

**NOTES FROM:**

**(ARTIST) LIFE SCHOOL**

**HOW TO WRITE A PROPOSAL  
WITH KIM PATON ON 22 JULY**

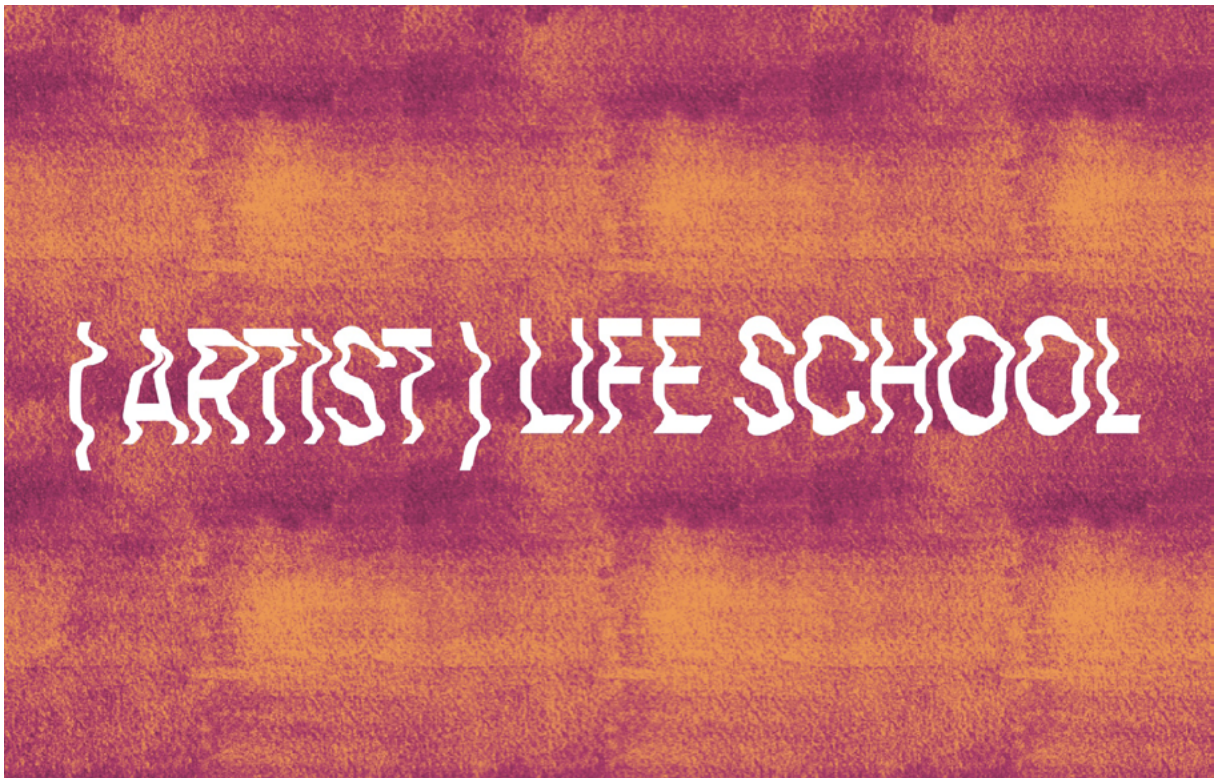
**THE  
PHYSICS  
ROOM** CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

# THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

## NOTES FROM (ARTIST) LIFE SCHOOL:

How to write a proposal with Kim Paton on 22 July 2021



Kim Paton 's background is studying sculpture at Massey, 4-5 years as a practicing artist before gradually she felt more of a fit with the back end production of art. This talk draws on that experience, as well as her experience facilitating and running galleries.

Proposal writing is not an exact science. It's very subjective.

A proposal is a weird moment between private practice and public exposure.

Kim distilled her talk into 12 slides which form the sections in these notes.

Please note: these slides are accompanied by an audio recording of the talk that is available the event page on our website via the link below:

<http://www.physicsroom.org.nz/events/artist-life-school-write-a-proposal>

## 1) KNOWING THE WORK

- Everything starts with the work. You've arrived at this moment from a tenuous moment of belief sustaining and enriching you.
- You need to feel that the work is ready to be put out into the world and received.
- The industry has professionalised, we've become deadline driven. A loose studio approach has been replaced with projects and deadlines. It's ok, but it can get in the way of the work.
- You need to think, slow down. Turn the noise off. Are you engaged in your practice? Driven? Are you compelled by the things you're working on? Without a deadline, are you compelled to arrive at the studio and do the work?
- You need to shut down the noise. The noise of what gallerists might think, what people will think, the noise about career development - it's noise. Your practice is about the work.
- If you have a kernel of an idea that's ready to interface with a wider audience—it's important to think about if that work is ready. Not is it RESOLVED—there's time for that. Are you ready to talk about it? To pitch it, write about it etc?
- You need to feel sure that you can talk to the work, not around it. Not everything has to be figured out, but you need to be confident and willing to front it.

