

## How to Get an Exhibition

Renowned art criticism (and sometimes curatorial) duo [The White Pube](#) recently created a candid – and very honest – ‘walkthrough’ guide for artists on [‘How to Get an Exhibition’](#). We’ve collaborated with them to produce the following version, drawing heavily from and based on the original, but adapted to suit disabled artists and sit alongside Shape’s own resources...

“When I was studying Fine Art,” says Gabrielle de la Puente, half of The White Pube team – the other half being Zarina Muhammad, “I used to ask people how you get exhibitions, how you can be in them. Except no one knew anything, and if they did they weren’t telling me, or maybe they believed that if you were a ‘Chosen One’, success would come to you naturally like good skin. But I’m sorry, we are not in a film, and now that I have a footing in this system I would like to formally write the rosebud cheat codes as a guide not only to my past self but for upcoming artists in general so they are allowed to know how they can be in exhibitions, from little diddy ones all the way to Tate.

A list of dos **and** don’ts, I’ve written this based on who I see exhibiting and different things that have happened to me and my peers here in the UK. But a disclaimer, I think the current steps to get to be an exhibiting artist are weird and I **in no way** want to insinuate I approve of them by writing this.”

1. Before anything, **be very good at what you do**. Make good things. This is something that can’t be fast-tracked or skipped over to get straight to the exhibiting stage. Deep down we are all in this to enjoy some really good art so that’s what needs to be focussed on first.
2. **Be a decent person!** There isn’t only one image of success – being rich, institutional, loud, and ‘making it’ – and we must be careful not to suddenly start climbing over each other to get on top. Let’s not be adversarial to people who don’t deserve it. Have healthy relationships, be collectively progressive and encouraging. The art world is Social and I’m capitalising that because frankly you’re not getting anywhere making art in isolation. No-one is going to come knocking if no-one knows who you are. You have got to introduce yourself (and that won’t be welcome if you’re not a decent person), which brings me to...
3. **Use Instagram.** These days, much of an artist’s success depends on whether or not they participate in social media. Instagram is the best tool with which to do this; to platform your art, to make and keep that visible, and to follow and support art people who will give you ‘likes’ and attention (and opportunities in return if they appreciate what you are doing). Instagram is convenient in the sense that you can track where good exhibitions are happening and who’s involved with them, as well as keeping a tab on general trends and discourse. A few tips: make your username your actual name so people can find (and remember) you, and do not have ‘Fine Artist’ or ‘FA’ in the username or profile section because it looks stiff, just have your location and a link to your website (which I will come on to). Post images and videos without dangling balls of hashtags below them, which will only falsely conflate your follower and like numbers and make you seem a bit desperate without really attracting the ‘right’ attention. Make a big effort to follow artists, galleries, curators and critics you enjoy, and to kickstart some back-and-forth, follow people who you think might enjoy what you are bringing to the table. To make sure that ‘table’ is in order, post good quality, clear photos of the art you are making; brightly lit, with horizontals and verticals aligned. Don’t use filters, it is weird, and DSLR photos you’ve put through Photoshop and then sent to your phone to Instagram come off over-baked. Stick to squares, portrait if need be - landscape photos do not get as much attention. Consistency is also very important or

you will drop out of others' timelines because of the platform's algorithms, so aim to post one thing a day or every other day. Don't go overboard with posting, liking, commenting, messaging or you will be annoying people and they will write you off.

