

[June 22, 1995]

A Portfolio is not only your calling card, which speaks for your professional reputation, it also speaks volumes about your personal reputation as well.

While 99.9% of you reading this right now are going "Duh!," sad fact of the matter is that, for too many upstarts - motivated either by their desperation to get their foot in the door, ambition gone awry, or just an unfortunate lack of common sense - the idea of passing off someone else's work as their own doesn't seem to bother them one bit.

On one hand, why should it? After all, when the current head of an agency, owned by a major player in the fashion world, can show her portfolio to Crystal Wright (Our Fearless Leader), featuring the work of an artist she was representing at the time - and get away with it - what does that tell you?

On the other hand, in a profession where one is expected to have all the sincerity of a used car dealer, such par-for-the-course trifles as deceit, betrayal, and leaving a trail of broken bodies in your wake, does tend to have this nasty habit of biting you on your patootie when you least expect it.

Can anything be done to protect an artist's work, and his or her reputation? Two up-and-coming makeup artists and two agency heads gave their views as well as their experiences in the trenches.

Thailand native Shutchai "Tym" Buacharn has done print work with photographer T. C. Reiner, videos, and commercials with actresses Natasha Henstridge and Charlize Theron ("They have good days and bad days, just like everybody else"), and did Janet Jackson's make-up on her recent world tour ("I can honestly say she is one of the nicest people I've ever met"). Tym has been focusing on getting an agent for the first time, which has been giving him some trepidation, as a rival artist's "work" has been making the rounds. "I was hired to do the dancers, and [he] was there to do Janet. But he screwed up and he didn't know how to fix [his mistake], so they asked me to fix it." When Tym returned home and began to put together a new portfolio and promo reel, he learned his former co-worker had the picture that HBO used to promote Ms. Jackson's concert special in his portfolio -- the work Tym did. "I called him and he said he thought it was his. I didn't buy it, but I didn't force the issue. I called his agent to complain, but [he] was no longer at that agency."

Tym has landed a couple of covers and an editorial, but with people he has worked with before. "There's not much you can do about it. There will always be somebody trying to pull you back down. I'm just trying to make a positive out of a negative."

But what about the picture in that portfolio? "I can get a letter from [Ms. Jackson's management], but what can I do with it? You don't know how much damage has been created until you get back out there. I'm hoping [agents] will question me about it rather than go 'he must have stolen it.' It could've been an honest mistake, but, like, come on! Any artist out there knows their own work, I don't care who you are." Yet, he understands why he was singled out. "Everyone knows Kevyn Aucoin, everyone knows his work; nobody's stupid enough to steal from him. It's so sad that people are so desperate to claim someone else's work as theirs. It takes a long time to get your book together and make it strong. This community is not a big community; eventually you are going to get caught. It's a dog-eat-dog world if you let it be, but there's enough jobs for everyone out there. The people who hire you are expecting you to do the caliber of work that you have in your book. He has dug his own grave." Tym believes "we need to police ourselves if this kind of thing is going to stop." As for the agency head with the bogus work, he has a simple solution: "She ought to be shot!"

Chicagoan Elena Arroy got her start working on student films at the American Film Institute, and much of her current business comes from its graduates. She has done mostly print and commercial, including the Oscar de la Hoya campaign for Mennen deodorant, and is currently involved with *Paper*, but is trying to get back into films. Unlike Tym, she has had stretches of non-work for months at a time, but lately, Elena, who doesn't have an agent, has been so busy, she has had to refer other artists for jobs her schedule won't permit her to do. "I get calls from people wanting information about the business or wanting to know how to get in or they want to assist." One would-be assistant showed Elena her portfolio, featuring a tear sheet Elena had done: "I asked about how she got the job, and she said something about how somebody told her the photographer needed someone. I asked her who shot the photo, and she gave me the wrong name." The girl finally confessed that she couldn't get a job, couldn't do a tear sheet, and was just trying to get a break. "I couldn't imagine how people could do that," she said. "I was very hurt."

But that wouldn't be the last time she would have to deal with sneaky stylists. One assistant actually brought her book to a shoot, and badgered the photographer with it. The director of a TV commercial asked Elena to get rid of another assistant after she showed up on the set and passed out her business card, bragging that not only was she a better make-up artist, but would work for a third of what Elena was charging. "They are not thinking. If someone was doing this to you, how would you feel? They want to get there really fast. They think they know it all already. They don't want to pay their dues. I still do free stuff, I still test, I still assist. I assist Melvone Farrell, who is a fabulous artist, and I'm always learning something new from her. Some assistants think they can jump in and be the key, but they can't." She echoed Tym's sentiment there's enough work to go around: "To take that position away from someone who has trusted you is just wrong. Be eager but not underhanded."

Professional self-preservation Elena's her mantra now. "I really need to work with [an assistant] before I can trust or give them work. If I were to take somebody to an agency, what if the agent had seen their book with my work in it? What if a photographer was dating the make-up artist? You never know the people you're working with."

