

SELF-PROMOTION FOR ARTISTS:

MORE THAN A NECESSARY EVIL

By Adam Eisenstat

If a tree falls in the forest and no one writes a press release about it, does it make a sound? By the same token, if an artist creates a work and no one else experiences it, does it have any artistic impact? Is it a viable creation? The act of creation guarantees only that a work will come into existence, but this is an incomplete equation without the presence of an audience. Whenever you hear an artist say that he/she creates "just for myself," don't believe it. Everyone knows that the audience isn't secondary to the artistic process — it's a crucial, necessary component. An audience, however, does not come into being on its own; there's an intermediary step between creating art and the formation of an audience. That step is promotion.

Many fine artists regard self-promotion as a base activity that is at odds with the creative process. In the extreme, they see it as dubious and sleazy, a mercenary endeavor that can only corrupt the purity of their vision. At best, it is a necessary evil that is totally divorced from the real business of making art. This attitude is increasingly unrealistic and burdened with the quaint notion of the artist as a gifted exile in a pristine realm, completely insulated from the world at large. More importantly, this attitude can be fatal to artists' careers and may preclude them from realizing even the most basic level of success.

Young artists especially are often reluctant to thrust themselves and their work into the arena of self-promotion. If they don't harbor the prejudice that self-promotion is tainted, then they may simply dread the whole process because it is so unnatural for them and doesn't mesh with their sensibilities. Their focus and training is on creating art, so promoting it seems like an intrusion and an endeavor for which they are wholly unprepared. This attitude assumes that art and promotion are totally distinct activities, functioning practically inde-

pendent of one another. Inherent in this view is the idea that specialists are best suited for the respective roles of artist and promoter. Yet artists who are not established rarely have the luxury of being able to completely entrust all of their promotional needs to a specialist. So, if an artist does not promote him/herself then this necessary task will go undone, in which case it is likely that the work, no matter how good it is, will not find an audience. Artists must "get their hands dirty" and lay some of the groundwork required for initiating their own careers.

MOTIVATIONS FOR LEARNING SELF-PROMOTION

Basic tactics of self-promotion can be learned, but artists need to be motivated to learn them. A preliminary step toward motivation is to abandon anti-promotion attitudes and realize that art promotion, if done correctly, is hardly the same as peddling consumer goods. It can be an enriching experience, the means or process of which is just as valuable as its ends (success); it doesn't have to be painful or artless.

Another factor that might move artists to embrace self-promotion is the realization that it's essentially a means of shaping their destiny; everything a creative person does with regard to their work reflects upon their future. Promotion means interacting with the public, producing a friction between the interior world that initiates a creative work and the exterior world. This friction gives promotion a frisson of tension and excitement; its effects are unpredictable, and no matter how carefully it is planned, no one really knows where it will actually lead or precisely what its effects will be. It may open other opportunities or reveal undreamed of possibilities. Or it may backfire and reveal harsh truths. An artist must capitalize on the results, whatever they may be, and adapt to the destiny they reveal, just as he/she

does in the course of his/her artistic life. Self-promotion is taking your fate in your own hands; it is an active, deliberate effort to make a mark and impose your creative vision on the world.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS/PROMOTIONAL DECISIONS: KINDRED SPIRITS

Artistic creation and effective promotion are not completely separate. Some of the same qualities that make good art — such as clarity, insight and directness — are those involved in good promotion. The artist who is good at self-promotion is generally one who can put some of those same qualities into the service of amplifying the work and expanding its audience; the promotion will be successful because it evokes the power of the art and hints at its further pleasures and revelations.

Promotion is driven by the artist's intent: Is he/she more interested in cultivating an audience or a market? Is it more about the art or the money? Not all methods of promotion are created equally, and different approaches are appropriate for different intentions.

The choices artists make in how they promote themselves often have a major impact on how their work is perceived. In a sense, promotion is a framework for the artist's oeuvre, and the decisions behind the promotional approach have an importance that may be equal to some of their artistic decisions. For example, placing one's work in a forum that inspires mockery rather than respect may fundamentally alter an audience's attitude about the work and sabotage one's effort to be taken seriously as an artist. Press exposure in less than reputable media may diminish even the best work in the eyes of an audience. Some opportunities for promotion can do more harm than good, so care must be taken.

The diligence and savvy an artist devotes to promotion will determine how effective that promotion is and, ultimately, how successful he/she may become. This will also play a large role in determining whether the art itself can bloom in an environment clouded by issues that have nothing to do with art. In a society saturated with commerce, and in an art world reflecting those values, the work that will stand out may be that which effectively deflects the more vulgar aspects of hype, while still employing deliberate promotional tactics. In other words, the most effective art promotion may be aggressive, yet avoid the flagrant hard sell. Promotion that doesn't seem like promotion is a route to achieving the sort of mystique barred to those whose work is considered too commercial. This is the strategy — or anti-strategy — at the heart of the elusive "buzz."

THE ART OF PROMOTION

Promotion need not be a purely functional aspect of one's creative output; it has dimensions that go far beyond the somewhat mundane activities involved in making promotional materials, getting the word out about exhibitions, etc. In the best of circumstances, it can also help define and enrich the art and the artist. For example, the artist statement, a fundamental promotional tool, is also a means of exploring biographical elements in an artist's work and bringing to light influences and ideas that add texture to the work.

Press interviews and profiles can also help add layers of meaning to the work and life of an artist. While the media is often seen by artists as a promotional vehicle for enhancing their reputation and increasing their audience, it also functions as a forum for ideas and an effective means of establishing a context for their art. The media, artist statements, and the like have the capacity to serve double duty for artists, promoting the art and defining it — two

roles that definitely complement one another. If approached with the same care and seriousness as the art per se, these tactics may come to be seen by the audience and/or critics as important components of an artist's entire body of work.

SELF-PROMOTION IS SELF-DISCOVERY

Self-promotion is not just about selling your work, it's also about selling yourself. This requires an artist to delve into some basic questions about him/herself: Who am I? Where am I from? What image of myself do I want to project? The answers to these questions have deep relevance to the work itself and indicate that persona, promotion and aesthetic are intertwined.

Being compelled to promote one's art requires an artist to communicate to others what his/her work means. It takes discipline and clarity to provide a context for one's art that will stimulate other people's interest in it. Such an exercise may provide an artist with a golden opportunity for finding out firsthand what the art means. Self-promotion may thus be a route to artistic discovery.

Promotion is more necessary than ever in a crowded, competitive marketplace. It's no longer possible for artists to maintain the illusion that creating the best work will automatically gain them an audience and ensure that their careers move forward. No one can doubt that bad work driven by good promotion often thrives; good work driven by good promotion will most likely find itself at the head of the pack.