

Undistracted: Making Art in a Time of Digital Interruption

The summary: How do artists stay undistracted?

Artists opt out of attention-draining, time-wasting platforms and tools.

Artists build digital lives in service of their goals and intentions. Use the platform, don't let the platform use you.

Artists schedule and prioritize embodied life. Studio time, face-to-face conversations, sleep, community connections, and practices like yoga and meditation.

Artists impose time limits on digital platforms.

Artists create small barriers, intentional inconveniences that slow the constant reflex to check, scroll, and click.

Artists use digital tools to limit, batch, and focus their digital tasks.

Artists outsource attention-draining digital work, hiring others for tasks they dislike.

Artists periodically re-examine their digital practices, redesigning their approaches as the technologies shift.

Artists use their most productive working hours for their most important work and save digital tasks for less focused, low blood sugar times.

Artists create and seek out unplugged spaces: a studio, a bedroom, an artist residency.

Artists play the long game, committing time to artistic growth. Digital life is quick and ephemeral; artistic practice deepens over decades.

Artists know themselves. They use tools and approaches that make them feel more like themselves, rather than contorting to use platforms that don't fit.

Making art in the age of digital distraction

I reached a breaking point. I was defeated by the constant beeping of notifications, the hours I spent “working” but not getting much done, the interruptions that could come at any moment, the meetings and rehearsals derailed each time someone opened a screen. My attention was deteriorating and fragmenting, detoured by digital interruptions that seemed urgent but, soon enough, landed me in time-wasting mazes unconnected to my pressing work.

And, the great irony, despite being constantly wired into communications technologies, I felt increasingly disconnected.

I started researching. I learned this was not an accident; it was literally by design. We are responding to our digital products exactly as intended.

We live in an attention economy. Our deep and precious attention is being monetized and colonized. Every day, intelligent, highly paid people go to work at Facebook, Google, Apple, and countless other companies to figure out: How can I get 30 more seconds of Andrew's attention? They explicitly prey on human psychology so that we scroll on, click once more, let the next video autoplay. They have real-time data to test new features and tweaks. *We got 10 more seconds of attention by adding this button.*

They are winning the Battle for Attention. It's a rout.

Attention is our superpower as artists. It's what we bring. Our ability to direct our awareness, to sustain curiosity and focus, to see, hear, and feel closely, deeply, and *differently* is central to our work and our impact. There are jobs you can do well while checking your phone every two minutes. Making art, I believe, is not one of them.

I needed help, and so I turned, as always, to my fellow artists.

I convened a conversation and skill-share in Philadelphia, and I surveyed 300 artists about digital distraction: *How do you manage your digital life and maintain time, focus, and imagination for your art practice?*

The good news is artists have built powerful tools and strategies for preserving our sacred attention. Artists are *counter-designing* digital tools and platforms to support focus, practice, and balance.

The challenges are significant. Artists reported spending an average of 94 minutes per day on social media. That is likely an underestimate, since most people under-report social media usage. The global average for smartphone users is now 143 minutes of social media per day.

If I spend 94 minutes per day on social media, that is:

A full-time 40-hour work week every 25 days

570 hours per year

A full working year (2000 hours) every 3.5 years

Over a fifty year working career, 14 years of full-time work

Are you using the platform, or is it using you?

I don't know what you should or shouldn't do. Each artist is the expert on their own practice. Many artists use social media to connect with community, artists, audiences, and opportunities. Some artists see social media as part of their artistic work.

But.

These platforms are designed to hijack attention and not let go, to strand us in endless and pointless scrolling. They study—I'm not making this up—an amoral approach called Compulsive Design.

Do you want to spend 14 full-time working years on social media? If you do, carry on. The rest of us need tools to **make use of these platforms and then move on**, getting back to the work that matters most.

"My experience is what I agree to attend to." William James

Undistracted Principles

Attention is our big sacred resource as artists. Sustained focus and imagination are our superpowers. In this age of interruption, they need to be protected.