Even though it's been in business for less than a month, potential clients are already beating a path to the Greenwich, Connecticut home of Studio Agency. "We decided to take the best of everything we've done and do a little agency thing and have some fun," said co-owner Jay Vincent. "That's the direction we're heading. It's still in the business and you can't go wrong." Jay got his foot in the door in a most-unconventional way. One day, he agreed to teach a friend how to play guitar if the friend taught him how to do hair. After working with Vidal Sassoon, John de Laria, and Paul MacGregor, Jay and his friend opened Natural Identity in 1970, which is still going strong. But by 1990, he decided he had had enough of snips and perms, and worked in nightclub management. Then, he worked as a beauty production distributor and a consultant for Loréal, Redken, and KMS, which "rekindled my love and affection for the beauty business, but I didn't want to [go into salons again.] There are too many disgruntled hair stylists out there. I wanted to 'give [running an agency] a shot.' Hence, Studio was born. "I like the 'circulatory system' of the beauty business -- that's what I like to call it: nutrition for every vital organ. It touches everything, when you think about it. It has to do with a certain kind of vanity." Studio is set up like a mini-salon, with testing and photography, ideal for the freelancer. "We're getting calls from people who want to [freelance], which is one of the things I hate about salons: you get kind of stale, and it creates negativity because you're not busy all the time, you just sit and think about how you're not busy, you're not out there, handing out your business card." So, what does he look for in talent? "People who are eager to be a part of the beauty business, have a passion for it, egos that aren't too big. I like to say 'the ego is my amigo.'"

Like Tym and Elena, Jay sees those who would even think of piggy-backing on another artist's work as the scum of the Earth: "I don't want to work with people who take, take, take. I'm sick of it. People don't take the profession seriously. It's insidious. It is a profession and you have to be a professional. I know for a fact that [some] will take the easy way out, and agencies will make ridiculous offers, just to grab talent. Back stabbing is so unnecessary. There's got to be some price to pay, some ramifications, I mean, we all gotta work." Yet unlike Tim, Jay doesn't believe in an honor system: "Human nature dictates otherwise." So how does he plan to protect Studio from unscrupulous up-and-comers? "I'm just a judge of good character, you can fool me twice," he chuckled. But seriously, folks: "We all copy hair cuts, designs, colors, but I think plagiarism is anti-complementary. Use other people's talent,, but don't show it in public. It's about the business owners controlling the situation. We all know the satisfaction that comes with doing your own work and seeing it out there. It's still a grey area; it all boils down to right and wrong deep down inside."

Angelika Schubert established the Célestine Agency in 1985. Célestine boasts it "is the first call for fashion, photographers, magazine editors, art directors, commercial and music video directors, publicity agents, and advertising agencies." It is equally-immodest about name-dropping the A-Listers their clients have mused, trussed, and fussed over: Sophia Loren, Jerry Seinfeld, Annie Liebovitz, Helmut Newton.

"Every agency has come across an artist's portfolio that may have an image they know belongs to another artist. How do deal with it is always a question," Angelika said in a statement. "Sometimes just asking the artist questions about the shoot might make them think twice as to keeping the image in their portfolio. If the problem is larger, i.e. more than one plagiarized image, then more investigation may be required. Calling the photographer to verify who worked on the shoot, contacting other artists involved in the project to verify the crew are ways of getting to the bottom of it without approaching the artist directly. If all else fails, asking the artist directly if it is their work will most likely produce the truth. Sometimes, an assistant who is working on their own portfolio while working as an assistant has put images in their book that they were the assistant on rather than the key artist on. Their thinking is that, since they worked on the shoot in some capacity, they can put the photos from the shoot into their portfolio. A brief definition of what constitutes a valid tear sheet usually clears things up. The best defense against plagiarism is on-page credits. If this can't happen, keeping records of your work and whom you have worked with can often provide the verification necessary to corroborate your claim. Every artist should always remember that 'your reputation precedes you.' Word travels fast and if you have been caught plagiarizing someone else's work, no agency will give you a chance."

Just flipping through *Vogue*, *W*, or *Elle* is enough to remind even a seasoned vet that getting in is one thing, getting to work with the best - and being considered the best - is something else entirely. One can't help but feel sorry for the girl who was so desperate to get a break, she used one of Elena Arroy's tear sheets. Even as one shares Elena's justified indignation, who knows how long the girl had been pounding the pavement, begging for a chance? In short, what she did may have been bad, but - unlike those two assistants - she was not a baying Hound from Hell who would gladly mow down Grandma.

The threat of being blackballed is not going to keep the truly Machiavellian from doing what they are going to do; as Jay Vincent pointed out, that's human nature. It is incumbent upon agents and industry professionals to figure out how to bring along new talent so that desperation is never there to begin with; a chance is the least that any of us deserve.