

THERE IS NO RIGHT WAY TO DO THIS



A Practical Resource for Creative Endeavors

By Herbert Lui

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NO RIGHT
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DO THIS

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CONTENTS

Introduction	i
From Action Comes Progress	3
Your Constraints Are Your Canvas	15
Make Your Own Market	23
Decide What Quality Means	39
Practice the Creative Process	53
Experiment Your Way to Something Big	67
Make Your Work a Craft	79
Align Your Actions with Intention	87
Keep Moving Forward	95
Epilogue	103

Introduction

I guess at some point, the things you need to learn are things nobody else can teach you.

—*Bill Watterson*

Could quantity be more important than quality? That's a question I sought to answer, and in July 2013 I released a blog post titled "Why Quantity Should Be Your Priority." I wanted to call out the false choice between quantity and quality. I proposed that quantity could be a reliable tool to improve quality.

The response was immediate; musicians, writers, designers, CEOs, investors, and even professional gamers virtually nodded in agreement, that repetition and purposeful development of the skill were the only way to become a master of the craft. As I write this, the article has been read 200,000 times, shared thousands of times, and even added to a university's coursework.

To my delight, I realized I was far from the only one who discovered this philosophy. Years before

I wrote my post, artists like Carol Marine started painting every day. As a result, she has created thousands of paintings. Illustrators like Beeples completed an image every day, composing and rendering thousands of illustrations. Recording artists like Future recorded five to ten songs per day and released just a small portion of them. There are now numerous movements that initiate people into making something every day, whether it's 28 to Make, the 100 Day Project, or #100DaysOfCode.

That's where this book starts. I want to offer you a wide range of strategies to maximize your output so you can improve your quality. This fits in with what Dean Keith Simonton, a distinguished professor at UC Davis, has discovered about creative productivity after decades of study. Simonton wrote, "Quality is then a probabilistic function of quantity." Or as poet W. H. Auden writes in his introduction to *19th Century British Minor Poets*, "The chances are that in the course of his lifetime, the major poet will write more bad poems than the minor."

Quantity is just one way of measuring the amount of action that we take. The philosophy of this book is built on taking action. It's through action that we learn, firsthand, what works and doesn't work for us. To borrow the motto of the laboratory of embodied cognition at Arizona State University, "Ago, ergo cogito." I act, therefore I think.

There is no right way to read this book. In fact, I encourage you to not read it cover to cover. Instead, pick and choose the parts that interest you. Because if there's one truth about work, creative or otherwise, it is that we are shooting at a moving target.

I don't believe in hard-and-fast rules, and there is no guaranteed success. What failed for one person works for another, because all that really matters is taking action.

This is not a manifesto. This book will not feature any prescriptions. Instead of the conventional advice format, I'll be making propositions, a concept I learned in improvisational comedy. If you go to a class, you'll see that participants are encouraged—but not forced—to agree to and expand on propositions. This freedom means they could easily say no. I would encourage you to reject a proposition if you don't think it serves you.

You're also free to adjust the proposition. I've used variations of these with my own writing team at Wonder Shuttle, as well as with teams at companies like QuickBooks, Flipp, and Shopify.

This book encourages you to change through action, by shining a spotlight on the limiting mindsets that prevent us from taking more action. This book also

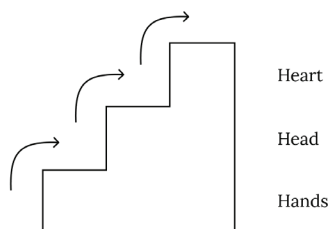


Exhibit A. Diagram for the hands, head, and heart.

proposes new and important actions that will infuse our work with some of the crazy, chaotic, energy it needs to thrive. We'll cover three different ways to change: with the hands, with the head, and with the heart.

For anyone who needs a diagram to organize their thoughts, here's one. As you can see in Exhibit A, the first and foundational step to change starts with the hands. From there, you use your head to drive change, and the heart follows.