Conscious choices bring intention to our attention. Our compulsive relationships to these products is not a character flaw or sign of weakness; it is how the products are intended. But we are makers, creators, designers. Approached as a design problem, digital distraction is solvable.

You can have a robust, sustainable artistic practice with any amount of digital time. I know productive artists who spend zero time on a screen and artists whose central platform is online. The amount is yours to decide (and re-decide later). How we structure and manage that digital time is the concern of this project.

If you aren't paying for the product, you are the product. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc are free because you—your attention, your data, your choices—are harvested and monetized. Social media platforms design for compulsive use because your attention is the revenue stream. This is a subtle but crucial distinction. We are not Facebook's customers; advertisers and data scrapers are their customers. Design decisions are made not with our interests at the center, but with advertisers' interests. One way out of this loop is to pay for your products. A website host does not care how much time you spend managing your site. Indeed, they strive to make it as simple and unintrusive as possible because you pay them, and, therefore, you are not the product, you are the user.

Tools ≠ Strategy. Social media, email, and websites are powerful tools *in the service of a clear strategy*. Without a strategy, the tool becomes the goal, consuming our time while adding little to our practice or impact.

What is the goal? Communications should serve your long-term personal, artistic, and professional goals. *Making Your Life as an Artist*, the free Artists U book, has a simple strategic planning structure for artists.

Who do you want to reach and how? Getting specific about constituencies makes you more effective.

What is the timeline and budget? Communicating takes time and money. When we aren't realistic about those costs, we get overwhelmed and do it poorly. Invest time and money in learning effective practices, understanding analytics, and, if it's useful, outsourcing tasks you dislike.

Hard strategies (setting defaults) and soft strategies (setting habits) give us back control. My central tactical finding was that artists use “hard” and “soft” solutions to manage digital distraction. Artists change default settings—hard strategies, things you set only once—for digital platforms they get compulsive about. Artists create intentional habits—soft strategies, things you choose daily or repeatedly—for less

serious problems. Deleting email from my phone is a hard strategy, a default, a wall. Choosing to reply to email only twice a day is a habit, a boundary I remake daily. Be honest and unconditionally friendly with yourself: When do you need a boundary and when do you need a wall?

The devil comes in a shroud of convenience. Creating slight inconveniences, little barriers to time wasting, helps bring intention to our digital lives. I don't have email on my phone. I could, at any moment, open my laptop, use my phone as a hotspot, and check my email. That slight inconvenience, maybe 30 seconds, creates a drastic reduction in how often I check email.

Understanding psychology allows us to counter-design our digital lives. Social media and email offer "intermittent rewards," occasional praise, opportunities, and offers of work buried in a stream of posts. They are a perfect example of what psychologist B.F. Skinner calls a "variable interval." You can best train someone to do an activity by rewarding it unpredictably, as gambling and the lottery do. If the interval were predictable, if you won five dollars on every tenth lottery ticket, no one would play. Social media platforms intentionally prey on this psychological trait by offering the unpredictable, tiny dopamine rush of validation, likes, and comments. When we understand compulsive design, we can counter-design our use based in our goals and rhythms, rather than scratching a compulsive itch.

Get your twelve hours (in the studio). Artists consistently lament a lack of studio time, time for their practice. Artists in my Next Steps survey reported wanting, on average, twelve more hours in the studio each week. This is a crucial number. When we nourish our practice over years and decades, the slow and essential work of art making can flourish. There is no substitute for putting in the time. One way to get more hours is to cut down on time-wasting distraction. If I cut my social media time in half by eliminating the mindless scrolling, I might pick up five hours a week. *"But I do social media in the in-between times, riding the train or waiting for a meeting to start."* Yes. And. Time spent imagining, dreaming, and thinking about artistic work moves our work forward. Or if I spend those spare minutes handling tasks that need to get done (answering emails, rereading a grant proposal, returning a phone call), I can free up time later in my day or week for art.

An example. Just an example.

