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ON THE GROUND

Practical Observations for Regenerating Art Education

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INTRODUCTION

As a contemporary artist who sees no difference between my studio and my teaching practice (they form a seamless legacy), I write from the ground up, from a hands-on perspective as an artist instructor seeking to regenerate the studio as classroom. Although art education is a site-specific process and cultural product, I share my field notes, which I have organized into three specific categories: the curriculum, the faculty, and the community.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, American middle-class students now enter art school with eight evolving tools including: (1) cable, satellite, and Web-accessible televisions; (2) laptop computers; (3) cell phones, and particularly smart phones; (4) DVDs and game players, portable and stationary; (5) MP3 devices and iPods; (6) credit cards and ATM cards; (7) digital cameras, integrated and standalones; and (8) scanners. All generate instant information, communication, and currency to goods, and several include image capture. A pivotal historical perceptual change is taking place among us, making the abyss between past and present modes of perception greater than ever before in terms of attention, translation, forms, aesthetics, and production. The future of art education will be based on the notion of universal immediate access.

Many of our old curriculum structures, fiercely protected by entrenched bureaucracies to the point of paralysis, make change extremely slow and even close to impossible, discouraging many young faculty members who are ready and clamoring for it. The temptation for administrators is to let things fall by their own weight: asking young faculty for patience while hoping that they do not burn out, give up, and leave during long transition processes; quietly buying out old faculty by offering early retirement, or passively waiting for them to retire or die with their boots on out of respect or political fear. In the meantime, current and new students, at least throughout schools in the United States, are paying fortunes for inadequate art educations and getting into bank-loan debt, which is a huge disservice to them. Therefore, we must not be lazy or afraid of triggering change, no matter how painful, and ultimately we must rely on the growing numbers of our art students who connect the dots on their own and end up with a multidisciplinary education in spite of the institution, not because of it.

So what does this all mean for foundation curriculum development? It means that art schools stand at the threshold of multidisciplinary art research and intradisciplinary art production—not as one more theoretical seminar or "multimedia" studio among stubbornly traditional course offerings, or one more state-of-the-arts degree, but as the next wave of cultural production. The artists of the twenty-first century may become in some sense Renaissance folk, deploying a panoply of disciplines and mediums for their work. But we must seek to understand these new patterns of creativity fully in order to ensure our nation of historical memory and true experimentation beyond Internet shopping for global materials and fabrication technicians.

Industrialism triggered the end of craft and divided makers from thinkers. Photography relieved painting and sculpture from the burden of documenting reality. And modernism allowed art decades of important psychological self-regard that affirmed the individual but unfortunately created a hermeticism that disconnected art from middle America, making it suspect and irrelevant. Conceptualism brought in a class system that turned artists into producers who hired shop technicians. We dismissed middle America as cattle and their artists as nostalgic artisans of the landscape. In turn, they responded by electing politicians who dismantled our nation's cultural life, and worse. The art world retrenched, thinking itself superior and believing it could survive through the benefaction of the private sector. Yet our recurring incestuousness, evidencing the decadence of empire and globalism, has finally crumbled our walls.

Contemporary art is evolving not only beyond traditional tools and techniques (the paint-stained academic studio, the macho foundry shop, and the cavelike photo laboratory) but also beyond the upper-middle-class, white-encoded traits of modernism's Puritan roots, as all art is generated by a specific people in a specific place; as whiteness is a color. Its art-for-art's-sake stance, historically important as a chapter devoted to process in the twentieth century, has generated a fear of narrative content, particularly the political, that is not serving us well in the twenty-first century. Modernism defined universalism purely through form, devoid of social content, but this has become a repetitive formula, an armor without a body, ultimately decorative. In the meantime, the rest of the world has caught up, and it is telling its stories unapologetically. Globalism is a network of intimacies. It finds profound traits of the human condition in common, despite site-specific differences. It bears no relation to a fascism of exported style.

What does this mean for foundation programs in our art schools, which are increasingly outdated and are the refuge of surviving but isolated and frustrated American modernists? It does not mean substituting Photoshop and crappy recycling for painting and sculpture. Historic means of production can be informed by conceptual and multidisciplinary methods that can save them from becoming the stuff of hobbyists, a visual macramé. Students should receive training in the basic tools of Conceptualism, such as scholarly research and literary writing, as applied to traditional painting, sculpture, printmaking, glass, ceramics, and photographic processes, making muscled and poetic gestures more conscious and articulate and balancing craft with thought, while also gazing selectively at other disciplines.