I'm earnest about the three sections, but I'm not serious about the diagram, of course. This isn't that type of book. Make your own damn diagram!

As the opening quote suggests, this book's aim is to get you to learn what nobody else can teach you. It's through looking at a variety of propositions, and trying them out on your own. You'll figure out what works for you. The overarching goal of this

book is to suggest a variety of methods and to give you the permission to try new ways of doing things. Ultimately, all of this is to help you discover how to do things your way.

Whether it's quality, progress, or even mastery that you seek, making and releasing your work are at the core of what I suggest. Take action and stay focused on the process of actually writing, drawing, coding, constructing, assembling, or whatever it is you do. I hope that this book provides a reveal behind the curtain of creative work, and supports you in taking more action.

Part 1

Hands

Hands - Head - Heart

Everybody starts off not knowing much. It's not only knowledge that makes progress. The difference between moving forward and getting stuck is action. Even some movement in the "wrong" direction can be progress. With our hands, we can focus our efforts on getting many good things done, and not making one perfect thing. By making many things, we let our expectations of each one melt away. We learn not just with our heads, but with our hands and our hearts. We accept the possibility that in order to make something great, we might need to start by making something ordinary. Our hands provide us with the momentum and encouragement we need to get started on our work.

Chapter 1

From Action Comes Progress

Draw, Antonio, draw and don't waste time.
—*Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni*

When we were children, none of us [needed to be told to draw](#). It was practically primal. We would naturally doodle. Yet at some point, most of us stop drawing.

Similarly, most of us have an instinct to take action, but we unlearn it throughout the years. A lifetime of comments like “You can’t do that,” “That’s not how things work,” and “Do you have a backup plan?” beat us into thinking practically and logically.

Our natural-born instinct to be creative, to play, and to look at the world with wonder and limitless possibility is stifled and tamped down so we can deal with the unpleasant business of being adults. We can’t use the left sides of our brains to think our way out of this one. The solution is not to try

to think our way out of this, but to take action and to let the brain follow. “If you want to think differently, first learn to act differently,” scientist Heinz von Foerster said.

Virgil Abloh visited a screen-printing shop and printed a design he made with Adobe Illustrator on a T-shirt. This was several years before Louis Vuitton would appoint Abloh to be its artistic director of menswear, and before Abloh’s brand Off-White would break through mainstream culture. [Abloh said](#) all of these opportunities come “from a moment that happened four years earlier in which I took an idea and got it made.”

That moment happened in the midst of Abloh supporting recording artist Kanye West through one of West’s most productive periods—after *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, during the *Watch the Throne* recording process and accompanying tour, and during the *Cruel Summer* compilation album. Even in this busy time, Abloh found a way to make it happen. He said, “Go and print that T-shirt today, and by today I mean in the next 30 minutes. If you don’t do it, that’s your problem.”

Abloh’s friend, creative director Justin Saunders, [said to GQ](#), “What I knew about creativity was saying no to things, but he’s on the opposite flip. It’s like when Virgil convinced me to be a DJ—I still

don't know how to use a mixer. I said to Virgil, 'I don't know how to DJ,' and he said, 'It doesn't matter. Let's just go have some fun.' And then eventually we were DJ'ing at Coachella."

Abloh's instinct is, in some ways, innate in each of us. While we know that action doesn't necessarily produce immediate results, it has a tendency to make *something* happen. To artist [Sarah Lucas](#), creative breakthroughs happen spontaneously and suddenly, creating greater progress than her hours or days of slogging through hard work. But upon reflection, she wonders if maybe they happened as an indirect result of, or relief from, her hard work.

You get lucky as you keep moving along and learning. Or, perhaps, it's more true to say that your unluckiness runs out. If you have to wait until you're sure of what's going to happen before you take action, you could be waiting forever. Even if you believe that circumstance, fortune, and fate control the majority of your life, you still have a choice to make about the small parts you control.