I was overwhelmed and underproductive. When I tracked how I was spending my time, I saw that I did thirty different things every hour, few of them well. My laptop was the center of my working world, and I jumped from productive work to dubious “research” online to checking email one more time to time-wasting scrolling. I felt it in my body, a jittery, caffeinated hum of *doing stuff fast all day* that left me wired and hollow. At one point, I landed in the hospital with a panic attack, a chilling reminder that minute-to-minute stress was taking a toll on my well-being.

I am generation X, born in 1969. I’ve lived in a pre-digital world and a digital world. My stepmom worked for Apple in the 1980s. I was the first person I know to go on an early version of the internet, through a futuristic looking phone that logged into computer systems by number, not name. Fancying myself a hacker, I tried to bluff my way into passwords, calling network administrators on our land line. I was an early adopter of productivity tools, the first person I knew to own a laptop, the first with a “Handspring” handheld computer. I helped friends troubleshoot their iMacs and dialup connections, and I introduced them to the strange thrills of BBS’s and AOL chatrooms. My dance company won awards for our 1990s website. The competition was not stiff.

As the technologies turned, I turned. I was slow to get a cell phone because I did not want to be reachable all the time. I did not want time-wasting interruptions close at hand. These new tools—smartphones, social media, email and video games in your pocket—shifted from productivity to distraction.

I made a performance called CELL, a journey for one audience member at a time guided by your cell phone, because I was alarmed and fascinated with the impact these little machines were having on the humans around me. The psychological effects seemed plain. I didn’t need to read the studies—and there are many—to know that attention was fragmenting, that depression and anxiety rose in direct proportion to smartphone usage.

I became a conflicted Luddite, a lover of the possibilities of technology and a hater of their new corporate forms. It is worth saying that I am susceptible to distraction. If an email pings, I open it. I removed video games from my laptop when I realized how much I played them. My resistance to compulsive technologies comes, in part, from my own compulsive tendencies.

Over the years, I counter-designed my digital life, using hard and soft strategies that work for me. Here’s my current system:

I have no email, games, social media, or anything interesting on my phone. My home screen is black and empty. I ask: Is this something that might seem fun to do

when I am bored? If so, I can't have it on my phone. Moments of boredom and wandering are opportunities for my artistic imagination.

I am not on Facebook or Instagram. I have political objections to how they are affecting our culture. I'd also rather spend those 14 working years making art and community.

I have an artist website and a website for Artists U, my organization. I have email lists for each and send updates, news, and calls to action. These cost money, and I consider it money well spent. I use the platforms; they don't use me.

I use an artist-designed app called Self-Control that completely turns off the internet for a set amount of time. I use this every day to write fiction.

We have no cable television in my house.

I seek out places where there is no internet or cell phone service.

I go to artist residencies twice a year if possible. If the studio has internet access, I ask not to be given the password so I can work in peace.

I have an Alphasmart Neo, a late 90s word processor keyboard (\$30 used) that allows for distraction free writing.

There are tradeoffs. Always. Artists ask to connect with me on social media, and I offer my email instead. (To be honest, that rarely leads to a sustained connection.) There are many discussions, professional and personal, on social media that I'm not part of. I am silent during the in-person conversations that revolve around "Did you see the that post?" No. I never see that post.

There are likely opportunities and paying work I could get if I invested time and effort in social media. This is a big one for artists: *I have to be on xxxxxx platform because I can get sales or gigs or opportunities.* But artists can and do generate sustainable artistic lives without these platforms. (All artists did until very recently.) And I'm satisfied with the gigs I get. I invest that social media time in my art, which, I believe, leads to more gigs. As my agent told me: "If you don't enjoy social media, Andrew, you'll suck it at it anyway. So don't bother."

TOOLS + TACTICS

CAVEAT: Every artist is different, every artist’s relationship to digital tools is different. None of this is prescriptive. Take what seems useful, leave what doesn’t. Find solutions and platforms that work *for you right now*. We all change over time, and the technologies change.

A word about communications

Social media and email are the time-consuming tools artists struggle with most. Artists complained that social media too often led to time wasting scrolling and argumentative rabbit holes. With email, artists struggle to stay caught up and worry that important emails are falling through the cracks.

