

Colleen Keegan is one of my colleagues in the Creative Capital Professional Development Program, <http://pd.creative-capital.org>. At Creative Capital, she has applied her extensive business background to create a Strategic Planning methodology for artists of all disciplines. I have used career planning for myself for over twenty years and have included it in my own teaching. However, working in the Professional Development Program with Colleen has been a great education in the solid business principles behind many of the activities I have done intuitively in my own practice. This is an interview with Colleen Keegan that took place on October 3, 2007.

J: Colleen, how did you get involved with teaching strategic planning to artists?

C: I had been working for 20 years on a project that was centered on adapting resources that were common to business to the particular needs of women. I was concerned because women were not enjoying economic success proportionate to their male colleagues. The project came to the attention of Ruby Lerner at the Creative Capital Foundation, and she asked me to speak to the artist grantees about strategic planning and the methodology that I had developed in the woman's project.

J: Did you leap to take the assignment?

C: I actually did not. I had a very romantic view of artists and a very romantic view of art support. I perceived that there were tons of other people who would be interested in doing that and I believed that artists were in a much better position than they were, partly because my exposure to living artists was limited. The artists that I intersected with in social circumstances were very successful and I thought that most artists were doing what they wanted to do on their terms.

J: So you had this sort of romantic view of artists.

C: Hugely romantic view of artists.

J: Like you read in the art magazines.

C: I have great respect for people who know what they want to do and admiration for those whose avocation and vocation are married. But I had no idea of the economic reality for artists or the intensity of their struggles.

J: But you came to the attention of Creative Capital and got an opportunity to work with artists.

C: I think part of the magic and privilege of working with Creative Capital was having the opportunity to approach things differently. To analyze artists' needs and challenges. When I went to the first retreat for Creative Capital grantees, the artists were beyond receptive to the notion and the application of strategic planning.

J: So you started by giving a talk about strategic planning.

C: I went to talk about the strategic planning system that I had developed for women and what the components of that were. That project was a twenty year project where I was working with only one or two women a year. It was enormously satisfying to me but a relatively small product. The

reception of it at Creative Capital was beyond my wildest dreams. So, at that point, I started to work specifically with artists at the retreat to test the system on artists and also make the adjustments for artists.

J: What are some of the differences in planning for artists than planning for your corporate clients?

C: For Artists, we've introduced a three-year plan in goal setting because artists have an enormously grandiose notion of productivity. It doesn't relate to anybody else's output, not to other people in the field, those in publishing, or others working in visual arts. The introduction of a three year goal was a way to set another benchmark. Surprisingly, and opposite of other areas, artists goals and dreams are small and the steps are big. In business these skills are learned.

It amazed me to see how successful artists were in spite of themselves rather than because of themselves. For example, rewards for artists were usually given when things were really difficult rather than when things were successful and that kind of an incentive system psychologically, behaviorally, and economically is not motivating.

J: So artists reward failure?

C: Artists absolutely reward failure.

J: No wonder they struggle.

C: I think there's a "Queen for a Day" syndrome. Creative Capital artist, Matthew Geller calls it, "One Downmanship" where artists are topping each other with stories about how bad the gallery was or how much debt they are in, and it becomes a cultural phenomenon. It is also interesting that artists usually do not factor finances as a barometer of success. For some it is even the reverse. This is why the arts are called an exceptional economy because they are not seen as being about money. Because of this, artists then become easily exploited and salaries are much lower for them than for people working in other disciplines.

J: I don't understand what you mean by that.

C: A traditional economy operates by assigning high monetary value to the prized goods and services. Money is co-related to everybody's success and value. In an exceptional economy where you can be successful without any correlation of monetary value, that is not the case.

J: What is monetary value?

C: A subjective assignment that is a really easy score card. Interestingly, in one segment of the art population, monetary value is huge and has always been huge.

J: Which segment is that?

C: That is the top of the commercial art market and includes the so called "art stars". These people

set and make a market. The market for contemporary art is enormous. The market for all art is enormous and it's outperformed stock and real estate over a hundred years. You know, art is a commodity that has performed in every marketplace. It's international, it's portable, and it is reasonably fluid. But the actual number of artists is not related at all to this market. There is not a supply and demand. There are more artists and artwork than there could ever be in demand. There is also no correlation between the educational systems and the art market in the way that there is in other fields.

