida, a New York artist known for critiquing art's power structure in his drawings and writing. In his view, the group can help people "understand what the field looks like and how rare it is to achieve the kind of art world success that they might be seeing or reading about."

Some of the coaching groups I explored met a clear need for many of their members and founders—while seemingly reproducing some of the hierarchical business models (namely, art schools) they're trying to escape.

Amy Beecher, a former Netvork member with a Yale University MFA, sees the uptick in artist coaches and career-development groups as a reflection of an increasingly professional approach to the creative life.

"Are these programs inevitable at this moment in time," she asked, "given the way that people who've been through MFA programs that sort of optimistically promise the myth of a career?"

## Artifacts

Illustration: D1

Today, shoppers at the new Department of Alcohol Beverage Services state liquor store at 151 E. 300 South can view the (now cleaned) bottles. Those and other artifacts found in the privy and around it are now housed in glass cases installed on the store's east wall.

Along with the bottles is a piece of a red earthenware pot, portions of platters and plates, a few animal bones, a horseshoe, a piece of a porcelain toilet bowl, two whole bricks and a plastic toilet, likely from the 1950s, a decade before all those businesses along 300 East were razed to make way for an asphalt parking lot. And each object has its own story.

### Why a privy?

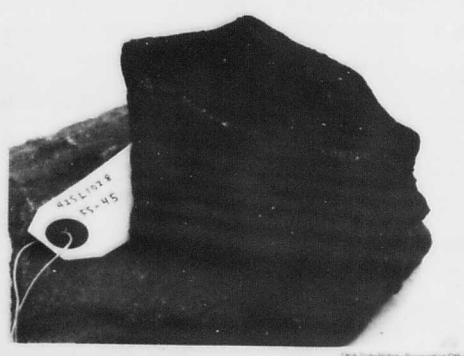
Since the site of the new liquor store has been "turned a little bit" throughout history, Merritt said, with structures being built and then torn down and then built again and then paved over, some of the artifacts' origins are open to interpretation. He said he believes the broken items (like the pieces of ceramic and earthenware) came from around the privy, where people were just disposing of refuse, and the whole objects came from the privy itself.

"Salt Lake City didn't get centralized garbage collection until 1888," Merritt said. "So, that meant people had to deal with garbage themselves. And sometimes they would fill holes in the yard with the garbage. If you already had a hole, and it was already stinky, you might as well throw your garbage in there and get it rid."

Once a privy "filled up," it was common practice to dump the trash in it, bury it and then dig a new privy next to it, Merritt said. He said he believes that soon after this particular outdoor filled up, the entire lot changed into a commercial district, by which time there was a sewer system in place, so another privy wasn't dug.

When the excavation crew hit the privy site with their backhoe and discovered the artifacts, they reported their findings to the State Division of Facilities Construction and Maintenance, which contacted Merritt with the State Historic Preservation Office.

When all the buildings on the site were removed in the 1960s and the corner was turned into a parking lot, workers "pretty well scraped the site clean," Merritt said. So, there wasn't a need to do a controlled archaeological dig while the liquor store was being built, because the site was so disturbed. That meant "we could just salvage material and learn a little bit of the history that was still intact," he said.



A piece of an earthenware pot made by Danish potter Frederick Petersen in the late 1800s is now on display in the state liquor store at 151 E. 300 South in Salt Lake City.

### The old bottles

The bottles found on the site include amber beer bottles, green bottles that came from clear liquor bottles and light turquoise bottles that once held soda, liquor, medicine and even Worcestershire sauce.

The cow and pig bones found at the site, combined with the presence of capers bottles and the Worcestershire sauce bottle, provide a window into what people in the late 1800s ate.

Salt was expensive at the time, Merritt said, but people still needed to add seasoning to their bland beef and pork, so they would add the pickled capers as a way to incorporate a salty "pop" into their food.

"So many people don't think about capers being that dominant of a food, but almost every excavation you find capers," Merritt said.

One of the most unusual bottles found in the old privy site is a large rectangular bottle, darkly clouded with age. It's from the Champlain company of Springfield, Ohio, and it once held concentrated embalming fluid, made from formaldehyde.

"It's the first one I've ever found, and so it sent me down a rabbit hole," said Merritt, who wondered how a bottle of a product typically used only by morticians would end up in a domestic setting.

Merritt checked maps to see whether there was a funeral home nearby, but there wasn't

one. He eventually learned that since there was not wide access to refrigeration in the late 1800s, people would actually add small amounts of embalming fluid to milk to help preserve it and keep it from spoiling.

Merritt's interpretation is that people were probably often doing this in the apartment building or boarding house behind the row of businesses on 300 South, as people ate together in big groups and consumed large quantities of milk. A person could have bought the formaldehyde at a dry goods store, he said.

"What happened is that people were dying from bad milk," Merritt said. "And then people started dying from too much formaldehyde in milk. Because it is meant for the dead, so it's not something you want to drink shots of."

The small medicinal bottles have a story, too. Medicine back then was often mostly high-proof alcohol, but it was still thought to be good for you, so drinking medicine was a socially acceptable way for women to drink alcohol, Merritt said. While it was OK for men to consume beer and liquor in public spaces, he said, women more often would have to duck into the privy to sneak drinks of medicine, and then they'd throw the bottles down the hole.

### The earthenware pot

When the Mormon pioneers arrived in Utah in 1847 with the goal of establishing a

self-sufficient agricultural society, Merritt said, they needed people who could make things, including pottery.

In the 1850s, they experimented with potters from England, but since those potters came from large factories, Merritt said, their skills were often limited.

Back then, Merritt said, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was opening proselytizing missions in Denmark, and those Danish potters still followed a system based on masters and apprentices. So they knew how to create pottery from start to finish, which is what one would need in a frontier setting, he said.

In the late 1850s, Salt Lake City saw its first wave of Danish potters arrive, Merritt said. Among them was Frederick Petersen, who arrived in Utah from Denmark in the late 1850s and had been apprenticed to a potter since he was about 5. In the 1860s, he opened his own pottery shop on 600 South and 300 East. Merritt said—about three blocks south of the liquor store—and he ran it until he died in 1898.

Merritt helped excavate the site of Petersen's pottery shop for his master's degree, and he recognized the piece of red earthenware found at the liquor store site as probably made by the potter. "That made me very happy, because that's very connected to this neighborhood," Merritt said.

The lead-glazed pot, which was likely thrown on a wheel, would have stood about 18 inches tall, Merritt said, and probably would have had Danish-style lug handles and been used to store milk or other supplies. The red clay came from Red Butte Canyon, he said, from a day deposit by East High School.

"A lot of the earthenware industry in Salt Lake City faded by the 1890s, because we had railroads," Merritt said. "People wanted this nice white stuff. They didn't want the old-style stuff. And so a lot of the pottery shops just disappeared. So, that made me happy, because I got one piece of his story on display."

### Why the artifacts matter

Each of the artifacts provides a "window into the past," Merritt said. While history often focuses on "the big narratives, the big stories, the important people," he said, the items that were found in this corner lot illuminate the lives of the "common" person who lived in Salt Lake City in the 19th century.

Now, people can come shop at the new liquor store and "learn a little bit about Salt Lake City history," he said.

"These items are going to be on display, not in a box somewhere never to be seen again," Merritt said. "And so this, to me, is a good usage of this history and that discovery."