## 2) KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT FROM THE WORK

- Know what you want, get beyond seeking approval (institutional approval that is).
- Don't take every opportunity put in front of you—be selective. Not every opportunity is a good opportunity. Sometimes you need to hold back, wait for the relevant ones to your practice.
- Think about what it is the work needs—is it a particular gallery? A particular material?
- Hold the power of your own practice.
- You need patience. Wait for the right thing to come along.
- Anxiety-inducing urgency—try to figure out how to let that go.

### **3) KNOW WHAT YOU NEED TO BRING THE WORK INTO BEING**

- Take a realistic approach to money and resources, management, hours.
- Make a list of what you can do and what you need help doing. Get support on how to bring it into being. Think about what support you need to make this happen in a way that you're happy with, ie. funding, critical guidance, help negotiating, not being alone.
- Think about external skills. You don't need to be the expert at everything. Don't be afraid to say what you need. You know the work.
- Artist-run spaces and some galleries are mandated to provide stewardship, support and scaffolding to help artists with professional development and delivery. That's their job!
- Don't forget the value of voluntary labour and good will.

### **4) SETTING YOUR OWN COURSE**

- There is no proper map. It's so subjective and the playing field is not even—navigating that landscape is tricky. There is no ordered system for how an artist's career pans out. There is no even flow. There are so many forces upon us, you have to go at your own pace. Often it comes in waves: project, project, 8 year's silence...
- Find ways to be sustained by what happens in your studio practice. It takes commitment and endurance.
- Conceptually, hold onto the notion that the power of your practice sits with you and no one else. Shut out the noise. Be actively interested and hungry to learn about the world around you, but don't get overwhelmed by focusing on everything that's going on around you. Look outward—research, read, be generous and supportive, BUT when the time calls for it—the shutters come down and you get into your own work.
- Resourcefulness is essential. Think about strategies for coping with the ebb and flow. Part time work, freelance contracting etc.
- Keep one or two trustworthy sounding boards around. Know that we are always our own worst critic—we are not a reliable judge for our work.

### **5) MAKE A GOOD MATCH**

- Know your kaupapa and the spaces you're looking at proposing for. Do your research about the gallery/space/institution—this is fundamental. What is the organisation? Why do they exist? What's their mandate? Their purpose?

- Make a good match—this regards galleries but also beyond that. Understand the niche of where you're applying, ie. don't pitch a painting to a craft gallery.
- If it's a good fit, research then email or call. Don't send a proposal right away.
- Save yourself time—find out key things before writing a whole proposal. Look into whether you can in fact submit proposals —it's not so common anymore.
- A call or face to face meeting is better as it will give you information about the organisation, but also shows that you're professional and following the plan.
- Where do you think this work should go? What's your dream scenario? Write a long list. Think about the pragmatics of that list.
- Think laterally—does it require an institution?
- Show initiative.

## 6) STRONG WRITING

- The term 'strong writing' is incredibly simple, but is often conflated and confused.
- It's not poetry or fancy words. Be wary of whether the language you're putting around it is fluff.
- Articulate what the work is about, why it has meaning or relevance.
- Succinctly describe the ideas driving the work. The tighter the info, the better. Keep it concise. Use smart and clear thinking.
- Write in your own voice.
- Do not overstate the premise.
- Work requires different levels of explanation, ie. process/making, concept.
- Doesn't need a high concept if it's not relevant to you.
- Provide relevant imagery for the work. Provide images so the reader can build a visual language around the work.
- Physicality—indicate what the work may look like in space, ie. scale, form.
- Describe the work—evidencing that you know how to manifest it.
- Delivery—if there's a complex element or any technical complexity, be realistic. Articulate that you understand what's needed.
- Be pragmatic. Keep to the budget. Write an achievable budget.
- Artist CV: exhibition history, summarise in an initial statement.
- Provide links—this is better than overloading a PDF with content.

## **7) MAKING A CONNECTION**

- Reaching out—it's a daunting process.
- What is the appropriate way to connect?
- Be polite.
- Make an appointment. Don't just walk in with your portfolio.
- Be professional and follow the process.
- Respect on both sides.
- Be part of your community. Foster relationships. This is very important as more organizations move away from open call models.
- What's your deadline? How far out are you programming in advance? Some galleries plan 12-18 months in advance, ARI's may have a quicker turn around.

## **8) WELCOMING THE NO**

- Don't expect a magic 'yes' on the spot.
- We are so scared of failure; develop a willingness to ride it out.
- Follow up once you've submitted a proposal—85% of people who submit one do not follow up. Be prepared to chase them up (within the realm of professionalism).
- Welcome the opportunity for someone to tell you what they think.
- Bear in mind that some organisations need to run ideas past a board and funding docs.

