

# A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mess

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For centuries, aspiring artists got their starts by observing and practicing what professional artists did inside their workshops. After mastering enough skills, they would then head off on their own. Modern art, starting in the middle of the 19th century, changed all that by calling into question what constitutes a work of art. Art began manifesting two things in tandem—radicality for its own sake and self-expression. Aspiring artists no longer needed to go to workshops or studios to become artists because being avant-garde and self-expressive did not depend on learning crafts, techniques, or studio methods.

For 100 years, from the mid-19th century up to World War II, artists flocked to Paris in droves, absorbing the spirit of the avant-garde in bars, cabarets, theaters, and salons, and developing their styles either as loners in their ateliers or as members of various bohemian groups convening over absinthe. But after World War II, when the center of the modern-art world shifted to New York, the education of artists began to take place more and more in colleges and universities. In the United States, part of that was due to an influx of government money, much of it disseminated through the GI

Bill. Many artists who were perceived as avant-garde, and who therefore couldn't support themselves through their work, found that they could support themselves by teaching in academe. Ambitious young art students gravitated toward college art departments where these avant-garde artists were teaching, if only to hang around other artists and pick up their bohemian attitudes.

Although plenty of solid teaching and learning has gone on in art schools and in colleges and universities, by the 1990s, as Howard Singerman argues in *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (1999), art education no longer demanded the acquisition of specific skills, but instead became simply a shortcut to an artistic identity.

Now, however, a tug of war is going on over what exactly constitutes an artistic identity. The result is that art education (by which I mean the education of artists for the professional contemporary art world, as opposed to the education of high-school art teachers, which is an entirely separate matter) has become a hodgepodge of attitudes, self-expression, news bulletins from hot galleries,

and an almost random selection of technical skills that cannot help but leave most art students confused about their ultimate purpose as artists.

This mishmash approach has been going on for so long that it amounts to an orthodoxy. It dominates the education of artists both in colleges like my own and in such art schools as the Otis College of Art and Design, in Los Angeles, and the Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn. In this aleatory orthodoxy, it falls to first- and second-year "foundation" courses to provide any meaningful link to art of the past. Those courses—"Basic Design," "Beginning Drawing," and so on—teach line, tone, shape, form, proportion, color, and some fundamental "hand skills."

On the opposite side are what are sometimes referred to as "post-studio" programs, which are growing increasingly popular. They, too, offer "foundation" courses, but instead of studying techniques and studio skills, the would-be artists, often fresh from high school, study ideas and concepts—the putative social, cultural, and theoretical issues having to do with art. This kind of program is the visual-arts equivalent of the liberal arts' "critical thinking." Its premise is that only by shaking off the dust of the past can students become either viable commercial artists or successful gallery artists in the 21st century; it directly transfers what's trendy in the galleries or advertising agencies onto the plates of undergraduates. Its overriding assumption is that although 21st-century art may contain some keystroking and button-

pushing references to old-fashioned, hand-crafted beauty, most of it will be otherwise engaged.

The seeping of more and more theory as well as "critical thinking" and new technology into traditional studio-art courses makes sense if art is seen as the product of a conceptual education rather than the result of the acquisition of creaky 19th-century skills that are attached to now-defunct ideas about beauty. At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, for example—where I did my graduate work in painting in the late 1970s, when video art had just been added to the M.F.A. program—the revised first-year program instituted last year requires all incoming undergraduates to purchase a laptop computer. Students are even given special lockers for their computers that, in effect, pre-empt space that otherwise would be designated for such messy art supplies as paint or charcoal.

What happens at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago matters: It is one of the nation's oldest and largest art schools and is therefore seen as a leader in art education.

One of the two required first-semester courses in the new SAIC program is "Core Studio Practice," whose catalog description begins: "Core Studio Practice is an interdisciplinary investigation of technical practice and conceptual and critical skills common to various areas of creative production." The description of the other required first-semester course,

"Research Studio I," begins this way: "Research Studio I offers students an opportunity to explore creative research strategies used by artists and designers."

The words describing those courses jolt old-school art professors like me who are oriented more toward drawing and painting than theory. Keep in mind that as late as the 1990s, Art Institute first-year students were required to take 12 hours of drawing.