Students should have to develop fully thought-out written proposals before, during, and after painting and sculpting. I don't mean that they should do this simply to defend an image or object during individual and group critiques, as students have always done, but to learn how to justify that creation intellectually, beyond the subjective, in our visually dense and materially cluttered world. If they don't want to do this, they have no business being professional contemporary artists. They should be doctors and lawyers who paint on Sunday, or they should be the fine two-dimensional technicians who paint for Jeff Koons. We are all creative; creativity is part of the human condition. However, not everyone is a cultural producer. Our art schools' counseling departments should be sharper in vocational counseling.

If you live in New York City, it looks as if all of the art created now is conceptual. However, if you visit cities and towns across our tired empire, most students are painting in some form or another. Painting remains the most populated major in art schools. Therefore, how do we marry Conceptualism and painting? Contrary to the predictable notion that painting alone needs to change, we need to begin to define Conceptualism beyond its by-now rigid academic classicism, its oxygen-lacking formalism, beyond the dictatorial notions of purity that all hegemonic styles inevitably acquire. Conceptualism was born in the 1960s as a movement in which the originating tangible and intangible ideas for works of art and their manufacture took precedence over the appreciation of final products (other than documentation). Yet Conceptualism has evolved to the point that artists now practice it, for better or for worse, as an aesthetic, if not a style (packaging); as a production methodology that can be applied to the most traditional of mediums; and as new hybrid forms that combine elements from many mediums and disciplines.

Art students need access to training in other disciplines, combining what we may identify as the very best of historical and contemporary drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, and installation art with conservation, ecological, and environmental efforts; ethics; cultural anthropology; urban sociology; behavioral psychology; global political science and economics; robotics; and media theory, among other fields. Nevertheless, the challenge is not just to open old boxed-up departments and bring in this challenging and refreshing intellectual diversity; it is also to not set this in stone.

It is time to call for a new flexibility in curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation, followed by even more change. Combinations of old and new mediums and disciplines will have to be revised every few years.

The structure will have to run against the traditional academic model: a revolving door that may not be very friendly to notions of tenure, even as schools will have to commit fully to a temporary or part-time faculty, unlike the current situation of low pay and no benefits for adjuncts.

This multidisciplinary foundation curriculum could be followed by more advanced junior and senior individualized learning, as soon as the individual art student is focused enough, project driven enough, with the curatorial guidance of theoretical and studio advisors. A multidisciplinary degree should be regarded as the beginning of a lifelong intellectual journey, not the end of it. This is about generating public intellectuals, visual scholars, and artist citizens: active cultural workers who participate in global society. I would institute a five-year B.F.A. and do away with undergraduate majors, even while disciplines and mediums would be studied with as much depth as possible. The loss of majors does not mean the loss of disciplined, rigorous training. Disciplines and mediums should be like languages that we engage with according to project needs.

There is no question that conceptually based multidisciplinary training turns foundation and advanced studio classes into reading-and-writing classes, as well as demanding more comprehensive courses in craft and technique. Thus, studio professors (who are normally paid less than art history and theory professors because administrators think that they have to prepare less) should have their pay increased. In addition, one of the issues that needs to be reconsidered is precisely the traditional separation of art history, art theory, and studio courses. *Conceptually based, multidisciplinary studios are hybrid learning environments.* Materially this means that either instructors need to have access to both messy studios and clean, wired classroom spaces, or there need to be coteaching teams. Instructors who are not able to implement conceptual processes and creative methodologies should be paired with scholars who not only give the usual lectures but also assign research and writing about the work in the studio and review it. At the faculty level alone, this academic conversation among peers should ideally reenergize these professionals.

THE FACULTY

Most multidisciplinary artists came to their complex practices during the twentieth century in a self-directed manner, particularly those who chose mostly nonprofit, community-based initiatives that engaged in public art. They constructed these practices through force of vision and character. They didn't receive a packaged template; they created the road on the map, though they looked back to earlier practices too.