What can you do with these platforms? Exchange words and images with other people. Period. They are communications tools, and, as has always been true with communications, strategy and intention bring results. The platforms don’t want your intentions; they would rather be our boredom relievers, self-esteem reinforcers, and entertainment portals. Approached as communications tools, social media and email become finite and useful.

Setting social media defaults

Quitting

I quit all social media.

I quit Facebook (8% of artists surveyed said they quit; 10% never used).

I quit Twitter (8% of artists surveyed said they quit; 65% never used).

Quitting social media is, unsurprisingly, the most effective hard strategy. Many artists expressed a desire to quit — “I hate Facebook” — but felt socially, professionally, or emotionally unable to. Those who had quit were universally pleased with their decision.

Limiting access

I don't have Facebook or Twitter apps on my phone.

I am intentionally logged out of social media on my computer. The small barrier of logging in prevents me from constantly checking.

I put social media apps on the second screen of my phone so they aren't immediately visible.

I turned off pop up notifications for social media.

I stopped following people on Facebook. You don't have to unfriend, just unfollow and they won't appear in your newsfeed. On Instagram, I stopped following people who make me feel bad. Even if it was my own insecurities at play, it was a game changer.

I unfollowed every single Facebook friend. This means I have no news feed, and it ended my compulsive feed-checking. When I need to contact someone or find information, I still have access to Facebook.

Many artists limit their access to social media platforms. By making the platforms less accessible and visible, artists feel more control over the choice to be on social media, rather than responding to the prompts of an app icon or notification.

Outsourcing

I hired an assistant to do online work. Worth every penny.

I ask people who like social media more than me to help.

Artists hire or barter with others to handle social media.

Setting social media habits

Time limits

I set designated times for updating Facebook.

I use Self-Control app to block myself from Facebook for 5.5 hours a day, sometimes more than once per day.

I take breaks during my work and, in that break time, I allow myself social media.

I downloaded a timer and I set it for ten minutes before logging on to Twitter or Facebook.

I set an alarm on my phone so I don't stay too long on any platform.

I try to limit social media to 'downtime' moments: commuting, eating alone, waiting in line.

I use stay-focused, a chrome extension that blocks all social media and news sites after 25 minutes per day.

Artists schedule and limit social media time. Losing track of time is the greatest danger of social media and the compulsive design behind it. Keeping track of time is the remedy.

Logging on with intention

I use Facebook for work related items. I don't scroll, post, like, or respond unless it really moves me.

I don't get drawn into the rabbit hole of arguments.

I only use my dance company's Facebook page and only for promotional purposes.

I don't open Facebook messages or texts unless I have time to respond right away.

Artists set their intentions with the platforms. Losing track of intention is another danger of social media. We log on to post a photo of our work and, two hours later, we are stuck in the quicksand of an internet argument, an endless feed of cat pictures, or the latest clickbait headlines. It is worth noting that these platforms are continually looking for ways to break down our intentions, so maintaining our intentions takes strength.

Management tools

I schedule posts for Facebook and Instagram ahead of time on a third party app so that I'm not always thinking of content.

I do everything in one app (I've used Buffer, Hootsuite, and Later) to schedule posts on Facebook and Twitter.

I schedule my Facebook posts through Facebook Page app.

Scheduling a week's worth of posts through a management platform eliminates the risk of time-wasting scrolling and frees us from the constant nagging thought "I should post something today."

Setting email defaults

Limiting access

I took email off my phone.

I turned off email push notifications and sound notifications.

I set "Check for new messages" to manual.

I got rid of internet at home so I only have internet at work. Not checking email or the news in order to unwind from the day has helped me free up my creative mind.

I can still check things on my phone if necessary.

Reducing access to emails is the most powerful default. Decreasing the constant ping of email notifications means less interruption.

Reducing and sorting emails

I unsubscribe to emails I don't need.

I have a second "burner" address for anything that might share my information or spam me.