Because much of the de facto curriculum at the Art Institute is determined by what individual instructors decide to teach under the loose rubric of course descriptions, there is no way of knowing for sure exactly how much development of studio skills goes on. But by using such terms as "creative production" instead of "creativity" and "critical skills" instead of "skills," and in citing drawing as just one among several "notational systems," the catalog descriptions make the practice of skills appear to be a very low priority. The first-year curriculum seems to promote a Web-oriented workplace full of computers, where students work antiseptically and collaboratively with others, behave like wannabe public intellectuals, and develop "concepts" that borrow heavily from the vocabularies of sociology, computer science, and government bureaucracy. Within this matrix, artists develop "research methods" for their "studio practice." Whatever odd tool is deemed necessary for their "practice" (formerly known as "work of art")—whether it is colored plastic bags, city-sewage-system dia-

grams, LCD displays, Webcams, or, however unlikely, a piece of drawing charcoal—is picked up and used without benefit of prerequisite courses that teach specific skills with a specific tool.

Instead of students individually observing art and life, steadily focusing within an art discipline, and working toward developing a signature style marked by self-expression, the "studio practice" has its practitioner busily collecting data, working in groups, constructing theoretical systems, and participating in interdisciplinary projects. "Studio practice" and "creative production" are conveniently nebulous terms—it is unclear, in fact, if they even need to culminate in a work of art.

As uncomfortable as I am with this sort of curriculum and "practice" of art making, I recognize how attractive it probably is to 18-year-olds who have grown up with the ubiquitousness of computers and an industrial-strength popular culture. By patting their most facile drawing protégés reassuringly on the back, art professors cannot really protect the foundation-skills courses that they profess to love. There are, after all, some aspects of the new programs that will prove useful to the next generation of artists, who will grapple with an even more digitized world than our present one. Besides, in a short time many of the same fine-arts students nurtured in the foundation courses offering traditional art skills will invariably turn around and metaphorically slay their old teachers by making their professional debuts

not with tenderly painted easel paintings but with sexy video installations or cool interactive Web sites.

On the other hand, educators who love traditional art but who, out of fear of being left behind, are jumping onto a theory-driven bandwagon are marching off to a land ruled by dilettante sociology, bogus community activism, and unrigorous science and philosophy. The notion that there could be a fusion of "studio practice" with old-fashioned artistic skills that would yield a wondrous hybrid in the same way that African and Western music together produced jazz hasn't panned out, at least not yet. The reason? Whereas African and Western music, for all their differences, were both about how things sound, theory-driven art and traditional visual art are not both about how things look. In art, the fusion merely strips the traditional art object (that is, one well-crafted physical object) of meaning while replacing it with a jumble of fatuous words.

The heart of the problem lies in the fact that ever since the birth of modern art 150 years ago, all artists—no matter what their visual style or theoretical intention—have been riding the great wave of Romanticism, which has been rolling across the arts for almost 300 years. With Romanticism, the autonomous self as the basis for all knowledge trumps everything. And even though the Romantic, "authentic" self of Odilon Redon or Lee Krasner has been adulterated by postmodernism and turned into a constructed, artificial self, today's

artists remain exactly like their early modern counterparts. Deep down, they consider themselves to be morally superior to nonartists—more intensely emotional and sensitive—and pitted against a cold and corrupt society.

Artists justified the esoteric nature of modern art with the idea that if something came from an authentic artist, it didn't need orthodox social justification. Modern artists defined their work as worthy, and themselves as special people, simply because they were artists. The audience for modern art long ago gave up expecting or wanting skills, talent, or beauty from artists and willingly acceded to the idea that an artist is a creative outsider whose usefulness lies mainly in being critical of everything. Think "court jester" without the humor.

Before modern art, though, artists had to take account of the larger society because they were forced to, by either the limits of patronage or official censorship. Since the advent of modern art, however, few if any artists consider the larger society beyond the art-world cognoscenti. To do so would mean either selling out to some version of Thomas Kinkadian aesthetics or, equally frightening, assuming a massively difficult chore.

Yet reassuming that task is precisely what artists must do. The future for thoughtful artists lies in rethinking how art fits into society as a whole—and not just as a self-righteous, intellectually fashionable social or political critique.