4. **Also use Twitter.** Not as many artists have Twitter but I think it's important, however do not use Twitter in the same way you use Instagram. Twitter is for commentary: what you think of art, life and politics. No one really wants to see your art here unless you specialise in memes. Try to be involved and present without begging for attention. Follow people you genuinely want to listen to and then, to get things rolling, again follow people who you think might like your work (but please absolutely do not then tweet pushing them to 'check out' your profile or your desperation will undermine my entire guide where we are all cool hard-workers casually plotting our way to success). And I promise I'm not saying all this for nothing: curators and institutions are on social media, constantly looking to the timeline for their programming because they are afraid of being out-of-touch. Artist-led spaces especially love to put on shows of artists they have been introduced to online – that's the research people are doing nowadays, it's the new easy / lazy studio visit. Some galleries would literally rather invite in someone with a good Instagram over a relevant local artist who does not come with the same level of social media presence. You have to play the game I guess.
5. **Think about what you put on social media.** For both Twitter and Instagram, it's interesting to see how people delineate their personal and professional lives and something you should consider. It can feel warm when an artist blends real life and 'art life' content on their account, and it's always useful to know that maker's subjectivities and where they are coming from in their production. And yet... That balance can tip; if it's wholly Art, it can feel soulless and the type of account a Professional Development Workshop you paid too much money to attend would have you set up. Alternately, if the content is all you-you-you, I'd question if you were in it to exchange cultural capital for social clout (normally the people who do this don't make very good art, normally).
6. **Get a website.** If you don't know how to make one from scratch, get Wix or Squarespace (buy your website plan near Christmas or Black Friday, or other times when they are likely to have sales on). You don't absolutely have to pay out for a 'proper' website either, you can always get a Tumblr, Cargo Collective or Newhive account, feel it out, even put your own domain as the URL (like [Zarina](#) has done). Here are other various website examples for your eyes and advice, pls see: [Sarah M Harrison's](#) for its clarity, [Laura Morrison's](#) for putting you directly in front of good images, [Yuri Pattison's](#) for its thorough archiving of seemingly everything he has ever done and made, and [Jennifer Chan's](#) for full sized images and not being boring.
7. **Once you are visible, make sure you are contactable.** Get a plain email address that you can throw at the top of your social media accounts and on your website too. It doesn't need to be info@yourownwebsite.com because email hosting can be expensive, a Gmail account is fine too, but then make the first half your name. I hope your parents gave you a good name. Business cards sound old-fashioned but they can pay off: I walked into an exhibition once, got speaking to the guy invigilating who also ran the space, gave him my business card so he could check out what I do and about a month later I got an email asking if I'd like to exhibit there. Of course this opportunity only came to me because he had my Instagram, Twitter and website to visit. I also once went to a talk Grayson Perry did and

I thought 'he'd probably like The White Pube' so I wrote [@thewhitepube](#) on the back of a receipt, gave it to him at the end, and he followed us the next morning. So remember: pen and paper exist.

8. **Put on a show with other artists.** I know this one sounds counter-productive but: I have seen reliable success in banding together with other artists in your position, finding a space, and putting on your own show to begin with. Sounds like cheating or self-publishing but it's necessary, in my opinion. You can get that first line on your CV, images to distribute online, and it's also an opportunity to invite publications in to write about the show, getting your name out in new places on the internet. For some universities, putting on baby's first exhibition is a mandatory part of the Fine Art course, and if you didn't go to university or it wasn't standard on yours, I think it's something you should make the effort to do. Hopefully you can find a network of people to do it with through your blossoming online presence, or you could do it with just one other person. Everyone seems to be keen to be involved in things like that so hopefully it won't be that hard to wrangle yourself an artist. One of the biggest things I got out of university was meeting a tonne of people, the people they knew and so on. So, the more the merrier with putting on your own exhibition, it just infinitely increases your visibility. My point here comes with the hope you are then 'out-there' enough, seen to be 'someone who exhibits', and you have enough points to qualify for the artist-led scene as a start.

A dream: as first on the ladder, you tour the different artist-led spaces across the UK – small, like Hutt in Nottingham or CBS in Liverpool; you're in a group show somewhere in Leeds. Someone in Glasgow then picks you up and you tell everyone it counts as a different country. Then comes VITRINE in London, and next you have unlocked the Cubitt / Auto Italia / Cabinet level of space. You have a residency at Wysing to figure some things out, everyone is very nice there, and then you get a video piece somewhere in the Berlin Biennale or an exhibition at Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, or similar. When you come back you show at Cubitt-level again, a solo show this time. The Guardian have written about you now and you feel more and more established. Time to show at Chisenhale, and the CCA are asking if you're free next year. After time and more write-ups and artist talks and a trip to the US for some meetings with the New Museum, the Serpentine are in touch. You're in a booth at the Frieze Art Fair, which you're not sure about but you need the money, and then back to making in the studio, where someone from the Arts Council Collection makes a visit to buy your work on behalf of Arts Council England. You call home to tell them you're a real artist.

My advice is: roll over dry ground like chewing gum picking up more and more debris and experience until you are at the Tate. Let's rewind.

9. **Aim for an attainable space.** When it comes to finding somewhere to do that first exhibition, in London you're most definitely going to have to pay to rent space, which is why it's sensible to find a number of people also keen on exhibiting so you can split the costs until it's affordable (call it an investment in yourself; it's privileged, but being an artist is privileged, so...). In other cities, find small shopping arcades or unused spaces; it doesn't have to be an art space, remember, all you need is a room. If you find somewhere contact them, let them know briefly what the exhibition is going to consist of, how many days you'd hope for, opening hours, why it would be good for you and even valuable to the locality (bringing in culture, entertainment etc.). Write a very succinct and charming email or letter; if you are good at flirting you'll always be able to write a solid cover letter. Showing you

have a plan will come off as professional and show you can be trusted. By the way, lots of people put on exhibitions in their own homes now because space is tight so if you have a big enough spare room and think you will be able to take good photos in it, why not? That's an exhibition too.