Many schools are still struggling with artists who found a niche on their faculties during the 1970s and '80s and then stopped growing—an unexpected perversion of tenure, which was meant to secure and promote radical thinking. They have become an old guard that holds on to the power fantasy of the New York painting school as an eternal and universal evaluation standard, by way of Abstract Expressionism and what critics called "Hard-Edge Abstraction," dismissing everything that has since come their way. They perceive everything as a question of turf. Therefore, they're threatened by new and visiting faculty, women faculty (though some of them are women who took on the ways of bully masculinity in order to succeed in a world of men), gay and lesbian faculty, faculty of color, and combinations thereof. This faculty does a lot of harm to students because rather than educating them, they have a dying agenda; they seek followers of tradition regardless of students' true needs.

I want to point out, as the extreme opposite to this, that we also do not need any more art world celebrities who do not take teaching seriously. We do not need famous artists in the classroom who do not teach with the same intensity with which they practice their art making, accepting teaching invitations merely out of vanity. They do not give enough time to students, depending too much on teaching assistants. When they finally show up in the classroom between exhibitions and trips, they talk about themselves more than they talk to the students about their work. And of course they recruit students as studio assistants, giving them the impression that this is a Hollywoodesque career—which is sometimes, but on the whole rarely, true.

We need a professionally active faculty committed to both teaching and pursuing its own extracurricular projects. We also need to stop hiring faculty artists who have no field experience—artists who have jumped from their B.F.A. to their M.F.A. without blinking and have very little to offer students other than textbook ideas and textbook art. This sort of oxygen-lacking wheel is killing contemporary American art in and out of academia. I believe that teaching should come after the fire of extensive field experience. Therefore, this means a curriculum that goes beyond exhibiting in faculty shows within college and university galleries, being awarded more than just faculty development grants and university-sponsored residencies abroad. This in-house system unfortunately serves to enshrine and promote mediocrity.

According to College Art Association statistics, although we are graduating more M.F.A.s than ever before, they are leaving school in such financial debt that they cannot afford to go into communities and take chances as artist-citizens. Perhaps this is a uniquely American problem, and European countries that support their artists face other challenges. In the United States, we are not graduating artists; we are graduating teachers right and left, and we should finally admit it. We are generating institutionalized artists and institutional art, and this runs the risk of collapsing over the next few decades, whether multidisciplinary or not. We need more fellowships for our students, and schools need to stop their grandiose expansion plans, consider their appropriate scale, and charge less for the education they provide as a civil act of cultural disobedience.

Because graduate art programs are mostly producing teachers, they should consider providing seminars in pedagogical theory—not just art theory seminars. Education is a discipline with many differing theories and practices, and we should respect it more seriously. I pursued graduate work in both education and psychology at the beginning of my career, and it made a huge difference in my understanding of the creative and learning processes in the studio as classroom.

THE COMMUNITY

Art has a socially critical role to play in the survival and evolution of the American democratic experiment, currently weakened by unrestrained capitalism and the threat of terrorism. Art schools need to rethink their relationships with art market representatives. I live in the real world, so I want my young multidisciplinary artists to pay their rent through their art projects as funded by foundation grants, museum commissions, teaching, lecturing, and gallery sales. I want our labor to result in the commoditization of multidisciplinary practice as a new means of expression that seems, unfortunately, to be increasingly devoid of social impact at the same time that it is swallowed whole by the voracious art market.

Conceptual practices and process-documentation-as-art are already commoditized. Multidisciplinary practice is just spreading across the pedagogical landscape; it is just about to be institutionalized. And what usually follows this new credibility is money, resulting in eventual bulk adoption by the gallery world. The question is what can we do at the art school level to try to protect the potential of a socially powerful art practice (and we haven't had one of those since early feminist and AIDS activist queer art) from this all-too-quick commoditization? How do we slow this down just a little?

Considering a new system of checks and balances, the politically challenging times we live in, and no desire to return to the 1960s, it is absolutely crucial that art schools consider their institutional role in the support of democracy. The history of creative expression is linked to the history of freedom. There is a connection between the state of artistic expression and the state of democracy. When was the last time we thought about possessing and exercising moral authority as art schools, in the U.S. and everywhere else in the world, as players in the national and international context—and how can this come about in our young century?