J: That's why so often by the time they graduate, artists don't know what to do. There is no job waiting or apprenticeship system to get them started except for some who manage to start working for successful artists as their studio assistant and they can start watching and learning to mirror some behavior that might be of benefit to them.

C: Well I think the incidence of that is enormously low. And it also makes people feel like they, individually, are failing. The artist myth seems to be that some gallery is going to come discover you and you will be then be selling everything for \$200,000. But realistically, that is one or two people out of many thousands.

So people graduate and they don't really analyze the market. People are graduating from graduate school with \$100,000 in loans and the notion that they can get a job as a framer and both support those loans and move forward. There is an essential disconnect.

Also, there has been massive wealth redistribution. Insurance and the cost of living are radically different in the places that artists congregate. I think, increasingly, people explore other options like Berlin or smaller American cities. But, you know, when creating a structure for your life, you have to think, about the quality of life, what will your cost of living be, and how much time will you have for making art? I also find that people have the courage to be an artist, but often times, they listen to everyone else talking about how difficult it needs to be and what their options are.

The thing I love about strategic planning is that it teaches people to pattern success, to look at who it works for, see how it works, and seek out alternatives. Many things that were viable twenty years ago are not viable now. It has been hugely gratifying having worked with over 1400 artists to see the radical changes that people make.

J: You've worked with 1400 artists?

C: 1400 artists.

J: So what are some examples of successful planning by the artists that you've worked with?

C: There are hundreds of stories. To pick one that relates to what we are speaking about, a woman who is in New York was working multiple part time jobs and doing her artwork at 2 o'clock in the morning in order to maintain an apartment in Brooklyn, health insurance, and minimal benefits. Then she reassessed what she was doing. She was doing traditional art jobs, working in a gallery and working in a framing establishment. She stopped working with art organizations and is now tutoring

for SAT's. She works from 3-10 and one weekend day and she is making \$150,000 a year. The market for academic services for high net worth families in New York is very strong.

J: So she took her great education and turned it into a parallel opportunity to fund her artwork.

C: And that happens all the time that people have a job that does not support their work. They have a job to support their work that in turn supports nothing because it is at the fringes.

But the real opportunity is to look at the model. Who is making money and what are they doing to make money? I also think that for people, there can be tremendous collateral value to work. There's camaraderie, exposure, structure, and other benefits. And it is very difficult to be creative constantly.

J: So in a way, the artists following Strategic Planning are seeing their life as a whole, applying a business plan to their entire life, and instead of separating one thing from the other, they are seeing one thing as an opportunity to take care of the other.

C: And one has to. Because, the economy changes, they are creating visibility for their work where it matters to them. I believe very strongly that people should do what they like to do. They should work with people they respect.

Creative Capital's strategic plan integrates these ideas and beliefs. First, it looks at your entire life, and the value of being an artist. I actually think that anybody in any field is naive if they do not integrate their whole life. The markets have changed and the economy has changed. People do not work at any single thing for forty years. You have to be very self-sufficient, look at the totality of your values, and be sure that you're really addressing all of your needs. I recommend an individual personal strategic plan, and I would totally emphasize the fact that it is personal. And it becomes the story that you tell yourself. It is your essential truth and you can build everything else from that. As a consequence from that, you then write a business plan for your art career.

J: And I suppose that at different stages of your life, your plan is very different. Do you work differently with an artist just starting out than you would with say a mid career artist?

C: Absolutely. I think everybody's plan is different.

And I think the other premise about strategic planning which is really important, is that strategic planning, at its core, is simple. It sees that all information is good information. It is an honest assessment of exactly where you are. It is an eyes open opportunity to not only deal with your present reality but also look at how you shape your reality.

Very fortunately, we found with strategic planning that bigger plans are always easier to reach than smaller plans. They are very inspiring. In terms of the adjustments that people have made, it is routine that people have quadrupled their income in a period of three years, and have moved from money being a secondary concern to a real measure of personal freedom and success.

Ironically, that also has created a visibility that has propelled their work farther. I believe, absolutely,

that one can be a brilliant artist and not engage in the business of art. But the business of art is a business and people invest because prices are going to rise. People respect success in artists.