10. **Know that you can also lie.** Because of the stress and costs of putting on a show yourself, I personally realised what I wanted most from the process was the pictures afterwards because they would be content for my website and for the artists involved; the exhibition documentation would be cultural capital, more things for us to distribute over social media, and more 'experience' I could cash in on when applying for anything, like funding applications and other opportunities. So, I got in touch with a low-key gallery space that I had been to see a show at, that I had reviewed a show at, that had paid me to travel to review something they had put on, and somewhere I felt I was generally on good terms with. I asked them if I could install an exhibition, photograph it, and take it down the same day without it ever opening to the public - and they said yes because it was an interesting proposition, and also the gallery would be able to add another show to their CV. A rejection of the capitalistic expectation of being hyperactive by just appearing to be active. Collectively, between myself, the artists, the gallery space and even an online publication that lists upcoming shows, we told the lie of the exhibition together. I made the show 'by appointment only' and then ignored all the emails from people asking to visit. I had already gotten what I wanted in the photos, we all had. That process of what I came to call the non-exhibition has turned into a website I now run with Michael Lacey called [littlemangallery.com](http://littlemangallery.com), and it continues to be a sneaky way to legitimise yourself. I very much love it.
11. **Go to things.** Go to the kind of things you enjoy and that you'd want to be a part of - if an event sounds vaguely interesting and you aren't doing anything else and it's free, take a risk and go! My willingness to attend talks and events definitely increases the amount of time people I'm sitting next to start talking. I went to a film screening once and the guy next to me started chatting, and said he runs a space in London. I gave him a business card and a few weeks later he'd added me on Facebook and messaged to ask if I would like to include something in a show he was putting on in Mexico! At another film screening I went to, I got speaking to the curator who kept in touch on Facebook and he emailed last month to ask if he could include a video The White Pube made in a screening at Whitechapel Gallery. Those two exhibition invitations wouldn't have happened without me actively participating and going to events. I know it's calm to throw on headphones and go to talks and quickly float away at the end like a ghost but you're closing off a lot of timelines for yourself. A reminder: I don't support everything I'm writing, I'm just saying things as I know them to be.
12. **Let people make contact.** I should probably mention that I just accept all friend requests now as long as they look like real people. I've hidden all my family and holiday albums and accepted that Facebook is simply another way for business to happen. As much as I don't like seeing business-related messages in my inbox (because I like those propositions to be contained in emails so I can properly sit down and reply to them as work), it's probably best you open the gates - something good could come through.
13. **Go on 'art dates'.** After The White Pube's own Twitter and Instagram were up and running and we started to get followers, I was like, 'who are all these people?' We put out a call for

‘art dates’, to meet strangers off the internet and get to know them in galleries, cafes and such. It’s always been friend-making to us more than ‘networking’ but sometimes those are one and the same because the people you know are the ones you want to work with. They are the people you even think to work with because you know them well. It’s another way to make the social happen, except it’s in your hands to make the invitation.

14. **Consider submitting to open calls:** Another point I need to address, but one that is nuanced, is whether or not you should do this. A rule of thumb would be if you have to pay to submit then it’s probably going to be a bad exhibition, though a few exceptions would be Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival which is excellent, the John Moores Painting Prize is worthy, and Bloomberg New Contemporaries, which is a springboard for serious exposure and success across the country and world (and further invitations to exhibit). I guess with everything you need to decide if you mind being in bad exhibitions or whether you’re in it for CV experience and exposure. As much as ‘getting your name out there’ can sound like a good thing, you need to be careful you’re not putting yourself in a box you don’t want to be in, because if your entire exhibition experience is open call shows about, say, Gothic Art or Digital Bodies or the colour pink, the art world class system might decide prescriptive art is all you’re good for, and the curatorial limits of those kinds of shows might not allow your own practice to breathe or be visible at all. I can see some artists with genuinely good work being pulled towards those type of shows instead of the ones where they get to truly flex, and I worry.
15. **Know when and how to submit to galleries.** The lower down the rung the gallery is, the more welcome they tend to be when it comes to receiving exhibition proposals and emails in which you put yourself forward. Do not walk up to the desk of an institution and ask to speak to a curator because you have just decided they’ve got time to listen to you (it happens). Most artist-led spaces prefer to curate their own shows and will turn their noses up at submission emails (which is rude). Some artist-led spaces will take your email seriously and reply but even that is rare. And it can come off as bad etiquette if you send an unwanted submission to some spaces; you might look silly for emailing that because if you don’t know the workings of that particular gallery it might look misguided or big-headed, so maybe ask around or check the website. A lot of galleries that aren’t social themselves rely on submissions and people putting themselves forward though, so just do some research.
16. Finally, **apply to competitions.** Locally, things like the Northern Art Prize or The Liverpool Open lead to respect and more exhibitions. While you are working hard at your internet visibility, don’t forget real life and the galleries who don’t rely so heavily on the internet. Competitions are a smooth way to enter into spaces you can unlock a whole new audience (and even patrons – imagine that).