## **9) DON'T GIVE UP UNTIL YOU GET A NO**

- Don't just put up with delays—persist until you get an answer. Sometimes they are being polite and don't want to say 'no' to you directly.
- Hold organisations to account.
- Feedback is helpful—it allows for a conversation about why it is a no.
- Be at one with the potential of a no. A thick skin is required. It needs to be robust so that it's not soul crushing. Step outside of yourself and understand that there are many, many reasons why you might get a no. There are a

multitude of matrices in play—timing, representation, materials and funding.

- A good curator should be able to see the good in work that isn't just to their personal tastes, however subjectivity is unavoidable.

## **10) FEEDBACK/ READING THE ROOM**

- If there is a door that remains open to continue to engage, do that. Maintain relationships.
- Sometimes the project is not fully cooked or resolved.
- Sometimes it's not the right place or time.
- Sometimes the project is just not good enough.
- Reflection and deflection—do not absorb the no into your heart.

## **11) BACK TO THE WORK**

- Go back to the studio—your motivations, ideas.
- Revise, reconsider or open up something for another phase
- Do not rely too heavily on external validation.

## **12) NICE TO HAVE**

Here's a tool belt for robustness:

- Tenacity, stubbornness. Developing this is a skill.
- Thick skin. Step outside yourself. Feel it. Move on.
- Engage with your community. Be an active participant in spaces where you want to show. Be part of the audience, come to talks, openings, events.
- Critique: studio visits. It's difficult to make this happen after art school!
- Mentorship—can you seek that from another artist/ Contact once a month for an hour of their time. People love to be asked to be helpful.

## **ABOUT (ARTIST) LIFE SCHOOL**

(Artist) Life School is a series of seminars that bring together contemporary artists to further develop professional skills, and sets out to answer the curly questions around maintaining a practice out in the world. Ideal for recent graduates and emerging artists, each workshop will host an industry professional to discuss the realities of making, funding, and showing your work.

This first seminar addressed proposal writing.

## **ABOUT KIM PATON**

Kim Paton is the Objectspace Director, a public gallery dedicated to craft, design and architecture. For 2021 she also holds the position of Artistic Director for Toi Moroki Centre of Contemporary Art (CoCA). She has previously held academic positions at Massey University, Wellington and Wintec School of Media Arts, Hamilton where she was lecturer, Research Leader, and curator of Ramp Gallery. Paton holds a Bachelor of Fine Art (honours) in sculpture from Massey University and a postgraduate diploma in Business Management from Waikato University. She has curated and written extensively on craft and contemporary art, and is co-author of the book *Contemporary Jewellery in Context*, published by Arnoldsche Art Publishers and released in July 2017.



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## TIPS FOR PROPOSAL WRITING:

### **Alice Canton Funding 101**

<https://www.thebigidea.nz/stories/funding-101-how-to-write-effective-funding-applications>

### **Tips & hints for writing a proposal**

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/589a8c096a4963ad40f38d2f/t/5ade4f406d2a73171825c30e/1524518721817/Tips+and+Hints+for+writing+a+proposal+2018.pdf>

### **Checklist**

[https://artwork-archive-assets.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/documents/AA\\_Grant\\_Proposal\\_Checklist.pdf](https://artwork-archive-assets.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/documents/AA_Grant_Proposal_Checklist.pdf)

### **How to write an arts grant proposal in 16 easy steps**

<https://www.format.com/magazine/resources/art/how-to-write-better-artist-grant>

### **Grant writing handbook**

<https://fpcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/grant-writing-handbook.pdf>

### **Effective grant writing**

<https://abj.artrepreneur.com/effective-grant-writing/>

### **Grant example**

<https://www.strategicgrants.co.nz/images/Grant-resources/WritingExamplesNZ.pdf>

## **SOME EXAMPLES OF CALLS FOR PROPOSALS:**

### **Blue Oyster Art Project Space**

<https://www.thebigidea.nz/work/227869-call-for-proposals-from-arts-practitioners>

### **Artspace Aotearoa**

<https://artspace-aotearoa.nz/news/call-for-proposals>

### **Corban Estate Arts Centre**

<https://www.thebigidea.nz/work/230330-call-for-exhibition-proposals>

### **RM**

<https://rm.org.nz/proposal-info/>

### **Sculpture Park**

<https://www.sculpturepark.co.nz/events-exhibitions/call-for-proposals>

### **Toi Pōneke**

<https://toiponeke.nz/visual-art-residency>

### **Gus Fisher Gallery**

<https://gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz/2021-callout-for-the-booth/>

### **Enjoy Contemporary Art Space**

<https://www.thebigidea.nz/work/226231-open-call-for-proposals>

### **North Art**

<https://www.northart.co.nz/article/call-for-exhibition-proposals>