I set a preferences rule that automatically sorts marketing emails to a "bulk" folder.

I move emails to folders and only keep things I need to respond to in my inbox.

I stopped "checking" email. I reply to incoming messages that are simple to respond to, and I flag as "Need Reply" anything I don't have time to answer right away. I deal with Need Reply messages in scheduled email time.

I have an administrator who assists with easy email replies.

Reducing the number of emails in your inbox reduces interruption.

Setting email habits

Scheduling and limiting email time

I read and return emails between 6:00 am and 7:00 am.

I return emails early in the morning and check briefly again at night.

I reply to emails every other day.

I save email communication for my office hours unless my response is time-sensitive.

I respond to new emails immediately because I only look at email when I have time to respond.

I try not to check email on my phone unless I can reply then and there.

I set aside an hour a day for email so they don't accumulate.

I use the Boomerang app to bring emails back to me at more appropriate times.

For business and managerial emails, I try to answer as quickly as possible. If an email involves making a sale or money, it gets priority.

The most common soft strategy is scheduling time to manage email.

Send better emails

Only send work emails that move the world forward.

I build clarity with my contacts about email rhythm and length of response. We keep emails short, make specific asks (no "Thoughts?"), and only CC people when necessary.

If something's truly urgent, I pick up the phone.

Only send good emails! An email can

convey information (no response needed)

help two or more people make a decision (make the ask specific; the more people in the chain, the more important that is)

Know which one you are doing. And if it doesn't fit one of those, schedule a phone call or in-person conversation.

A work-related email that is five paragraphs is too long.

Looking to schedule a meeting with a group? Use a doodle poll.

Consider using a <http://three.sentenc.es> signature. It says: let's try to keep emails to three sentences.

When I email people with resources (curators, presenters, funders), I make my asks short and ridiculously specific, something they can quickly say yes or no to. Can we find time for a short call so I can tell you about this project? Or: Would you be willing to e-introduce me to So-and-so? These folks are extraordinarily busy, and hundreds of people want their attention. I always reread these emails before sending: Is there something specific and doable to say yes to? And could it be shorter?

Too many email chains fill our inboxes without doing anything productive. Sending fewer and briefer emails saves us and others a lot of wasted time.

Other soft strategies:

I have multiple email address for multiple projects.

I aim to keep only 10 - 12 emails in my inbox at all times.

I make a list of the most urgent emails to send each day.

I use an email program (Mac Mail) to work offline and do all of my responding without receiving new messages. Then I go online and send my responses as I walk away from the computer. I do not look at the new messages flooding in. They are for next time.

I programmed text expansion shortcuts for frequently used blocks of text, e.g. a pleasant response to a new fan who wrote about my show.

Often a single phone call is better than a series of back and forth emails.
I fall behind on email because I choose to be present.

Studio time, art time: setting defaults

I do not take my phone into the studio.

My studio is a computer-free zone.

I teach dance, and this year I started a policy of absolutely no phone use in the studio once class starts, even during breaks. I think this is one of the most important aspects of training I'm imparting to my students.

In the studio, I don't let in conversation. I certainly don't allow the uncertainty and useless doubt engendered by social media.

I write first drafts using an Alphasmart Neo, early 2000s word processor with no internet (\$30 on Ebay).

I have two laptops. One is for composing music, and it does not connect to the internet. The other is for communications and online work. Drawing that simple distinction changed my artistic life.

Studio time, art time: setting habits

I don't turn on the computer in the studio until I've done my analog work.

Every morning, I spend 10-40 minutes drawing and writing out a list before I turn on computer stuff.

If I want to make any art in my home studio, I don't open my computer at all in the morning until I've put in a good work session.

I must read, write, and rehearse before I may use electronic devices.

I don't reply to things when I'm painting (in 1-2 hour increments).

I put my phone on night time mode when in studio so no alerts.

I use the Self Control app to block the internet on my laptop when I am working on my novel.

Setting phone defaults

I consciously do not have a smartphone.