I would like to put forward the notion that *art schools should be the conscience of the art world*, becoming far more involved in it, which is fundamentally different from what has taken place in the past, when art schools dismissed the art world under the guise of purity. All this, once again, worked for a while, but the art market has gotten so big that even critical attention from the art world requires market credibility.

Art schools should not only consider finding a strong and clear moral core from which to educate but should achieve a moral presence in the art market. They should educate young artists about shop and business ethics; counsel them about the challenges of early success, in terms of the rigid branding expectations that are publicly set; dare to address those art dealers and collectors who walk through their M.F.A. shows; and host more than ever before the experimental and political art that has not yet found exhibition venues. Otherwise their alumni are going to be vulnerable to both art market pressures and conservative political climates. In the end, art theory alone—whether feminist, queer, or postmodern—does not constitute a lasting moral core for art schools. Actions must follow. These positions, if not exercised in the real world, end up as ultimately disempowered liberal talk. There need to be truly embodied practical gestures of institutional citizenship. In the U.S., art schools should also claim the role of lobbying Washington for more arts funding.

People roll their eyes when someone suggests that art students perform some volunteer service as part of their formation. But I cannot tell you how challenging and ultimately formative it was for me to work as a reader to blind college students during my undergraduate studies. I remember spending all morning in the drawing and painting studios and then switching gears and

spending many afternoons with intelligent people my age who could not see the images I was creating; I had to describe these images to them. That experience made me not only more articulate about my work but much more mindful of and generous with audiences.

Carol Becker, the current dean of Columbia University's School of the Arts, in a 1993 essay, "The Education of Young Artists and the Issue of Audience," wrote the following, which I paraphrase.[1] The issue of audience is not raised enough while looking at student work in art schools. Therefore, by omission, it is usually assumed that the work is being made for a gallery context, and this assumption becomes self-fulfilling. Educators should guide artists to help viewers through their work's complexity. That is what art students find most difficult to actualize. They themselves do not always know how they arrived at their own images, so they are unsure of what information is necessary to give people. And yet the amount of "information" revealed by a work of art is the measure of how much power an artist gives to an audience.

How can art schools transcend the critical and commercial tastes dictated by a handful of urban centers like New York, Los Angeles, London, São Paulo, and Berlin? The answer may lie in having some portion of the conceptual and technical art training anchored in struggling communities and in violated natural landscapes, as cultural supports for their sustainable human development and ecological restoration. There is much talk among the airport-living art world elite about postnationalism (although ethnic violence and even genocide seem alive and well in Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe). However, such talk is still mostly circumstantial, even as we slowly evolve toward that postnationalist future.

Culturally serving needy and isolated populations, black, brown, yellow, red, and white, poor and rich, is an important factor in the formation of a visual scholar. Community-based pedagogical experiences, whether they complement a curriculum as encouraged extracurricular work or as studio workshops, should not be relegated to the experimental or public art corner of a department, but should be integrated into everything else. We cannot be prescriptive of what experiences in cultural services an art school may make available to its art students. Art schools need to look around and find what is right for them. Art schools need to act as site-specific entities. When I was a visiting professor at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, first in Jerusalem and later in Tel Aviv, I experienced an art program that attempted to mix Jewish and Arab students in the same classes. The effort was challenging and painful, but necessary. Otherwise it would have been a morally bankrupt school. I do not think that they have succeeded in attracting numbers, but they hold a moral ground for trying.

Moreover, for some art schools, it may not be about providing some community experience. It may be about accessing a region. I have often spoken with curator Saralyn Reece Hardy, former head of the Museums and Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts and now director of the Spencer Museum of Art in Kansas, about the need for a new regionalism. I think that American art schools need to visit their own country, particularly the Midwest—that unknown area between New York and Los Angeles. They are still making the mistake that the pioneers made: they think it empty, barren. It would be much more revolutionary for a Northeast or West Coast art school to have an outpost in Kansas than in London, reconsidering the prairie, the westward expansion, the notion of the endless (political) boundary that we just expanded to the Middle East.