The time has come, in other words, for artists to think about how they fit into society. What do they really give to it? Are they necessary to it? Who, exactly, constitutes their audience?

In this case the only way to leap forward is to go backward—to ideas that had credibility before modern art. We need to dig them out, however, from beneath the accumulated rubble of history. The idea I have in mind is one of the oldest of all—that artists need to consciously consider their audience.

The basis for a truly interdisciplinary art education of the future requires art students to read some of the great treatises on the role of art and artists in society. Without turning art students into research scholars, we can guide future artists to be more philosophical and relevant to our culture as a whole than most artists—even those with the best of intentions—are today. We need to direct art students to serious thinkers from the past who have reflected on the nature of art and the artist, in philosophy, history, or fiction, and whose historical distance allows us to see ourselves, in effect, from the outside.

For example, by having art students read Leonardo da Vinci's *paragone* (a rhetorical device used to explore the merits of the different arts developed during the Renaissance) on painting—without an art-historical or philosophical intermediary—college art professors would expose aspiring artists to an articulate master whose thinking about art led to art's being

accepted into the university in the first place. Moreover, younger artists would learn not to dismiss Leonardo as a mere archaeological relic of 15th-century Italy, as so much current theory is inclined to do.

When students read *Laocoön*, written in 1766 by the Enlightenment essayist Ephraim Gotthold Lessing, they are prompted to think about the differences between the spatial and temporal arts (in Lessing's lexicon, painting and poetry). *Laocoön* contains a down-and-dirty struggle over what constitutes our visceral reaction that something is ugly and whether, or to what extent, we can get around our aversion to specific physical things or our attraction to beauty.

If you really want to wake up 18-year-olds, discuss with them why a mole located very close to the mouth (an actual Lessing example) makes so many people squeamish. Talk with them about the risks artists take in using visually disgusting subject matter (which Lessing also writes about) without historicizing Lessing into an "example" from the Enlightenment. Talk about, as he does, the natural limits imposed on the arts by our sense of smell. Point out to them that so-called risky contemporary artists like Paul McCarthy, who uses bloodied meat-like figures in his art, or Karen Finley, who notoriously smeared chocolate over her naked body in a series of performance pieces, implying all the while that she was smearing excrement, are actually not that risky. Both are merely simulators of the disgusting.

By teaching students Rousseau's "Letter to d'Alembert on Theater," an attack on the arts that recapitulates Plato's examination of the generally uncritical assumption that art has some inherent social value, students would be prompted to ponder whether art is automatically good for people, in all times and all places. In that context, students could be asked to think through whether becoming an artist is actually closer to becoming a swindler than a social worker. Selected passages on art in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* would reveal the particular pressures on artists that result from living in a democracy, compared with living in an aristocracy, and lead them to see the inevitable tension between social equality and excellence in the arts.

For art professors whose cup of tea isn't hard-core philosophy, why not teach fiction that puts artists in real predicaments about their purpose? For example, in Balzac's allegorical short story "The Unknown Masterpiece," the lead character, Frenhofer—a character who loomed large in the imaginations of Cézanne, Picasso, and de Kooning—gets sucked into the black hole of artistic self-absorption. In John Fowles's *The Ebony Tower*, two artists clash over the meaning of abstract art in what is clearly a metaphor for the meaning of artistic freedom.

Readings from outside the modern and postmodern box would shake up art students who have learned bromides in high school

such as "Art is a form of communication," only to have them replaced by gaseous pseudosociological truisms along the lines of "Art derives from myriad socially constructed 'truths' based on the repression of the Other," or "Global nomadism produces hybridized cultures." Wrestling with perennial questions about how art fits into a good society, or how it might function differently in a bad society, would inject an intellectual and moral rigor into art education.

A new reading curriculum such as the one I am suggesting could prove stronger at salvaging hands-on arts such as drawing and painting than the head-in-the-sand, keep-on-trucking attitude now favored by professors who believe in the centrality of drawing and painting. For it was art itself that inspired Leonardo, Lessing, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Balzac to think so deeply in the first place.

In any event, the most crucial job at hand is to steer art students away from the self-congratulatory, self-indulgent deconstructionesque platitudes that increasingly guide their educations. After all, why major in art just to become a half-baked social scientist? When things get this messed up, it's time to go back to the future.

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