



The Law Office of Deborah Gonzalez, Esq.

IP: Art, Music, Entertainment, Digital

Atlanta – New York

www.dgonzalezesq.com

Art: Five Points of Promise and Power

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Hello again.

This month's topic comes from a keynote speech I gave to the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society Gala Banquet. These honor students worked on a year-long project focusing on the democratization of art, what it means, and what are the perils and the promises of art for our society. As they presented their work for recognition and awards, I tried to sum up some of the underlying concepts of where they can take what they learned and apply it throughout their lives – my message was simple – they (you, me, us) are works of art that are constantly created, recreated, refined, and set out into the world to make it a more beautiful space. Hope you enjoy.

As an intellectual property attorney my clients are from the creative industries – they write books to tell stories, create art to express thought, compose music to share feelings, and produce entertainment and film to document history as well as have fun. There are many reasons why they do what they do, but I am grateful for their dedication to their craft. After all, I am not an artist, are you? Or are we all artists?

One of my students, many years ago, who was a cook, in a Public Speaking course, gave a speech about what makes a good dish – it was more than just the recipe. I thought his breakdown was brilliant and I told him one day I would use it for one of my own speeches. So, today is that day. I took his three-part formula and added a few of my own ingredients to come up with my five (5) points of the promise and power of art. In no particular order, I present them to you.

Palate – I equate palate to “taste,” and for most people they will take that further to define good or bad tastes. But one of the best things about law is that law does not define “art” – it is also not an art critic and does not determine what is good art or bad art. Whereas you may have heard that “art is in the eye of the beholder” for the law, “art is in the hand of the creator.” But this first amendment-based right to define your artwork also allows others to criticize art, even going so far as to censor certain art works based on concepts of obscenity and morality. How many books that are now considered classics were first banned from publication? How many paintings by Manet were banned from the Exposition (remember *Olympia*)? How many remember Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York cutting funding to the Brooklyn Museum of Art because of a painting of The Virgin Mary with elephant dung? These examples demonstrate how art has the power to stir up the community, to bring about controversy that can lead to discussion and reflection about our society and us.

Patience – Patience is about time. Art takes time to create. How much time depends on the artist and when the artist believes the work is finished. Sometimes it can take minutes, sometimes it can take years. Sometimes it is never considered finished. But again, the only one who can say it is finished is the artist. There is a great story about Leonardo da Vinci and his painting of the Last Supper. Leo liked to take his faces from the community around him – from real people. Apparently Leo wasn't finishing the painting fast enough and when prompted to

complete his answer was that he needed two more faces – he offered to put the Bishop’s face as Judas and his own as Jesus. They left him to finish in his own time. The other thing to keep in mind, perhaps before the finish, is when is an art work begun? This becomes very important in commissioned works – is it when they first approach the artist or when the contract is signed?

Partnership – Art is not created in a vacuum – we are bombarded with visual, oral, and visceral inputs all day long, every day of our lives. Any one of these sensory snippets or all or some of them in combination can become the impetus for a new art work. The partnership then comes from being part of this amazing world we live in – all of it, from the beautiful and breathtaking to the grim and unbearable. Artists take it in and express it out in new and challenging ways. But the artist also has others that surround him or her to help the work be exhibited, appreciated, and shared – the artist team. Made up of industry professionals – a manager, a representative, an attorney, a financial person, a marketing person, gallery owners, museums curators, fans, supporters, etc., etc., etc. – the team works as a living, dynamic organism, breathing life into two and three-dimensional works.

Politics – Politics is about how someone obtains, maintains and uses power. In the art world that comes in two forms. The first is the role of art as historian, documenting the events occurring around us. Think of how political campaigns depict their candidates in propaganda or how Royal weddings memorabilia or Goya’s paintings of the tragedy of war. The second is the role of art advocacy. Funding for art programs in schools and communities are being attacked and hacked as being unnecessary in the education of our students and citizenry. But studies abound about the importance of art – in education, in health and therapy, in the general well being and happiness of a community. We need those who will advocate for art, who support it through funding and patronage, and who create it. For when the creation of art stops, hope is lost.

Passion – The artist is a passionate person. They have enthusiasm for what their concept and message is, they have tireless energy to see it completed, they have a loyal dedication to their craft and often sacrifice to see projects through. They show us passion through their expression of life and they call to our own passion to be released as we bear witness to the process of their creations. Without passion, art dies.

These five ingredients – palate, patience, partnership, politics and passion – mixed together and set at room temperature, produce a delicious buffet of flavor, color and texture. View art. Promote art. Pursue art. Create art. View every day of your life as another opportunity to create your life and fulfill your promise of changing the world.