This is the kind of curriculum reality check that also leads me to say that if American art schools are in the business of mirroring culture, they need to stop dismissing religion as an anti-intellectual subject and conversation. Walking through art schools right now, it is hard to tell that we are a country at war. Cultural critic Michael Brenson, during a lecture delivered some years ago at the New School for Social Research in New York City, argued that museums that have embraced globalism will sooner or later have to address the social, political, and economic forces that triggered global art: grassroots narratives about colonialism, racism, poverty, civil war, rape, fundamentalist religion, and terrorism, among many others.[2] Otherwise museums were going to end up doing a terrible disservice by decontextualizing and ultimately castrating global art, robbing it of its power by regarding it only through its formal qualities. The same could be said of art schools. Art schools need to embrace the narratives of their international professors and students, or they will betray them by colonizing them once again through whiteness.

Nevertheless, art schools cannot simply use communities as one-time laboratories for new trends in art making. There is no universal community access—no passport to all communities. Working successfully in one specific community does not mean that the same methodology can be used elsewhere or have the same resulting experience. Schools should enter into long-term partnerships with communities whose leaders and members are willing to participate in the education of artists, the way they might take on the education of doctors by allowing the establishment of a public clinic. In addition, there is a need to improve the mental health services that art schools offer to students

who are facing dyslexia, attention deficit and compulsive disorders, addictions, and depression. Art schools need to help students through these personal challenges before giving them the responsibility to work with communities.

Community interaction is not just about making art as the site for social change; it is about possible new materials found outside the studio and the computer lab. It is about the ethics of collaboration, about issues of authorship and profit sharing. Who takes home the cash if it can be sold in the art market? Do the ethics of place dictate that a product be ephemeral or permanent? Should it be about process and experience rather than about an object at all? Moreover, should there be two products that satisfy different needs: social needs and career needs? Community-based art places its emphasis on issues, on problem solving through culture, rather than on the purity of mediums. I also want to point out that what I have stated here about community could be said of the environment. As artist Frances Whitehead is fond of saying, the history of humanity is overrated. As a Zen Buddhist, I do not even believe in the human concept: there are no humans; there is only nature.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS THE MEASURE OF OUR SUCCESS?

What constitutes success for the graduating student? Success is a tricky term. Some artists achieve great critical success but no commercial success, or vice versa. There are plenty of commercial artists with showy assets who are dismissed as clowns and impersonators fooling the gullible masses by the critics, whose notion of art is still very traditional. In addition, some artists feel that they are never successful enough, no matter how great their curatorial and financial accomplishments. The fact is that in America's culture of entertainment, few visual artists are household names. Any television celebrity elicits more name recognition than any biennial star.

Nevertheless, in the short term, art schools are successful if they guide young artists into the right artistic production processes for them: this match between talent (creative intelligence and skills) and old and new mediums is what gradually helps them to achieve their unique voice. This match also inserts the young artist into visual history, into the right ancestral inheritance line through which to locate, understand, and articulate their work both to the art world that receives them and in the greater social context. Recognizing a social context helps to liberate young artists from the modernist anxiety concerning originality, which is turned into spectacle by celebrity culture. If an art school were able to achieve this for its students, it would be an enviable institutional accomplishment. For an art student to acquire so much intellectual and technical maturity would be admirable.

In the long term, I believe that artistic success should be defined as the ability to sustain art making for a lifetime, whether within the profit or nonprofit sectors, remaining part of the conversation about the destiny of the country, the culture, and global citizenship. Artistic success should be about continuing to grow and produce, constructively critiquing and regenerating, because no one should be blindly tied to tools that become obsolete, to mediums that cease to be relevant to people's lives, to theories that no longer explain who we have become as a people, both mirroring the culture and providing alternatives for the culture. I have often been hard on modernism in the United States because, just as religious architecture, imagery, and materials (stained glass) were the language of the Middle Ages, modernism was the language of the twentieth century. But to continue upholding it feels like the decadence of empire. Perhaps environmentalism will be the consciousness shaping art in the twenty-first century, but regardless, schools must be free to entertain visions of the future.

As an artist, I sometimes feel no urgency to make more art because I am surrounded by throwaway images, piles of inexpensive objects, and lots of noise. Nevertheless, I am still driven to continue to help students find the right artistic processes for them—with some small epiphanies and breakthroughs along the way, I hope—so that they in turn provide society with critical thinking tools that help to uphold a creative democracy.