Artists often have a very subjective view of affordability. It is very important to look at the economic circumstances of the people that are buying art. Artists too often believe that their customers are their friends and the customer, in a broader sense, has to be an art patron. Who is buying art? What is wealth and value in America and in the world?

J: So artists need to really think carefully about their audience?

C: Absolutely. And they have to look at indicators in their market. What is the cost of opera tickets? Or basketball floor tickets? What does a safari to Africa cost? What are the other expenses common to high net worth individuals? Classically, there has been an association between a Rothko and a six room apartment in Park Avenue.

J: You mean there's a monetary qualification as to Rothko's go up so does the price

C: It is coincidental but they were thought to be the same. Actually, the Rothko's have now exceeded a six-room apartment, but that was an equation that people made. But you want to ask these questions and look at what's at the top of the market.

J: Well, how about the artists who are more community based and don't want to make objects for wealthy people? How do they value their work? What do they do?

C: Oh, I think that's absolutely fabulous. I think that they can become important advocates for public art and for artist fees.

I think there are circumstances where teaching is fabulous and I think artists need to be advocates within a university system in terms of matching those wages with those in other disciplines.

There is absolutely no correlation between success and the amount of money you make and money and happiness. There is an absolute correlation though between how much money you make and what your expectations are. Reaching and exceeding your expectations and goals is deeply satisfying, but it's not just about money. Money is only one measure.

I think that for many artists it is about inclusion in museums, the prominence of their work, and the legacies that they leave. And that's the great thing about strategic planning; you decide what your goals are and how you will realize them. There is no such thing as a lot of money. There is no such thing as wealth. But there is such a thing as a personal freedom Artists are the greatest subsidizers of their own work. What we don't want to see are artists under subsidizing it. And I don't think that there are wrong answers or right answers. I just think people want to be conscious of making choices. Most artists finance their work initially and then debt finance that. And that's fine. You just want to know what it is. You don't want to finance the work yourself and under finance it and not give it the visibility, leverage, or time that you really want it to have.

J: If someone you cared for was beginning a career as a visual artist, what advice would you give them?

C: Plan. Be sure that you identify all the skills and resources that you need. I think artists are small businesses and need to be a boss that THEY would want somebody to love to work for. I also think that all business skills are learned.

And to always work smarter rather than harder.

J: What are some of the biggest mistakes you think an artist can make building a career?

C: Artists meet success with the opportunity for more unsupported work and that is not sustainable. I think that you cannot meet success with fear and that happens at every point. I think that is the time to decide who you could hire up and who you could hire down and how you leverage. I think it's really important, at a success point, to move to the next success point, and I see that time and time again, success is met with the notion of scarcity which can be disastrous.

I also think that there is no single opportunity. There is always another one

And finally, the other worse thing is to operate with no plan, because a plan ironically protects creativity. Planning is about taking the chaos out of things that are not creative that will drain you and that is time and money. Time is a really interesting and important as an ever changing resource. But it's not ever about working more. I actually do not believe I've ever met with an artist who doesn't work hard enough, but people do not preserve their resources. They don't take enough time off. They don't really value their talent or their time.

And another huge mistake is they do not respect their core competency. Too often, artists have been infantilized in terms of the perception of how good they are with time, how good they are with money, and what they can and cannot do. They can do everything and manage everything that is vital to their career and nobody will ever do it better. I also think regardless of how successful you are, if there is not a measure of control, it's very frightening. And it also can be taken away. And this is really about making courageous decisions in the long term. But in a way, it is really easy. And also, I strongly believe in the component of writing things down and having a written plan. Putting your subconscious thoughts into words does control the agenda and make one proactive rather than reactive.

J: Thank you.

Colleen Keegan is a partner in KEEGAN FOWLER COMPANIES, an equity investment and consulting firm specialized in providing strategic planning and business affairs services for companies in the communications and entertainment industries. Keegan has also worked as a producer for MTV Networks, WETA, and SHOWTIME. She has served on numerous Boards of Directors including the American Refugee Committee, the MS Foundation,

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The Artist's Guide: Making a Living Doing What You Love by Jackie Battenfield

Colleen Keegan, Strategic Planning Consultant at Creative Capital, October 3, 2007

Texas Film Commission, Emily's List, the NOW Legal Defense Fund and Senator Dianne Feinstein's Advisory Council.