

Art Advice (from Men)

A few weeks ago, I attended an artist talk at Parrasch Heijnen gallery. The artist Joan Snyder was speaking with art historian/ curator Jenni Sorkin in honor of Snyder's solo show, *Woman-song*. Sorkin introduced Snyder as an iconic artist who played an important role in the feminist movement beginning in the 1970s.

As Sorkin spoke, I watched Snyder squirm. The elderly painter was clearly uncomfortable with the labeling and praise. When Sorkin asked Snyder what it meant to be a feminist artist, Snyder replied, "I don't really think about that. I am that, but no." Sorkin continued to press her, asking Snyder to speak about the difficulties that women artists continue to face today. "We all know that," Snyder said in a curt voice, waving her arm in impatience with the topic.

Sitting in the back row, I was initially surprised by the feminist artist's unwillingness to dive into a discussion on women and the art world; although, perhaps she was expressing frustration and impatience rather than disinterest. Snyder, who has been defined as a "feminist artist" for over four decades, must be awfully disappointed by the lack of change in the art world. I'm disappointed too.

We've all read the articles with titles like "Why Are There Still So Few Successful Female Artists?" or "Inequality Endures: The Price of Being a Female Artist." We know the pay gap and representation gap persist. The way we speak about inequalities in the art world is broad and impersonal, and ultimately disengaging, even (or perhaps especially) for an artist defined by her participation in the feminist movement.

I saw Snyder's disinterest in the general conversation as a desire to speak about women in the art world on a more personal, specific level. My experiences of sexism in the art world are small, but cumulative. What follows is a collection of advice from the last six months that male friends have given me in regards to my art career. These exemplify moments in which I have felt my place as a female artist most acutely.

Jay touches my shirt and says I look too "put together." When I go to openings, I should mess my hair up a little, look flustered.

Ethan says that if I feel like painting, I should paint. But he thinks my introverted nature is a problem. He tells me to be more social, stay late at openings to get invited to after parties. He regularly sends me late night texts like, "Come over. We don't have to fuck. I just want to spoon."

Scott reminds me, "Painting isn't like riding a bike. You can't just 'start painting again.'"

Kris thinks I should wear skirts and dresses more. Make-up too. He playfully warns me that I'd better look good for his opening.

Derrick pulls me outside of Ethan's house after the Superbowl. He warns me that I should distance myself from Ethan because he drinks too much. "You don't want to be associated with that." He also says I shouldn't hang out with Kris. When people see us together I look like a gold digger.

Sarah Weber (b. 1988, Chicago) is an artist and occasional writer based in Los Angeles. She received her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Her active studio practice includes painting, drawing, and edible sculpture.

I ask Mark if he can cover my shift at work, but he says it doesn't pay enough. He tells me later that I'm not as committed to being an artist as he is because I'm too focused on my job.

Mike looks at Instagram and tells me that things in my studio "look weird." When I ask him what he means, he just shrugs his shoulders and changes the subject.

Stephen and I exchange studio visits. Afterwards I invite him to an artist lecture at the Hammer, but he's not interested in going. He says I should text him when I get home, but I don't feel like going out so I let him know I will be staying in. He responds, "I don't think this friendship is working out. I just feel like what's the point? Sorry." He texts me several months later, and I congratulate him on his solo show.

Adam passes through my studio on his way to the bathroom. He looks at my most recent paintings and asks me if I've read Jerry Saltz's essay on Zombie Formalism.

Matthew has a two-part strategy for me. 1) Become a party girl. This involves going out every night from approximately 8 pm to 2 am. I need to drink more and try cocaine. Partying is the only way to meet everyone, and meeting everyone is very important. 2) Make big paintings. Nobody cares about small work or works on paper. The paintings should be light and colorful, and when I talk about the work to curators and gallerists I need to sound light and breezy. I must be careful not to sound too smart because it comes across as defensive and intense. Hours later, while driving to the art fair, Matthew casually mentions that he and his girlfriend have decided to open up their relationship. She is currently out of town.

I wonder about the unsolicited advice Joan Snyder has undoubtedly been given over the course of her career. How many times have men started conversations with her by saying, "You know what you should do?" It's shocking how accustomed we, as women, have become to experiencing micro-aggressive comments from our male peers, however well-intentioned they may be.

When a difficult subject like "inequality and discrimination in the art world" is discussed in broad terms, it's easy to disengage, as Snyder did. We are dulled by the statistics and percentages, which feel removed and separate from our individual experiences. The most immediate way to move the conversation forward is to speak personally and specifically.

In the art world, boundaries between the social and the professional are often blurred, and the difference between a casual discussion and a studio critique are not always clear. It feels archaic as a woman to say that I want my artwork challenged, not my personhood (but it's the reality). The art community may be one of the more open-minded and liberal communities, yet inequalities are still felt daily. Language shapes reality, and in sharing our experiences of communication between genders, perhaps we can continue to work towards a better understanding of each other.