I have two smartphones - one in airplane mode that isn't connected to email or text.

I use it to listen to books/podcasts and to create videos for social media.

I have nothing interesting on my phone, no email, social media, or games, i.e. nothing that I might do when I'm bored.

I turned my phone to grayscale (black and white) to make it less tempting.

I removed all the alerts from my phone: email, Facebook, Instagram, etc.

I let my phone battery die.
Ringer and media notifications are always turned off.
I put all my apps in a folder, and I put the folder on my second screen so my home screen is blank. No tempting icons. I have to specifically seek out an app.
Phone is off from 5:00 pm to 6:00 am unless otherwise scheduled.
I leave my phone on silent. Anyone who needs to talk will leave a message.
I keep my phone plugged in downstairs at night and use a separate alarm clock.
I started a No Conference Calls policy, offering instead to meet in person or talk one-on-one. It saves me many wasted (and aggravating) hours every month. It's worth saying that I'm at a point in my career where I feel secure making that rule.

Setting phone habits

I let calls go to voice mail during the day and return messages in the evening.
I put my phone on mute most of the time.
I don't answer the phone all the time, nor do I answer email or text messages right away. It's not an alarm, it's a form of communication.
I put my phone on Do Not Disturb, I do a check-in after I work, and then don't pay attention to my phone.
I've notified all of my friends, colleagues, etc, that I am not tethered and will answer their call when I answer.
I keep phone tucked away during rehearsals.
I put my devices into airplane mode before sitting down to work and put a time limit on my "disconnected" session.
I keep my phone on silent most of the day but leave it on vibrate.
I use Stay Focused app (android).
I use the app Moment to track my phone time and it yells at me if I'm over 2.5 hours or it's between 10pm and 11am.

Positive steps: morning, sleep, and Sabbath

In the morning, I look at the sky before I look at a screen.
I charge my phone across the room while sleeping.
I have a "digital sunset" an hour before bed, all devices off and put away.
No screens in bed.
I do a 10-minute check-in before bed so I can start my day with the ball rolling.
Bedroom is off limits for reading emails.
No screens in bed or at the gym.
One day a week of no technology: phone, computer, and internet are turned off.
I put my phone on airplane mode as I start getting ready for bed, it helps to disconnect.
My partner and I turn off our phones and computers after we clock out on Fridays and don't turn them on again until Sunday morning.
For at least the first 30 minutes after waking, I don't look at email or social media.

No screens after 10 pm.

I aspire (though don't always succeed) at having a screen-free Shabbat, Friday sundown to Saturday sundown.

I take two full days each week, corresponding with Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, when I don't look at email. I set up an "Away from email" automatic response during this time.

I've set the intention of practicing yoga in the morning before checking email.

No technology rule one hour before sleeping, and in the morning until I've done my morning writing, yoga, gotten dressed, and had breakfast. Usually this is the first two hours of waking.

No phone use before getting out of bed and showered in the mornings.

Only fun stuff after getting in bed (games, reading Nook, scrolling through Facebook or Instagram). No work.

I have started doing the crossword before I go to bed instead of getting lost on the internet or a TV show.

I turn off my phone ringer in the evening.

I use a timekeeper app so I remember time is passing and take breaks at healthy intervals.

I do most of my art first thing in the morning before I check the Internet.

No screens after 11 pm on weeknights.

I place my phone out of reach during family time.

No email or financial tracking apps in bed.

No phone during meals and movies.

Positive steps: embodied life, community, mindfulness

Before dealing with any digital tasks, I schedule a few hours of non-arts related community service every month. Working with youth, elders, houseless folk, returning citizens, or others in need.

Minimizing time on digital stuff = maximizing time on art, family, and friends.

I read books, garden, and have conversations with people.

Getting in body flow—cleaning, stretching, meditating—gets me back in touch.

Setting meditation times helps me.

It's worth considering abandoning social media altogether, focusing on in-person relationships and online tools that don't involve algorithms and advertising.

My biggest strategy to get offline is to have creative meetings with other people.