Gabrielle clarifies that these guidelines “rely on money, luck, social energy, mental health”, being friendly and, of course, being a good artist. Everyone’s art is valid, and what’s ‘good’ is subjective, but it’s important to recognise that artists whose practice connects and resonates with others, and whose work conveys or articulates something considered of importance and relevance, will always be on the right track. Originality excites people, and really feeling that an interesting idea is being communicated to you through a work, when combined with an original approach, is irresistible.

“Mostly what I want to get across is, at the end of the day this is just people talking to other people and deciding whether to include them in things or not,” continues Gabrielle, “If you are popping up all over the place, you might come to mind when people are having those conversations.” Exhibitions and exposure go hand-in-hand; it can be challenging to promote yourself but it’s



important to see making the time and training yourself to engage in self-promotion as part and parcel of being an artist: “the jobs we’ve gotten through The White Pube have all been through being found on the internet, people knowing about what we do and recommending us, or people reading about TWP on other websites and then getting in touch. The net is big but try and make yourself a big fish so you’re easy to catch.”

Gabrielle concludes, “I hope what I’ve outlined above can help you get to where you want to be, but remember that exhibiting should be based on the quality of your art and how much value people find in it, not how popular you are as a person.”

So there you have it. Perhaps it does sound simplistic or contrived, and is absolutely topical and relevant to the particular period of time that we’re living in now rather than being timeless advice, but as we know, much of art world success is about playing the ‘game’, and in order to play the game you need to know how it works...! So hopefully this realistic, honest and crystal-clear information is more a breath of fresh air than disheartening.

Remember, although this is a ‘cheat sheet’ for the art world in the 2010s it is always true that artistic success is based on the combination of both making ‘good’ work and also having a presence. To have that presence, self-promotion is very important – nobody else is going to do it for you, after all, at least not with anything like the drive and dedication you would have – and so you can find an additional Shape resource for artists on how to promote themselves and their work [here](#).

Good luck!

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**Shape's resources are designed to bring disabled creatives and cultural organisations closer together, so that creatives gain better access to opportunities, and so that organisations improve their inclusion and diversity. We canvas a range of opinions towards ensuring that excellent art is delivered and supported by a more representative arts sector. Our stance is that the arts sector needs to improve accessibility and inclusion at every level.**

**This particular resource focuses on the importance of artists influencing people in the art world through effective networking combined with the use of some streetwise tips. This is based on an assessment of mainstream artworld expectations, which are often exclusive and elitist.**

**We recognise and appreciate that many artists we support face barriers to communication and networking, whether in person or online, and welcome suggestions from people with lived experience of these barriers towards the creation of resources which address such issues. We are interested in exploring ways in which networking events can be made more welcoming and inclusive, and also the strategies artists use to connect with and influence others, whether or not they use traditional networking techniques or pathways.**

**To get in touch, please contact us via [marketing@shapearts.org.uk](mailto:marketing@shapearts.org.uk) or call us on 0207 424 7330. We also run accessible artist development events where people can meet with us and others in an art context.**

If for whatever reason going to physical events isn’t always an option for you, we also run a Facebook group for disabled people who work in contemporary art (as artists, curators, programmers, teachers, media and beyond), based in any country, which is aimed at facilitating discussion, support, sharing and networking – you can find it [here](#).

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This resource is adapted from an original text by [The White Pube](#). View more of Shape's artist resources [here](#).

Image: Work by [David Lock](#) in Shape's [Adam Reynolds Memorial Bursary: Shortlist 9](#) exhibition, Artlink Hull, 2017