Not to mention, our actions train our brains to think, using our bodies. They also train our brains to see the opportunities for progress. The most surefire way to become a great writer, regardless of

how much inherent talent a person has, is to write a lot. Leonardo da Vinci called this “componimento inculto,” which biographer Walter Isaacson describes as “an uncultivated composition that helps work out ideas through an intuitive process.” Basically, thinking by sketching.

We always have a choice, which is to take action, or not. If our schedules seem too busy, we will need to reclaim the time and energy to do it. Here are several propositions designed to encourage you. Try them out and see how they fit:

Do something without caring about the results.

Proposition: Take action on something you want to do, today.

Throughout the years, we are conditioned to do things well and to constantly improve. If we’re not doing that, we’re led to believe we’re getting worse. If we regress, we are failures. These beliefs are all based on a flawed assumption: that progress is linear.

At an extreme, this could lead us to chase perfection. If something isn’t absolutely perfect, we believe it’s not worth doing. But perfectionism creates an impossible standard for us to meet. This is just one of many reasons we start procrastinating and get blocked.

Think of the person whose goal in life is to write and release a masterpiece, but isn't interested in publishing a blog post. It will be nearly impossible for that person to do the former without trying the latter. In reality, the only failure is to not try, out of fear of making something bad.

In his book *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!*, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman recalls an art class when he was instructed to draw without looking at the paper. He was impressed with the results, noticing a "funny, semi-Picasso like strength" in his work. He knew that it would be impossible to draw well without looking at the paper, so he didn't consciously try. He writes, "I had thought that 'loosen up' meant 'make sloppy drawings,' but it really meant to relax and not worry about how the drawing is going to come out." The solution is to do something without caring about the results.

Today, if you accept this proposition, you will take action on the thing you want to do. If you want to write, then write at least 20 words in a notebook. If you want to draw, sketch something out. If you want to make music, hum a melody into the voice memo in your phone and try to create it on an instrument or in your computer.

If you're uncertain of what the thing you want to do is, then do the thing you think you want to do. Or do the thing you think your best friend thinks you want to do. Or write a list out and roll dice. It's only by trying many things that you find the one you really like.

Try your best with what you have. Ideally, you will be able to finish your task in five minutes. That short time makes it difficult to do anything well, so hopefully you will put that possibility out of your mind and focus on the process. There will be a time and place to care about results—but it's not while you do the work.

Play the fool.

Proposition: Do something you want to do, in spite of knowing that people will laugh at you for it.

“To the preservation of the universe, instead of its destruction,” poet Allen Ginsberg said. He and a television show host, William F. Buckley, Jr., were debating the Vietnam War. Ginsberg pulled a harmonium up, sat it on his lap, and sang a [Hare Krishna](#) song. Buckley Jr. smiled the smile of someone uncertain of how to react. As Allen sang seriously, Buckley Jr.'s smile disappeared, and he moved a finger over his mouth as if to silence himself. “That was the most un-Hare Krishna I've ever heard,” Buckley Jr. laughed after the song.

Actor Ethan Hawke, a big proponent of the beat generation, [said](#) when Ginsberg returned to New York City, his friends rebuked him. He looked like an idiot and the whole country was making fun of him, they said. And Ginsberg's response was, "That's my job, and I'm going to play the fool."

Ginsberg knew that he interrupted the regular scheduled programming on TV and that the poetry would resonate with people. At the very least, it gave most of them something to talk about. Perhaps it would give a few something to consider or think about in quiet times.

It's important, amidst all of this experimentation, to remember that it's not *just* about other people liking your work. It's about expressing yourself, to the fullest. See if they understand you. Do something embarrassing. Express something honest, something positive, that you think may be silly.

As filmmaker David Lynch wrote, "Keep your eye on the doughnut, not on the hole." Stay focused on the work and what you want to say. Don't be afraid of how people may or may not react—be okay with making them laugh at you, not with you. Know that in the quiet hour when they can't sleep, your truth may come into their mind, and they'll wonder what it all really meant.

Set and meet a daily quota for 10 days.

Proposition: Choose a creative operation. Do it for 10 days.

On November 7, 2007, students of Michael Bierut's Yale class each picked an activity and committed to doing it for 100 days in a row. Bierut [recalls his instructions](#): "The only restrictions on the operation you choose is that it must be repeated in some form every day, and that every iteration must be documented for eventual presentation." One student chose to dance every day, another chose to make a poster in under 60 seconds each day, and still another made a different version of the same poster each day.

This is a reliable way to gain experience, improve your skills, and build discipline. Lindsay Jean Thomson, who facilitates the 100 Day Project, an online project inspired by Bierut's class, says that there's a noticeable improvement in how the projects turn out from day one to day 100. "If you sit down and do something every day, you *will* get better at it," she says.

One hundred days can sound like too much of a commitment, so I suggest starting with 10 days. If you feel on day 10 that it's manageable, then continue to day 100.

You have innate discipline; it might just be asleep. The daily quota will cultivate this discipline, channeling it into your creative work, until it's strong enough to take over and it becomes a part of who you are. For added accountability, participants in the 100 Day Project need to share their progress every day on Instagram, and Bierut's students presented their project at the end of the 100 days.

If you write two pages per day, in a year, you'll have produced over 700 pages—enough to publish two novels. If you keep at it for a decade, you'll have written 20 novels.

Do your thing, in 20 seconds.

Proposition: Simplify the thing you picked into something you can do in 20 seconds.

Social scientist B.J. Fogg's [Behavioral Model](#) tells us that the more ability a task requires, the more motivation it will also require. That idea applies to creative work, which is why these propositions require minimal ability and time. This insight is key to creating habits and tapping into your discipline.

Vin Verma, who goes by the name Internetvin, has made music and written code every day for a year. One of his techniques is to find a way to do music or code in 20 seconds (e.g., in coding, writing just a single line, `print("way too tired..")`). Similarly,

one of Bierut's students, Zak Klauck, made posters in under 60 seconds per day. Mike Winkelmann, known as Beeple, has made an original illustration every day for over a decade. He spent just a few minutes on days he had food poisoning, as well as on the day his child was born.

Life gets busy sometimes. The trick is to find ways to make progress in a matter of seconds. On days where you have little time to spare, this 20-second variation will make sure you keep progressing.

Make it the best part of your day.

Proposition: Make doing your creative work a highlight of your day.

Discipline will get your routine started, but happiness and excitement keep it going. Michael Saviello, also known as Big Mike, paints during his lunch hour inside Astor Place Hairstylists, where he has been a manager for 40 years. It's not difficult for Big Mike to paint during the lunch hour at his day job. "This is my favorite part of the day," he says.

At the beginning, as you make the decision to do your thing, it might feel like another task in your to-do list; maybe even a chore, on some days. But you can also cultivate the attitude not of "I *need* to do this," but of "I *get* to do this." If you don't enjoy it, then you need to ask yourself what you're doing

and why. Is the goal something different from enjoyment, or passion? Are you driven to change your career path, or to learn a new skill for a different reason?

These sorts of questions might enable you to realize that the thing you've picked isn't really the right one for you. Lindsay Jean Thomson's first 100 day project was taking a photo each day, only for her to realize that writing suited her better. Nonetheless, Jean Thomson fulfilled her 100 days of photography. Some days must have been hard and others easy, but she made it happen.

Be easy with yourself—if you don't actually like it, don't force it, but just know why you're doing it. Maybe you need to practice this skill in service of the one you really like. (For example, you need to practice research in order to become a good writer.)

You may also realize that, after a few days of practice, it really becomes the best (or second best, or third best) part of some of your days. This isn't necessarily meant to be a lasting, permanent, "I've found *the thing!*" but rather, "I've found *something.*" Many people pick up two or three different crafts throughout their lives; maybe you've found the first one, and the second one awaits you some-

where down the line. Nonetheless, once you've found it and committed to your chosen creative work, the next move is to figure out how to fit it into your day.

